



Legislation Text

File #: 130746, **Version:** 0

Calling upon the Philadelphia School District to make Howard Zinn's best-selling book "A People's History of the United States" a required part of the high school U.S. history curriculum as Philadelphia City Council recognizes the need to expose students to a more accurate, complex, and engaging understanding of United States history than is typically found in traditional textbooks that often ignore the influence that people of color, women, and the working-class had in shaping our nation's history.

WHEREAS, The empowering potential of studying U.S. history is often lost in a textbook-driven trivial pursuit of names and dates. Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States" emphasizes the role of working people, women, people of color, and organized social movements in shaping history; not simply the version retold by those powerful enough to ensure history remembers their actions in a positive light, regardless of the truth; and

WHEREAS, It is imperative students understand that history is made not by a few heroic individuals, but instead by a nation of people's choices and actions, thereby also learning that their own choices and actions matter; and

WHEREAS, In the first chapter of the book, Howard Zinn notes how so much history-telling focuses on the elite; the presidents, the generals and industrialists. It is a winner's history, and implicitly teaches students to pay attention to the victors and disregard the rest. Zinn rejected this notion writing, "I prefer to try to tell the story of the discovery of America from the viewpoint of the Arawaks, of the Constitution from the standpoint of the slaves, of Andrew Jackson as seen by the Cherokees, of the Civil War as seen by the New York Irish, of the Mexican War as seen by the deserting soldiers of Scott's army, of the rise of industrialism as seen by the young women in the Lowell textile mills, ...[and] the New Deal as seen by blacks in Harlem"; and

WHEREAS, "A People's History of the United States" highlights a fundamental flaw in how history is traditionally taught. By laying out events in neatly sequenced chapters, students are led to believe major turning points were inevitable and had to happen that way. For example, because of the enormity of slavery, it may appear to students that its abolition was foreordained. But this misses the significance of the social movement that fought to end slavery, its difficult choices, and the breadth of resistance, beginning especially with the enslaved themselves that ultimately brought the scourge of slavery to an end; and

WHEREAS, One of the remarkable things about Howard Zinn's scholarship is his capacity to narrate stories that are often unbelievably horrific and yet never lose sight of the goodness that courses through human experience. Philadelphia needs a new generation of high school graduates that do not expect progress to simply happen for them. Young people need to idolize unsung heroes in order to believe they themselves have the power to ensure every new chapter of our City's history is brighter than those that came before it; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That Council does hereby recognize the need for students to be taught an unvarnished, honest version of U.S. history that empowers students to differentiate between moments that have truly made our country great versus those that established systemic

inequality, privilege, and prejudice which continue to reinforce modern society's most difficult issues, and we urge the Philadelphia School District to make Howard Zinn's, "A People's History of the United States" a required part of the high school U.S. history curriculum.

FURTHER RESOLVED, That an Engrossed copy of this resolution be presented to Dr. William Hite, Superintendent of the Philadelphia School District as evidence of the sincere sentiments of this legislative body.