

Full Committee hearing on Intellectual Diversity

Bill Number: Oversight

Hearing Date: September 24, 2003 - 10:00 AM

Witness:

Sandra Stotsky, Ed.D.

(Former) Senior Associate Commissioner, Massachusetts Department of Education
Malden, MA

Testimony:

Thank you for the privilege of speaking before you. I speak to you today as the administrator in the Massachusetts Department of Education who was responsible for the development of the 2002 Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework. By professional training, I am an academic researcher and writer and have analyzed the content of elementary instructional reading programs, school literature anthologies, and professional development activities and materials in all subject areas. I also speak to you as an active participant in local community life. I served as an elected trustee of my public library for 14 years and as an elected Town Meeting Member for 10 years. In addition, I served as president of my local chapter of the League of Women Voters. I fully understand the need for informed civic participation and community service to make self-government meaningful. The chief purpose of my testimony is to suggest that an understanding of our basic political principles and our civic identity as a people are at stake in the conflicts taking place today over state history standards and history textbooks and related curriculum materials for professional development.

Academically sound and strong history standards will not completely solve the problem of how to strengthen the study of history in K-12 and promote civically meaningful student achievement. But they will help a great deal.

Civic education has typically taken place through the history curriculum in units on local and state history in the early grades, a one-year course on US history usually in grade 11, and a middle school course in state and federal government. Over the past 100 years, however, there has been a steady decline in the teaching of history through the grades. During the early decades of the twentieth century, the social studies—a mix of history, political science, geography, civics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, and current events—emerged and steadily gained ascendancy. As a school subject, it has always had participatory goals, but it has always been academically erratic in approach because it lacks a clear disciplinary framework. And the results speak for themselves. Today the traditional US history course, with its in-depth study of the Founding and the Framers, has almost disappeared under the weight of “multiple perspectives.” It has become a course in socio-cultural not political history, leaving teachers little time to help students understand the historical and philosophical basis for, as well as contemporary applications of, our political principles and procedures. The result is uninformed civic participation, if any at all. Although some of the ignorance may be dispelled by a grade 12 course in US government, only 17% of the high schools in Massachusetts, for example, require such a course for graduation.

It is not easy today for states to develop academically sound and civically responsible history standards. Many educators (and others) seek to use the study of U.S. and world history to create hostility to the US in particular, and to Western values in general, and to eliminate a national identity for Americans. They want Americans to see themselves as

“global” or “world” citizens, with a cross-national racial, ethnic, or gender identity as their primary identity. (E.g., see the attachment: A recent Resolution by the Boston City Council on how Columbus Day is to be celebrated in the future.) No help is available from national standards because those produced by the National Council for the Social Studies and the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA were and remain ideologically biased, causing state by state battles over state standards.

In Massachusetts, statewide history standards were mandated in the Education Reform Act of 1993-1994. After a three-year series of battles, the first set of standards was approved in 1997 by the Board of Education. At that time, critics charged it with being “Eurocentric,” but the Boston Globe praised it for precisely that reason. The Department of Education began revision of the 1997 document in 2001. Revision was mandated by law and was badly needed, but not because of the document’s Eurocentric orientation. To begin with, the 1997 document lacked specific grade by grade content standards. What it did offer as standards were four separate sets of statements for the study of history, geography, economics, and civics/government for four-year grade spans. These statements were chiefly expressions of broad intellectual processes or academic goals. Although the document contained excellent lists of core topics and commonly taught subtopics for U.S. and world history, these topics were not written in the form of standards nor arranged developmentally. Nor did the document require a list of seminal documents taught to all students. Its fundamental flaw was that the standards it provided for the grade 10 test required for graduation were in world, not U.S., history.

The 2002 curriculum framework addresses all the limitations of the 1997 document and is fully supported by the Commissioner of Education, the Board of Education, the Governor’s Office, and some key legislators—i.e., it enjoys broad bipartisan support. At most grade levels, recognized historical periods in U.S. or world history serve to organize history standards reflecting the core topics of the 1997 document but integrating the relevant content of geography, civics, and economics. Thus, unlike most other states’ documents, this document provides teachers with only one set of content standards to address at each grade level, together with related concepts and skills. At the high school level, the document provides standards for two continuous years of study of U.S. history. These standards will serve as the basis for the test required for graduation. To unify study across the grades and across both U.S. and world history, the document suggests a few overarching themes on the origins and development of democratic principles, democratic institutions, and individual freedoms.

The 2002 curriculum framework is not a politically correct document; its standards address both the U.S. and the rest of the world honestly and without a double standard. The U.S. history standards: (1) emphasize American history, geography, and who we are as a people in the early grades; (2) present a balanced view of the development of our educational, political, and economic institutions in the Colonial period; (3) offer strong standards on the Framers and the Founding and on our political principles and institutions, their origins and evolution, in grades 3-5 and high school; (4) stress the Founding as politically revolutionary, not as a reflection of the thinking of slave-owning sexists; (5) require reading of a variety of seminal U.S. political documents in high school; and (6) expect students to understand the pluralist nature of the people of the U.S., with particular reference to the history of African Americans.

The world history standards: (1) clarify the roots of Western Civilization (a moral code stressing individual worth and personal responsibility, and the origins of democratic institutions and principles); (2) address the presence, nature, and history of slavery in non-Western as well as Western cultures; (3) address enough British and European history to ensure coverage of the history of democratic institutions and principles there and in the U.S.; (4) provide for systematic learning of world geography; (5) expand coverage of Islamic history because of Islam's role in shaping African and Indian/Southeast Asian history and the problems in Muslim-dominant countries today; (6) limit coverage of early Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Indian history, as well as native cultures in the Western hemisphere and in Africa, to avoid a mile-wide, inch-deep curriculum and to address teachers' criticisms of the 1997 document; and (7) eliminate comparative study of religious beliefs across the world in the elementary and middle grades because of age-inappropriateness.

Before the vote on the document, the critics—chiefly social studies or multicultural educators—set forth various complaints. (1) They quarreled with the omission of anthropology, sociology, and psychology, and a lack of encouragement of political activism—reviving the old quarrel between social studies and history educators. (2) They claimed that the document lacked “overarching” themes because they did not like the current overarching themes on the evolution of democratic principles and personal freedoms. (3) They charged the document with being too “prescriptive,” having too many facts and standards for each grade, promoting “drill and kill” and rote memorization, and leaving little room for “creative” teaching. (4) They complained of insufficient standards on Native Indians and on Africa, Asia, and South America before the 16th century. (5) They found the document too Eurocentric and proposed, instead, and provided details for, an Islamocentric curriculum. And (6) they perceived the standards on Islam as “biased” if not “racist” because they addressed problematic as well as positive aspects of Islamic civilization (such as asking students to learn about the trans-African slave trade to the Middle East and to explain why Islamic societies failed “to keep pace” with Europe after 1500).

Earlier minor skirmishes with several members of a teacher advisory committee dealt with such matters as whether Mexico was located in Latin America, Central America, Middle America, or North America (a call to the Mexican Vice-Consul confirmed that the Mexicans saw it in North America) and whether, after 9/11, Afghanistan could be taken out of Central Asia and placed in the Middle East. Other minor debates concerned whether a stress on American citizenship in the early grades would be “offensive” to some children, whether the mention of American folk tales like Davy Crockett and Annie Oakley would make the document sound like propaganda for the National Rifle Association, and whether the document would have standards addressing all of the native Indian tribes in Massachusetts, especially the Nipmucs (a tribe that few had heard of).

Who were the critics? The chief critics were (1) a superintendent who at the time was head of the Massachusetts superintendents' association and was once head of Educators for Social Responsibility and (2) a network of educators and politicians spanning Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Boston University's African Studies Center, an organization called Primary Source providing consultants and curriculum materials to the schools, and the Boston City Council.

These critics have used a variety of strategies, first to try to delay the vote on the standards, then, after the vote, to try to distort the state assessments to be based on them and to delay implementation of the standards by the schools. For example, in the final stage of preparing the document for a vote, the head of the superintendents' association sent inaccurate information about the document to all the other superintendents in the state, asking for their signatures on a petition to send to the Department seeking delay and major revisions before Board approval. Both sets of critics requested non-public meetings with the chairman of the Board, the Commissioner, and/or Department staff to present the changes they wanted in the final draft. Several critics communicated regularly with some Department of Education staff (through telephone calls and requests for meetings) to get changes made—almost to the point of harassment. Almost no changes were made because the requests were outside of a public process, the suggestions were unsound or unacceptable, and most teachers and administrators did not want the vote delayed (and did not support the critics).

After Board approval of the document, allies of the critics got themselves placed on Assessment Committees responsible for developing future state tests in history. They sought but failed to get someone in their camp in charge of these assessments at the Department. In addition, the superintendent who was head of the superintendents' association keeps threatening to come up with an alternative set of standards and keeps trying to discourage the schools from implementing the standards.

In Massachusetts, we face other problems in implementing these standards, many of which are nationwide in scope. Many schools do not have enough money to buy new textbooks or other materials to address topics they have not been teaching. Teachers who want to address the new standards have few sound textbooks to use. Many lack adequate knowledge of U.S. and world history themselves—and are at the mercy of inadequate or often grossly misleading curriculum materials. In my judgment, the most serious problem we face with respect to curriculum materials in history, geography, and civics stems not from textbooks produced by mainstream educational publishers but from curriculum materials and consultants provided by professional development centers in schools of education and by non-profit organizations for use in the endless stream of professional development workshops teachers are mandated to take.

These centers and non-profits tend to be ideologically driven, often have better personal contacts with school personnel than do mainstream educational publishers, and by-pass the public scrutiny that textbooks may receive. They can easily politicize the entire curriculum in the vacuum created by neutered textbooks. One Massachusetts-based but internationally active organization—Facing History and Ourselves—is currently promoting a moral equivalence between Nazi Germany and the U.S. in its workshops and materials on the American eugenics movement, implying that the US is responsible for Hitler's racial policies and, ultimately, the Holocaust. (See my essay "How Study of the Holocaust Is Turning America into Amerika" that I have also submitted for the record.) The Massachusetts-based organization that is part of the network of critics—Primary Source—is pushing reparations for slavery in its curriculum materials. Many other groups peddle non-facts about the Arab or Muslim world. Organizations and centers like these are frequent partners with school districts in proposals for state and federal grants. Unfortunately, most parents, school boards, and other citizens do not know how to use sound state standards constructively to promote academically sound courses, textbooks,

or professional development activities in their own schools or to monitor the quality of existing ones.

Problems in implementing sound history standards in the schools may be exacerbated by another nationwide factor. According to several historians with whom I have discussed this matter, undergraduate history departments tend not to teach much political or intellectual history these days, or hire new faculty with specialties in US political history to teach courses in it. If this is as widespread a problem as they suggest, then prospective history teachers for K-12 are limited in what they can learn in their undergraduate programs about the philosophical and historical basis for and evolution of our form of government. Prospective K-12 teachers are also limited by the ideological bent of most history departments today. K-12 teachers may end up ideologically as well as academically unqualified to teach to sound academic standards. These are deeply serious problems that could be addressed in the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Let me close on a more optimistic note. In their efforts to develop academically and civically sound history standards, governors, boards of education, and commissioners of education are often beleaguered by the kinds of critics or sources of opposition we faced in Massachusetts. However, in Massachusetts we found several sources of support to help counter the pressure these critics exerted, openly or behind the scenes. First were the history teachers themselves. Most are not ideologues. Few are willing to express support openly at their own faculty or school board meetings or in public, especially if their own administrators are among the critics, but they will respond to questionnaires from a department of education that requests their judgments on policy matters even if the department requires individual (not group) signatures on whatever is e-mailed or faxed back to it. For example, to find out how they would rank the many core topics for world and U.S. history in the 1997 document so that we could reduce the sheer bulk of what the curriculum would need to cover, we sent questionnaires by e-mail to all high school history/social studies departments in the state asking teachers to rank all the topics at three levels of importance. We also sent questionnaires about the desired content of state assessments, especially for the graduation requirement. We received replies from about 1000 teachers, the tallies showing a preference for an emphasis on U.S. and Western history at the high school level and for a test of U.S., not world, history for the graduation requirement. In response to an early draft of the standards, we found that K-5 teachers preferred an emphasis on local, state, and U.S. geography and history, not on ancient or other civilizations, and that the spiral curriculum in U.S. history (a continuous chronological, slightly overlapping curriculum for grades 5, 8, and 11, starting from the discovery of the New World and ending up in 2001) did not work as planned; teachers said they had to review everything studied three or six grades earlier so that students rarely got beyond the Depression or World War II in grade 11. The organization of the 2002 document shows that the Department responded to the teachers' comments, enhancing its credibility.

Through the public process of sending out several working drafts of the standards, we discovered another strong group of supporters—the staff of our local museums and historical societies, their trustees or benefactors, legislators, local public officials, and members or officials of Chambers of Commerce and other community service or business organizations. An emphasis on U.S. and Western history in general and on our political

principles and institutions, with a balanced view of this country's and Western history, makes complete sense to them. They do not tend to favor politically correct curricula. The kind of history curriculum that our public schools have is a matter of public policy and, ultimately, drives public support for our public schools. I believe that public officials as well as professionals with knowledge of government, history, or economics, and with a deep stake in preserving our political principles and institutions, should serve on the committees that develop history and social science standards. In fact, they might legitimately be more heavily represented than educators themselves. Academically sound and explicit history standards matter a great deal. They serve as a guide to academically honest teachers and statewide assessments. They guide publishers of curriculum materials and textbooks in states where the schools must teach to the standards because there is accountability for student learning that is tied to state tests based on the standards. They also serve (as in Massachusetts) as the basis for licensing regulations and tests for prospective history and government teachers. And they can serve as the basis for judging the quality of undergraduate history and political science courses in institutions that prepare prospective teachers if federal funding is tied explicitly to high cut scores on teacher tests in history and government or on college exit tests that reflect the academic and civic content of sound history standards for K-12. In this way all the important elements are conceptually linked. The sooner that tests in history and civics are required by No Child Left Behind legislation, the sooner it may be possible to work out these links as public policy.

Resolution

Boston City Council
(2003)

Whereas, throughout its history the City of Boston has been a community of immigrants from places all over the globe who have been attracted to its economic opportunities, world-class cultural and educational institutions, and its openness to new ideas and peoples; and

Whereas, the City of Boston has, in turn, benefited the global community through the contributions of its multi-ethnic citizenry to democratic ideals and progressive innovations in science, theology, medicine, governance, human rights, the arts, and numerous other fields; and

Whereas, the Boston Public Library, the oldest publicly supported municipal library in America, is inaugurating a new map exhibit entitled "Faces and Places" that celebrates the diversity of Boston's citizenry and the development of the rich texture of its neighborhood communities over the years; and

Whereas, The Mary Baker Eddy Library for the Betterment of Humanity, Boston's newest library open to the general public, is inaugurating a new exhibit in its world-famous Mapparium entitled "Words for the World" that features the voices of children sharing their grandest ideas and hopes for the world; and

Whereas, it is entirely fitting and proper at this point in our history to recognize the interconnectedness of our municipal community with the global community and to honor specifically the unique role of "Boston in the world and the world in Boston;"

Therefore, Be It

Resolved: That the Boston City Council, in meeting assembled, declares that October 11, 2003, and hereafter every Saturday of the Columbus Day weekend be “World Citizens Day” in the City of Boston and calls upon its citizens to participate in such community activities as are appropriate to the occasion.