



INTRODUCTION *and* NATIONAL FINDINGS

» SHELDON M. STERN and JEREMY A. STERN

Vanishing History Education and the Importance of Standards

It has become a cliché to speak of a crisis in American history education. But real problems, left unsolved, can easily devolve into cliché. The crisis in U.S. history education is, unfortunately, entirely real, however tiresomely it has been declared, depicted, and decried. “America is facing an identity crisis,” the Bradley Project found. “The next generation of Americans will know less than their parents about our history and founding ideals. And many Americans are more aware of what divides us than of what unites us.” Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David McCullough agrees, after decades of teaching and lecturing at colleges and universities:

I don't think there's any question whatsoever that the students in our institutions of higher education have less grasp, less understanding, less knowledge of American history than ever before. I think we are raising a generation of young Americans who are, to a very large degree, historically illiterate.⁸

Historical comprehension is vital if students are to understand their nation and world, and function as responsible, informed citizens. The study of history is of inestimable intellectual value in its own right, too, helping students understand how societies function and evolve, how ideas and beliefs change and interact—in short, what makes people *people*, and how the world we live in came to be. The nurturing of historical understanding enables young people to grasp what essayist L.P. Hartley meant when he wrote, “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”⁹

Nonetheless, at the college level, American history requirements are an endangered species. While history courses are widely available, and in many cases quite popular, basic requirements—mandatory core surveys—are vanishing. Fewer and fewer universities *require* American history, or any history at all, as part of the undergraduate general-education curriculum. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni found in 2009 that not a single one of the twenty “top” American universities, from Brown through Yale, required undergraduates to study their own nation’s history. Likewise, of the twenty “top” liberal arts colleges, from Amherst through Williams, only the U.S. Military Academy required the study of American history. Finally, of the “60 State Flagship Institutions,” from Alabama through Wyoming, just ten required American history at the undergraduate level.¹⁰

The widespread rejection of core history requirements at the college level makes K-12 U.S. history education all the more important. Unfortunately, history education at the primary-secondary level is itself often on life support for many reasons, including that an alarming number of future history teachers pursue degrees

8 The Bradley Project on American National Identity, *E Pluribus Unum* (Milwaukee, WI: The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, 2008); Bruce Cole, “The Danger of Historical Amnesia: A Conversation with David McCullough,” *Humanities*, 23 (2002).

9 L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (New York, NY: New York Review of Books, 1953).

10 *What Will They Learn?: A Report of General Education Requirements at 100 of the Nation's Leading Colleges and Universities* (Washington, D.C.: American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2009), <http://whatwilltheylearn.com>.

in education, rather than majoring in history itself.¹¹ Worse, most education schools make minimal efforts to fill the inevitable gaps in their content knowledge, preferring instead to focus on “learning theory” that encourages skills acquisitions—such as critical thinking—rather than knowledge acquisition. If learning theory is all the *teachers* have learned, it will inevitably be the basis on which they organize their classes, with actual historical content making only occasional appearances if it happens to be “relevant.” The inevitable result will be bored, under-challenged students who, understandably, come to see history class as a waste of time.

Of course, it’s not just history teachers who need to learn essential U.S. history content. It is essential for all Americans—whether they are college-bound or not—to graduate from high school with a clear understanding of our nation’s rich history. After all, only history can provide the intellectual context on which our democracy depends for its survival. Only history can provide young Americans with an understanding of the values and traditions which unite us in spite of persistent divisions and tensions. And only history can enable students to understand how hard our predecessors fought for advances such as free speech, religious tolerance, the right to vote, minorities’ and women’s rights, and constitutional restraints on government power—advances that were daring and radical in their time, even if we now take them for granted.

That is why K-12 U.S. history standards are so critical. When properly implemented (and assessed)—and when adequate classroom time is assigned—it is these standards that provide the foundation upon which districts, schools, and teachers build their curricula and that drive their instruction.¹² Contrary to conventional wisdom, mandating strong standards need not stifle teacher creativity. Laying out key content does not dictate *how* that essential content should be taught; it merely provides a roadmap to help guide the way. By failing to set clear, rigorous, and comprehensive history standards, states fail to take the first and most important step toward ensuring that their schools graduate historically literate American citizens.

The State of State U.S. History Standards

Forty-nine states and the District of Columbia offer some form of U.S. history standards. These run the gamut from impressively comprehensive to uselessly vapid. Unfortunately, the latter heavily outnumber the former. If teachers and students in much of the country are to have meaningful guidance, the standards of many states will require massive revision.

There is no predictable pattern or reliable indicator of how a state will do: A state’s size, region, and political alignment tell you little or nothing about the quality of the standards it has produced. The problems that afflict state standards are, unfortunately, far more predictable.

» THE SOCIAL STUDIES MIASMA

The most pressing and common defect in state standards is the submersion of history in the vacuous, synthetic, and anti-historical “field” of social studies. As Diane Ravitch has opined:

¹¹ Diane Ravitch (“Who Prepares our History Teachers? Who Should Prepare our History Teachers?” *The History Teacher*, 31 (1998)) has documented that over three-quarters of America’s social studies teachers did not major or minor in history as undergraduates and most do not have degrees in any academic field. The same is true of a majority of those explicitly called history teachers. In short, most American youngsters are taught history by a teacher who “was not sufficiently interested in the subject to study it in college. Of all subjects taught in school, history has the largest proportion of teachers who are teaching ‘out of field.’” History may be extreme, but the case is not unique: The National Commission on Math and Science Teaching for the 21st Century has found that over half of high school students taking courses in science were being taught by “out of field” teachers.

¹² Recent education initiatives tend to emphasize math, science, and other STEM subjects, which are the focus of mandated testing. Thus, teachers are frequently pressured to devote most classroom time to the content covered in assessment tests, in which history rarely figures. See Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

*What is social studies? Or, what are social studies? Is it history with attention to current events? Is it a merger of history, geography, civics, economics, sociology, and all other social sciences? ... When social studies was first introduced in the early years of the 20th century, history was recognized as the central study of social studies. By the 1930s, it was considered primus inter pares, the first among equals. In the latter decades of the 20th century, many social studies professionals disparaged history with open disdain, suggesting that the study of the past was a useless exercise in obsolescence that attracted antiquarians and hopeless conservatives. (In the late 1980s, a president of the National Council for the Social Studies referred derisively to history as “pastology.”)*¹³

In fact, “social studies” is more than a method of organizing content: It is an ideology that has steadily evolved and adapted since the early twentieth century. However, its central concept remains immovable: Positing trans-historical (and often ahistorical) interpretive “concepts” over historical facts and context, it splits the past into arbitrary and thematic “strands.” It exemplifies the self-defeating “how-to-think not what-to-learn” mentality, favoring jargon-laden thinking and learning skills over specific content. Many states with the most smug introductions—touting abstract and un-measurable social studies aims, even as they boast of excellence, thoroughness, and comprehensiveness—have the worst and least substantial standards. Indeed, social studies practitioners often openly reject the notion of core curricular substance in history. Students are instead expected to analyze concepts, using whatever knowledge they may happen to acquire. They are asked to focus on what is relevant to their contemporary concerns and developing selfhood—an invitation to judge the past through a present-day lens, rather than to understand it in historical context. (This tendency is commonly known in the education field as “presentism.”)

Social studies dogma dictates a convoluted, artificial, and abstract organizational scheme. Historical content is broken up among the various categories, or “strands,” of social studies theory: The most common are history, geography, economics, and civics/government, although others may be tacked on as well. Even within these arbitrary strands, history is not presented chronologically or coherently. Instead, it is further splintered among thematic “sub-strands,” “benchmarks,” “performance descriptors,” and so forth. Each fragment of information is to be classified and sub-divided according to its place in a theoretical and conceptual hierarchy of thinking skills. History becomes a tool for understanding social studies concepts, rather than the other way around. Real people with real lives and real motivations are often ignored; the worst standards frequently fail to mention a single historical individual. All too often, standards focused on social studies make nonsense of historical context, development, and interconnection, not to mention basic accuracy. Such relentlessly ahistorical approaches rob history of its drama, inspiration, and tragedy, and will likely stunt rather than promote the interest, engagement, and intellectual development of young people.

» OVERLY BROAD “CONTENT” OUTLINES

A classic *Peanuts* cartoon by the late Charles M. Schulz shows Peppermint Patty at her school desk about to begin a “History Test.” The question reads: “Explain World War II.” “Explain World War II?!” Patty exclaims in astonishment. Then she sees the next line: “Use both sides of the paper if necessary.”

In fact, many state U.S. history standards offer teachers and students little more than isolated fragments of decontextualized history—often presented in absurdly overbroad directives that come startlingly close to Schulz’s caricature: “prioritize the causes and events that led to the Civil War from different perspectives” (New Jersey); “analyze the interactions among individuals and groups and their impact on significant historical events” (Wyoming); “explain how specific individuals and their ideas and beliefs influenced U.S. history” (Connecticut); “discuss the causes and effects of various conflicts in American history” (Idaho); “determine and explain the historical context of key people and events from the origins of the American Revolution through Reconstruction including the examination of different perspectives” (Colorado);

¹³ Diane Ravitch, “A Brief History of Social Studies,” in James Leming, Lucien Ellington, and Kathleen Porter-Magee, eds., *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2003).

“investigate the causes and effects of war in the early history of the United States” (Arkansas), and even, *pace* Charles Schulz, analyze “causes and effects of World War II” (Vermont).

When actual state standards are barely distinguishable from cartoon parody, something is definitely wrong.

Such “guidelines”—a toxic combination of the immeasurably vast and the ridiculously vague—give hardly any guidance to districts or teachers with which to draft curricula or plan lessons, and they tell students hardly anything about what they are expected to learn. The contrast with the first-rate state standards could not be more stark. The latter not only offer specifics and detail, but go beyond simple checklists, discussing *why* people and events were important, how events and ideas developed, how they are interconnected, and how primary documents can add to students’ understanding (a special strength of Massachusetts). In short, they seek to *explain* the history behind the lists of required material. A particularly impressive step in this direction has been taken by South Carolina, which offers high-quality expository “support documents” to explicate the material outlined in its standards. Of course, states that offer reasonably comprehensive checklist-style outlines still offer teachers and students something useful: In conjunction with decent textbooks and other sources, they will at least have a sense of what to cover and what to learn. But simply expecting students to explain the “causes and effects of World War II” is both preposterous and disingenuous.

» PROBLEMS OF SEQUENCE AND GRADE-LEVEL RIGOR

Students’ understanding, sophistication, and attention span increase dramatically between elementary and high school. Yet far too many states—even some with otherwise sound standards—make the fundamental error of splitting all U.S. history standards into a once-through progression across grade levels, so that some periods are only covered in elementary or middle school. California, for instance, despite offering one of the best content outlines in the country, covers the period to 1850 in fifth grade, from 1800 to 1914 in eighth grade, and 1900 to the present in eleventh grade. While the standards do suggest recapitulation of earlier material at the start of each grade, full coverage of earlier periods is relegated to early grades. The result is a heavy bias towards the modern period, the only era to receive in-depth treatment while students are in high school; essential foundational knowledge about the origins of our nation and its democracy is given short shrift. Indiana, also a state with strong content, follows a similar pattern. In Massachusetts, another of the best states, a two-year high school course covers the period from 1763 to the present—but the colonial era is covered only in fifth grade.

To make matters worse, many other states with far less impressive content follow the same problematic sequence—often not even calling for recapitulation of material covered in earlier grades.

This question of sequence recently erupted into public view with the controversy over North Carolina’s 2010 revision of its history standards. Many parents and educators were distressed to discover that the state proposed teaching only the period from 1877 to the present in high school. In the end, North Carolina education officials responded by placing a full, two-year U.S. history course at the high school level. But, ironically, North Carolina’s abortive plan to cover only the modern period in high school was much the same as that already used, without significant public comment, by California, Indiana, and many other states. Critics were right to challenge its wisdom in the Tar Heel State. It should also be challenged elsewhere.

» POLITICIZING THE PAST: THE EVER-PRESENT DANGER OF IDEOLOGICAL DISTORTION

Bias from the Left

In 2003, at the time of the last Fordham review, many state U.S. history standards were plagued by overtly left-wing political tendentiousness and ideological indoctrination. There has been some retreat from such open bias since then. Nonetheless, more recent standards provide abundant evidence that political correctness remains alive in American classrooms. Lists of specific examples are routinely little more than

diversity-driven checklists of historically marginalized groups. North Dakota, in one typical case, offers this slanted, chronologically muddled, and historically nonsensical selection of famous Americans in the early grades: “George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Susan B. Anthony, Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, César Chávez, [and] Sacagawea.” Likewise, in multiple states, the World War II home front is reduced to the experiences of women, African Americans, and interned Japanese Americans—students would hardly guess that *all* Americans participated in and were personally affected by the war effort. Political bias is, indeed, less strident in many cases than it was in 2003. Yet bias by selective emphasis is still bias.

Lamentably, outright politicized distortion continues to appear as well. Surely the most persistent example is the fictitious notion that the Iroquois League was a crucial influence on the drafting of the Constitution in 1787. There is not a shred of historical evidence for this assertion—yet it continues to appear as historical fact in the academic standards of many states.¹⁴

Too often, uncomfortable and complex historical realities are evaded and oversimplified. While most states rightly address the horror of the Atlantic slave trade, *not a single state* tells the full story. Many standards mention that Africans were “abducted,” “captured,” “seized,” and marched in chains and shackles to be sold—without ever revealing that their original captors were themselves Africans: “Africans and Europeans [and, later, Americans] stood together as equals [in the slave trade], companions in commerce and profit. Kings exchanged respectful letters across color lines and addressed each other as colleagues.”¹⁵ Even the best state standards are evasive on this point. South Carolina’s superlative expository “support documents” provide a solid discussion of the Atlantic slave trade, yet merely note that “slaves were transported first from the interior of Africa to the slave ships,” never mentioning that these Africans were enslaved, transported from the interior, and sold to Europeans by other Africans. Likewise, slave systems in the West Indies and North America are discussed, but there is no reference to slavery in Africa.

Also widespread in state history standards is politically correct “presentism”—encouraging students to judge the past by present-day moral and political standards, rather than to comprehend past actions, decisions, and motives in the context of their times. Several states, for example, prod students to fault the revolutionary generation for denying full equality to women and blacks—without explaining that *in the context* of the late eighteenth century, the idea of government based even on the votes of white, property-owning males was itself radical and untested.

Exposure to the full truth about complex historical events is essential if students are to learn to avoid simplistic and politically correct finger-pointing and instead achieve genuine understanding of historical causality. Not even the most determined social studies advocates would expect students to judge Washington for failing to end the Revolutionary War by using jet fighter planes against the British. Nonetheless, many standards continue to encourage students to fault people in the past for not accepting ideas, values, and beliefs (such as gender equality) which, *in their historical context*, were as anachronistic or non-existent as modern technology.

Bias from the Right

A more recent problem has lately drawn considerable media attention to the issue of state standards. While the dominant political influence on education, at all levels, continues to come from the left, political intrusion is now developing from the right as well.

Even as the left pushes stories of American perfidy, the right counters with triumphal accounts of American perfection. Conservative bias is as much a form of political correctness as its liberal counterpart: Both

¹⁴ See, for example, a trenchant refutation of this resilient myth by Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Gordon Wood: Gordon S. Wood, “The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Use of History,” *Historically Speaking*, Vol. 10, no. 1, Jan. 2009, p. 4.

¹⁵ Charles Johnson, Patricia Smith, and the WGBH Series Research Team, *Africans in America: America’s Journey through Slavery* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1998).

seek to use history education to promote an ideological and political agenda. Both are, at best, historically misleading and potentially damaging to our shared values as a nation. Leftist criticism of education gained strength because the old, traditional narrative *was* overly celebratory and exclusionist. The left went much too far in the other direction: In an effort to include those previously excluded, they all too often excluded those previously included. Yet a return to the *old* distortions is hardly the answer for twenty-first century America.

Most of today's state standards either strive for political balance or tilt leftward. Yet there are occasional counter-examples: The Kansas standards, for instance, seem to prod students to condemn the New Deal as an ineffective and dangerous expansion of government. Still, the leading edge of the conservative effort is in Texas, where a highly public and blatantly partisan battle has erupted into the national media. The conservative majority on the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE) has openly sought to use the state curriculum to promote its political priorities, molding the telling of the past to justify its current views and aims. Indeed, the SBOE majority displayed overt hostility and contempt for historians and scholars, whom they derided as insidious activists for a liberal academic establishment.

Throughout the Texas standards, dozens of references (even the *title* of the high school economics course) offer a drumbeat of uncritical celebration of “the free enterprise system and its benefits”—resembling, in an inverted historical echo, Soviet schools harping on the glories of state socialism. Native Americans, disproportionately discussed in many other states, are almost totally missing. Slavery is downplayed and segregation barely mentioned—omissions pointedly noted by former U.S. education secretary (and Houston superintendent) Rod Paige.¹⁶ Members of the SBOE also showed themselves determined to inject their personal religious beliefs into history education. “Judeo-Christian (especially biblical law)” and “Moses” are, incredibly, listed as the *principal* political influences on America's founders. The separation of church and state, a much-debated and crucial concept in the drafting of the state constitutions (1777–1781) and the federal Constitution (1787), is simply dismissed.

This ideological manipulation has been challenged, and not only from the doctrinaire left. Secretary Paige explicitly warned that “ideology” had been allowed “to drive and define” the Texas standards. History education should not merely swing “from liberal to conservative,” he declared, or “carry political ideology for either party”: History should “speak its authoritative voice through the qualified historians and educators.” Members of the SBOE, Paige noted, wanted the standards to be “fair” only to their chosen shibboleths. But history, as he noted, is not “fair”—it is what it is, and the standards should lay out facts, including those which “were negative.” “It makes no sense,” as Diane Ravitch has similarly argued, “to have an elected or appointed school board deciding which facts belong in history textbooks and which scientific ideas are valid. They do not have the qualifications to do this and they should not have the power to do it.”¹⁷

» IDEOLOGICAL CO-DEPENDENCY: THE CYCLE OF SELF-PERPETUATION

The ultimate irony is that educational ideologues on both left and right feed off each other in an endless cycle of self-righteous distortion. The right believes that political correctness undermines pride in America's heritage; hoping to reclaim and restore the “real America,” it seeks to revive a narrow and outmoded historical perspective. The left-wing educational establishment, in turn, continues to present itself as a

¹⁶ Paige objected in the hearings (May 19, 2010) that “the institution of slavery and the civil rights movement are dominant elements in our history and shape who we are today.”

¹⁷ SBOE hearings, May 19, 2010; “2 Notable Voices Joining Chorus against Book Plan,” *San Antonio News-Express* online, May 18, 2010; Diane Ravitch, “‘T’ is for ‘Texas Textbooks’: The Lone Star State mandates the teaching of patriotism—and promotes ignorance in the process,” *Daily Beast*, March 14, 2010. None of the SBOE leaders are subject-matter experts. The chairman and leader of the conservative faction is a dentist; the educational background of the SBOE's “expert” historical adviser is a B.A. in “religious education” from Oral Roberts University; another member justified an amendment by citing her “research” on Google (Texas SBOE public hearings, Mar. 11, 2010).

heroic minority, battling against the traditional “triumphalist” curriculum that they insist still dominates schools—despite the fact that its own views have long since become entrenched educational orthodoxy.

The majority of the Texas SBOE, regrettably, has not sought to redress such left-leaning distortion and ideology by promoting objectivity. They do not, in fact, inherently object to the concept of education as a tool for indoctrination. Rather, they wish to substitute the *right* ideology (in both senses of the word) for that of the left. Such efforts, laden with contempt for historical scholarship and analysis, are not only harmful in themselves—they play straight into the left-wing victim narrative, strengthening its grip in other states and threatening the progress that has been made in breaking its hold. A reinvigorated left will then further goad the right, leading to a vicious cycle of accusations and politics at the expense of education. The chief casualties are historical comprehension, and the good of the students themselves—which is always the case when education becomes an ideological weapon.

No Excuses: the Availability of First-rate Models

One thing must be abundantly clear: The many states that offer little or no historical content have no excuse for this egregious failure. Even if a state is not in a position to prepare its own rigorous standards, it has unlimited and free recourse to the excellent standards of *other* states.

Puzzlingly, several states claim to have consulted the best standards yet seem to have learned nothing from them. The District of Columbia, by contrast, could fairly serve as a model for other jurisdictions with weak standards. In 2006, the District prepared new standards, largely by combining material from the highly-regarded California and Massachusetts documents. The result is one of the best sets of standards in the country. Indeed, by developing its own grade-level sequence (avoiding California’s unfortunate once-thorough sequence over grades five, eight, and eleven) and adding additional content of its own, the District arguably created a document better than either of its principal sources. Many states would do well to emulate its example.

South Carolina, meanwhile, has introduced an entirely new model, transcending the limitations of even the most comprehensive outline-format standards. Even the best outline can only offer structure and key ideas. But in 2008, the Palmetto State added a set of “support documents,” which dramatically expand the outline with a substantive *historical narrative* of remarkable sophistication and depth. The result is a unique and valuable resource, not only for South Carolina teachers, but also for teachers across the nation—leaving absolutely no excuse for the near-total lack of substance in many state U.S. history standards.

It is particularly instructive—and encouraging—to conclude by noting that the District of Columbia and South Carolina, polar opposites politically, have put their students’ interests first by creating two of the nation’s best U.S. history standards.