

April 25, 2024

Governor Kim Reynolds  
Des Moines, IA

Dear Governor Reynolds:

HF 2545 injects politics into the process for reviewing and revising state academic standards for K–12 students in history, social studies, and other disciplines. Riddled with distortions and inaccuracies, this legislation overrides the state’s mandated process for developing public school curricula, while imposing unprecedented restrictions on the content and structure of key courses in US and world history. The American Historical Association (AHA) urges you to veto this bill within the 30-day window for legislation passed in the final three days of a general assembly session.

Iowa does not need a new “plan to regularly review and revise” the state’s core content standards. Your state already has an effective system in place to accomplish this goal. In his 2013 Executive Order 83, Governor Terry Branstad initiated a multistage process for the revision of academic standards that allows ample opportunity for public scrutiny and input. In 2017, the State Board of Education adopted revised K–12 Iowa Core Standards in Social Studies. Owing to pandemic-related delays, implementation is still ongoing. Throughout this process, Iowa Department of Education staff have incorporated input from committees of educators, academic historians, parents, and a variety of community stakeholders. This democratic process, which emphasized contributions from a wide range of Iowans, accords with guidelines from the AHA, the National Council for the Social Studies, and other leading professional organizations.

HF 2545 abandons this decentralized and responsive model for curriculum development. The new legislation insists that each committee tasked with reviewing portions of the curriculum must include “four members of the general assembly” appointed by party leaders in each chamber. In addition, it tasks the director of the state education agency with preparing a report with findings and recommendations for the governor and the general assembly, communicating unambiguously that it is politicians who will exercise control over the K–12 curriculum.

Few Iowans are likely to accept the notion that decisions about what is taught in public schools should be subject to partisan control. Fewer still are likely to support the idea that putting elected politicians in the room where decisions about curriculum are being made would somehow contribute to the quality of history instruction in Iowa’s schools.

Iowa’s education system is built on respect for local and district-level priorities. Section three of HF 2545 imposes what is, for Iowa, an unprecedented degree of state-level control over the content of primary and secondary history courses. This statutory mandate adds new requirements that almost certainly will require districts to purchase new textbooks, retrain teachers, heavily alter curricular materials, and

invest in extensive professional development at considerable expense. If enacted, this measure would disrupt the ongoing implementation of Iowa's current academic standards and add even more uncertainty into an education system still reeling from the lingering effects of a global pandemic. The result is likely to disorient teachers, burden already strained school budgets, and do a disservice to students, all while elbowing Iowans out of their own educational policymaking.

To what end?

Iowa's protocols for creating social studies standards establish a process that is transparent, inclusive, and incorporates insights from both professionals and relevant public stakeholders. In contrast, the legislative architects of HF 2545 exploited procedural loopholes to rush through radical reforms with no advance warning and little time for debate. On April 17, at the tail end of the legislative session, Senator Brad Zaun proposed a sweeping amendment that added a pared down version of a different bill (HF 2544) that had failed to progress beyond the Senate Education Committee earlier this session.

Adding five of the seven sections of the final bill and tripling its length, these changes significantly expanded the scope and scale of the measure to include proposals that had already failed in the face of public scrutiny. In February, the AHA sent a letter to Iowa legislators pointing out that the language in HF 2544 cobbled together provisions from five model bills being promoted by a coalition of out-of-state activists with little attention to the specific needs of Iowa students at each stage in their educational development.

By not following its own mandated (and appropriate) processes, Iowa is undercutting the future prospects of its students. As the AHA has documented through our extensive work on career preparedness in history classrooms, the aspect of history education employers value most is students' ability to communicate with and understand people from different backgrounds. In contrast, HF 2545 tasks curriculum review committees with prioritizing geographically and culturally narrow versions of US history, Western civilization, and civics. At a time when Iowa should be offering its students the best and broadest educational opportunities to stay competitive in the world economy, these standards have the potential to hobble students with a parochial worldview and deprive them of the chance to become tomorrow's global leaders.

The new curricular mandates included in HF 2545 appear to contradict various clauses within Iowa Code's existing education requirements. Consider the following examples:

- Iowa Code Section 256.11 provides that "global perspectives shall be incorporated into all levels of the educational program" (Iowa Code Section 256.11). HF 2545 focuses narrowly on US history and Western civilization, crowding out limited resources and class time in world history. Districts and teachers will be forced to choose between different legal requirements.
- Iowa Code 256.11 also establishes that standards must contain "a multicultural . . . approach." In contrast, HF 2545 requires that the American history course "begin with the discovery of the western hemisphere." This ignores entirely thousands of years of history in both Iowa and North America. Beginning American history with first contact between Europeans and Indigenous Americans while including an extensive list of classical influences on Western civilization ensures

a lopsided approach to American history, omitting many of the diverse perspectives that have made Iowa and the United States thrive.

- Section 256.7, subsection 26, requires “alignment of the core curriculum” in Iowa’s public schools “to other recognized sets of national and international standards.” The curriculum mandates in HF 2545 are patterned after model legislation from a coalition of activist organizations, not a recognized or accredited source of standards. The future of Iowa’s students is far too important to hold hostage for political ends.

These flaws and shortcomings are the results of politically motivated efforts to reject established legislative and education policy procedures. This bill is a Frankenstein’s monster constructed out of five out-of-state model bills that share little more than the support of a small group of lobbyists with an overt political agenda. Iowa’s first-class public universities have plenty of historians to provide the kinds of expertise that this legislation ignores. Instead of turning to language sourced from New York’s Madison Avenue, Iowa should consider adopting its own homegrown standards. The AHA urges you to reject this bill, which will weaken public K–12 education to the detriment of Iowa’s students.

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". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "J" and "G".

James Grossman  
Executive Director