

AHA Statement on Florida's African American History Standards

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Florida schoolchildren learn a definition of *antisemitism* in the fifth grade as part of the state's Holocaust Education curriculum. State standards for high school recognize that to learn about the Holocaust, students must understand the meaning, breadth, and implications of antisemitism. The term itself appears a dozen times in eight pages.

This is as it should be. It is not possible to learn about what happened to European Jews without understanding the concept of racism and reckoning with its impact.

And yet, according to the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE), the state's young people can learn about slavery, sharecropping, lynching, Jim Crow segregation, disfranchisement, and ongoing systems and practices of racial discrimination without confronting the concept of racism. The word doesn't appear in the new African American history standards until high school, and then only once in fourteen pages.

Recent conversation about the new standards has pointed especially to a reference to enslaved people learning useful skills (indeed, that is a fact). But insufficient attention has been paid to the overall framing, particular contexts in which such skills were learned, and the revolutionary uses to which enslaved people put them. A skilled dressmaker, for instance, stitched the clothing that enabled her escape.

So, yes: enslaved people learned trades necessary to the southern economy based on racial slavery. But that work was forced labor, and an enslaved blacksmith's skills didn't protect him from his wife and children being sold. The Florida standards miss the crucial point when it comes to American slavery: the institution was grounded in property rights, and that property was human.

Considering where the standards document lays emphasis and how it contextualizes seemingly straightforward facts is key to understanding its apparent goal. In words that have been repeated in legislation passed across the South and parts of the Midwest, it is not permissible to teach that "with respect to their relationship to American values, slavery and racism are anything other than deviations from, betrayals of, or failures to live up to, the authentic founding principles of the United States, which include liberty and equality."

Such measures have two goals: (1) to marginalize slavery and racism from the broad narrative of US history and (2) to clean slavery up a bit. Note, for example, how the K-12 chancellor of the FLDOE responded to criticism of the section on slavery: "Our standards do not teach that slavery was beneficial. Our standards are factual, objective standards that really teach the good, the bad and the ugly." Most

historians would be curious to know what the chancellor regards as the “good” part of slavery. Equally perplexing is a comment from a trustee of one of Florida’s public universities: “The record of the United States on slavery on a comparative basis is much better than almost anywhere else.”

Given this perspective within Florida’s new educational establishment, it is hardly surprising that the state’s public school students will not see a mention of slavery until they reach the fifth grade; until then, the sole focus is on Black Americans’ “contributions” to American life. All well and good, but also a history cleansed of oppression or victimization. In high school, the curriculum mentions “contributions” 23 times (55 in the full K–12 document) without one mention of “white supremacy” and only a single reference to “lynching.” Students will learn about the exploits of patriotic Black soldiers without learning why *none* of these warriors were awarded the Medal of Honor during World War I or II.

What is the purpose of denying young people as comprehensive a history as possible? Why is the FLDOE promulgating a history curriculum that hides central elements of our nation’s past and refers to enslaved people as “Africans” even after they had lived in the United States for generations? These men and women were not Africans; they were Americans.

Students who learn that their forebears enslaved other Americans are unlikely to be inspired by such a telling of the past. But the remedy for discomfort is not to marginalize the lasting effects of legal, economic, social, and cultural institutions that condoned the buying and selling of other humans for nearly 250 years. Our work as historians is chock-full of stories that can inspire students and readers without obscuring essential concepts. All facts and narratives require context; in the United States, slavery and racism are contexts that cannot be dismissed as “mere deviations.”

Florida’s own governor has said, “You do not distort American history to advance your current ideological agenda.”

I am not advocating an education that makes children feel guilty for the actions of their grandparents or even their parents. History instruction should grapple honestly with the past so that students can shape their future with an understanding of how we got here and why it matters.