

April 14, 2023

Board of Education Standards
South Dakota Department of Education
800 Governors Dr.
Pierre, SD 57501

Dear Members of the South Dakota Board of Education Standards:

In September 2022, the American Historical Association (AHA) registered strong concern regarding the revisions process for the South Dakota Social Studies Standards. Despite some efforts to respond to overwhelming public criticism, the proposed draft on the agenda for your April 17 meeting still fails to satisfy the AHA's [Criteria for Standards in History/Social Studies/Social Sciences](#). The document's numerous flaws can be traced to a process that was rushed, secretive, and driven by political motives at the expense of the educational needs of South Dakota students.

The AHA urges the Board of Education Standards to restore the careful process delineated in [state law](#) and proceed with public review of the July 26, 2021, draft developed through the appropriate channels. Prior to October 2021, South Dakota, like many other states, followed a clearly articulated procedure for standards revision. The South Dakota Department of Education (DoE) convened a committee composed of historians and educators to revise the social studies framework. But Governor Kristi Noem cast aside the good work of this group before any public hearings were held. At a cost of \$200,000, the state DoE hired William Morrisey, a retired politics professor from Hillsdale College—a private religious college in Michigan with a public commitment to partisan politics—to rethink the entire framework for social studies education. The resulting standards, published in a [revised version on March 30, 2023](#), pursue an agenda that combines insufficient relevance to the needs of students with inadequate understanding of South Dakota's people and history. This is what happens when an appropriate and inclusive process is replaced by a single consultant with neither local ties nor direct, practical experience in K–12 history education.

The AHA joins a clear majority of South Dakotans in its assessment of this unabashed attempt to interfere in K–12 social studies education. Of 1,094 [public comments](#) gathered online, 940 oppose the new standards. Morrisey's proposal completely restructures the entire curriculum. Parents and taxpayers wonder who will foot the bill for new textbooks at every grade level and to retrain teachers to cover totally different material. Local [superintendents](#) and school administrators worry about how teachers will cover a dramatic increase in content without additional class time. South Dakota's [nine tribal nations](#) understandably lament that their histories have been scaled back and marginalized.

Morrisey's standards appear to have ignored the age-appropriate intellectual development of children. Even the brightest first graders, for instance, will struggle to understand John Winthrop's "city upon a hill" sermon (1.SS.7.H), when they are still coming to terms with their own place in a local community.

And will a six-year-old really be able to “explain” the history of slavery as well as “why slavery is morally evil” (1.SS.7.E and F)? Furthermore, the standards specifically and deliberately ignore the role of historical interpretation and contextualization, as if history were just a long list of names and dates. Good history education helps students learn to explore issues from multiple perspectives.

These flaws and shortcomings are the results of politically motivated efforts to reject established legislative and education policy procedures. When the state DoE developed standards that Gov. Noem considered incompatible with her ideological predilections, she chose to disrupt the process rather than request revisions from the duly constituted working group of historians and other educators. In February 2022, the AHA [sent letters](#) to South Dakota’s legislature opposing proposed legislation restricting history education. When the legislation failed to pass these bills, Gov. Noem turned to executive order to prohibit the teaching of “divisive concepts” and “critical race theory.” To dispense with established processes reveals an alarming lack of transparency and disregard for the public.

This is the bottom line: **The standards you are considering would do significant harm to students in your state.** In eschewing critical thinking and habits of mind, these standards would set South Dakota students at a disadvantage as they prepare for success in college and a range of careers. We must prepare our students for success in the 21st century instead of clinging to an idealized vision of 1950s education that never was. The narrow history education elaborated in this draft would fail to help students locate their own individual stories within South Dakota’s history. By erasing the complex and contested voices that together made the United States, it will rob them of the skills necessary for engaging in civic life.

The AHA urges you to revisit the 2021 proposed standards. Tainted by serious procedural errors, the March 30, 2023, draft cannot be redeemed to meet the standards of our discipline.

With 11,000 members, the AHA is the largest membership association of professional historians in the world, representing every historical era and geographical area. Founded in 1884 and incorporated by Congress in 1889 for the promotion of historical studies, the Association provides leadership for the discipline, helps to sustain and enhance the work of historians, and promotes the critical role of historical thinking in public life. Everything has a history.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James Grossman', written in a cursive style.

James Grossman
Executive Director