

Jewish Community Relations Council

From Antisemitism to Abortion, Guns, and CRT, It's a Busy Time for Ohio Legislators

By Daniel Pearlman, Jewish Community Relations Council Director

This article follows a legislative updates article featured in the September edition of Toledo Jewish News ("TJN"). In line with the Jewish Community Relations Council's ("JCRC") mission to educate and advocate the community on important issues and seek consensus with a commitment to Jewish values, JCRC will report on legislative updates 3-4 times per year in the TJN.

With antisemitism rising nationwide, it is crucial to call it out wherever and whenever you see it. Ohio Governor Mike DeWine understands this. Last month, Governor DeWine sent a letter to all 111 Ohio public and private college and university presidents calling for them to ensure that their campuses are inclusive and welcoming to Jewish students. This follows our discussion with the Governor in August about rising antisemitism on college campuses, organized by our partners at Ohio Jewish Communities ("OJC"). "No student should be afraid on a university campus, especially because of their race or religion," wrote Governor DeWine. "Sadly, for too many of our Jewish students today, that is not the case. Cases of antisemitic and anti-Israel sentiments have been reported on our campuses here in Ohio and nationally."

OJC works on our behalf with elected officials from both parties in Columbus and in Washington, DC, representing Ohio's eight Jewish Federations, their partners, and agencies on a range of state, federal, and international issues. Howie Beigelman, OJC's Executive Director, was instrumental in organizing the meeting with Governor DeWine in August and following up with the Governor's Office to get this letter sent out.

The Governor asked college presidents to take concrete steps such as reaching out to on- and off-campus Jewish communities and working with them to ensure a safe environment online and off; directing campus chiefs of police and public safety directors to work with Jewish communities and local and state law enforcement to ensure that services and other celebrations are safe and uninterrupted; committing personally to the issue and find ways to speak out against antisemitism; and urging their campus communities to protect and promote free, open, and civil debate.

The timing of Governor DeWine's letter was arranged to coincide with the national Shine a Light on Anti-

semitism initiative. (JCRC's antisemitism rally last month, and similar events that took place in Cleveland and Dayton, also coincided with this initiative.) Working with the Jewish Federations of North America, a diverse political and geographic group of seven other state governors also issued official proclamations coinciding with Shine a Light. Stephanie Hausner, chief program officer of the Conference of President of Major American Jewish Organizations, said that Governor DeWine's letter "may be the strongest public statement from an elected official in the United States regarding campus antisemitism."

Over the past few months, two anti-abortion bills have been introduced by our state lawmakers. Ohio House Bill 480 was modeled after the controversial Texas anti-abortion law passed several months ago. Like the Texas law, HB 480 would allow "any person" to file civil lawsuits seeking \$10,000 or more against anyone in Ohio who performs abortions or "knowingly engages in conduct that aids or abets the performance or inducement of an abortion," including paying for it via insurance. However, whereas Texas' law bans abortions performed at least six weeks into a pregnancy, HB 480 would go even farther, prohibiting any abortions from being performed in the state. HB 480 also includes no exceptions for rape or incest, though it would prohibit lawsuits from being brought against abortion patients by anyone who impregnated them through rape or other sexual violence. Another bill, Senate Bill 123, serves as a "trigger bill" that would ban all abortions if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Two bills have also been recently introduced regarding our state's gun laws. Ohio House Bill 227 would allow concealed carry without a license or training. Meanwhile, Ohio House Bill 99 would allow school boards to grant permission to teachers and other school employees to carry guns on school property without having to go through the same lengthy training required of armed security officers. Both bills have passed the Ohio House of Representatives and now head to the Ohio Senate. If signed into law, these bills could affect the safety and security of our Jewish community. The Fraternal Order of Police of Ohio, the state's largest police union, is against

both bills.

In addition, lawmakers in the Ohio House of Representatives have introduced two bills, inspired by Critical Race Theory ("CRT"), that would restrict the teaching of certain concepts and topics in K-16 classrooms. Ohio House Bill 322 primarily targets public schools and state agencies, but the Ohio Department of Higher Education would be included under the definition of state agency. This bill prohibits public entities from requiring discussion of current events and prohibits the teaching of a list of topics dealing with race, sex, slavery, and bias. It also targets history and civics courses, discouraging the discussion of current events, controversial issues, or activities that involve social or policy advocacy. Moreover, the legislation specifies that teachers cannot be required to teach anything that goes against their "sincerely held religious or philosophical convictions."

Ohio House Bill 327, meanwhile, is slightly different and more punitive than HB 322. The bill prohibits public schools, state agencies, colleges, and universities from offering teaching, instruction, or training on "divisive concepts" or accepting private funding to promote such concepts. Violations of the bill would result in the withholding of funding to school districts or State Share of Instruction to colleges and universities. The bill has a list of concepts related to race, sex, nationality, color, and ethnicity that it defines as divisive and therefore prohibited. It does say that divisive or controversial concepts can be taught if done so objectively and impartially, but who gets to determine what is objective and impartial is unclear.

Dan Greenberg, a teacher at Sylvania Schools who serves on the board of directors of the National Education Association ("NEA") and is an active member of the Ohio Education Association ("OEA"), emphasized that the OEA "is adamantly opposed to these two bills." A few months ago, he went to a committee hearing in Columbus to testify in opposition to these bills, along with dozens of other people from across the state, including OEA President Scott DiMauro.

"Public K-12 schools do not teach critical race theory," explained Greenberg. "In fact, 99% of teachers had never heard of critical race theory until last spring. Public schools in Ohio teach the standards outlined by the Ohio Department of Education."

When asked about the recent controversy in Texas, where a school principal instructed his teachers to teach "both sides" of the Holocaust as if it's not a historical fact, Greenberg explained that if Ohio House Bill 322

or 327 is signed into law, "we could see issues similar to what happened in Texas." But he mentioned that the issue goes even beyond teaching about the Holocaust. "Someone asked [the committee] about a project that fourth graders in the Columbus area did, basically lobbying the state to take certain actions, like making a certain species of butterfly a protected species. Would that be allowed any longer because it is engaging students in a political cause? The Representatives [including the ones pushing the passage of the bills] could not say whether it would be allowed or not."

In short, Greenberg argues, "passage of the bills would have a chilling effect on honest engagement of historical events."

Two months ago, Toledo's JCRC joined other JCRCs across Ohio in signing onto a statement of concerns to our elected officials about Ohio House Bills 322 and 327. We are concerned that the lack of clarity around what constitutes a "divisive topic" in these bills could lead to unintended consequences. For example, we are concerned that an educator may view topics surrounding the Holocaust as potentially "divisive" and thus not worth the risk to teach. The same could be said for other essential chapters of history.

All Democratic and some Republican lawmakers are opposed to these six bills. Regardless, with Republican supermajorities in both the House and Senate, these partisan bills still have a good chance of passing. These pieces of legislation are proceeding at the same time as Ohio is debating its state legislative and Congressional redistricting processes under allegations of gerrymandering. At time of writing, the Ohio Supreme Court is considering the legality of the Congressional map proposed by the Ohio Redistricting Commission.

Interested in learning more about these and other legislative issues? Attend JCRC's next program: Legislative Briefing with Howie Beigelman, Executive Director of Ohio Jewish Communities, taking place on Thursday, January 13 at 6 pm on Zoom. To register, please email sherry@jewishtoledo.org or call 419-724-0351.

Have thoughts about any of these bills? We want to hear from you! Look out for JCRC action alerts in the "Behind the Scenes at JCRC" e-newsletter to contact your elected officials about specific bills as they come up. If you have any questions or would like to get involved in JCRC's government affairs work, please contact Daniel Pearlman, JCRC Director, at 419-724-0315 or daniel@jewishtoledo.org.

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