

# How Should American Students Understand their Civic Culture? The Continuing Battle over the 2002 Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework

ESCRIBO COMO EX-MIEMBRO DEL MINISTERIO DE EDUCACIÓN DEL ESTADO DE MASSACHUSETTS, DONDE FUI RESPONSABLE DEL DESARROLLO DEL SISTEMA CURRICULAR DE HISTORIA Y CIENCIAS SOCIALES. ESTE ENSAYO ES UNA VERSIÓN LIGERAMENTE REVISADA DE MI TESTIMONIO ESCRITO –PROMOVIDO POR EL SENADOR JUDD GREGG–, PARA UNA AUDIENCIA TITULADA “¿QUÉ ES LO QUE SUS HIJOS ESTUDIABAN EN LA ESCUELA? CÓMO INFLUYEN EN LA EDUCACIÓN LOS NIVELES DE ENSEÑANZA Y LOS LIBROS DE TEXTO”. LA AUDIENCIA TUVO LUGAR EN EL EDIFICIO DEL SENADO DE DIRKSEN, EN WASHINGTON, D.C., EL MIÉRCOLES 24 DE SEPTIEMBRE DE 2003. EL TESTIMONIO ORAL ESTÁ DISPONIBLE EN UNA TRANSCRIPCIÓN DE LA AUDIENCIA, Y LA VERSIÓN COMPLETA DE MI TESTIMONIO HA SIDO INCORPORADA AL EXPEDIENTE PÚBLICO. LA AUDIENCIA FUE UNA EXPERIENCIA, POSIBLEMENTE LA PRIMERA DE OTRAS SOBRE ESTA MATERIA, Y NO RELACIONADA POR EL MOMENTO CON NINGUNA PROPUESTA LEGISLATIVA.

PALABRAS CLAVE: HISTORIA DE LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS, HISTORIA UNIVERSAL, IDENTIDAD CÍVICA DE LOS AMERICANOS, ENSEÑANZA DE LA HISTORIA.

I WRITE AS THE FORMER ADMINISTRATOR IN THE MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE 2002 MASSACHUSETTS HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK. THIS ESSAY IS A SLIGHTLY REVISED VERSION OF WRITTEN TESTIMONY INVITED BY SENATOR JUDD GREGG OF NEW HAMPSHIRE, CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND PENSIONS, UNITED STATES SENATE, FOR A HEARING TITLED “WHAT IS YOUR CHILD READING IN SCHOOL? HOW STANDARDS AND TEXTBOOKS INFLUENCE EDUCATION.” THE HEARING WAS HELD AT THE DIRKSEN SENATE OFFICE BUILDING, ROOM 430, WASHINGTON, D.C., ON WEDNESDAY, SEP-

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**TEMBER 24, 2003. THE ORAL TESTIMONY IS AVAILABLE ON A TRANSCRIPTION OF THE HEARING, AND THE FULL WRITTEN VERSION OF MY TESTIMONY HAS BEEN ENTERED INTO THE PUBLIC RECORD. THE HEARING WAS AN EXPLORATORY ONE, POSSIBLY THE FIRST OF MANY OTHERS ON THIS TOPIC, AND UNCONNECTED AT THE MOMENT TO ANY PROPOSED LEGISLATION.**

KEYWORDS: UNITED STATES HISTORY, WORLD HISTORY, CIVIC IDENTITY OF AMERICANS, HISTORY STANDARDS.

IN BOOKS OR REPORTS published in 2003, three prominent historians, each independent of the other, have judged the 2002 Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework as containing one of the best sets of state history and civics standards in the United States<sup>1</sup>. For that reason alone, the document warrants attention outside the United States. It also warrants attention in other Western countries because the political issues faced by the Massachusetts Department of Education in developing an academically and civically sound document are political issues not only in the rest of the United States but in European countries as well.

In this essay, I describe the features of the 2002 Framework, the kind of criticisms it received, who its critics were, and the problems the Department now faces in implementing it. The chief purpose of this essay is to show that an understanding of basic American political principles and the civic identity of Americans as a people are at stake in the conflicts taking place in the U.S. today over state history standards, history textbooks for classroom use, and related curriculum materials for teachers' professional development<sup>2</sup>. Academically sound and strong state history standards will not completely solve the problem of how to restore and strengthen the study of history in American public schools. Nor, as I will explain, will they necessarily promote a meaningful civic education or an in-depth understanding of the genesis and evolution of basic political principles and institutions in Western civilization and in the U.S. in particular. But they will help a great deal.

Civic education in the United States has typically taken place through the history curriculum in units on local and state history in the early grades, a one-year course on United States 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, ci-

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<sup>1</sup> Diane Ravitch (2003) rated it one of the two best sets of history and social science standards in *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Children Learn*. Paul Gagnon rated its "civic core" (its civics/government standards) as among the top eight in the country in *Educating Democracy: State Standards to Ensure a Civic Core*, a report published by the Albert Shanker Institute, Washington, D.C. ([www.ashankerinst.org](http://www.ashankerinst.org)). Gagnon adapted this report for an article in the Fall 2003 issue of *American Educator*, titled "In Pursuit of a 'Civic Core': A Report on State Standards, pp. 24-31. Sheldon Stern, former chief historian at the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library in Boston, judged the U.S. history standards in the Framework among the top six in the country in a report released by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, titled *Effective State Standards in U.S. History: A 2003 Report Card*.

<sup>2</sup> Readers should keep in mind throughout this essay that a reference to state standards means the standards of one or all of the 50 states in the Union, not the standards of the government of the United States. The federal government is prohibited by law from promulgating its own standards; the basic responsibility for education in the U.S. lies with state government.

vics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, and current events—emerged and steadily gained ascendance. 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 United States 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 U.S. 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 United States 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 (the national professional organization for social studies teachers) and the National Center for History in the Schools at the University of California, Los Angeles are ideologically biased, causing state by state battles over state standards.

In Massachusetts, statewide history and social science standards were mandated by the state legislature in the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993-1994. After a three-year series of battles, the first set of standards was approved in 1997 by the Massachusetts Board of Education, the body of citizens appointed by the governor of Massachusetts and responsible for setting state policy for K-12, to be carried out by the Department of Education. At that time, critics charged it with being “Eurocentric”, although 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 grade 10 were in world, not U.S., history. The Education Reform Act mandated that passing scores on the grade 10 tests for all subjects would be required for high school graduation, and the members of the Board in 2001 (some of whom had not been on the Board in 1997) wanted the graduation test to be on U.S., not world, history.

The 2002 curriculum framework addresses all the limitations of the 1997 document and is fully supported by the Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, Board of Education, Governor’s Offi-

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ce, and some key legislators –i.e., it enjoys broad bipartisan support<sup>3</sup>. 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 Americans 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 up to the present; 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, with an emphasis on physical and political geography; 5) expand coverage of Islamic history because of Islam's role in shaping African, Balkan, Iberian, and Indian/Southeast Asian history and because of the many political, social, educational, and economic problems in Muslim-dominant countries today; 6) limit coverage of early Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Indian history, as well as of indigeneous 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 be-

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<sup>3</sup> The 2002 Framework can be viewed on the Massachusetts Department of Education's web site: [www.doe.mass.edu](http://www.doe.mass.edu).

cause 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 Indian tribes and on Africa, Asia, and South America before the 16<sup>th</sup> 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 from the 7<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to explain why Islamic societies failed “to keep pace” with Europe after 1500, intellectually, technologically, economically, militarily, and politically).

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 quickly 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 popular 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 have heard of).

Who were the critics? The chief critics were 1) a superintendent of a school district 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 the Department’s 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 trying to discourage school districts 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 and often grossly misleading curriculum materials. In my judgment, the most serious problem we face nationwide with respect to curriculum materials in history, geography, and civics stems not from the textbooks produced by mainstream educational publishers but from the 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 that 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, with offices now in Europe –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 U.S. is responsible for Hitler’s racial policies and, ultimately, the Holocaust<sup>4</sup>. 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 U.S. 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 address-

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<sup>4</sup> See my essay “How Study of the Holocaust Is Turning America into Amerika,” to be published in *Understanding Anti-Americanism: Origins, Symptoms, and Consequences*, Paul Hollander, Editor, Chicago: Ivan Dee, Spring 2004. This essay has also been submitted for the public record, to accompany my written testimony.

sed in the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, which the U.S. Congress is scheduled to revise and vote on in 2004.

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 for the elementary, middle, and high school, 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 accountability for student learning 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

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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 get conceptually linked. The sooner that tests in history and civics are required by No Child Left Behind legislation (the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 2002), the sooner it may be possible to work out these links as public policy.

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## 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.

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