



How to Avoid Political Posturing about State Standards for Civics Instruction in American Schools

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Social studies and civics courses are distinctive parts of the American public school curriculum because they introduce students to what it means to be a good citizen. Nationwide, there is some consensus that certain key topics should always be taught – such as the Founding Era, individual rights, and the operations of the various branches of U.S. government. But curricular offerings on civics, government, and U.S. history also involve political issues, so it is difficult to avoid controversies involving external groups inspired by today's versions of conservative and liberal ideologies. Choices about historical events or civic lessons to include in mandated curricula can be highly polarizing, and the outcomes may be shaped by the party that happens to be in office.

Debates in Texas about social studies standards recently showed how polarizing this part of the school curriculum can be – and similar disputes have happened in Minnesota, Nebraska, and Tennessee. Headline battles have focused on the content of lessons: Should American exceptionalism be stressed? Or the nation's tortuous experience with African American slavery? Is free market capitalism to be celebrated? If climate change is discussed, should it be taught as fact or as a controversial theory? But, ironically, such publicized battles may involve more posturing than classroom impact.

Although content is important, how civics classes are actually taught may matter more for what students take away and whether they learn to become engaged citizens in American democracy. Ideologically clashing policymakers often underestimate the role of teachers and good pedagogical practices, while overplaying the impact of nuances in the content of classroom presentations and assigned materials. The most public controversies may not lead to the sweeping consequences various contenders fear – or hope to see. Standards for social studies curricula become just one more political battleground where larger debates over the direction of U.S. politics are staged – with only marginal impact on what is actually taught, or perhaps leading to diminished interest in what is already a shrinking part of school offerings.

Battles about Content Instead of Tests

Social studies is unusual for not having been included in recent public education controversies about regular testing and accountability. The No Child Left Behind law stresses instruction and testing in math and reading and leaves civics offerings aside; and the Common Core standards in various states do not currently include the social studies curriculum. Most U.S. states do not require students to take a standardized test in social studies, nor do they outline clear objectives for instruction in this area. Even states that do set goals and administer social studies tests tend to give assessments in this area the lowest priority. Passing a social studies test is usually not required for students to graduate. This has led to less time spent teaching social studies, as 36% of U.S. school districts decreased such instruction, on average by 76 minutes per week.

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But a reduced role in the curriculum has not eliminated political battles over what to teach. Because the social studies curriculum is written at the state level, curriculum revisions have become a stage for clashing ideologues to attempt to infuse the curriculum with their own understandings of civic values and historical lessons. Usually, the State Board of Education sets statewide standards for subjects, giving local school districts some leeway in developing curricula and lesson plans. State boards may also control textbook adoptions and determine passing test scores and graduation requirements. Ten states, including Texas, hold partisan elections for posts on their boards of education, while other states select members through non-partisan elections or executive appointments. Not surprisingly, in states with elections, board members are often pressured by interest groups ranging from textbook publishers and teachers' unions to ideologically inspired groups pushing larger political agendas.

The Texas Warning – Find Ways to Downplay Politics

When Texas adopted the 2010 revisions to its social studies curriculum, conservative Republicans apparently prevailed in the 9-5 partisan vote – and headlines declared that the “Texas School Board Rewrites U.S. History with Lessons Promoting God and Guns.” But the details are much less dramatic. Both old and new standards emphasized the structure of government, individual rights, and patriotism, while new standards placed a bit more emphasis on religion and on America's exceptional qualities as a nation. Tweaks included such changes as adding the name of an individual and shifting the order of words in lessons. Generally, a Texas teacher could still use the exact same lesson plan, method of instruction, and materials to comply fully with either the 1998 or the 2010 standards.

Even if the impact is less than headlines proclaim, ideological rancor over social studies is spreading and there is every reason to expect more of the same as states revisit standards. Meanwhile, all who care about this area of instruction should bear in mind that pedagogical choices have more influence than curricular content. Lessons about the Founding Fathers, individual rights, or U.S. exceptionalism may not be retained; but research shows that lasting changes in behavior and values can come from having students engage in projects where they participate in local government, help organize voter drives, or coordinate a community project. Standard-setting in states and localities would do better to ratchet down the political rhetoric and focus instead on how to teach such enduring skills. The following changes would help:

- Select members of state boards in non-partisan elections or by executive appointments.
- Give teachers, scholars, and other relevant experts a larger role in revising and implementing statewide standards for civics instruction.
- If schools remain focused on accountability through regular testing, include civics tests to ensure that significant class time is devoted to such instruction.

In every state, citizens, teachers, and scholars should become more aware of how standards are revised for the civics and social studies curriculum – and learn from the wasteful ideological battles in Texas *how not to proceed* in shaping this vital area of student learning. Preparation for full engagement in American democracy can be much better accomplished by lowering the political volume and focusing on universal improvements in student skills.

Read more in Christie L. Maloyed and J. Kelton Williams, “**Much Ado about Texas: Civics in the Social Studies Curriculum.**” *The History Teacher* 47, no. 1 (2013): 25-40. <https://scholars.org>
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