

National Experts Highly Critical of Minnesota's Social Studies Standards

MDE largely disregarded feedback from handpicked reviewers



On January 5, 2024, Administrative Law Judge Eric Lipman approved the Minnesota Department of Education's (MDE) controversial K-12 social studies standards, which have generated public outcry for three years. He rejected just one subpart of one standard as "unduly vague," and MDE quickly remedied that with a two-word tweak.

Judge Lipman should have applied his reasoning on undue vagueness to the entire set of standards on citizenship and government, history, geography, economics and ethnic studies — requiring MDE to withdraw them and start over.

Instead, he praised the standards for what he called their unifying, "E Pluribus Unum" spirit and assured Minnesotans that they will "prepare students for life-

long civic participation and collaboration with people from different backgrounds." In reality, the standards instruct students to embrace race-based group identities; portray America as "oppressive" and "imperialist"; and call on young people to "resist" our nation's fundamental institutions.

The judge's ill-considered decision will subject both Minnesota students and teachers to political indoctrination in the classroom for the next 10 years. Moreover, Center of the American Experiment recently obtained documents — through a public records request — that reveal **MDE ignored its own paid expert reviewers, and knowingly crafted academic standards that violate multiple statutory requirements.**

Three of MDE's four reviewers — experts in citizen-

ship and government, economics, geography, and history — criticized the standards, some in scathing terms. One of them denounced the standards as among the worst in the nation. “And now the sentences I do not want to write, but you have to read,” he wrote:

Compared with dozens of other standards, and tested in a number of different ways, **these proposed standards rank very low — much worse than average. They need a lot of revision before they could be called even barely adequate** [emphasis added].

This criticism is highly significant. MDE presumably chose reviewers it expected to endorse its proposed standards, just as it stacked the committee that drafted those standards with politically aligned extremists who share its ideology. (In fall 2021, the department abruptly dropped two potential reviewers after Republican legislators began asking questions about their apparent political bias. One potential reviewer had insulted Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis on social media, while the other was a fervent advocate of Critical Race Theory.)

MDE’s hand-picked reviewers criticized the standards for three fundamental reasons: They are 1) politically imbalanced, 2) deeply divisive, and 3) in many respects, unmeasurable and unteachable.

1. The standards’ political bias

The first reviewer, a prominent academic who has written and reviewed academic standards for more than 30 years, panned MDE’s proposed standards in a meticulous, withering 25-page critique. While acknowledging that he personally “favors most of the ideas of the political left,” he deplored the standards’ pervasive leftward bias.

The purpose of educational standards in a democracy, he explained, is to reflect a “broad consensus” by citizens on the knowledge and skills that “every child (future citizen)” should “gain in school.” If a “significant number of people” view a new set of standards as

“the result of one side ‘winning’ a political debate or culture war,” the drafting process has clearly failed, he wrote.

To test for impermissible political bias, the reviewer performed “a careful semantic analysis” of the entire document, “based on a peer-reviewed typology that has a strong research foundation in neuroscience and behavioral psychology.” He described its results as “deeply dismaying.”

First, he did a word count of terms and concepts associated with either the political left or the political right, using a framework devised by Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at New York University. He found a striking imbalance: **154 terms that signal the political left, and only six that signal the political right.** (Those

six occurred in just three benchmarks, all before third grade.)

“[T]hese benchmarks have a decidedly leftward slant, and they have essentially ‘marginalized’ valid moral concerns of the political right,” he concluded. (Emphasis added.) “Is this the ‘seeking

of consensus’ that is desired in a set of educational standards?”

The reviewer’s analysis of the “citizen issues,” or current events-related topics, on which the standards and benchmarks focus produced a similar starkly skewed result. For example, he found zero mentions of China, Russia, Britain, France and Spain, but many mentions of Native Americans, including six of “Anishinaabe” and 63 of “tribal.” Meanwhile, the terms “free press” and “freedom of press” — fundamental to American democracy — merited zero mentions.

In light of these and other far-reaching examples of political bias, the reviewer admonished MDE as follows: “I beg the [standards drafting] committee to re-read these benchmarks in light of **the very high likelihood that such a clumsy and glaringly unbalanced package will prove to be deeply counter-productive** [emphasis added].”

The worst offender: Ethnic Studies

The reviewer reserved his most devastating criticism

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for the Ethnic Studies standards and benchmarks. Here he documented “a host” of “serious pragmatic/practical/technical issues,” ranging from “stereotyping” and “causally questionable” to “bizarrely imbalanced.” Yet these defects “pale when compared” to “one huge problem of tone,” he wrote, referring to the standards’ underlying political imbalance.

The reviewer cautioned MDE not to dismiss his concerns as “just one opinion.” “It is precisely because I am...personally committed” to addressing “ethnic and racial justice that I think **Minnesota needs to seriously consider discarding the entire set of Ethnic-Studies standards and benchmarks, and starting over,**” he declared. (Emphasis added.)

2. The standards’ divisive ideology

MDE’s second reviewer, who focused on citizenship and government as well as Ethnic Studies, also emphasized that the purpose of education is to develop citizens who are well-versed in our nation’s “common dynamic narrative and our motto: E Pluribus Unum — out of many, one.”

But MDE’s standards do precisely the opposite, beginning in kindergarten. An Ethnic Studies standard labeled “Identity,” (Std. 23) states this forthrightly:

The student will analyze the ways power and language construct the social identities of race, religion, geography, ethnicity, and gender. The student will apply understandings to one’s own social identities and other groups living in Minnesota, centering those whose stories and histories have been marginalized, erased, or ignored.

In Ethnic Studies, with its focus on immutable traits that (allegedly) divide students, there is “one very important strand missing,” admonished the reviewer. “Ethnic studies,” he emphasized,

is not only about diversity, it’s also about unity. **M.L.K. said, ‘I have a dream today, deeply**

imbedded in the American dream.’ Without a conception of unity, diversity makes no sense [emphasis added].

Absent a focus on unity, our social fabric will fray, with dangerous and unpredictable consequences, he warned. “*This is the only understanding we can have as a nation and still call it a nation* [emphasis added].”

Making matters worse, **MDE’s standards also fail to teach students the basic principles that undergird our democratic system of government**, including the “rule of law, legal limits to freedom, and majority rule with protection for minority rights,” the reviewer wrote. As a result, “the principles and values that guide the republic” will remain “a mystery” to students.

Finally, the reviewer emphasized public schools’ paramount responsibility — especially at this polarized time in our nation’s history — to teach students that, when they “debate issues and advance policies that question our culture,” they should do so in “civil and respectful tones.”

“The idea of citizenship... is first of all about reciprocal duty and mutual respect,” he

declared. “Without this base, we have nothing but ‘me-first-ism.’”

In fact, however, **MDE’s standards accustom students to the language of disrespect, self-righteousness and grievance-mongering.** For example, the reviewer writes, “**calling US foreign policy ‘imperialism,’**” as the standards do,

shows a lack of international historical, economic, and political understanding. It’s a **made-up concept, signifying a deep disrespect for Americans who served their country in foreign conflicts and wars** [emphasis added].

The reviewer calls out the flawed, simplistic thinking that the standards instruct students to adopt. In our complex world, he writes, a student should be taught to “proceed cautiously when making a moral judgment about his or her claim,” and must understand that “it is

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misleading to impose a contemporary frame of reference upon the actions of historical figures.”

The standards do not promote nuanced habits of thought like these, which are “indispensable for good citizenship,” he suggests. Yet **unless students grasp such truths, he writes, there will be “little chance for real civic discourse” in the future** [emphasis added].

3. The standards are unmeasurable and unteachable

Minnesota law requires state academic standards to be clear, concise, objective, measurable and grade-level appropriate. MDE’s standards are deeply flawed in some or all of these respects, say three of the department’s reviewers.

The first reviewer focused on the social studies **benchmarks, whose purpose is to clearly delineate the specific, grade-level knowledge and skills students are expected to master** to fulfill the broader standard. Vague or overbroad benchmarks make it difficult or impossible for teachers and curriculum planners to do their jobs, he explained, and can sometimes even lead to “parent revolt.”

The reviewer found that the proposed Minnesota standards “fail miserably” in this respect. To confirm his assessment, he asked “more than 20 teachers, county-level social-studies coordinators, and other colleagues in five states” for their reaction to a random sample of MDE’s benchmarks. Their typical response: **“I wouldn’t have a clue what to do to meet this.”**

The second reviewer focused on the **standards’ lack of an “overarching conceptual framework”** and the “instructional limitations expressed in the work as a whole.” Because “no obvious design exists,” he wrote, knowledge will be “atomize[d]” into “meaningless bits of information, most of which, students will disregard.” Teachers will be left “to guess how a standard fits into the larger picture of what they are responsible for teaching.”

In addition, the reviewer noted, **the standards fail to define many of the sweeping terms and concepts**

they employ. “What,” for example, he asked, “is racial capitalism? There should be no assumption that a concept like that has a common meaning in the field of economic[s].”

“Even if you adhere to ‘agreed’ upon subjectivity,” he added, “there has to be some common agreement regarding facts[,] definitions, and values, even to approach meaning and civil decision making.”

Without such agreement, he concludes, **“implementation of these ideas and standards into classroom practice simply will not happen or will happen in incomplete and inaccurate ways** [emphasis added].”

He singles out Ethnic Studies standards in this respect, describing “Ways of Knowing/Methodologies” (Std. 25) as “confusing,” and “Resistance” (Std. 24) as “extremely difficult to understand” and “overloaded with content, some of which is contradictory.”

Finally, the reviewer emphasized that students cannot grasp complex topics until they understand the simpler ideas on which more advanced topics are based. For example, the citizenship and government **standards fail to teach students about democratic principles as basic as the “rule of law.”** Other

startling omissions, he points out, include “the complex understandings needed of concepts like civic reasoning, consensus building, market systems, monetary policy, human and social capital, and value tensions.”

The third reviewer, who assessed the economics standards, shared these concerns, listing the following examples:

- “The teacher may teach something without the required previous knowledge for students to learn, apply, and engage with the content in the lesson plan.”
- “You cannot just expect students to calculate the unemployment rate without learning the specific definition of who is considered unemployed...”
- “I am...concerned for the Economics strand,” in particular “the macro portion.” “The benchmarks need a lot of work. The wording is unclear on some of them. There are gaps in

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what students should know before meeting the knowledge and skills mentioned in the benchmarks.”

- “Some of the economic benchmarks make no sense...”
- If teachers “are not guided on...specific concepts, it can be frustrating and discouraging for teachers to teach it.”
- “It cannot be said enough that specific concepts need to be mentioned in the benchmark[s] that are the building blocks to graph, calculate, analyze, and explain [and] are missing on some of these benchmarks.”

Conclusion

MDE’s failure to massively rewrite the social studies standards in response to its own paid reviewers’ devastating critiques is scandalous. As a result, Minnesota public schools will have among the worst social studies standards in the nation.

The department’s second reviewer summarized what’s at stake. At this highly polarized “breakpoint” in our country’s history, he wrote, “[o]ur first priority, our first public policy goal, must be to ensure our survival as a free nation, and social studies educators must lead in this work [emphasis added].”

But this won’t happen unless our schools teach today’s students — the next generation of Minnesota citizens — what unites them and provide them with a rich understanding of the “principles and values that guide” our republic.

In this vital work, the Minnesota Department of Education has failed abysmally. ★

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