

March 2023

AHA Briefing Memo on Virginia Standards

On February 2, 2023, the Virginia Board of Education (VBOE) voted to accept the proposed [History and Social Science Standards of Learning](#) (SOLs) upon first review. After a period of public comment, the VBOE will meet again in late March to consider potential revisions before anticipated adoption in April 2023.

The American Historical Association (AHA) has monitored the history standards revision process in Virginia with concern. We encourage our members and other Virginians who share an interest in preserving the integrity of history education to [provide written comments](#) to the VBOE and testify in person at any of [six public hearings](#) to be held across the state from March 13-21.

Why Your Comments Matter

Since August 2022, the Virginia state history and social studies standards have emerged as an unlikely focus for politically motivated efforts to shape public education.

The collective efforts of individuals and organizations (including the AHA) have already accomplished a great deal in moving the revisions process in the right direction. In August 2022, then State Superintendent of Instruction Jillian Balow unexpectedly dismissed an initial draft of state history and social studies standards that had been developed over two years in collaboration with hundreds of educational experts. In November, and with little warning, Balow proposed a radically reconceptualized [new draft](#). The AHA's [letter](#) to the VBOE warned that such standards "would create substantial gaps in the knowledge, historical thinking skills, and habits of mind taught to Virginia students." The VBOE agreed with advice submitted by the AHA, a host of other educational organizations, and dozens of Virginians who testified that the November draft standards were unacceptable. The Board recommended developing a new draft that combined the August and November documents with reference to the existing (2015) standards.

In recent months, the AHA has worked in close collaboration with the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), the Virginia Social Studies Leaders Consortium (VSSLC), the Virginia Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (VASCD), and several other statewide organizations. In December, the AHA, the VSSLC, and the VASCD drafted [collaborative combined standards](#) for the VBOE's consideration. In January, the AHA and five other organizations published a [joint statement](#) criticizing Superintendent Balow's revised [January draft](#). Again, the [Board's response](#) to the eloquent testimony of dozens of concerned Virginians made clear its members recognition that further changes would be needed.

In politics, local relationships and vocal participation can trump other considerations. Every person who turns out to support honest and effective history education can make a measurable difference. Public participation is crucial at this stage in the revisions process.

Content Devoid of Context

The proposed SOLs currently under public review show a marked improvement over the deeply flawed November draft. In the wake of public criticism, the Board of Education took steps to produce a more rigorous framework, one that recognizes a wider range of voices. Virginia students will benefit from learning about the aspirations and achievements of changemakers—Alexander Hamilton (VUS.6c), Nelson Mandela (WHII.11b), Amelia Earhart (2.10b), the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (USII.6f), and the pivotal role of HBCUs in higher education (USII.2g)—alongside difficult topics such as redlining and the Tulsa Race Massacre (VUS.12a), Mao’s Cultural Revolution (WHII.12a), and Kristallnacht (WHII.9d).

After the Board voted to accept the January standards for first review, Superintendent Balow [brushed off criticisms of the document](#), noting, “we have expanded the history of Indigenous people, especially east of the Mississippi. We have expanded African American history, African American studies. We have expanded opportunities for students to learn about Asian American and Pacific Islander events.”

The Superintendent’s comments are true: There are more people and topics addressed in the new standards than in earlier versions, especially as pertains to Black history. Nevertheless, a lack of continuity across thirteen grade levels and poor organization throughout mean that students will learn—and, just as vitally, retain—far less of this material than they could and should. “Inclusion” in a long list of names and events cannot provide context, emphasis, or an overarching narrative. Adding faces to the mural does not change the story the picture tells.

Good historical content does not teach itself. The Virginia SOLs are currently more meaningful as a list of historical facts and figures than as a practical plan for primary and secondary education. Throughout this framework, a focus on names and events comes at the expense of the major themes and disagreements that drive historical change. Repetitive proclamations about the importance of “great individuals” and a singular “broad civilization” robs history of contingency and drama as well as accuracy.

The erasure of context and conflict results in a set of disconnected stories about the past with no overarching coherence. The SOLs devoted to US history contain no meaningful engagement with the enduring tension between republican forms of government and movements to expand democratic participation. Aside from declaring that slavery represents the “antithesis of freedom” (VUS.8a), there is little consideration of the many and varied campaigns to broaden the definition of citizenship to include and protect previously marginalized groups. The deeply misguided decision to ignore or brush past US involvement in wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq disregards a consensus among historians—as well as most Virginians—about how these conflicts themselves and the debates they spawned shaped our world, both at home and abroad.

Perhaps most alarming is the implication that neither slavery nor racism has a history. Though defenders of the SOLs are quick to say they recognize slavery as a principal cause of the Civil War. The document's overall treatment of slavery does more to obfuscate than clarify. The standards erase any distinction between the racialized chattel slavery that emerged in the Americas and earlier forms of bondage, such as the varieties practiced in ancient Rome (WHI.5e) and Meso-America (WHI.12e). Instead, the standards perpetuate misleading narratives with roots in racist ideology. Tenth-grade World History II carries the authors' discomfort with confronting racism to an absurd extreme, ascribing sole responsibility for "the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade" to "the Ashanti and other powerful Western African Empires" (WHII.6d). To diminish the significance of racism, the eleventh-grade Virginia and US history framework describes bonded labor (indentured servitude included) as a "type of slavery" (VUS.3b). Such narratives comprise an ahistorical pastiche that denies the role of racial discrimination as an organizing principle in histories of the US and the world.

How to Think vs. What to Think

An [inexplicable increase](#) in the sheer quantity of material that students are expected to learn will hinder their ability to develop either a comprehensive understanding of the past or the habits of mind that inform historical thinking—appreciation for context, awareness of change over time, information literacy, empathy for multiple perspectives, and the ability distinguish the past from our very different present.

History education can provide crucial training in critical thinking and independent analysis. Instead of dictating that students memorize long lists of names and terms, the SOLs can and should be reframed around exposing or introducing students to historical content. A minor shift in emphasis will enable a profound reorientation in pedagogical practice.

The document opens with "foundational principles" for social studies education that verge on political propaganda. Obviously biased language about "centralized government planning" and "socialism" being "incompatible" with "democracy and individual freedoms" should be deleted. This portion of the document already praises "free enterprise, property rights and the rule of law." Good history education trains students to analyze evidence and evaluate claims. Telling students what to think is a form of indoctrination.

One might expect a document like this to foreground the nation's founding principles. Instead, the introductory section runs through a list of talking points with no obvious connection to history or social studies education, placing political motivations ahead of the needs of students. Surely Virginia's teachers have not been telling students that they are "responsible for historical wrongs based on immutable characteristics, such as race or ethnicity." This language, borrowed from political activists, has no relevance to the SOLs and serves only to diminish their purpose and credibility. Moreover, anthropologists and historians would dispute the very idea that these categories are "immutable." Whatever the merits of "open access to all instructional materials" and eliminating "teacher-created curriculum," neither goal specific to social studies, nor are they "guiding principles" for history, geography, economics, or civics. They can and should be removed from the standards document.

Continuity and Content Progression

The proposed SOLs put much of the most complicated material in the early grades. In several instances, relocating concepts and content will dramatically improve student learning and retention.

Consider the coverage of Indigenous peoples. In a Frequently Asked Questions section on its website, the Department of Education has taken care to clarify that the standards address [Indigenous people before 1492](#). Though this is true, students will engage with the content in this document over the course of their thirteen years of education, not in one sitting.

Across all grade levels, the standards reinforce an outdated framework for the history of Indigenous people—adapted from a century-old thesis by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner more—in which Indigenous people essentially vanish along with the hostile wilderness that defined the “frontier.” Though most professional historians repudiated Turner’s core assumptions decades ago, his influence here explains why fifth-grade US history addresses the original inhabitants of the Chesapeake (US1.2) under the heading “Geography” (much as Native American artifacts are often exhibited in “Natural History” museums). In fourth grade, a standard on “Virginia’s Indigenous Peoples” emphasizes archaeology with somewhat more specificity (VS.2). But even when the standards draw more effectively on good historical scholarship, they miss the mark as practical guidelines. Second-grade social studies (2.5) offers the most extensive engagement with histories of Indigenous people, asking students to comprehend the “location, use of resources, and... contributions” of the nations and tribes of the Eastern Woodlands, Plains, and Southwest, as well as “understanding Indigenous Sovereignty, including but not limited to the importance of land, history, and culture.” This would be a lot for advanced undergraduate students to tackle. It will surely exceed the capacity of even Virginia’s most capable seven-year-olds.

Meanwhile, the eleventh-grade course on Virginia and US history (VUS) begins with Christopher Columbus and other European explorers (VUS1), effectively ignoring thousands of years of history. In fact, the course framework laid out in this document confines the influence of Indigenous peoples to a narrow window between the establishment of the “first thirteen” English colonies (VUS.2) and the American Revolution. A truly chronological survey would begin with Powhatan and the peoples of Werowocomoco, and recognize the influence of Indigenous nations through each subsequent era up to the present. Instead, the proposed standards awkwardly cram Indian Removal, westward migration, even a 2020 Supreme Court decision into a single standard (VS4) that is placed before a discussion of the French and Indian War (1754–1763) and the Revolutionary Era (1763–1789). Does it make sense for students to grapple with a recent Supreme Court ruling before they’ve discussed the constitutional powers of the federal judiciary?

Standards for early grade levels should include Indigenous history, discussions of slavery, and engagement with the complexities of the Revolutionary Era. The educational framework would be far more effective if it were revised to build a foundation for later introduction of more advanced concepts rather than requiring the youngest students to comprehend the most advanced material.

A similar pattern holds for many other aspects of US history, where content is rarely continuous across grade levels and significant topics are assigned in ways that undercut their effectiveness. For example, the SOLs ask fourth graders to describe “the laws that established race-based enslavement, including but not limited to the 1705 General Assembly law,” while neglecting to address these same sources in eleventh-grade history, when students would stand a better chance of comprehending them. Asking fourth graders to grapple with the codification of racialized slavery without reinforcing and expanding on this content in later grades will undermine the cumulative effectiveness of the standards.

Erasures and Emphasis

Given this focus on content, the decision to omit or marginalize certain crucial topics is especially perplexing. Subjects cut from previous drafts include fascism, militarism, racism, the bubonic plague, labor movements, the Korean War, the Transcontinental Railroad, the 2008 Financial Crisis, Medicare, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And what was the rationale behind significantly reducing coverage of the transatlantic slave trade, early 20th-century Progressivism, the Vietnam War, and the War on Terror? There is a simple fix to these omissions. Standards and component subpoints addressing these and other themes should be restored to language proposed in earlier versions.

For example: Does it serve the needs of our students to ignore the Columbian exchange (present in previous drafts)? Does reference to the Age of Revolutions (WHII.4) make sense after removing the substandard on the French Revolution and neglecting to mention Haiti? Who encouraged the Board to create a new substandard on the role of monasteries in spreading Christianity in Northern Europe (WHI.10b)? And why does this addition come at the expense of the Northern Renaissance and the influence of Islamic scholars like Averroes, whose writings helped spark renewed interest across Europe in classical philosophy (WHI.13)?

The Vietnam War, meanwhile, has been relegated to the margins of these revised standards, presented more as an afterthought than a transformative event in domestic politics, a key front in the Cold War, and a major international conflict that cost the lives of 58,000 US military personnel and millions of Vietnamese people. Framing the war as merely a domestic “social movement” (VUS.17c) is spurious and short-sighted.

The repeated tributes to innovation, free markets, and industrialization paid throughout the standards completely ignore the significance of workers, working conditions, labor movements, and regulations. The decision to delete the portions of the standards engaged with these issues (e.g. USII.4e in 2015 standards) results in a view of US history devoid of reference to the state or collective action of any kind. A single mention of the creation of “public sector labor unions” (USII.8c) in the 1960s appears to have snuck past an otherwise comprehensive shut out of laborers.

The standards also shy away from more recent historical developments. It is unwise to suggest, as they plainly do, that the processes of historical change began to wind down in the 1960s. It is telling that the section on Contemporary America in sixth-grade history ends with the “impact of the ‘Baby Boom’.” Absent are decades-old events, legislation, and developments that students will need to grasp if they are to understand Medicare, Johnson’s Great Society, the War on Drugs, NAFTA, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Affordable Care Act, and many more of the issues that continue to shape their world today?

These absences are perhaps most jarring as they pertain to the state’s own profoundly important past. Astonishingly, Virginia now proposes teaching its own history without reference to Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation, a turning point in the American Revolution included in the August draft but subsequently cut. Other puzzles abound: why would Bacon’s Rebellion appear in fourth-grade Virginia Studies, but not the eleventh-grade Virginia and US history course that serves as a capstone for high schoolers?

It is possible to salvage these standards in a way that accentuates their strengths. But this process will require careful and considered reorganization as well as thoughtful and nonpartisan reconsideration. The Board must prioritize the long-term educational needs of the more than 1.2 million public school students in Virginia over the short-term political imperatives of their ostensible guardians.