

Feedback on the current K-12 Social Studies TEKS

To: Monica Martinez
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Dear Ms. Martinez et al:

I have divided my comments into two sections, the first dealing with general concerns, and the second listing individual entries that seem deficient.

Section A

As I began my review of the current K-12 social studies TEKS I expected to find that the format of the TEKS was acceptable, and that I would only be recommending relatively minor changes in the content of the eight strands for the various grade levels. Unfortunately, that has not proven to be the case. These eight strands as they now stand in the TEKS are unwieldy and cumbersome, and overload both the textbook publishers and the teachers with too many emphases they are required to cover. This has led to redundancy, and made much of the strands' content superfluous. I strongly recommend that the strands be reduced to five: history, geography, government, citizenship, and science and technology, or at most six, including economics (see below). This will sharpen the focus and streamline the teaching task for both textbook publishers and teachers. By removing extraneous and unnecessary subjects which the textbook writers and the teachers are currently expected to cover, they will be enabled to do a better job on the important remaining strands, and thereby make the coverage of these strands more interesting to the students.

To give a specific example, I simply opened at random to Chapter 113.5., Grade 3, (13). (A) requires the student to "identify the heroic deeds of state and national heroes such as Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett." But, this is better covered under Texas state history, or even American history in general. It is totally unnecessary to have this taught under a separate "culture" section. The same holds true for the next entry (B), which requires the textbook and/or teacher to "retell the heroic deeds of characters from American folktales and legends such as Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan." This could be handled in a much more interesting way under American history in a unit titled: "19th century American Legends and Folklore."

On the same page, under (14) (A), the student is expected to identify selected individual writers and artists and their stories, poems, statues, paintings, and other

examples of cultural heritage from communities around the world.” This can be much better handled under geography, for it would add interest for the students to what could otherwise prove to be the boring task of learning the physical location of various countries.

A separate strand for culture is uncalled for and unnecessarily complicates the teaching task.

Additionally, the trend in American education has been to study American culture in comparison to other cultures around the world, which leads to the rejection of the idea that there is anything unique or exceptional about American civilization. Yet, various Texas state laws concerning education correctly call for a teaching emphasis on patriotism, citizenship, and the free-enterprise system. Fulfilling these educational mandates in the State of Texas will require the students to learn *why* America is the greatest country in the world, and *why* they should be proud to be an American.

Again, when it comes to the strand entitled “science, technology, and society” the word “society” should be removed. What exactly does society mean in this context? If by that is meant that the impact of any particular technology on society needs to be taught, that seems to go without saying. Any competent textbook or teacher would make sure to include this, but to give it equal weight with science and technology creates overload and confusion for both textbook publishers and teachers.

The economics strand likewise seems to add unnecessarily to the textbook or teaching task. In Chapter 113.24., Grade 8, (13), Economics, (A) it says that “the student is expected to identify economic differences among different regions of the United States.” This is better handled under geography. (B) requires the student to “explain reasons for the development of the plantation system, the growth of the slave trade, and the spread of slavery.” This is an important segment of American history and should be taught under that heading. (C) expects the student to “analyze the causes and effects of economic differences among different regions of the United States at selected times in U.S. history.” Again, the word “history” gives the clue as to where this should be covered. At the least, I would strongly urge that the economics strand be redone to focus primarily on teaching our children why the American free enterprise system is superior to all other economic systems. But, considering the compelling need to reduce the number of strands and sharpen their focus, I would recommend that economics not be a separate strand.

Finally, the social studies skills strand affords no direction whatsoever for the textbook publishers or the teachers. Take, for example, the entries in Chapter 113. 24.

Grade 8, (31). It says that “the student communicates in written, oral, and visual forms.” [No kidding?]. “The student is expected to: (A) use social studies terminology correctly.” [And just exactly, pray tell, what is “social studies terminology”?] (B) “use standard grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and punctuation.” [That is usually covered under something called “English”]. (C) “transfer information from one medium to another...using computer software as appropriate” [these Jr. High students learned to do that 5 or 6 grades ago!]. (D) “create written, oral, and visual presentations of social studies information.” [This is so vague as to be completely useless].

Having a separate social studies skills strand seems basically meaningless, for the general skills mentioned under this heading are simply obvious study and research skills that competent teachers should be inculcating in their students when they do history or geography units. Social studies skills are *methodology* issues, and have nothing to do with the educational *content* of history, geography, government, citizenship, and science and technology. Therefore, social studies skills should *not* be a separate strand.

Besides the formatting of the TEKS there are other important general concerns. Nowhere to be found throughout the document is there any mention of the *motivations* of the discoverers, settlers, and founders of America. Reading through the TEKS as they are currently constituted could give the impression that history just “happens,” that random impersonal forces control events. That is, of course, the false teaching of Marxism – i.e. that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” is inevitable. However, history is actually the results of decisions made by individual human beings – people make history. And their decisions and actions are a product of their belief systems, their worldview. Ideas shape history. There is always a context, a reason for the decisions made and the actions taken.

Studying history this way – telling the stories of real people and what motivated the decisions they made, and then what happened as a result of those decisions – gives the present-day student the exciting idea that he or she can influence the course of history. And *that* is one of the main things we are aiming at in the education of our children. We want them to reach young adulthood with the vision that they can be world changers!

Therefore, it is imperative that the textbooks and the teachers handle the teaching of history by considering the motivations of those who made American history. In our American situation it is indisputable that the motivational role of the Bible and the Christian faith was paramount in the settling of most of the original 13 colonies,

notably Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. The settling of America was not “accidental” but purposeful. For example, the Pilgrims were motivated to risk their lives in coming to America because of their Christian faith, and their desire to propagate that faith in the American wilderness. Even small children need to understand that the Pilgrims were not just “people who liked to take long journeys in ships” (as one elementary history text puts it), but rather a group of people who believed in God and tried to live by the teachings of the Bible. Pilgrim Governor William Bradford made it clear that “they had a great hope and an inward zeal . . . of laying some good foundation . . . for the propagating and advancing of the Gospel of the Kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the world.” They were not refugees thrown up on the rocky shores of New England, but missionaries with a strong sense of call and purpose. They knew exactly what they were about.

When the New England Confederation was formed in 1643 between the Puritan colonies of New Haven, Connecticut, Plymouth, and Massachusetts Bay, they said “we all came into these parts with one and the same end and aim, namely, to advance the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Additionally, William Penn noted that “The acquisition and government of the Colony (that bears his name today) was so to serve the truth and the people of the Lord, that an example may be set to the nations.”

Similarly, the Founding Fathers were men who believed that government must be based on the God-given inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that belong to all people. Without understanding their motivations, it is impossible to understand why they resisted the tyranny of Great Britain.

Countless other examples from colonial America may be adduced, but the point is that the discovery, settling, and founding of the colonies happened because of the Biblical worldviews of those involved. Only when this is taken into account can America’s founding be properly understood. And, if the cause and effect relationship between people’s worldview and their actions is made an integral element of the teaching of history, then the study of American history can become *inspirational* for our students in regard to the formation of their own lives, rather than simply *informational*.

In the introduction to the social studies TEKS (2) says: “To support the teaching of the essential knowledge and skills, the use of a variety of rich material such as biographies; folktales, myths, and legends; and poetry, songs, and artworks is encouraged.” There are several serious concerns here. First, because kindergarten

children have a hard time distinguishing between factual stories and fantasies these kinds of myths, legends, fantasies and folk-tales should be avoided until they have sufficient maturity to understand the difference. However, because children of all ages love stories, and because the reading or hearing of true stories is the best way for students to learn history, the history strands should emphasize the importance of using narratives. Exciting and true stories from the lives of real Americans such as Paul Revere, John Paul Jones, Jeb Stuart, George Washington, William Bradford, Abigail Adams, Harriet Tubman, Dorothea Dix, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and countless others should be utilized to teach biographical history.

History should never be taught as a continuous progression of names, dates, and places, and events, but rather as a narrative. What students at all grade levels will remember best is stories, so the facts of history should be interwoven with narratives. For the lower grade levels, the story would be the main element of the history lesson. In the upper grade levels, history would be examined more analytically, but the stories would still play an important role in the teaching. At any grade level, a good history teacher is a good storyteller.

Second, it is a matter of great concern that there is no mention here of the foundational documents of American history – particularly the Mayflower Compact, the Massachusetts Body of Liberties, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, the Constitution, and the Northwest Ordinance. And there are others that should be included. While the TEKS (2) quoted above may not have been intended to be an exhaustive list of supplementary materials, and while some of the founding documents are mentioned briefly elsewhere, the centrality of these foundational documents in our history should be taught to all students, even those in elementary school. Further, since study of these documents is mandated by Texas State law during Freedom Week, the introduction to each major section of the TEKS should explicitly name them and underscore the importance of their use in the classroom. In this way, even young students will learn that Americans believe in a government of laws, and not one dictated by the whims and passions of men. This will, of course, begin to lay a proper foundation for their understanding of citizenship.

Concurrently, in learning how to study America's founding documents, subsequent amendments to the Constitution, Supreme Court cases, state papers, etc., students will also learn the skills of research that are unnecessarily currently dealt with in a separate strand. At the same time they are learning about these important documents they should also learn how to evaluate the differences between primary and secondary source documents, between private papers and public papers, and what weight to give each type of source when learning about American history.

At all levels of education, K-12, attention must be paid to the basic concepts that underlie the American tradition of constitutional law government. Further, it is impossible for students to understand American civilization if they do not learn the *sources* of those concepts. For example, the separation of powers in our Federal government is rooted in the Founding Fathers' clear understanding of the sinfulness of man. James Madison, one of the chief architects of the Constitution, studied under the Presbyterian minister president of the College of New Jersey, Dr. John Witherspoon. Witherspoon taught Madison that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" and that the only human remedy for this is effective government, which has to be in a "mixed and balanced form." Under the tutelage of Dr. Witherspoon, Madison came to accept the Biblical teaching of the sinfulness of man, and quaintly expressed this belief in Federalist Paper # 51: "But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature. If men were angels, no government would be necessary." Madison, Washington, Hamilton, Jay, Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, Benjamin Rush, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Elias Boudinot, Samuel Adams, John Dickinson, Robert Treat Paine, Richard Stockton, James Wilson, William Patterson, and many other Founding Fathers believed that because of man's sinfulness, no one is to be entrusted with the absolute power of government. Hence, they rejected monarchy and gave us the separation of powers in our form of government.

Another foundational concept that reflects the Biblical influence on American government is the consent of the governed. To the last man, the Founding Fathers believed that no one has the right to govern another human being without that person's consent. As Lincoln said, that is "the sheet anchor of American government." Government by the consent of the governed found its earliest expression in our history in the Mayflower Compact of 1620, when the Pilgrim elders signed a one-page document that stated that they "freely covenanted together to form a civil body politic." But the roots of government by the consent of the governed can be traced all the way back to the Israelites in the Sinai wilderness under Moses. When he had read the laws of God to the people, they gave their consent to be governed by these laws (Exodus 24:3, 7).

In point of fact, American history cannot be understood without appreciating the importance of the word "covenant." From the earliest days of New England, the settlers were concerned to live up to the tenets of their Christian faith, which required them to "love their neighbors as themselves." Herein lay the only hope for a just society, for if we are not concerned for the welfare of our neighbors, justice is not possible. In fact, we make a mockery of the word justice if there is no civic concern, no commitment to care for others. Our second President, John Adams, in an address to

the Massachusetts militia in 1798, said “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” In order for the Constitution to “work,” then, we must be civic-minded – we must care for the rights and welfare of others. The Founding Fathers’ Biblical worldview taught them that human beings were by nature self-centered, so they believed that the supernatural influence of the Spirit of God was needed to free us from ourselves so that we can care for our neighbors. That is what Adams means when he says that the Constitution can only work for a moral and religious people.

In light of the overwhelming historical evidence of the influence of the Christian faith in the founding of America, it is simply not up to acceptable academic standards that throughout the social studies TEKS I could find only one reference to the role of religion in America’s past.

It is interesting to note that the Founding Fathers thought that both religion and the morality formed by religious faith were absolutely necessary for the success of republican government. And they never mentioned the one without the other – they were always coupled: religion and morality, morality and religion. The most famous expression of this belief was George Washington’s 1796 Farewell Address, in which he stated: “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports . . . And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion . . . Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.” Twenty years earlier John Adams had put it even more succinctly in a letter: “Statesmen, my dear Sir, may plan and speculate for liberty, but it is religion and morality alone, which can establish the principles upon which freedom can securely stand. The only foundation of a free constitution is pure virtue.”

Students should be expected to identify these foundational principles, and be familiar with their origins, in order to gain a proper understanding of American government and history.

Section B

I would also like to call attention to specific TEKS entries that seem deficient and should be rewritten. Unfortunately, many of the ones concerning history seem to be compiled by someone more concerned to be “politically correct” than to accurately portray American history. Out of many that could be listed, here is a sampling:

- * 113.2 Kindergarten. (11) Culture. The student is expected to (B) “identify differences among people.” This is precisely the kind of thing that can be better covered under geography.
- * 113.3 Grade 1. (4) History. The student is expected to (A) “identify contributions of historical figures such as Henrietta King and Thurgood Marshall who have influenced,” etc. These two selections are not strong enough examples in light of the multiplicity of persons who have impacted American history. Harriet Tubman and Sam Houston would be better choices, and there are hundreds of others.
- * 113.3 Grade 2. (4) History. Again, in regard to (B) Amelia Earhart was an aviator, and not particularly an example of “inventiveness.” People like Cyrus McCormick and Alexander Graham Bell would be better choices.
- * 113.3 Grade 2. (11) Government. The student is expected to: “identify some governmental services in the community such as libraries, schools, and parks,” etc., etc. These examples are not as good as: the fire and rescue department, the police, and school buses.
- * 113.3 Grade 2. (14) Citizenship. (C) “Explain how selected customs, symbols, and celebrations reflect an American love of individualism, inventiveness, and freedom.” It would be far better to have this read: “Explain how selected customs, symbols, and celebrations reflect American beliefs and values such as freedom, love of country, and respect for the law.”
- * 113.3 Grade 3. (2) History. (A). “Identify reasons people have formed communities, including a need for security, law, and material well-being.” This is not history – this is sociology, and should not be in a history unit.
- * 113.7 Grade 5. (b) (1) History. (B) “describe the accomplishments of significant colonial leaders such as Anne Hutchinson, William Penn, John Smith, and Roger Williams.” Anne Hutchinson does not belong in the company of these eminent gentlemen. She was certainly not a significant colonial leader, and didn’t accomplish anything except getting herself exiled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for making trouble.
- * 113.7 Grade 5 (19) Citizenship (C). “Identify significant individuals such as Cesar Chavez and Benjamin Franklin who modeled active participation in the democratic process.” To have Cesar Chavez listed next to Ben Franklin is ludicrous. Chavez is

hardly the kind of role model that ought to be held up to our children as someone worthy of emulation.

* 113.7 Grade 5 (24) Science and technology and society. (A) Describe the contributions of famous inventors and scientists such as Neil Armstrong, John J. Audubon; Benjamin Banneker, Clarence Birdseye, George Washington Carver, Tomas Edison, and Carl Sagan.” This is a rather pathetic list. The only ones worthy of inclusion are George Washington Carver and Thomas Edison. What about Thomas Watson, the Wright brothers, Henry Ford, Alexander Graham Bell?

*113.24. Grade 8 (13) Economics. (A) “Identify economic differences among different regions of the United States.” This belongs in geography. (B) “Explain reasons for the development of the plantation system, the growth of the slave trade, and the spread of slavery.” This belongs in history. (C) “Analyze the causes and effects of economic differences among different regions of the United States at selected times in U.S. history.” This belongs in geography. These are further examples of why a separate strand for economics is not really justified.

*113.35. United States Government. (14) Citizenship. (C) “Analyze issues addressed in selected cases such as *Engel v. Vitale*, *Miranda v. Arizona*,” etc., etc. A glaring omission here is *Roe v. Wade*, which has arguably more impacted American life than any other Supreme Court decision in the twentieth century.