



NATIONAL EXPERT: MINNESOTA'S ACADEMIC STANDARDS AMONG THE NATION'S WORST

Review of the 2021 Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in Social Studies, Draft Three

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Dr. McClay is an eminent historian who has taught American history at the University of Oklahoma; Pepperdine, Georgetown, and Tulane Universities; Hillsdale College and other higher education institutions.

He has received numerous national and international awards, and served as a consultant to other states revising their Social Studies and History standards.

He is the author of *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story* (2019), a bestselling, prize-winning U.S. history textbook for high school and middle school students.

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Executive Summary

Dr. McClay's credentials:

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Dr. McClay begins his review by describing the goal of K-12 Social Studies education.

- » That goal is to equip students with the knowledge and habits they need to become citizens who can sustain and carry forward our heritage as a free, self-governing people.
- » This requires a civic education that nurtures a sense of community — “a vivid and enduring sense” of what we share as Americans who belong to “one of the greatest enterprises in human history.”
- » If students are to acquire a strong understanding of history, of how our democracy got where it is, they must study “a full, accurate and responsible account of our nation and its past.”

Minnesota's proposed social studies standards fail in all respects to fulfill this goal, McClay concludes.

The standards do not focus on what unites us, but what divides us. In fact, “the radical ideological assumptions behind them amount to a repudiation of everything that the serious study of history and civics has ever meant in this country, or any country.”

For this reason, the standards are “among the worst in the nation.” “It is hard to exaggerate the destructiveness of what is being attempted in Minnesota.”

The standards' flaws include the following:

- » ***They make “radical political activism,” not academic knowledge and the cultivation of civic identity, the goal of education.***
 - The primary ideological vehicle here is “Ethnic Studies” — a “fifth strand” that standards drafters have added to the four Social Studies disciplines in Minnesota statute: History, Geography, Economics and Citizenship and Government.
 - Ethnic Studies is not a valid academic discipline.
 - The political ideology that drives it “opposes America’s founding principles” as set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.
 - It highlights “resistance” to our nation’s fundamental institutions as a civic virtue, from kindergarten on, and

implicitly calls into question “the very legitimacy of the regime under which we live.”

- In this way, Ethnic Studies makes “a great disguise for the work of forming young minds into political pawns.”
- » ***The standards place race at the center:***
 - They will train children “to examine every question or moral conflict primarily in terms of race and group identity.” This is not “a healthy way to build a more equitable and harmonious American society.”
- » ***The standards eliminate basic facts of history and geography that students need to become informed citizens.***
 - They omit foundational knowledge of American and European history, including the sources of our democratic institutions and political ideas.
 - For example, students learn nothing about the key events and figures of the American Revolution and Civil War, America’s role in World Wars I and II, the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, and the French and Russian Revolutions.
 - The standards present American history — not as the story of an effort to realize our noble founding ideals ever more fully — but as an “ugly, soulless” competition between oppressor and victim groups.
 - **In geography**, students do not learn essential facts like the names and

locations of the continents, the Atlantic Ocean, the Amazon, the Rocky Mountains, England, or China.

- Instead, they will “explain the social construction of race and how it was used to oppress people of color and assess how social policies and economic forces offer privilege or systematic oppressions for racial/ethnic groups related to accessing social, political, economic and spatial opportunities.” (9.3.17.3)
- » ***The standards require teachers to become political propagandists.***
 - From grades K through 12, teachers must supply children with the stories of “marginalization, erasure, greed, domination [and] oppression” that the standards depict as the central dynamic of American history.
- » ***The standards are not “clear,” “objective” and “measurable,” as Minnesota statute requires, and will be virtually useless to teachers.***
 - On the contrary, they are “wooden, abstract, crude, clumsy, deficient in age-appropriate awareness, and absolutely useless to teachers seeking to improve their classroom performance.”

Examples:

- » First-graders — six-year-olds — are asked to “Identify examples of ethnicity, equality, liberation and systems of power, and use those examples to construct meanings for those terms.” (1.5.23.1)

- » Fourth-graders — 10-year-olds — are asked to “Explain the role that stereotypes and images, including those that are racist, play in the construction of an individual or group’s identity; identify the implications associated with them and how and why stereotypes have changed over time.” (4.5.23.2)

Recommendation

- » ***The standards are so deeply flawed that mere revision will fail*** to make them compatible with the fundamental aims of civic education.
- » ***The only solution is to jettison them and start over.*** Short of that, the elimination of the “Ethnic Studies” strand and ideology is “an absolute necessity.”

Introduction

I am pleased to have this opportunity to present my considered views regarding the 2021 Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in Social Studies, Draft 3. **I shall organize my evaluation into four parts.**

First, **I will introduce myself**, and offer some insight into my background and qualifications for this evaluative task. Second, I shall **make some general observation about the appropriate goals** for such Standards, and evaluate whether this document taken as a whole achieves those goals. Third, I shall provide some **specific commentary about the text of the Standards**, proceeding in roughly chronological sequence. Finally, I shall provide some **conclusions about where, in my estimation, the process should go from here.**

I am currently employed as a professor of history at Hillsdale College. Over the course of a lengthy career in higher education, I have held the following posts as an academic historian:

Victor Davis Hanson Chair in Classical History and Western Civilization, and Professor of History, Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, MI, 2020—present.

G.T. and Libby Blankenship Chair in the History of Liberty, and Director, Center for the History of Liberty, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, 2013—2020.

“I am pleased to have this opportunity to present my considered views regarding the 2021 Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in Social Studies, Draft 3.”

Reagan Professor of Public Policy, Pepperdine University, August 2019—May 2020.

William E. Simon Distinguished Visiting Professor, School of Public Policy, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA, August 2009—May 2010.

Fulbright Senior Lecturer in American History, University of Rome, January—May 2007.

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Chattanooga, TN, SunTrust Bank Chair of Excellence in Humanities and Professor of History, 1999—2013

Georgetown University, Washington, DC, Royden B. Davis Chair in Interdisciplinary Studies, 1998—99.

Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, Associate Professor of History, 1993—99; Assistant Professor of History, 1987—1993.

University of Dallas, Irving, Texas, Assistant Professor of History, 1986—87.

I have been the recipient of numerous awards for my scholarly work. My book *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America* received the 1995 Merle Curti Award of the Organization of American Historians for the best book in American intellectual history. Among my other books are *The Student's Guide*

to *U.S. History*; *Religion Returns to the Public Square: Faith and Policy in America*; *Figures in the Carpet: Finding the Human Person in the American Past*; *Why Place Matters: Geography, Identity, and Public Life in Modern America*; and most recently *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story*, a bestselling and prize-winning U.S. history textbook which has also appeared this year in a Young Reader's Edition, designed for middle-school students.

I also have a strong record of service to my discipline and to the country. I served on the National Council on the Humanities, the advisory board for the National Endowment for the Humanities, for eleven years, and am currently a member of the U.S. Commission on the Semiquincentennial, which has been charged with planning the celebration of the nation's 250th birthday in 2026. I have been the recipient of fellowships from the Woodrow

Wilson International Center for Scholars, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Academy of Education, and was a recipient of the 2022 Bradley Prize. I am a graduate of St. John's College (Annapolis) and received my Ph.D. in History from the Johns Hopkins University.

In addition, **I have served as a historical consultant to several states around the country that have undertaken the revision of Social Studies and History standards**, so I am familiar with the challenges and possibilities of the very kind of work that the Minnesota Social Studies Standards Review Committee has been doing. I have been a consultant to two different companies engaged in the production of secondary-school level curricula for the study of American history, and am actively involved in current public debates about the direction of civic education in American schools.



Section I: General Comments

Before I address myself to the specifics of this third draft of the proposed Standards, I want to take up some more basic matters first. These are considerations that we tend to ignore, but absolutely must engage more fully than we have, if we're to have a more satisfactory outcome from our efforts. And here is the core of the matter: We need to give deeper thought to the ends toward which we aim in teaching social studies to the young. We can't evaluate this draft or anything of the kind without first being clear about what we are trying to accomplish.

Or to put it more simply, we need to be able to answer with clarity the question: **What do we want from these statewide standards, and from the teaching of social studies in our schools?** And to ask the question even more pointedly, what in our list of wants is absolutely necessary? Many things are desirable. But education in

the real world is always a matter of triage, of throwing overboard the profusion of desirable but nonessential things, so that the essential ones can take root and thrive.

“The most fundamental justification for mandatory public education is that of creating a citizenry that will be competent for the sustaining of a free and self-governing people. Without it, liberal democracy is unsustainable.”

What then is essential in social studies? First and foremost should be civic education, what we used to call “civics,” something that we have badly neglected for a generation or more. **The most fundamental justification for mandatory public education is that of creating a citizenry that will be competent for the sustaining of a free and self-governing people.** Without it, liberal democracy is unsustainable. As Thomas Jefferson famously declared, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

But “civic education” refers to something more than an acquaintance with the nuts and bolts of a political system. Yes, it is important to understand how to vote, how a bill becomes

a law, what the three branches of government are about, how our complex federal system works, what our rights are, and a myriad of other procedural elements in our political arrangements. But it has to be more than that.

A sense of history needs to be there, for one thing. We neglect an essential element in the formation of our citizens when we fail to supply our young people with a full, accurate, and responsible account of their own country and its past. That's what the formal study of American history should provide: a sense of the larger story of which each of us is already a part. Cicero endorsed the study of history for just this reason: "To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born," he said, "is to remain always a child."

The evidence of our failure in this respect is overwhelming and incontestable. In fact, the most recent test administered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), sometimes called "The Nation's Report Card," shows continuing decline in already low history and geography scores, and flatlining in civics scores. The explanations adduced for this abysmal performance are many, and the barriers thrown up by the surrounding culture are formidable. But the bottom line is that we must recommit ourselves to the teaching of both history and civics, and the recognition that the two belong together. As Eliot Cohen of Johns Hopkins has aptly expressed it, "without history, there is no civic education; without civic education, there are no citizens; without citizens, there is no free republic."

All of which is true, and the stakes are indeed that high. But there is something more that needs attending to in the work of civic education. Tracking scores on standardized

tests can provide us with useful if limited data about the state of our historical knowledge. But they cannot tell us about the depth and quality of that knowledge, and the extent to which those who possess it feel a genuine and living connection to it — that is, a felt connection to their own past. That connection is what we most need to recover and restore.

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Citizenship is not merely about voting. It is about membership in a society of civic equals: citizens, not subjects, whose respect for one another's equal standing under the law is a guiding moral premise of the democratic way of life. Civic education is not only about how a bill becomes a law. **It is about promoting a vivid and enduring sense of what we have in common, of our belonging to one of the greatest enterprises in human history:** the astonishing, perilous, and immensely consequential story of our own country.

Both things involve fostering that sense of felt connection to our past, and of gratitude for the good things that we have inherited, along with a feeling of responsibility for the tasks of preserving them and improving upon them.

Ultimately, in fact, a patriotic education should be an education in love. It must be embraced freely, and be strong and unsentimental enough to coexist with the elements of disappointment, criticism, dissent, opposition, and even shame that come with moral maturity and open eyes. But it is love all the same, and without the deep foundation it supplies, a republic will perish. If we wish to perpetuate our republic, we need to cultivate in the rising generations the desire to do what is necessary to make that possible.

Where our decline is most alarmingly visible is in the loss of any semblance of civility in wide swaths of our public and private lives. We are in danger of losing our capacity for serious deliberation, and that is an ability that does not come naturally. We also have to cultivate a civic identity, a space that we learn to inhabit together. The cultivation of that identity, and the habits of mind and heart that go with it, are a central part of the task of educating citizens.

How to do that? **First and foremost, we have to strive to cultivate in ourselves an awareness of the things we have in common, rather than stressing the things that separate us.** That should be one of the principal aims of any program of study in civics. The things we have in common are a shared language, a shared capacity for reason, shared systems of law, and a shared culture, which includes the institutions of public life within which we channel our debates, as well as a shared account of our lives together as citizens of this town, this state, this country. This is what civic education, and social studies, should be about.

But we have been failing to do it. And a people that can't engage in rational deliberation is not going to be capable of democratic governance. "The qualifications for self-government in society are not innate," Jefferson said; "they are the result of habit and long training." Civic education ultimately has to concern itself with that long training, with the formation of souls that possess those qualifications, and are equal to the challenges and rewards of self-governance.

Now to the question at hand. **Do the proposed revisions to the Minnesota Social Studies Standards further that cause?**

"I find that the proposed new Standards do not warrant the public's support. They are unacceptably politicized, and are too deficient in too many categories to be acceptable."

For those who care about the education of Minnesota's young people, the state is coming to a critical juncture. Minnesota's K-12 Academic Standards in Social Studies are revised every ten years, and the latest revision is approaching the point of adoption. Now is the time for the public to focus its attention on these revised standards, and consider whether

the innovations they propose are going to be consistent with the public's interest in educating children for full and constructive citizenship in their state and their nation.

I find that the proposed new Standards do not warrant the public's support. They are unacceptably politicized, and are too deficient in too many categories to be acceptable. Some historical background will be helpful in clarifying the reasons for such negative

judgments.

First, it should be understood that the Minnesota standards adopted in 2004 were universally regarded as a model for the nation. They took their lead from a 2003 document produced by the American Federation of Teachers entitled *Education for Democracy*, which proclaimed that it was necessary for educators to "transmit to each new generation the political vision of liberty and equality that unites us as Americans, and a deep loyalty to the political institutions put together to fulfill that vision." (Full disclosure; I was a historical consultant for this project.) The AFT statement was timed to correspond to the 40th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington, and was signed by a politically diverse group of Americans including former President Bill Clinton; former United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick; Senator Edward Kennedy; Diane Ravitch; essayist Richard Rodriguez; Reg Weaver, President of the National Education

Association; Sandra Feldman, President of the American Federation of Teachers; Kweisi Mfume, President of the NAACP; Arturo Rodriguez, President of the United Farm Workers of America; former Michigan Governor John Engler; the historian David McCullough; and many others.

The AFT document called for “an expanded course of study in history, civics, and the humanities, providing students with a full, warts-and-all understanding” of their nation’s history. This is exactly what the 2004 Standards provided, not a sanitized version of the American past. And the AFT document concludes with the following paragraph: “As citizens of a democratic republic, we are part of the noblest effort in history. Our children must learn, and we must teach them, the knowledge, values and habits that will best protect and extend this precious inheritance. Our schools play a major part in this mission, and we the signatories of this document pledge them our full support and call upon all Americans to join us.”

The 2004 Minnesota standards responded directly to the challenge presented in the previous year by the AFT document to transmit “this precious inheritance” based in “the noblest effort in history” to a new generation of American students, including a knowledge of constitutionalism, limited government, liberal democracy, free institutions, civil society, market economics, and American history. The Minnesota document performed this task well, balancing the negative and the positive, acknowledging the nation’s sins and shortcomings, giving attention to the role of minorities, women, and non-Western

peoples as much as the role of men and people of European ancestry. The Standards also thoroughly examined social and cultural history, geography, economics, civics and government, as well as political and intellectual history and ideas. It was by no means a document taking a narrow and racially exclusive perspective on the American past. Far from it. And it is not hard to see why the 2004 Standards were regarded as among the best in the nation by a wide variety of observers.

This background needs to be understood to appreciate just **how radical the proposed new Standards are** — how radical a departure they have made from what were, only a few years ago, the gold standard for the nation, and **how tendentious and politically motivated their tenor is**, and consistently so. They seek to displace an excellent and balanced set of Standards — readopted in modified form in 2011 — by ones **motivated by radical, even revolutionary, political ideology**. Indeed, the **radical**

ideological assumptions behind them amount to a repudiation of everything that the serious study of history and civics has ever meant in this country, or any country.

Indeed, **it is hard to exaggerate the destructiveness of what is being attempted in Minnesota**. I cannot think of a single historical example of a nation whose governing authorities would choose to instruct their children in such a corrosive and self-abasing way. It is unprecedented. It is an exercise in near-continuous repudiation, or civilizational self-hatred.

The ideology behind these Standards opposes the centrality of America’s founding

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principles as embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Its highlighting of “resistance” as a civic virtue, from kindergarten on, is an implicit calling-into-question of the very legitimacy of the regime under which we live. It takes the view that history is not about a search for objective truth about the men and women who made our world, designed our institutions, built our cities, fought our wars, conquered dread diseases, and lifted the burdens of hunger and poverty for so many millions who swarmed across the oceans to its shores, and still do today. No, history is about the construction of useful and “truthy” narratives corresponding to the requirements of group identity, understood as categorization by race, class, gender, ethnicity, and so on. The larger meaning of American history in this view is not a story of an ever-widening experience of opportunity and freedom, but of a systemically oppressive society, in which there is only the grim and unending struggle between the powerful and the powerless, a struggle in which injustice generally has prevailed.

The moral atmosphere of the new proposed Standards is entirely reminiscent of the *New York Times*’ controversial (and historically inaccurate) “1619 Project,” which sought to claim the arrival of the first slaves in colonial Virginia as the true Founding of the American nation, rather than the traditional marker of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. **The drafters of these new Standards do not wish**

“The drafters of these new Standards do not wish to have American history thought of as the story of an effort to realize our noble founding ideals ever more fully, but rather as an ugly and soulless competition between the narratives of the dominant classes and the stories of the marginalized and oppressed and forgotten, whose sufferings and deprivations have in the past been erased from the larger story.”

to have American history thought of as the story of an effort to realize our noble founding ideals ever more fully, but rather as an ugly and soulless competition between the narratives of the dominant classes and the stories of the marginalized and oppressed and forgotten, whose sufferings and deprivations have in the past been erased from the larger story.

Therefore, the only plausible reason to study the past is to emphasize these lost stories, to the exclusion of the larger one, and prepare students for political activism and “resistance” to our nation’s fundamental institutions, in order to replace them in the name of a higher form of social justice. The past has no other possible use. This is precisely the opposite of what a good civic education ought to be doing.

We see what is coming at the very outset of the Standards, where we see **the elevation of something called “Ethnic Studies” to a category level (“strand”)** on a par with the four state-mandated topics of History, Geography, Economics, and Citizenship and Government. Ethnic Studies is an ill-defined catch-all category, whose principal unifying principle

is its embrace of radical political activism as the goal of education. But in these proposed Standards, Ethnic Studies is treated as an organizing principle equivalent to the other four established disciplinary categories — and because it is a principle that can be anything one wants it to be, **it makes a great disguise for the work of forming young minds into political pawns.**

Lest you think that I exaggerate, let me quote from the words of Brian Lozenski, one of the principal spokesmen for Ethnic Studies in Minnesota, and a leading influence on the Social Studies Standards:

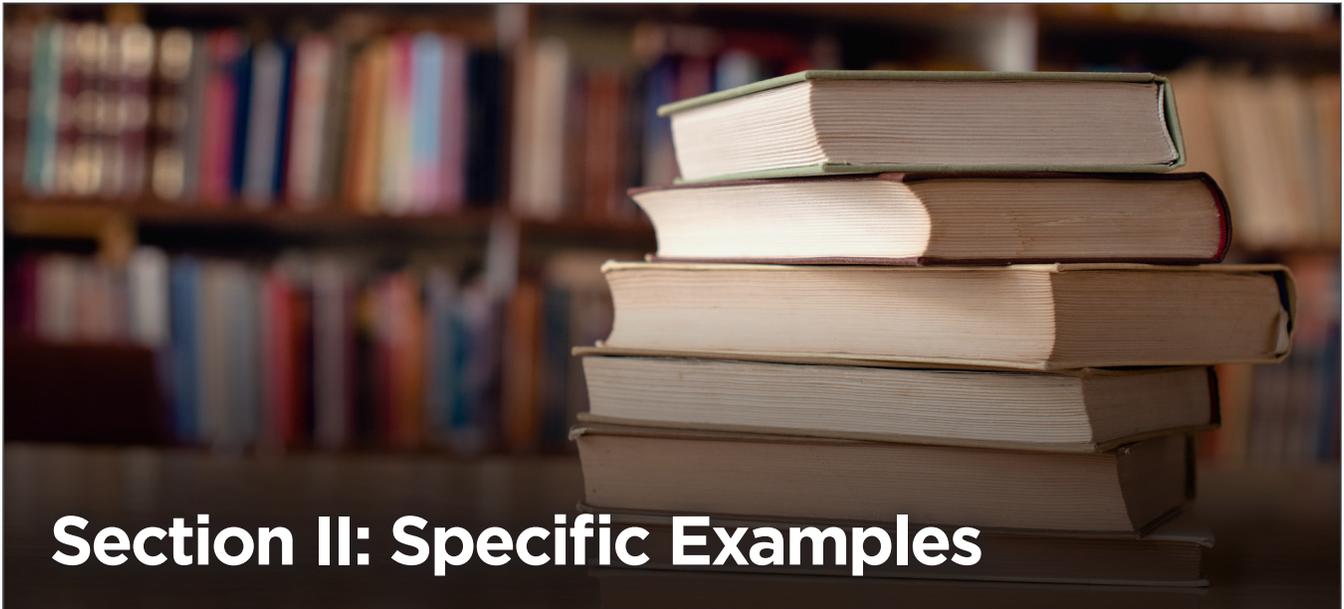
Ethnic Studies by nature is interdisciplinary and helps us understand how our social worlds are constructed. Ethnic Studies helps young people make connections between anti-Black racism and environmental crises, between ableism and mass incarceration, between labor exploitation and heteropatriarchy. It represents an educational paradigm that demands young people not only think, but act.

Ethnic Studies centers the heritage knowledges and lived experiences [sic] of those who have borne the brunt of colonial devastation, including global Indigenous communities, women and genderqueer people, neurodivergent and the dis-abled, and those living in poverty. Ethnic Studies de-centers those of European descent and, for instance, inquires about the relationships between Black and Indigenous peoples, and dives into the formation and complexities of Afrolatinidad and Mestizaje. Ethnic Studies explores the colonial roots of the dispossession of Palestinian land and the creation of Zionism. Ethnic Studies deconstructs the racialization of Asian peoples and asks questions about

colonization and conflict among Asian nation-states and the displacement of indigenous Asian populations such as the Hmong. Ethnic Studies demands language reclamation. Ethnic Studies demands an account of racial capitalism and its environmental impacts on the Global South. Ethnic Studies helps us connect so many struggles together in nuanced and complex ways.

Note the prevalence of language about “centering” and “de-centering,” and “exploring” and “deconstructing” and “asking questions about” and “demanding an account.” These are all words that deal with ideological framing, and not with content. Note also that the author asserts that this curriculum “demands young people not only think, but act.” He is not shy about emphasizing the activism that is the curriculum’s ultimate goal.

Of course, most Minnesota teachers are conscientious about teaching their subject, and do not understand themselves to be in the business of propagandizing young political activists. Will these teachers find anything of value in the new Standards? It is hard to see how. The fact is that, in contrast to the substantial and content-rich 2004 Standards, which offer many very specific guidelines for classroom instruction, **these new Standards are vacuous and lacking in specificity, and thus will be of little use to classroom teachers.**



Section II: Specific Examples

The document detailing the Standards and Benchmarks associated with the new effort is almost 100 pages long. **One would need 100 pages to detail and explicate all the examples of vacuous or politicized language.** So let's look at one example, the very first standard for Kindergarteners in the Civics and Government strand. Here is how the Standard (Std. 1) reads: "Civic Skills: Apply civic reasoning and demonstrate civic skills, including civic discourse, for the purpose of informed and engaged lifelong civic participation." The accompanying Benchmark (K.1.1.1) still doesn't give teachers anything specific to work with: "Demonstrate civic skills in a classroom that reflect an understanding of civic values by identifying a classroom goal and listing ways that students work together using civic skills to address a need or goal." This is not much help to a classroom teacher.

"This is the pattern throughout most of the Standards. With only a few exceptions they are wooden, abstract, crude, clumsy, vague, deficient in age-appropriate awareness, and absolutely useless to teachers seeking to improve their classroom performance."

This is the pattern throughout most of the Standards. With only a few exceptions **they are wooden, abstract, crude, clumsy, vague, deficient in age-appropriate awareness, and absolutely useless to teachers seeking to improve their classroom performance.** They have the air about them, much as does Lozenski's language about Ethnic Studies above, of abstract ideological dicta, rather than concrete and content-oriented guidelines for practical application in the classroom.

But that is just to scratch the surface of the problem. And now we return to the truly egregious addition, the Ethnic Studies strand. To be sure, all of the other strands contain politicized elements. By the sixth grade, the Citizenship and Government strand is asking, in its first Benchmark (6.1.1.1), that students "[a]nalyze a state or local policy issue by identifying and examining opposing

positions from diverse perspectives and frames of reference, interpreting and applying graphic data, determining conflicting values and beliefs, defending and justifying a position with evidence, and developing strategies to persuade others to adopt this position.” Here the politicized elements are implicit rather than explicit. But in the Ethnic Studies strand, the elements are announced in an entirely pure and undiluted form. I can convey the essence of the matter by a single example, which is by no means an unusual one.

This example again comes from the Kindergarten level in Ethnic Studies. First the dead giveaway that we are entering political country: there is a Standard under “Ethnic Studies” that is titled “Resistance.” (K.5.24) This category of Resistance runs through every grade level, including Kindergarten! The clear message is that resistance is a central aspect of civic education. Here is the very first Standard and Benchmark for Ethnic Studies at the Kindergarten level. The Standard reads as follows:

Resistance: Describe how individuals and communities have fought for freedom and liberation against systemic and coordinated exercises of power locally and globally; identify strategies or times that have resulted in lasting change; and organize with others to engage in activities that could further the rights and dignity of all.

It is odd to think that the principle of “resistance” is something we need to be teaching five-year-olds. At that age, resistance comes naturally, and the definition of injustice tends to be “not getting what I want.”

But now look at the accompanying Benchmark:

Retell a story about an unfair experience that conveys a power imbalance (your own or from a story you have read). Share what we can learn from this story.

This with five-year-old children! And a topic considered under the rubric of “ethnic studies.” There is an assumption present here that every “power imbalance” has to do with something called “ethnicity,” i.e., race, and children have

the requisite knowledge to judge for themselves what a more proper “power balance” might be. But more likely, the teacher will be tasked with “instructing” the child as to what constitutes a power imbalance. In other words, he or she will be engaging in political indoctrination.

If we pull back to look at the larger picture of what is going on in this approach to civic education, several things become apparent. The things that separate us, the weight

of racial or ethnic inequities and conflicts and resentments past, real or perceived, actual or imagined, are what are being emphasized. These points of division are going to be validated and loaded onto the consciousness of children early in their lives, long before they are able to reason about them, before children can find their way to a higher shared ground of civic equality and civic identity. **It is not an exaggeration to say that children will be trained by these Standards to examine every question or moral conflict primarily in terms of race and group identity. Is that a healthy way to build a more equitable and harmonious American society?**

Of course, we know that children have a strong sense of fairness, and use the word

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all the time. "It's not fair!" That's the unofficial battle cry of all young people. We also know that the perception of unfairness is generally a childish emotion that is likely to mislead us, and needs to be subjected to an external standard of reasonableness, generally administered by an adult. The process of becoming an adult is precisely that of learning how to separate our emotions from an objective shared reality that stands above them. That also is the way that we learn to be decent people and responsible citizens, by learning how to place the law and the public interest, and the shared sensibilities of others, above our passions and interests.

Page after page of the new Standards features objectives that are neither age-appropriate nor politically neutral. Many of them are frankly ridiculous. First-graders are asked to "Identify examples of ethnicity, equality, liberation and systems of power, and use those examples to construct meanings for those terms." (1.5.23.1) Fourth-graders are asked to "Explain the role that stereotypes and images, including those that are racist, play in the construction of an individual or group's identity; identify the implications associated with them and how and why stereotypes have changed over time." (4.5.23.2)

Here's another fourth-grade benchmark: "Identify the processes and impacts of colonization and examine how discrimination and the oppression of various racial and ethnic groups have produced resistance movements." (4.5.25.1)

Perhaps some elementary-school students are miraculously aware of these oppression narratives. But let's be frank. **What these instructions really do is require teachers to supply those stories of marginalization, erasure, greed, domination, oppression, and**

whatever else. It is a formula for turning teachers into propagandists, and even forcing them into that role — in many cases doing so against their wills.

As I said, this is the stuff of sheer hilarity... or it would be, were it not the souls of our children that are being marinated in this tendentious stew. The pattern established in the first grade continues through to the ninth grade, with the same boilerplate Standards language, accompanying benchmarks of increasingly strident ideological explicitness. By the ninth grade the student is repeatedly asked to "examine the impact of U.S. imperialism and foreign policy on immigration patterns," and "examine the construction of racialized hierarchies based on colorism and dominant European beauty standards and values," and "develop an analysis of racial capitalism, political economy, anti-

Blackness, indigenous sovereignty, illegality, and indigeneity." (9.5.23.5, 9.5.23.2 and 9.5.24.2) The case for radical politicization is so clear it does not need exposition. All one has to do is read the plain language.

In addition, **the imperative importance of activism is clear**, and sometimes even explicit. Third graders: "Identify a local public problem and describe ways that individuals and groups can take informed action to influence decision makers to make a difference in the civic life of their communities." (3.1.5.1) Seventh graders: "Identify a pressing contemporary issue in your community or the United States, examine its historical context and design a plan to address it." (7.4.22.2) Ninth graders: "Design an action plan to address the disproportionate impacts of environment issues and climate change on different communities from local to national scales." (9.3.16.3). All this comes before students can possibly have sufficient

"Page after page of the new Standards features objectives that are neither age-appropriate nor politically neutral. Many of them are frankly ridiculous."

scientific knowledge to have an independent understanding of the subject matter for which they are “designing.” **The call to activism is clear even in the strand for Geography.** For example, high-school students must “evaluate the impact of spatial decisions on policies affecting historically marginalized communities of color and Indigenous nations and take action to affect policy.” (9.3.17.4)

It is oppression narratives as far as the eye can see. It is astonishing how much is being left out in the process. **There is almost no attention to the foundational facts of American and European history.** In fact, the latter category, or its kindred category, Western Civilization, are both entirely missing in action. *There is no such thing as Western Civilization.* **A whole**

vast category of historical knowledge, from which we derived our institutions and many of our political ideas, is completely absent, gone with the wind. Even in the category of World History the new Standards give far less attention to Chinese, Indian, and Middle Eastern cultures than the 2004 Standards did.

In the urgent haste to learn the oppression narratives, students never learn the basic story of America, the key events, actors and ideas that shaped American democracy and the larger world. That narrative is not decentered; it is all but eliminated. The leadership of George Washington, the midnight ride of Paul Revere, the battles at Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill are never named. The leaders and pivotal events of the Civil War — including Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, the battles at Gettysburg, and the surrender at Appomattox — are never mentioned. America’s role in World War II is

barely mentioned, and students learn nothing about Roosevelt, Hitler, Stalin, or D-Day.

Nor do they learn about ancient Egypt and Greece, the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, the French Revolution, Napoleon, the Russian Revolution, etc. In Geography, students do not learn the names and location of continents, the Atlantic Ocean, the Amazon, the Rocky

Mountains, England, Egypt or China. Instead, they will “evaluate political, economic, spatial and historical perspectives used to justify the displacement/removal of indigenous people.” (7.3.17.1)

High school students — in Geography again — will be taught to “explain the social construction of race and how it was used to oppress people of color and assess how social

policies and economic forces offer privilege or systematic oppressions for racial/ethnic groups related to accessing social, political, economic and spatial opportunities.” (9.3.17.3)

The Draft Standards document tries to minimize its responsibility by stressing that there is a difference between these standards and an actual curriculum, emphasizing that local educators will make the decision about what materials to use, or to put it in the jargon of educationese, “how to deliver instruction.” But it is hard to see how such Standards, laying down such obvious and tendentious ideological goals (or as the document prefers to call them, “rigorous learning expectations”) could possibly leave room for any substantive flexibility for faculty and local officials. Although, paradoxically, it is also hard to see how teachers will be able to find in these Standards anything useful to them in their work in the classroom.

“A whole vast category of historical knowledge, from which we derived our institutions and many of our political ideas, is completely absent, gone with the wind.”



Section III: Conclusions

Let me conclude by referring back to my beginning, and to the fundamental questions I posed. **What is it that we want from our Social Studies classes in our primary, middle, and secondary schools? And do these revised Standards supply it?**

I think the answer to the last question has to be a resounding **No** — if, that is, we think that civic education in the broadest sense is one of the chief goals of social studies, and if we believe that the chief purpose of civic education is the production of citizens. Men and women who are public-spirited, who are conscious first and foremost of their commonalities, of the things that they share, of the ties that bind and the histories that connect, not the particularized wounds and resentments that they choose to foster and extend. We want and need men and women who have the capacity to know and love the imperfect country of which they are a part, and understand how their lives are already woven

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together in it, and in the lives of others before us, in countless ways.

There is pluralism and multiculturalism at every turn in these Standards. But I could not find a single place in them where the common experience of all Americans is invoked, and only one place — in the first grade! — where the word “patriotism” is even used. Even there, the word is not used in the language of a Standard but in one of the benchmark activities, and it is noncommittal about the virtues of patriotic sentiment, asking only for a description of “ways people show patriotism.” (1.1.2.1) That’s all it has to say. They could have been asking students for an anthropologist’s

perspective, or a Martian’s, rather than a citizen’s. That is not what is needed for the education of Minnesota’s young people.

Can these Standards be repaired, adjusted, and made compatible with the fundamental aims of civic education as it has been

traditionally understood? I do not think so. I think **they are so fundamentally flawed that the only solution is to jettison them and start over**, using the 2004 Standards as a guideline for how the next revision should be done. Short of that, **the excising of the “Ethnic Studies” portion of the Standards is an absolute necessity.**

Nothing will be lost, and much will be gained, by their elimination. But as I have pointed out above, even the four traditional strands are honeycombed with examples of politicized topics, though often conveyed in language so abstract that it is unlikely to have much effect. What is most problematic in the “traditional” strands is less what is present than what is absent: concrete and content-rich accounts of American history, Western history, even many elements of World history, basic Geographical knowledge, basic Economic knowledge about the workings of markets, currencies, and the like, and so on. All of this is set aside, so that the politicized agenda can take center stage.

There may be one lesson that we can profitably learn from these otherwise misbegotten and destructive standards.

“Minnesota has been thrust into national prominence by the prospect of becoming a terrible example, a byword for both sloppy pedagogy and mindless radicalism, rather than the good example that it has been for many years now.”

Look for a moment at the first of the Ethnic Studies Standards dealing with Resistance: “Describe how individuals and communities have fought for freedom and liberation against systemic and coordinated exercises of power locally and globally...and organize with others to engage in activities that could further the rights and dignity of all.” (1.5.24.1) That’s

not bad advice. After all, the Minnesota Draft Standards for 2021 are “a systemic and coordinated exercise of power” by educational bureaucrats, destructive to the “dignity of all.” It would be entirely appropriate, and very much in the American tradition, to resist.

So, I want to conclude by expressing gratitude for this opportunity to weigh in on a subject of great importance, an issue in which **Minnesota has been thrust into national prominence by the prospect of becoming a terrible example, a byword for both sloppy pedagogy and mindless**

radicalism, rather than the good example that it has been for many years now. I hope that the latter characterization can be made to prevail in this instance.





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