

The Filson Historical Society

February 8, 2022

Dear Filson Members,

As you are probably aware, there are three bills proposed in the Kentucky General Assembly (House Bills [14](#) and [18](#) and Senate Bill [138](#)) that seek to limit the ability of school boards and teachers to teach complex lessons from American history to Kentucky public school students—particularly around issues of race and gender. The [Filson Historical Society's new strategic plan](#) challenges us to help communities build a stronger present and future through learning from their past. So, we invite you to join us in opposition to these efforts to limit the intellectual freedom of Kentucky students and educators.

The Filson aligns itself on this issue with the [Kentucky Commissioner of Education](#) and [the American Historical Association](#). “Educators must provide an accurate view of the past in order to better prepare students for community participation and robust civic engagement,” writes the AHA. History is an act that calls all of us together to explore, question, and debate. There are ideas and actions that we should all justly celebrate in American history, as well as individual and structural failings which we should not just condemn but work to avoid in our present and future. “Suppressing or watering down discussion of ‘divisive concepts’ in educational institutions,” the AHA statement continues, “deprives students of opportunities to discuss and foster solutions to social divisions and injustice.”

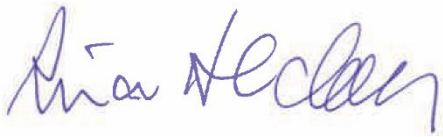
Senate Bill 138 provides a list of primary sources, important pieces of legislation or public speeches, that it demands must be included in appropriate grade-level public school history curricula. The Filson supports the critical use of primary sources in history education and has long provided both original material and guiding questions to classrooms. Beyond critiquing the narrow document selection, the idea of creating curriculum by legislation is irresponsible in the democratic society which these bills purportedly celebrate. Doing so ignores the professional judgment and training of educators, who have both deep content knowledge and training in age-appropriate teaching and learning techniques. It ignores the democratic process whereby local curricula are shaped by school boards who can be held accountable by their communities.

House Bill 18 authorizes disciplinary action against teachers, and House Bill 14 lays out steps for investigating and fining school districts who might be accused of teaching with facts and historical documents which the framers of these bills wish excluded from public instruction. This is a chilling move to punish and discourage free speech that stands directly opposed to the Filson's mission of collecting, preserving, and sharing the full history of our state and region.

The Filson depends on a membership that is raised to explore and question our past in the service of our future. Freedom and constructively critical curiosity, not simply celebration, is the hallmark of a healthy society. The Filson, as a private nonprofit organization, is fortunately not subject to the restrictions that these bills seek to mandate. Yet the Filson recognizes that public education shapes the next generation of our membership. To remain as strong, vibrant, relevant, and diverse as our wonderful organization has become, we must resist such overreaching efforts now.

If you are so inclined, we urge you to contact your legislator via the Legislative Research Commission by telephone (800-372-7181) or [email to your individual representative](#) as soon as possible to voice opposition to these or any bills that would overrule the professional judgment of teachers, deny the democratic mandate of local school boards, and restrict the right of Kentucky students to fully understand the world they will inherit and lead.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Richard H. C. Clay". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Richard H. C. Clay, President & CEO

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Stern". The signature is highly stylized and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

John Stern, Chairman of the Board of Directors