Last week we learned of the extraordinary decision by Florida’s Department of Education to reject the College Board’s Advanced Placement course on African American Studies in the state’s high schools. Claiming that the course violates Florida state law, a spokesperson for Governor Ron DeSantis claimed, “the course is a vehicle for a political agenda and leaves large ambiguous gaps that can be filled with additional ideological material.” Additionally troubling in this decision, is the inclusion by the Department of Education of readings from many leading African American historians, scholars, writers, and activists, including among them OAH member and Distinguished Lecturer Robin D. G. Kelley.

As the largest professional organization in the country representing historians of American history, the Organization of American Historians (OAH) firmly denounces this characterization of the course and the Department of Education’s decision. The OAH further rejects the characterization of these scholars and their scholarship as examples of “woke indoctrination,” and instead recognize them as central to the interdisciplinary research and teaching of African American history and culture, as well as American history more broadly.

We also repeat our strong condemnations of efforts to limit the teaching of “divisive concepts,” including the teaching of slavery and racism in the US, and so-called “Don’t Say Gay” laws prohibiting classroom instruction and discussion about sexual orientation and gender identity in some elementary school grades. Vibrant democratic societies are not built upon a foundation of selective depictions of the past, but rather demand critical examination of and grappling with the historical record. These policies deepen the threat to inclusive and accurate K-12 history that is essential to our democratic and pluralistic society.

While the curriculum of the AP African American Studies course is deliberately interdisciplinary—thus including a range of fields of study including, but not solely history—OAH is deeply concerned about the broad ramifications of divisive concepts legislation, and the Florida Department of Education’s decision on academic freedom. As stated in OAH’s Academic Freedom Guidelines and Best Practices, “Academic freedom is the foundation of intellectual discovery; it ensures an open search for knowledge … essential to the citizenry of a democratic society.” In teaching and learning, academic freedom, “includes the individual instructor’s right to select course materials and content, pedagogy, make assignments and assess student performance.”

The OAH is committed to supporting our community of historians and educators, including K-12 teachers, as well as students in Florida and across the nation struggling to challenge the growing number of laws impacting how and what American history is taught in our schools. The Organization of American Historians remains dedicated to promoting excellence in the scholarship, teaching and presentation of American history, and to encouraging informed public discussion of and engagement with historical
questions that are critical to understanding both the triumphs and tragedies of our nation’s past. We look forward to bringing leading scholars, teachers, and advocates together in conversation about inclusive and social justice-oriented teaching and learning in all classrooms at our upcoming Conference on American History in Los Angeles.

On behalf of the Executive Committee of the Organization of American Historians,

Erika Lee, President

Beth English, Executive Director

*Endorsed by the Immigration and Ethnic History Society (IEHS)*