

American Lesson Plan

Teaching US History in
Secondary Schools

A Report from the American Historical Association

2024

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American Lesson Plan: Teaching US History in Secondary Schools

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Introduction

What Are Students Learning about Our Nation's History?

Since 2020, an expanding and contentious debate over history education has generated outrage, wild claims, and a growing sense of alarm in homes and communities across the country. State legislators, school board members, pundits, parents, and activists endorse a dizzying array of potential solutions even as few seem to agree on either the root cause or the nature of purported crises in our public schools.

These debates storm across a landscape of history education often mischaracterized through stereotypes and assumptions grounded in overtly ideological agendas. The loudest voices frequently focus on what they believe students learn in the classroom. Without reference to any concrete evidence that teachers routinely use a series of “inherently divisive concepts” or hot-button texts, state governments across the country have created unprecedented legal restrictions on the content of history instruction. At least 20 states have enacted legislation or taken executive action in this vein, while related controversy has spilled over into the revisions process for academic standards.¹ Opponents of these prohibitions accuse legislators and their allies of invention and distortion in these caricatures of curriculum and practice.

This political theater and vigorous debate lack an important element: evidence drawn from careful research. While scholars and journalists issue periodic reviews of textbooks and state standards, no research team has developed a comprehensive analysis

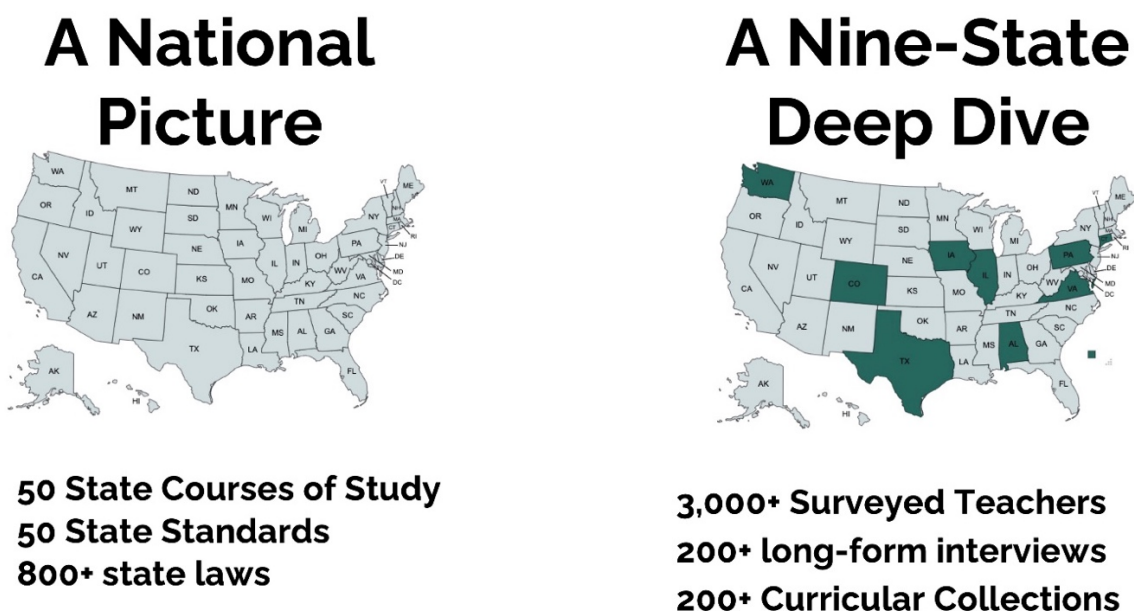
¹ The count is higher still when it includes restrictions focused on elementary or postsecondary education. On legislative and executive initiatives, see Jeremy C. Young and Jonathan Friedman, “America’s Censored Classrooms 2023,” PEN America, November 9, 2023, <https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-classrooms-2023/>. On state standards, see Julia Brookins and Brendan Gillis, “Maintaining Standards: Recent AHA Contributions to the Fight for Honest History Education,” *Perspectives on History* 61, no. 5 (May 2023), <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/maintaining-standards-recent-aha-contributions-to-the-fight-for-honest-history-education-may-2023/>.

of the full picture—the what, how, and why of middle and high school US history instruction.

In 2022, the AHA launched the most comprehensive study of the national US history teaching landscape undertaken in the 21st century. We wanted to know what is actually happening in classrooms across the country. Are teachers distorting history or indoctrinating children? Careful research transcends the heat and noise surrounding history instruction and enables us to provide a helpful and reliable source of information to parents, administrators, legislators, journalists, historians, and the many other stakeholders invested in the future of public education.

This report distills insights gathered during a two-year exploration of secondary US history education to illuminate the three levels where decisions are made about what students learn: the state, the district, and the teacher. Combining a 50-state appraisal of standards and legislation with a nine-state deep-dive into local contexts, we commissioned a NORC at the University of Chicago survey of over 3,000 middle and high school US history educators, conducted long-form interviews with over 200 teachers and administrators, and collected thousands of pages of instructional materials from small towns to sprawling suburbs to big cities (Fig. 1). The US education system—diverse, devolved, and divided—could never be captured by the blunt slogans that have dominated partisan media and drawn attention from even more careful observers.

Fig. 1: Overview of Project Source Base



What have we learned?

First and foremost, we've learned that secondary school US history teachers are professionals who are concerned mostly with helping their students learn central elements of our nation's history. Many teachers participate in a nationwide culture of history education that operates through channels rarely addressed in public debates on the topic. The lessons, assignments, and curricular materials we reviewed display broadly similar approaches to US history across states and localities. We did not find indoctrination, politicization, or deliberate classroom malpractice. A lack of resources, instructional time, and professional respect represent far clearer threats to the integrity of history education across the United States. If there is any wholly inaccurate message being sent by our schools to millions of students and their families, it is that history is not important enough to command time, attention, and public resources.

We have also learned that a compelling answer to the question of “what is actually taught in American history classrooms?” rests on an understanding of how decisions are made about what is taught, how teachers feel about the process, and, ultimately, what goes right and wrong with history along the way.

This story—of how (or whether) curricular initiatives travel from national priorities, through state agencies and local bureaucracies, across networked professional associations and interest groups, and onto the teacher's desk—is not easily summarized. Borrowing a culinary metaphor, our study of standards and curricula is an appraisal of required menus and popular recipes, not a review of the meal itself.² A vast array of cookbooks, ingredients, and health codes shape what the chef (the teacher) is enabled, encouraged, and obliged to incorporate as they step into the kitchen to prepare a meal (or to sit down on Sunday night to prepare a lesson). Consequential decision-making happens at every level, even if many state and district-level curricular cookbooks never leave the shelf.

We highlight several insights that we hope readers will consider as they contemplate the future of education:

1. **Common Ground:** While there is no national education *system*, an informal culture of history teaching grounded in common goals and a shared professional sensibility is

² The metaphor is repeated often by educational historian Jonathan Zimmerman. See Erik Gross, “A Conversation with Jonathan Zimmerman: Evangelizing Liberal Education,” *The Forum*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.goacta.org/2019/08/a-conversation-with-jonathan-zimmerman-evangelizing-liberal-education/>.

evident nationwide in both discourse and classroom practice. The accountability movement in US education pulled social studies into successive rounds of standardization beginning in the 1990s. While history was left unevenly marked by the double-edged sword of standardized testing, accountability reinforced similar courses of study and shared sets of values, norms, resources, and vocabulary that teachers nationwide recognize. This common ground is sustained by professional organizations of teachers and administrators, curriculum publishers, social media groups, resource providers, and professional development programming.

The good news is that the US history typically taught in public schools is not riddled with distortions or omissions. Many teachers present variations on a broadly consistent outline of US history that is grounded in evidence, familiarity with foundational primary sources, and the work of professional historians as refracted through commonly used educational resources. Local curricula and state standards lay the groundwork for a generally unobjectionable (if limited) structure of coursework where rigorous history can certainly thrive. Curricula are at their best when questions of causation, context, and significance frame the content.

When materials fall short of the expectations of professional historians, it is typically because history instruction has been streamlined to focus on bare facts, banal platitudes, flat inevitabilities, or a vague set of literacy skills rather than meaningful knowledge. State mandates and prohibitions are unlikely to solve this problem; social studies teachers need more classroom time and more professional development.

2. **Cold Fronts and Hot Spots in the Culture War:** Media accounts of a politically charged war for the soul of the social studies are overblown. The national teaching culture described above varies from state to state, district to district. But generally it is grounded in professional norms and shared commitments that bear little resemblance to caricatures of classroom indoctrination. Yes, politics does intrude and perhaps sometimes distort. Teachers in some locales have been bullied and spooked away from perfectly good lessons by threats associated with right-wing ideological activists and punitive state legislation. Meanwhile, teachers in some progressive enclaves cringe as administrators insist on ideologically inflected initiatives that push history and historical analysis to the margins. Still, the significant majority of teachers do not face regular political objections to the way they teach US history; far from fending off

throng of critics, many struggle to get parents, students, and even administrators to care about history at all.

The teachers in our sample consistently express a strong and praiseworthy professional commitment to partisan neutrality in the classroom. Teachers want students to read and understand founding documents to prepare them for informed civic engagement. They also want them to grapple with the complex history and legacies of racism and slavery. Curricular materials associated with overtly partisan or ideological messaging can expect a cool reception from teachers.

History is always political.³ At a minimum, historians and educators make decisions about what people, texts, events, and topics are worth knowing and understanding. But the politics of historical interpretation rarely align precisely with any single political party or movement. A majority of history educators embrace an approach to the past that is grounded in helping students recognize the importance of respectful attention to multiple perspectives, even those with which they may vigorously disagree. Americans will continue to debate what is worth learning about their nation's history—and they won't always agree.

3. **Free Online Resources Outweigh Textbooks:** Educational publishing is still big business, but traditional textbooks are unlikely to stand at the center of history instruction. The eclipse of textbooks reflects the advent of digital learning management systems (LMS), the proliferation of online teaching materials and open educational resources (OER), a relentless push for “one-to-one” ratios of computing devices to students, and a student population that many teachers increasingly view as unprepared and/or unwilling to read critically or at length. In place of or as a supplement to textbooks, schools license digital materials on an ongoing basis, often outside of state instructional materials adoption processes or district approval procedures. Meanwhile, teachers make prolific use of a decentralized universe of no-cost or low-cost online resources. US history teachers rely on a short list of trusted sites led by federal institutions including the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and Smithsonian museums.

³ Throughout this report, we carefully distinguish between politics, partisanship, and ideology. Politics is defined through human relationships and turns on debates over who can or should hold power. Politics become partisan when individuals shape their views around a party or its agenda. Ideology describes how ideas and ideals shape political action.

4. **Testing Matters, for Better or for Worse:** The presence of a state-mandated assessment in history exerts a strong influence on district conditions, with local ramifications for staffing, reporting, interim testing, and curricular alignment. Teachers in states with and without testing report mixed feelings in each case, sensing the boost in clarity, status, and resources that tested subjects receive while bemoaning the narrowing of curriculum that can accompany standardized assessment. Testing at the state level tends to produce more testing and administrative paperwork at the local level. Generally, however, trends appear to be moving away from standardized testing in social studies. History was always a collateral target of the accountability movement, and assessment rituals have been slow to reassert themselves following the interruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.
5. **Teachers Make Curricular Decisions:** Despite efforts by state agencies, district administrators, and school principals to align, synchronize, assess, and discipline instruction, teachers have substantial discretion in deciding what they teach, how they teach it, and what materials they use. Outside of assessment states, very few teachers perceive that their district requires anything of them beyond the pace of the course. At the course-team level, however, collaboration is indeed ascendant, whether chosen freely or mandated by district or school administrators. Looking across their careers, veteran teachers report a clear trend away from autonomy and idiosyncrasy and toward alignment and common assessment. Nevertheless, many teachers retain considerable control over crucial decisions about what they say and do in their classrooms.
6. **Bad Questions Give Inquiry a Bad Name:** One of the most promising developments of the past 40 years of history instruction has been the increased focus on history as a discipline-specific process of inquiry. Teachers have more sophisticated curricular resources than ever to help students inquire, think, read, and argue like historians. However, there may be collateral costs to this otherwise productive focus on inquiry. When content (names, dates, places, stories) are blurred in favor of skills-based abstractions, teachers may have more difficulty defending the integrity of history against politicized accusations that what they're teaching is nothing more than a "biased," "divisive," or "problematic" opinion. Nor does calling something an inquiry guarantee that moralism, presentism, or fatalism won't creep into history teaching. Ongoing dialogue among academic historians, teachers, administrators, curriculum

developers, and the public can sharpen collective understandings of the difference between good historical questions and the questions that history can't answer.

7. **Calls for Help:** Teachers freely admit where they could use more support, citing areas of challenge on both ends of the American history timeline; precolonial Native America and events since the 1970s rank highly as areas for which teachers voice the need for more training. Judging from the curricula we appraised, historians across all subjects and eras of US history have an important opportunity to distill and communicate recent insights from their subfields to K–12 educators. Moreover, K–12 educators have a crucial opportunity to inform the type of research, writing, and professional development (PD) that would be most productive.

Whether under pressure to rush through a topic, or admitting that they lack strong content knowledge in particular areas, teachers cite the need for ongoing, history-rich professional development. This is particularly urgent, as district-organized PD tends to focus on technology or pedagogy, rather than the subject-area enrichment that teachers say they want.

This report documents and analyzes the AHA's exploration of the content and contours of US history lessons across the country. To fully contextualize what teachers deliver in the classroom, we examine the complex balance between state policy, district-level curricula, and the work of individual teachers. Classroom educators have much more autonomy and exercise a far greater degree of professional engagement than many legislators and activists recognize. Where teachers turn for educational resources and the extent to which they consult state academic standards can matter more than the content of textbooks, the arcana of administrative guidelines, or the political party for which they cast a ballot.

Organization of the Report

This report is driven by three questions:

- What are American middle and secondary school students taught about US history?
- Who decides what will be taught in US history?
- What sources, texts, and materials do teachers actually use when they teach US history?

We address these questions across the four parts of the report.

Part 1: Contexts explains the rationale and methodology for the study, including the reasons we chose particular research questions, sample sites, and source bases. We show how we captured a snapshot of conditions across three levels of curricular decision-making: the state, the district, and the teacher. This section places the report in historical context, offering a brief account of the perennial and evolving debates about history education in the United States.

Part 2: National Patterns highlights trends and anomalies in the patchwork of US history education across the United States, including courses of study and the scope (the temporal focus) of coverage. We explain the rise of state education agencies and state social studies standards along with common sources of alignment such as the College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards (C3 Framework). We appraise the role of state-mandated assessments as well as the variable rationales, stakes, and implementation of history testing. We highlight national patterns of legislation related to history and civics education since 1980, including mandates for coverage of diverse groups and other topics, noting where legislation has changed or been consistent across the states.

Part 3: Curricular Decisions moves into the schoolhouse, discussing how teachers navigate their professional environments and responsibilities. We explore the tug-of-war between school administrators and history teachers, detailing the curricular effects of these labor dynamics on paperwork, pedagogy, and politics. We track the rise of teaching teams and their varying levels of alignment from common exams to pacing guides. While documenting the decline of textbooks in K–12 history classes, we explain what has replaced them, especially the range of free online sources and digitally licensed curricula. We describe the various forms these resources take and critically consider the implications of their emphasis on inquiry. This section concludes with a detailed exploration of the pressures that teachers face as they attempt to navigate controversy: partisan resources they try to avoid; ideological tensions stemming from state and district policy; and conflicts introduced by parents and community members.

Part 4: Curricular Content appraises specific content areas and how teachers and districts make plans to teach US history. Based on materials we collected from teachers and districts, we focused a standardized rubric on six topics, chosen for their widespread classroom coverage and their prominence in public, political, or

historiographical debates: Native American History; the Founding Era; Westward Expansion; Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction; the Gilded Age and Progressive Era; and the Civil Rights Movement. In all cases, we intended our appraisals to be part of a constructive description of meaningful patterns, not a celebration or indictment of any individual teacher, district, curriculum developer, or state education agency.

Part 1: Contexts

Research Questions

Well before the AHA initiated this research, various public figures already had claimed to have answered its underlying questions. In one camp were political progressives, whose response to the election of President Donald Trump in 2016 included calls to confront the social bases of racism and reaction in American politics.¹ In some cases, these calls revived a perennial critique: that K–12 US history curricula instilled a triumphal fable about the nation, insufficiently revised to reflect more critical scholarship and unreflective of a racially diversifying cohort of school-aged Americans. Journalists like those helming the *New York Times Magazine*’s multistage 1619 Project led with headlines that schoolchildren were being subjected to “educational malpractice” for having not been taught the “fuller truth” about slavery and racism.² The project’s designers and contributors asserted at its rollout in 2019 that centering race, slavery, and resistance would contextualize contemporary political concerns.³

¹ See, for example, Jeremy Adelman, et al., “Trump 101,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 19, 2016, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/trump-101/>; N. D. B. Connolly and Keisha Blain, “Trump Syllabus 2.0: An Introduction to the Currents of American Culture That Led to ‘Trumpism,’” *Public Books*, June 28, 2016, <https://www.publicbooks.org/trump-syllabus-2-0/>.

² “‘We Are Committing Educational Malpractice’: Why Slavery Is Mistaught—and Worse—in American Schools,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/19/magazine/slavery-american-schools.html>.

³ “The New York Times Presents The #1619Project,” livestreamed on Aug 13, 2019, YouTube video, 2:11:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrfV7w3EyGI>. Meanwhile, the *Times* partnered with the Pulitzer Center to develop and distribute a free curriculum that would ensure young people would “be the ones to move it forward.” (Quote is from editor Jake Silverstein.)

Media coverage of products like the 1619 Project spurred countervailing claims by political conservatives that patriotic education was in urgent need of restoration.⁴ The Trump presidency already had struck a restorationist and nationalistic pose, promising a celebration of American heritage that would turn back the tide of liberal critique and splintered identity.⁵ A unique context in the spring and summer of 2020—the combination of a pandemic lockdown, a presidential campaign, and widespread unrest related to racial injustice—kindled new initiatives. As Trump declared in an Independence Day address at Mount Rushmore, “our children are taught in school to hate their own country.”⁶ The president’s hastily assembled 1776 Commission promised to cut through the “twisted web of lies in our schools and classrooms.”⁷

For activists answering Trump’s alarm bell, unpatriotic curriculum was the tip of the iceberg; beneath the surface was a divisive “default operating ideology” that had drifted from the academy to the schoolhouse.⁸ Conservative strategists christened the iceberg “critical race theory” (CRT) and launched a legislative icebreaker in March 2021 to ban the teaching of “divisive concepts.” By the end of that year, lawmakers in 22 states had introduced 54 bills in the anti-CRT mold, passing 12; by the end of 2022, 137 more bills had been introduced, with a total of 41 states considering an anti-CRT initiative. By 2023, the panic had slowed, and only two bills passed explicitly related to history education.⁹

⁴ See, for example, Newt Gingrich, “Did Slavery Really Define America for All Time?” *Newsweek*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/newt-gingrich-1619-project-slavery-america-1456307>; David Marcus, “US History Doesn’t Need to Be ‘Reframed’ Around Identity Politics; It Already Has Been,” *The Federalist*, August 20, 2019, <https://thefederalist.com/2019/08/20/u-s-history-doesnt-need-reframed-around-identity-politics-already/>.

⁵ Donald J. Trump, “Inaugural Address” (speech, Washington, DC, January 20, 2017), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-address-14>.

⁶ Donald J. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump at South Dakota’s 2020 Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration” (speech, South Dakota, July 4, 2020), National Archives, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-south-dakotas-2020-mount-rushmore-fireworks-celebration-keystone-south-dakota/>.

⁷ Donald J. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump at the White House Conference on American History” (speech, Washington, DC, September 17, 2020), National Archives, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-white-house-conference-american-history/>; Jonathan Butcher and Mike Gonzalez, “Critical Race Theory, the New Intolerance, and Its Grip on America,” Heritage Foundation, December 7, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/civil-rights/report/critical-race-theory-the-new-intolerance-and-its-grip-america>; Manhattan Institute, “Woke Schooling: A Toolkit for Concerned Parents,” June 17, 2021, <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/woke-schooling-toolkit-for-concerned-parents>. For the AHA’s criticism and commentary on these initiatives, see “AHA Statement Condemning Report of Advisory 1776 Commission,” January 20, 2021, <https://www.historians.org/news/aha-statement-condemning-report-of-advisory-1776-commission/>; James Grossman, “On the Way Out, Trump Trashes History: Why the 1776 Report Is So Damaging,” *New York Daily News*, January 21, 2021, <http://www.nydailynews.com/2021/01/20/on-the-way-out-trump-trashes-history-why-the-1776-project-is-so-damaging/>.

⁸ Christopher Rufo, “How Critical Race Theory Is Dividing America,” interview by Michelle Cordero, Heritage Foundation, October 26, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/progressivism/commentary/how-critical-race-theory-dividing-america>.

⁹ Jeremy C. Young and Jonathan Friedman, “America’s Censored Classrooms,” PEN America, August 17, 2022, <https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-classrooms/>. Legislatures passed quite a few “educational gag orders” in

Hyperpartisan politics added fuel to ongoing debates at the local, state, and national level about the teaching of US history. Were American schoolchildren, as some on the left feared, experiencing an uncritical, triumphal US history education in which teachers kept slavery and racism away from the center of the American story? Or, as right-wing activists asserted, had partisans of critical race theory captured the education state to present an explicitly negative view of the nation?

AHA researchers immediately realized that two straightforward facts rendered sweeping generalizations about whitewashed history and brainwashed students implausible. The chasm between curriculum as written and the curriculum as taught—the difference between the recipe and the meal—obscures what actually happens in American classrooms.¹⁰ In addition, the devolved structures of governance and loosely coupled systems of management preserve local control of most aspects of education.¹¹ Something like nutrition recommendations (state standards) are put to paper and given the force of law in all 50 states, but the quality of raw ingredients varies widely, and recipes (curricular materials) are cobbled together across a vast, localized landscape of independent kitchens. Decisions about what should be served to students reside with multiple actors: school boards and district staff across more than 13,000 districts; principals, department

2023, but most were directed to higher education or at LGBTQ+ content in K–12 health education. For more on educational gag orders, see PEN America’s database: <https://pen.org/issue/educational-censorship/>.

¹⁰ Scholars have, without appeal to culinary cliché, explored this dynamic across a range of fields. For differences between “intended curriculum,” “enacted curriculum,” “learned curriculum,” and “assessed curriculum,” see Curtis C. McKnight, F. Joe Crosswhite, John A. Dossey, Edward Kifer, Jane O. Swafford, Kenneth J. Travers, and Thomas J. Cooney, *The Underachieving Curriculum: Assessing US Schools: Mathematics from an International Perspective* (Champaign, IL: Stipes, 1987); Andrew C. Porter and John Smithson, “Are Content Standards Being Implemented in the Classroom? A Methodology and Some Tentative Answers,” in Susan H. Fuhrman, ed., *From the Capitol to the Classroom: Standards-Based Reform in the States* (Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, 2001). For “rhetorical curriculum” versus “formal curriculum” versus “curriculum-in-use,” see David Labaree, “The Chronic Failure of Curriculum Reform,” *EdWeek*, May 19, 1999, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-the-chronic-failure-of-curriculum-reform/1999/05>.

¹¹ For the classic descriptions, see Karl E. Weick, “Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (March 1976): 1–19; John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan, “Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony,” *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 2 (September 1977): 340–63. For helpful skepticism about loose coupling and an updated typology for understanding both the “institutional environment” and the “technical core,” see James P. Spillane and Patricia Burch, “Policy, Administration and Instructional Practice: ‘Loose Coupling’ Revisited” in *The New Institutionalism in Education*, Heinz-Dieter Meyer and Brian Rowan, eds. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 87–102. For arguments that analytic distinctions—between policy and practice, formation and implementation—clarify very little in the sociocultural web that enacts curriculum, see Edmund T. Hamann and Lisa Rosen, “What Makes the Anthropology of Educational Policy Implementation ‘Anthropological’?” in *A Companion to the Anthropology of Education*, Bradley A. U. Levinson and Mica Pollock, eds. (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 461–77; For recent confirmations of the old thesis, see Julia H. Kaufman et al., “How Instructional Materials Are Used and Supported in U.S. K–12 Classrooms: Findings from the American Instructional Resources Survey,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA134-1.html.

chairs, and course teams in over 90,000 public schoolhouses; and the individual social studies teachers responsible for delivering lessons in every history classroom.¹²

To reflect the complexity of curricular decision making in the United States, our opening question—What are American middle and secondary school students taught about US history?—spurred two follow-ups:

- Who decides what is taught in US history?
- What sources, texts, and materials do teachers *actually* use when they teach US history?

Our work follows in the footsteps of multiple research teams that have sought to map the social studies landscape.¹³ In the 21st century, the Fordham Institute has been the most prominent and prolific, issuing five report cards on the quality of US history and civics standards since 1998.¹⁴ In 2003, the AHA and the Organization of American Historians (OAH) conducted a national survey, assessing teacher qualifications, academic standards, assessment, and graduation requirements for social studies.¹⁵ With a focus on geography, the Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education at Texas State University has conducted a survey of state requirements every year since 2009.¹⁶ Most recently, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) assembled a digital interactive dashboard of state standards, disciplinary coverage, graduation requirements, and assessment mandates.¹⁷ Meanwhile,

¹² National Center for Education Statistics, “Table 209.50. Percentage of public school teachers of grades 9 through 12, by field of main teaching assignment and selected demographic and educational characteristics: 2017–18,” https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_209.50.asp.

¹³ See Bessie Louise Pierce, *Public Opinion and the Teaching of History in the United States* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926); Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage, 1980); Kyle Ward, *History in the Making: An Absorbing Look at How American History Has Changed in the Telling over the Last 200 Years* (New York: New Press, 2007); David Jenness, *Making Sense of Social Studies: A Publication of the National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools* [a joint project of the American Historical Association, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, National Council for the Social Studies, Organization of American Historians] (New York: Macmillan, 1990); Roy Rosenzweig and Peter Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Jeremy A. Stern et al., *The State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History* (New York: Fordham Institute, 2021), <https://fordhaminstitute.org/sites/default/files/publication/pdfs/20210623-state-state-standards-civics-and-us-history-20210.pdf>.

¹⁵ Sarah Drake Brown and John Patrick, *History Education in the United States: A Survey of Teacher Certification and State-Based Standards and Assessments for Teachers and Students*, sponsored by the AHA and the OAH, 2003.

¹⁶ Caroline McClure and Joann Zadrozny, *Social Studies and Geography Survey for Middle and High Schools* (San Marcos, TX: Gilbert M. Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education at Texas State University, 2015); Joann Zadrozny, *Social Studies and Geography Survey for Middle and High Schools* (San Marcos, TX: Gilbert M. Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education at Texas State University, 2017); Joann Zadrozny, *Social Studies Standards Report* (San Marcos, TX: Gilbert M. Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education at Texas State University, 2022).

¹⁷ “Social Studies Standards Map,” AIR, 2023, <https://www.air.org/social-studies-standards-map>; Courtney Gross and Kimberly Imel, “The State of K–12 Social Studies Education,” AIR, March 2024, <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/State-of-K-12-Social-Studies-Education-Report-March-2024.pdf>.

an array of other organizations have conducted targeted reviews of state standards and available curricula on selected topics in American history and civics.¹⁸

This report breaks new ground by capturing conditions across three levels of curricular decision-making: the state, the district, and the teacher. By exploring the relationships among these levels, including the power each wields and the resources they can draw upon, this comprehensive report explains how history curriculum is enacted in the United States.

Methods and Sample

With American educational policymaking diverse, devolved, and divided, we were especially interested in capturing a range of environments, both among states and within them. For state standards, graduation requirements, and state legislation, we covered the entire nation. As we moved into the details of state rulemaking, district guidance, and teacher choices, we chose nine states as the field sites for our survey, interviews, and collection of curricular materials. Each of the selected states—Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Washington—represents one of the nine regional divisions used by the US Census and provides a mix of political, administrative, and social contexts affecting education. (For an extended discussion of politics, state agency authority, social studies assessment, and labor and licensure rules within these nine states, see [Appendix 1](#).)

¹⁸ Melissa Kay Diliberti, Ashley Woo, and Julia H. Kaufman, “The Missing Infrastructure for Elementary (K–5) Social Studies Instruction: Findings from the 2022 American Instructional Resources Survey” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2023). https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA134-17.html. On textbooks, see Dana Goldstein, “Two States. Eight Textbooks. Two American Stories,” *New York Times*, January 12, 2020; Donald Yacovone, *Teaching White Supremacy: America’s Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity* (New York: Pantheon, 2022). On civics, see Sarah Shapiro and Catherine Brown, “The State of Civics Education,” Center for American Progress (February 2018); David Randall, “Learning for Self-Government: A K–12 Civics Report Card,” Pioneer Institute and the National Association of Scholars, white paper (February 2022). On the colonial and founding era (and the New Deal), see David Randall, et al., *Skewed History: Textbook Coverage of Early America and the New Deal* (New York: National Association of Scholars, 2021). On slavery, see “Teaching Hard History: American Slavery,” Southern Poverty Law Center, 2022. On Native American history, see Sarah B. Shear, Ryan T. Knowles, Gregory J. Soden, and Antonio J. Castro, “Manifesting Destiny: Re/presentations of Indigenous Peoples in K–12 U.S. History Standards,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 43, no. 1 (2015): 68–101. On the history of the Reconstruction era, see Ana Rosado, Gideon Cohn-Postar, and Mimi Eisen, “Erasing the Black Freedom Struggle: How State Standards Fail to Teach the Truth about Reconstruction,” Zinn Education Project, 2022. On the Civil Rights Movement, see the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance Project, “Teaching the Movement: The State Standards We Deserve,” (March 2012) and “Teaching the Movement 2014: The State of Civil Rights Education in the United States,” (March 2014). On attitudes among teachers and the broader public regarding history, see Peter Burkholder and Dana Schaffer, *History, the Past, and Public Culture: Results from a National Survey* (Washington, DC: AHA, 2021); Stephen Hawkins, Dan Vallone, Paul Oshinski, Coco Xu, Calista Small, Daniel Yudkin, Fred Duong, Jordan Wylie, Research Fellow, *Defusing the History Wars: Finding Common Ground in Teaching America’s National Story* (New York: More in Common, 2022); Clare Howard and Dalton Savage, “Voices from the Field: Understanding the Needs of History Educators,” (National Center for History Education, forthcoming).

The State

Consequential decisions about what students will learn have increasingly been taken up by state departments of education. Indeed, the early 21st-century expansion of federal involvement in education was preceded and enabled by the late 20th-century growth of state education agencies (SEAs). Civil rights mandates in the 1960s, suits regarding disability law and school finance in the 1970s, and the assessment and accountability movement in the 1980s and 1990s all strengthened the hand of SEAs over schooling in the United States.¹⁹ Today, state boards of education typically adopt academic standards, staff SEAs with curriculum specialists, and in some cases enact assessment and accountability regimes or rules for statewide adoption or approval of instructional materials. State legislatures frequently pass laws mandating that SEAs regulate graduation requirements or assessments in social studies, mandate new course offerings, or specify content coverage. State lawmakers also have repeatedly chosen social studies and US history instruction as a place in school codes to leverage moral authority, comment on issues of civic import, or recognize advocacy by particular constituencies. In practice, state authority is alternately constrained and empowered by a dynamic interpenetration of local operational control, federal requirements and incentives, and networked professional associations and interest groups—any one of which individual school teachers can, and often do, ignore.

Without standardized assessment, state agencies have limited leverage over local curricular decisions. To learn how these trends and conditions have affected the state's role in US history curricula, the AHA appraised state standards in US history in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, conducted surveys and interviews with state curriculum specialists, compared courses of study and assessment regimes nationwide, and assembled a 50-state database of 877 distinct pieces of legislation related to US history education, primarily over the last 40 years.²⁰

¹⁹ See Patrick McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006); Paul Manna, *School's In: Federalism and the National Education Agenda* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006); Gareth Davies, *See Government Grow: Education Politics from Johnson to Reagan* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007); Kenneth K. Wong, "Federalism Revised: The Promise and Challenge of the No Child Left Behind Act," *Public Administration Review* (December 2008): S175–85; Gail L. Sunderman, Ben Levin, and Roger Slee, "Evidence of the Impact of School Reform on Systems Governance and Educational Bureaucracies in the United States," *Review of Research in Education* 34 (March 2010): 226–53.

²⁰ To assemble a corpus of 877 individual legislative acts passed between 1980 and 2022, AHA researchers used a variety of databases, including HeinOnline, LexisNexis, and digital state legislative archives. Our assembled database

The District

State-level documents are ultimately a poor proxy for an understanding of in-use curriculum. Teachers can do excellent work in states with weak or incoherent standards, and history can be taught poorly in states with carefully written state documents. Even in states with highly specific standards, state-mandated common exams in US history, and a robust administrative apparatus, questions about what instructional materials will be used and how topics will be taught will almost always be answered locally. Some school districts—or local education agencies (LEAs)—have the capacity and ambition to answer these questions in great detail, with intricate curriculum maps, pacing guides, unit plans, common assessments, and a suite of purchased resources aligned to state standards. These districts may task a designated social studies coordinator, curriculum specialist, or instructional coach with rituals of alignment and oversight, revising materials in sync with state standards or convening teachers in course level teams in ongoing cycles of data analysis and curricular development.

In most districts, however, layers of social studies staffing and official documentation of US history curricula simply do not exist. What is taught rests with the teachers who teach the course—sitting in binders, digital cloud storage, or in their heads. Even in districts where an administrative ecosystem of subject-specific curriculum coordinators has been allowed to grow, expectations of district-wide fidelity to official priorities are rare in the absence of common assessment.

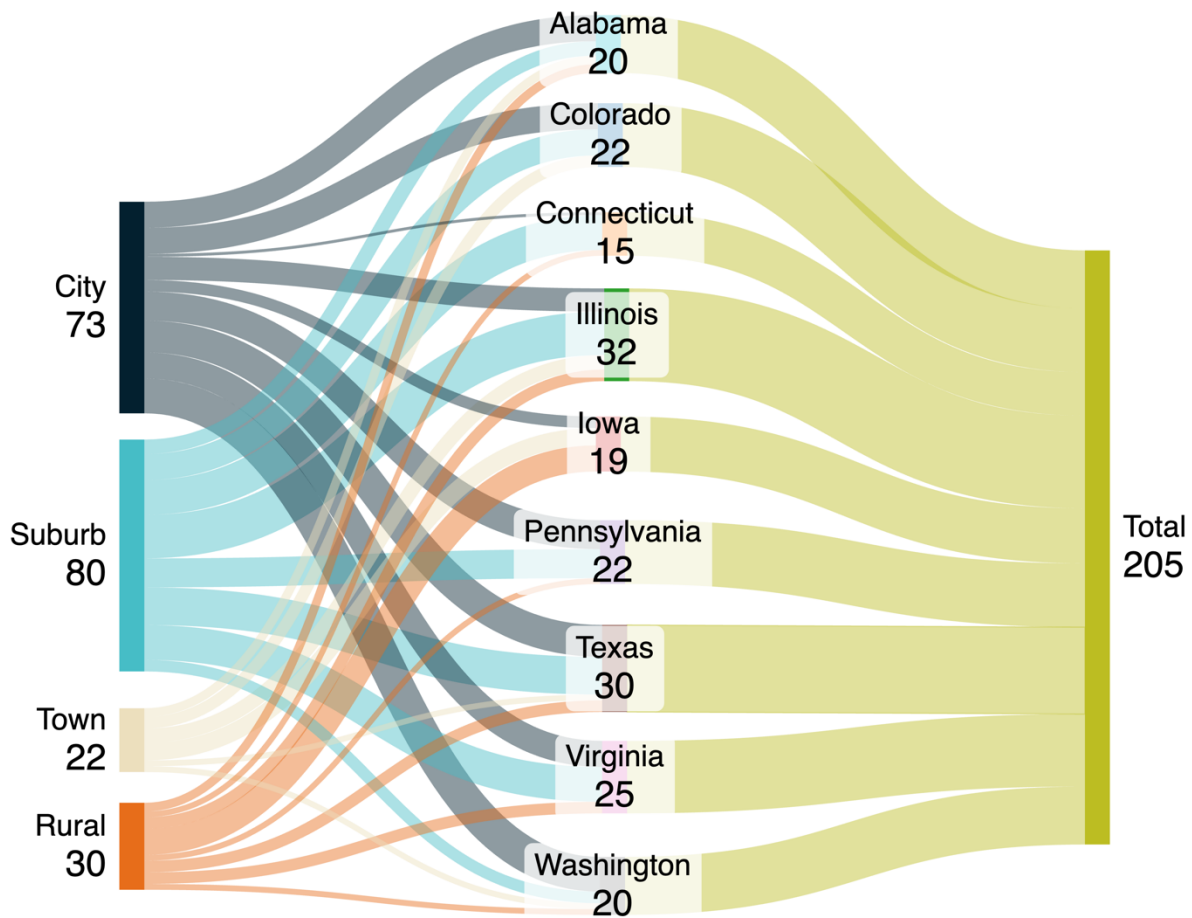
To gain a view of these dynamics, we interviewed educators (147 teachers and 58 administrators) across our nine sample states.²¹ Interview subjects were recruited in a multistage process, leveraging contact lists and social media networks from the AHA, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, a project partner), National History Day, the National Council for History Education, and the Council of State Social Studies Supervisors. After exhausting these contacts, we sent email solicitations directly to social studies teachers in states and locale types that were at that point underrepresented. Once

provides a broad sample of lawmaking aimed at social studies instruction. Its reach is extensive but not exhaustive, and its scope is limited to the activities of state legislatures (as opposed to the actions of state boards of education).

²¹ Our picture of curricular standards and practices was supplemented by interviews with 205 social studies specialists, teachers, and curriculum experts across 182 jurisdictions. All interviewees signed an agreement that affirmed their consent, guaranteed that their identities would not be connected to any quoted material, and that interview notes would be kept by the AHA as confidential documents for 60 years before being transferred to the AHA archive (see Appendix 2). Interview citations reference the subjects' occupation and state, but names and districts are never specified.

the survey instrument was in the field, we increased our pool of interview participants by allowing survey respondents to opt in to a follow-up interview by way of a link at the conclusion of the questionnaire. Hour-long interviews followed a standardized, semistructured format and were conducted over Zoom between August 2022 and February 2024. Interviews explored teachers' interests in history, their views of managerial dynamics in the school and district setting, the instructional resources and professional development providers that they trust, and the moments of challenge that they encounter from students, parents, and community members. (See [Appendix 2](#) for the release form and questionnaire.) We paid special attention to capturing a mix of social and political environments within each sample state, with 39 percent of interviewees from suburbs, 36 percent from cities, 15 percent from rural locales, and 10 percent from towns ([Fig. 2](#)).

Fig. 2: Interviewees by State and Locale Type (n = 205) (Made at SankeyMATIC.com)



To appraise historical content, we needed instructional materials. Our most reliable collection method was to ask interview subjects to provide what they used. Most teachers were happy to share, as were many administrators. Elsewhere, curricular paperwork and instructional resources were found on district websites. In some places—when administrators expressed concerns about copyrighted materials or where political pressure had left district officials fearful of public scrutiny—we encountered evasions or refusals. When needed, we sent Freedom of Information requests, some of which were efficiently and thoroughly honored, while others idled or resulted in only the broadest outlines of course topics.

Because there is no standard unit of paperwork used by all teachers or administrators, we appraised materials across a broad spectrum of formats. We took anything we were given, so long as teachers used it or were told to use it. Analysis across a range of formats proved challenging—not even a comparison of apples to oranges, but apples to elephants. Our collection came to include everything from district-issued curriculum maps to course-team performance assessments to published lesson plans to entire LMS course modules to personal PowerPoints to lists of primary sources. This archive of curricular materials represents in-use documents from more than 200 distinct jurisdictions across our nine sample states, as well as several major textbook titles, digitally licensed curriculum products, and popular no-cost online resources.²²

²² Tens of thousands of pages of instructional content constitute the archive for this research. These materials were collected directly from individual teachers and school districts and downloaded from publicly available state and district websites. Our archive contains 194 unique “collections” of instructional material obtained from teachers or districts in our nine sample states. Many reflected the approach of a single teacher, some expressed the priorities of a course team at a single school, and others contained directives and resources for an entire district. Citations in this report distinguish provenance by referring to “teacher documents” and “district documents.” In three states, we also encountered what we referred to as “multidistrict” documents, resources developed by the state agency or a state agency partner that were then adopted or used in multiple districts in that state. Following the links and directives included in multiple district documents took us to a cluster of published materials, which we also appraised, including leading resources from C3 Teachers, Crash Course US History, the DBQ Project, Digital Inquiry Group (formerly Stanford History Education Group), and Newsela. We also collected and appraised content in leading middle and high school textbook products for US history. The books appraised were: James West Davidson, Michael B. Stoff, and Jennifer Bertolet, *My World Interactive: American History* (Boston: Pearson Education, 2019); Emma J. Lapansky-Werner, Peter B. Levy, Randy Roberts, and Alan Taylor, *US History Interactive* (Paramus, NJ: Savvas Learning Company, 2022); Diane Hart, *History Alive! The United States Through Industrialism* (Rancho Cordova, CA: Teachers Curriculum Institute, 2021); Diane Hart, *History Alive! The United States Through Modern Times* (Rancho Cordova, CA: Teachers Curriculum Institute, 2017); Fredrik Hiebert, Peggy Althoff, and Fritz Fischer, *American Stories* (Chicago: National Geographic Learning, 2019); Fredrik Hiebert, Peggy Althoff, and Fritz Fischer, *America Through the Lens: U.S. History, 1877 to Present* (Mason, OH: National Geographic Learning/Cengage, 2023); Joyce Appleby, Alan Brinkley, Albert S. Broussard, James M. McPherson, and Donald A. Ritchie, *Discovering Our Past: A History of the United States* (Columbus, OH: McGraw Hill Education, 2018); Daina Ramey Berry, Daina Ramey Berry, Albert S. Broussard, Lorri Glover, James M. McPherson, and Donald A. Ritchie, *United States History: Voices and Perspectives* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2023); and *US History: Civil War to the Present: Teacher's Guide* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

With instructional materials collected, we then appraised their content, focusing a standardized rubric on six topics: Native American History; the Founding Era; Westward Expansion; Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction; the Gilded Age and Progressive Era; and the Civil Rights Movement. Appraisals were not designed to celebrate or indict any individual teacher, district, curriculum developer, or state, but rather to discover meaningful patterns, which we present for each topic area in [Part 4](#).

The Teacher

Ultimately, an accurate picture of what is taught, what is used, and what is valued can come only from teachers themselves. In April 2023, the AHA contracted with NORC at the University of Chicago to conduct a survey of public middle and high school US history teachers in the nine sample states. Together, the AHA, NORC, and University of Chicago Survey Lab teams developed the online instrument for the teacher survey.²³ Designed to take about 30 minutes to complete, the survey elicited detailed information on a range of topics: teaching environment; background (years of teaching experience, highest academic degree); the role of curricular directives from the school, district, and state; materials used for teaching US history; familiarity with various free teaching resources; teaching goals and values; and what topics participants find most important, most rewarding, and most challenging to teach. To identify teachers to contact for the survey, NORC leased a directory of teachers from MDR Education, a division of the commercial analytics company Dun and Bradstreet.²⁴ These teachers were then contacted and screened for eligibility for the AHA survey.²⁵ Between April and August 2023, our survey hit the field, ultimately collecting usable responses from 3,012 participants whose school settings represent a full spectrum of locale types (city, suburb, town, rural) and social

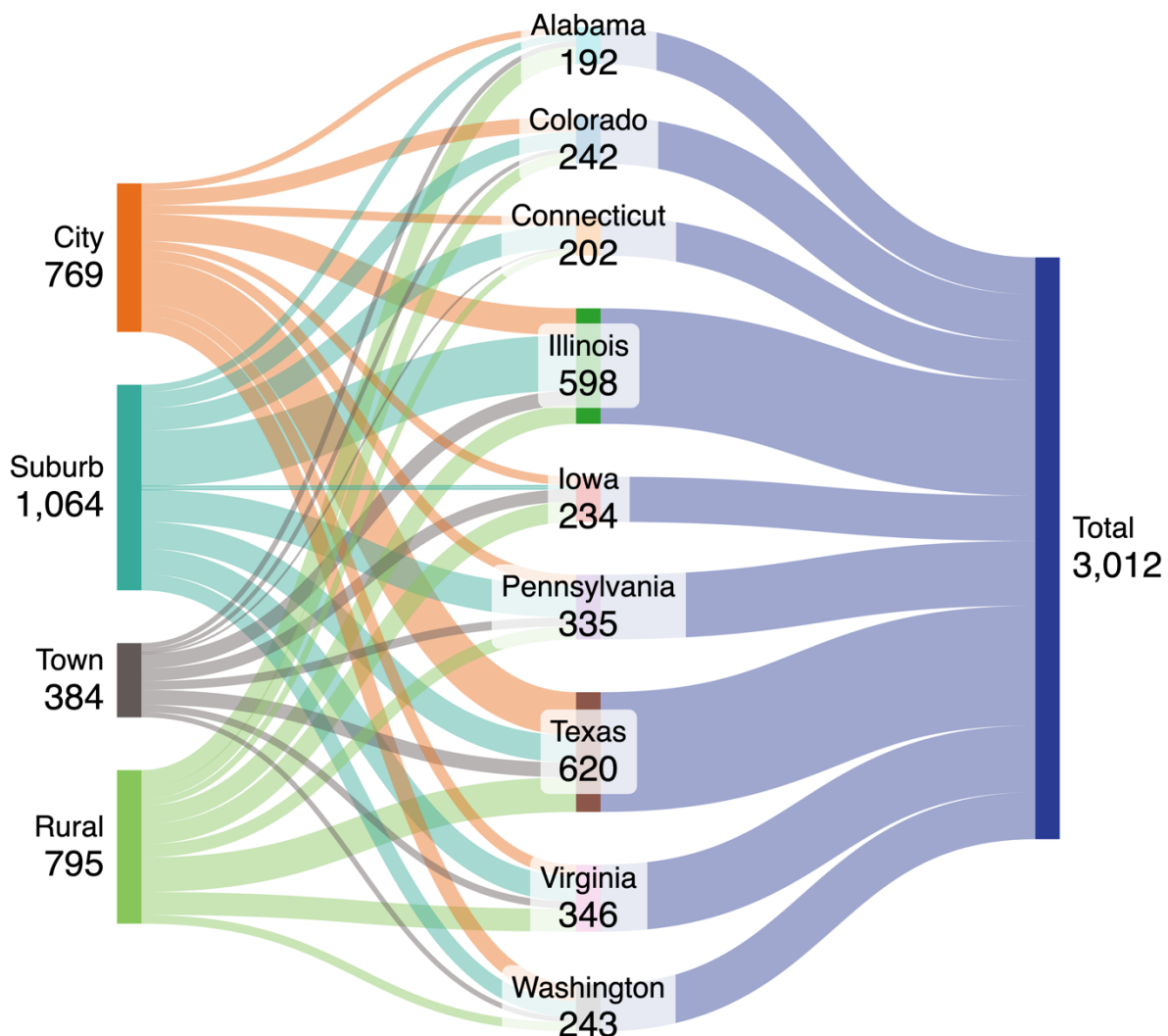
²³ AHA researchers took the lead on conceptual content and NORC advised on question wording, question ordering and branching, informed consent statements, and future contacting information capture. The Survey Lab programmed the survey into Qualtrics and incorporated multiple rounds of iterative feedback from the AHA and NORC teams into the final online survey.

²⁴ The target population for the survey was all public school teachers who taught US history to one or more classes in grades 6–12 in the sample states during the 2022–23 academic year. MDR identifies teachers' subjects and grade levels taught through a variety of online data sources, assigning each a "job code." Subjects taught are identified in "job code" fields and up to eight job codes are identified for each teacher. US history is included in the job codes, but it was clear that the numbers identified in each of the nine states and overall were substantially lower than what would be expected based on student enrollments, class sizes, average teaching loads, and average numbers of US history courses taken by students. To reduce the likelihood of undercoverage, NORC leased a directory of all public-school teachers in the nine states who had one or more job codes identifying a social studies, social science, or history teaching field. This yielded a directory of over 56,000 teachers.

²⁵ Eligibility was defined as (1) teaching one or more US history classes to students in grades 6–12 in the 2022–23 school year, and (2) one or more of those US history classes was not an AP or other college credit class. Under these assumptions, there would be about 24,054 eligible US history teachers for the survey in the MDR directory.

environments (socioeconomic status and racial/ethnic composition) in each state (Fig. 3). The number of teachers returning the survey in either “complete” or “partial” form represented a 13 percent response rate.

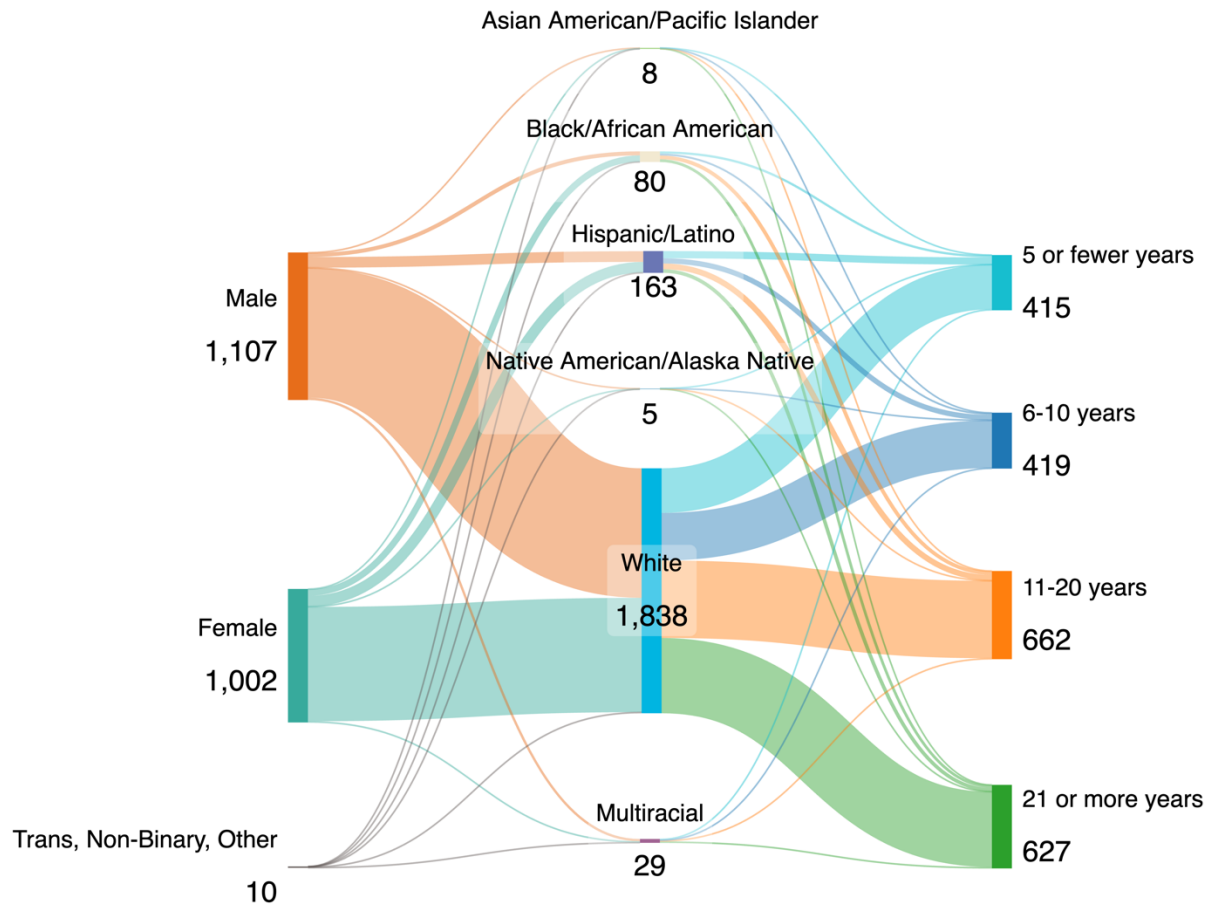
Fig. 3: Survey Respondents by State and Locale Type (n=3,012) (Made at SankeyMATIC.com)



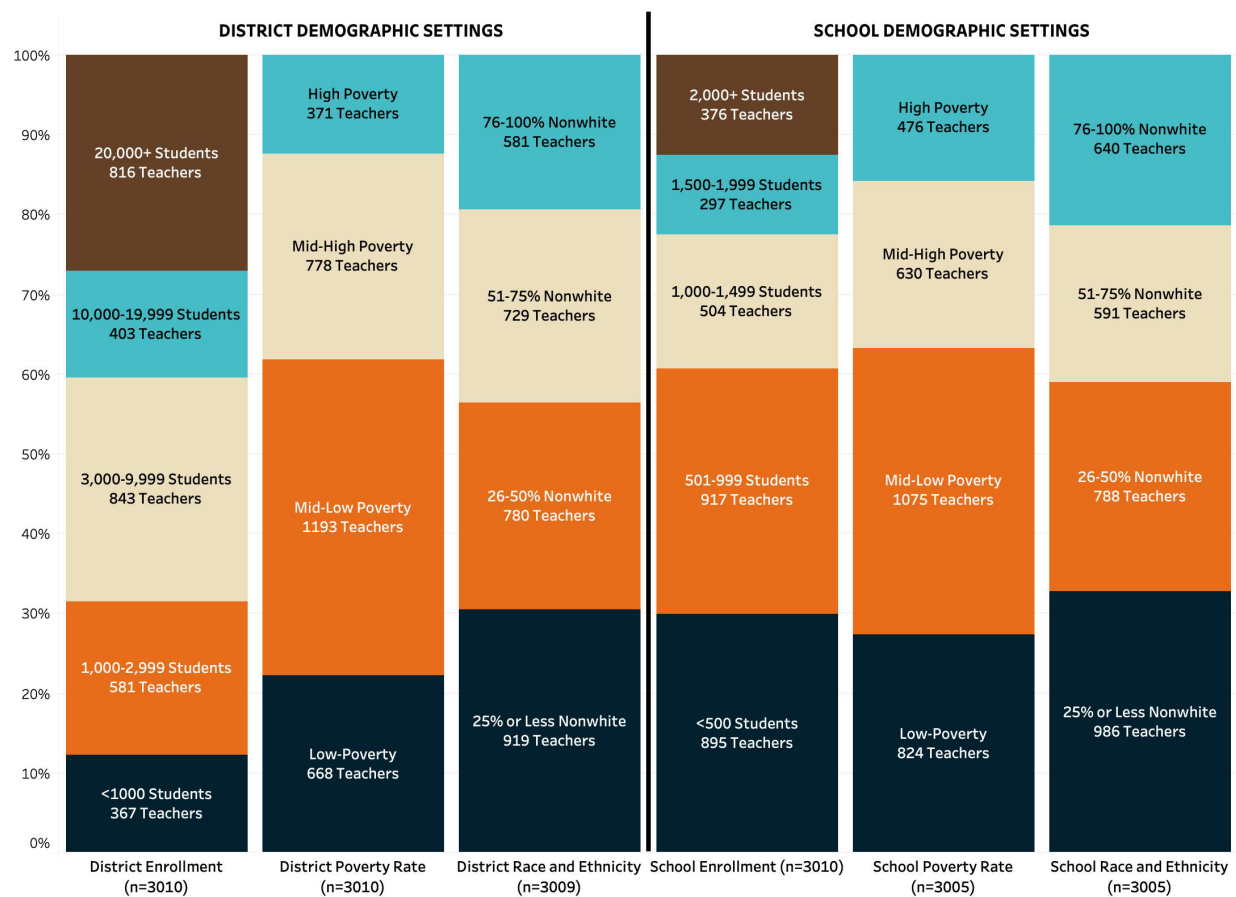
Survey results reveal how teachers conceptualize key topics in US history, the resources they trust, and the challenges they face. With anonymous responses sorted by state and district locale type, these data also allow us to interpret how diverse state and local environments of assessment, accountability, and standards affect US history teachers’ priorities and practices. Additional social and demographic information about each respondent (gender, race and ethnicity, years of teaching experience) and their

school setting (socioeconomic profile, racial and ethnic composition) afford angles of additional analysis (Figs. 4 and 5).²⁶

Fig. 4: Demographic Profile of Teacher Respondent Sample (sex, race/ethnicity, years teaching) (Made at SankeyMATIC.com)



²⁶ For an extended discussion of how our sample of survey respondents was assembled and evaluated for representativity, see Appendix 3, especially Table A23.

Fig. 5: District and School Demographic Settings for Survey Respondents²⁷

Taken together, our archive of teacher interviews, survey responses, and instructional resources dives deeply into teacher practice, embracing not only the prescriptive guidelines produced at the direction of district administrators but the in-use materials that teachers make and deliver to their students, bringing us as close to the meal of classroom instruction as can be achieved in a study of this kind.

Historical Antecedents

Current clashes are hardly the first time that US history curriculum has become a proxy battlefield for ideological factions in a broader American culture war. With each round of debate, new teams of investigators have stepped in to survey the curriculum. These

²⁷ The National Center for Education Statistics defines public school and district poverty levels by what percentage of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL). Students' FRPL eligibility in low-poverty schools and districts is 25.0 percent or less, mid-low poverty is 25.1 to 50.0 percent, mid-high poverty is 50.1 to 75.0 percent, and high-poverty is more than 75.0 percent. See National Center for Education Statistics, "Concentration of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch," Condition of Education (US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2024), <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/clb>.

researchers typically promised an objective appraisal but rarely without a stake in the outcome.²⁸ Tensions associated with public education in a democracy propel these cycles of strife and audit. Conflicts between democratic and administrative authority create the potential for friction, as traditions of devolved local governance confront the layers of credentialed professionals who do the work of educating students and managing the system. Educators tasked with innovation or reform are bound to collide with broadly held expectations among parents that what schools conserve and transmit should resemble what was passed on to them.²⁹ In the context of public schooling arranged into subject matter content, there is the added tension *among* professionals, whose various claims to expertise (as educators, administrators, or scholars) come into competition.

From Amateurs to Professionals

History has always been more likely than other subjects to provoke disputes about national identity.³⁰ If the common schools were, as Horace Mann put it, an “apprenticeship for self-government,” history took the role of head tutor.³¹ American history, a widely used mid-19th-century textbook explained, inspired the pupil with tales of “virtue, enterprise, generosity, and patriotism” and equipped “a person to fulfill those duties which, in a free government, he may be called to discharge.”³²

By the time historians had marked off their professional jurisdiction as scholars and educators (expressed in the founding of the AHA in 1884), state legislatures were turning schooling into a compulsory fact of American childhood. While professional historians were pleased to see history safely ensconced within the expanding educational systems of the industrial age, their sense of history’s purpose had grown beyond inspiration and instruction for citizenship. Converted by their experience with German

²⁸ For historians’ various frustrations with public understanding of history, as well as their many interventions beyond the academy, see Ian Tyrrell, *Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

²⁹ Labaree, “The Chronic Failure of Curriculum Reform.”

³⁰ Issues of sex education or more critical approaches to US history may seem ready-made for these flashpoints, but even subjects like New Math can provide the spark. See Lisa Rosen, “Myth-Making and Moral Order in a Debate on Mathematics Education Policy,” in *Policy as Practice: Toward a Comparative Sociocultural Analysis of Educational Policy*, Margaret Sutton and Bradley A. Levinson, eds. (New York: Ablex Publishing, 2001); Christopher J. Phillips “The New Math and Midcentury American Politics,” *Journal of American History* 101, no. 2 (September 2014): 454–79.

³¹ Horace Mann, *Ninth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board of Education, Boston, December 10, 1845* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, State Printers, 1846), 37.

³² Charles Goodrich, *History of the United States of America* (Boston: Hickling, Swan, and Brewer, 1857), 1.

empiricism, historians like Herbert Baxter Adams reported that the history seminar had “evolved from a nursery of dogma to a laboratory of scientific truth.”³³

Professional historians built those laboratories and defined those truths within a social and institutional milieu bounded by race, class, and gender. In addition to dignifying many of the racial and gender prejudices common to the men welcomed into the professoriate, academic training increased the social distance between historians and history teachers. Many academics doubted whether the nation’s schoolteachers, many of whom were women and clergymen, were capable of transmitting the discipline’s new insights to American classrooms. As educator-psychologist and eugenicist G. Stanley Hall announced in an 1880 essay collection for history instructors, “no subject so widely taught is, on the whole, taught so poorly.”³⁴ In response, historians enthusiastically joined the cascade of special committees convened between the 1890s and the 1920s to bring order, continuity, and disciplinary integrity to elementary and secondary education and made the scholarly case for history’s place within it. Authoring the 1894 report for the so-called “History Ten” at Madison, Wisconsin, historian Albert Bushnell Hart stressed history’s scientific and philosophical dynamism. Far from the “mere lists of lifeless dates” presented in too many American classrooms, Hart declared history a “training of the mind,” combining “the advantages of a philosophical and a scientific subject.”³⁵

The emphasis on history as mental training reappeared as historians convened subsequent committees (of seven in 1899, five in 1905, and eight in 1907), while also affirming its centrality to popular notions of preparation for citizenship. The especially influential AHA Committee of Seven (1899) cast the toolbox of “historical-mindedness”—cause and effect, relationship and analogy, extraction of information, systematization of fact, exertion of imagination, and argument through “well-chosen words”—as tantamount to scientific training for culture, character, and citizenship.³⁶ The committee argued that political (rather than social, economic, or cultural) matters should form the core of a US

³³ Adams, quoted in Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 33.

³⁴ G. Stanley Hall, as quoted in David Warren Saxe, *Social Studies in the Schools: A History of the Early Years* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 32.

³⁵ Albert Bushnell Hart, *Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies*, National Education Association (New York: American Book Company, 1894), 168.

³⁶ Andrew C. McLaughlin, Herbert B. Adams, George L. Fox, Albert Bushnell Hart, Charles H. Haskins, Lucy M. Salmon, and H. Morse Stephens, *The Study of History in the Schools: A Report to the American Historical Association of the Committee of Seven* (1898), 26.

history course. In the American setting, they explained, a history of parties, politics, and policy created a vivid index of the social and industrial rhythms of the population.³⁷

Progressive Era Turf Wars

By the Committee of Seven's own admission, its survey of 300 schoolmasters provided an unsatisfactory picture of current history conditions, but ensuing studies by other auditors indicated that the AHA's own publications had gained a wide influence. The committee's recommendations rapidly became understood as a default reference for why, how, and in what order history should be taught in the schools.³⁸ But historians soon found themselves jockeying for position with other experts. As the social sciences matured within the academy, newly trained professionals sought to break history's monopoly within mass schooling.³⁹ Social scientists found some solidarity with the educational Progressives of the era, who, from a variety of philosophical perspectives, viewed "traditional" history and other aspects of extant curriculum as hidebound barriers to the uniquely modern task of "social education."⁴⁰ The historical profession also had dissenters within its ranks, as prominent scholars like Charles Beard and Carl Becker called the prevailing history program an "educational outrage" and endorsed its "radical reorganization."⁴¹

These constituencies gathered their critiques into the three-part National Education Association (NEA) publication, *Report on Social Studies* (1913–16). In addition to naming the new multidisciplinary umbrella under which history, geography, civics, and economics would be classified, the sociologist-heavy committee behind the report announced the goal of education as that of "social efficiency," fusing Deweyan notions of meeting children's "immediate needs" with managerial ambitions for the

³⁷ McLaughlin, et al., *The Study of History in the Schools*, 74–78.

³⁸ See E. W. Osgood, "The Development of Historical Study in the Secondary Schools of the United States," *School Review* 22, no. 7 (1914): 444–54.

³⁹ Robert Orrill and Linn Shapiro, "From Bold Beginnings to an Uncertain Future: The Discipline of History and History Education," *American Historical Review* 110, no. 3, (June 2005): 727–51, quotation 739.

⁴⁰ The "Progressives" were a mixed bunch, of course—"not a single entity but instead a cluster of overlapping and competing tendencies." David F. Labaree, "Progressivism, Schools and Schools of Education: An American Romance," *Paedagogica Historica* 41, nos. 1 and 2, (February 2005): 275–88. On the classic typology of "pedagogical Progressives" and "administrative Progressives," see David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974). For an extended discussion of historiographic complications, see Herbert Kliebard, "The Search for Meaning in Progressive Education: Curriculum Conflict in the Context of Status Politics," in *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893–1958* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 272–91. See also Ronald W. Evans, *The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 21–24.

⁴¹ Beard, quoted in Saxe, *Social Studies in the Schools*, 135; Becker, quoted in Orrill and Shapiro, "From Bold Beginnings," 740.

“neighborliness” of the social whole.⁴² Over the next several years, social studies’ innovations were further amplified by the NEA’s *Cardinal Principles* report on secondary education in 1918, the founding of the NCSS in 1921, and the proliferation of education professor Harold Rugg’s textbook series, *Man and His Changing Society*, during the 1920s and 1930s. Historians found themselves torn between asserting the primacy of history against social studies or elbowing for space within it.⁴³

The AHA’s stewardship of a multiyear, Carnegie Foundation–funded interdisciplinary study of the nation’s schools further exposed the tensions among those seeking to shape social studies education. As the study’s component publications were released amid the economic crisis of the early 1930s, the emphasis, especially by educationist George Counts, on social studies education as a project of “social reconstruction” proved too much for some contributors.⁴⁴ Prominent members of the study commission refused to endorse its final recommendations, and the popular press panned the study as radical propaganda. Ultimately, the AHA issued no statement of its own on the report, and by the 1940s, professional historians were making a steady retreat from the K–12 scene.⁴⁵

History’s Persistent Public Profile

Despite an apparently diminishing profile for history in the schools, popular expectations—that history should be taught, and that its main themes should be heroism, patriotism, and (a contested) pluralism—drove an entire genre of activism. These popular expectations proved at odds with the social reconstructionism of the educationists *and* the self-declared intellectual dispassion of academic historians.⁴⁶ Whatever the ambitions

⁴² Saxe, *Social Studies in the Schools*, 148–53. Quotes in Arthur William Dunn (compiler), *Report of the Committee on Social Studies of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education of the National Education Association: The Social Studies in Secondary Education* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1916), 9–10. The account presented here skates over several historiographic disputes. For a useful overview, see Stephen Thornton, “A Concise Historiography of the Social Studies,” in *The Wiley Handbook of Social Studies Research* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2017), 7–41; Thomas Fallace, “The Intellectual History of the Social Studies,” in *The Wiley Handbook of Social Studies Research* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2017), 42–67. For more on the centrality of education to the Progressives’ broader social vision, see Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1957* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969); Daniel Rodgers, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics since Independence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987) 179–87; Leon Fink, *Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁴³ Orrill and Shapiro, “From Bold Beginnings,” 746.

⁴⁴ Evans, *The Social Studies Wars*, 52–59; Herbert Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893–1958* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 162–67.

⁴⁵ Orrill and Shapiro, “From Bold Beginnings,” 747.

⁴⁶ A 1923 AHA resolution put things bluntly: “Attempts, however well meant, to foster national arrogance and boastfulness and indiscriminate worship of national ‘heroes’ can only tend to promote a harmful pseudo patriotism.”

of social studies advocates, US history never left the curriculum, and Americans continued to care deeply about the moral lessons of its content.⁴⁷ Many of those in charge of mass schooling continued to define history's function as a project of nationalism and civilization, with special urgency to assimilate and develop the allegedly underdeveloped self-governing capacities of African Americans, Native Americans, and immigrants.⁴⁸ For their part, European immigrants in the 1920s demanded that coverage of defining episodes of the American character, especially the revolution, be made inclusive of heroic contributions by their co-ethnics.⁴⁹ In the Jim Crow South, Confederate nostalgists developed "measuring rods" to judge alleged Northern bias in textbooks, sought to censor interpretations with which they disagreed, and injected skewed interpretations that favored Southern white elites, exerting a durable influence on curricular treatments of slavery nationwide.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, among networks of Black educators, a set of opposite motives sustained an ongoing series of debates and campaigns aimed at resisting and revising the pervasive omissions and denigrations of Black humanity found in most American history curricula, reified in works of popular history and cinema, and reiterated

"Resolutions on History Teaching in the Schools," AHA, December 29, 1923, <https://www.historians.org/resource/resolutions-on-history-teaching-in-the-schools/>.

⁴⁷ For elaboration of history's hold on the curriculum through the 1930s, see Thomas Fallace, "Did the Social Studies Really Replace History in American Secondary Schools?" *Teachers College Record*, 110, no. 10 (October 2008): 2245–70.

⁴⁸ Thomas D. Fallace, "The Racial and Cultural Assumptions of the Early Social Studies Educators, 1901–1922," in *Histories of Social Studies and Race: 1865–2000*, Christine Woyshner and Chara Haeussler Bohan, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 37–55. Campbell F. Scribner, "The Dilemmas of Americanism: Civic Education in the United States" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Citizenship and Education*, Andrew Peterson, Garth Stahl, and Hannah Soong, eds. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1–14. On Progressive era educators' various contests over cultural assimilation, racial development, social stratification, and gender, see Julia Wrigley, *Class Politics and Public Schools: Chicago, 1900–1950*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1982); William J. Reese, *Power and the Promise of School Reform: Grass Roots Movements during the Progressive Era* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986); James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Michael B. Katz, *Reconstructing American Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); John L. Rury, *Education and Women's Work: Female Schooling and the Division of Labor in Urban America, 1870–1930* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995); Jacqueline Fear-Segal, *White Man's Club: Schools, Race, and the Struggle of Indian Acculturation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); Cristina Viviana Groeger, *The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

⁴⁹ Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America: Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 12–28.

⁵⁰ In 1915, Mary Margaret Birge, chair of the textbook committee of the Texas Division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, proclaimed: "Strict censorship is the thing that will bring the honest truth. That is what we are working for and that is what we are going to have." Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Convention of the Texas Division, United Daughters of the Confederacy . . . 1915 (1916), 43, cited in Fred Arthur Bailey, "Charles W. Ramsdell: Reconstruction and the Affirmation of a Closed Society," in *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*, John David Smith and J. Vincent Lowery, eds. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 251. On the grassroots movement to keep Confederate versions of history alive, see Mildred L. Rutherford, *A Measuring Rod to Test Text Books and Reference Books in Schools, Colleges, and Libraries* (Athens: United Confederate Veterans, 1920); Herman Hattaway, "Clio's Southern Soldiers: The United Confederate Veterans and History," *Louisiana History* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1971): 213–42; Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause and the Emergence of the New South, 1865–1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Zimmerman, *Whose America*, 30–38.

by some of the most distinguished historians in the academy. William Archibald Dunning, who served as AHA president in 1913, and his students promoted interpretations of post–Civil War Reconstruction that provided intellectual justification for racism and the exclusion of southern Blacks from political participation. Historical scholarship of this era thus added scholarly and cultural cachet to the racist portrayals that structured generations of American textbooks, popular histories, and film.⁵¹

By the 1930s, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, led by historian Carter G. Woodson, had succeeded in empowering Black educators to refute these expert judgments on their citizenship and dignity, reject racist textbooks, and replace them with a burgeoning crop of history curricula chronicling and celebrating the achievements of Black people—materials which, so long as they were designated for Black pupils in segregated schools and avoided documenting white racism, would be approved by white school boards.⁵² In the North, where the educational color line was more likely to be perforated, teachers and administrators like Madeline Morgan created curricula with an emphasis on contributions and uplift while also leveraging the sociological theories of race relations to promote teaching Black history to all public school students as part of World War II–era “intercultural education.”⁵³

⁵¹ Dunning’s views, historian Eric Foner notes, “dominated historical writing and public consciousness for much of the twentieth century” and “did more than reflect prevailing prejudices—they strengthened and helped perpetuate them. They offered scholarly legitimacy to the disenfranchisement of southern blacks and to the Jim Crow system.” Eric Foner, “Preface,” in *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*, John David Smith and J. Vincent Lowery, eds. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), xi. On the academy’s role in reflecting and ratifying Confederate apologia and racist portrayals of Black agency, see Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 72–80; David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2002); John David Smith and J. Vincent Lowery, eds., *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013); Sarah Weicksel and James Grossman, “Racist Histories and the AHA,” *Perspectives on History* 59, no. 2 (February 2021), <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/racist-histories-and-the-aha-february-2021/>. On the role of mass culture in amplifying Lost Cause mythology (especially in the work of D. W. Griffith and Claude Bowers), see Jack Temple Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986); David E. Kyvig, “History as Present Politics: Claude Bowers’ The Tragic Era,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 73, no. 1 (March 1977): 17–31; Melvyn Stokes, *D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation: A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵² See Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1933); August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915–1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Jacqueline Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Sarah Bair, “The Early Years of Negro History Week, 1926–1950,” in *Histories of Social Studies and Race: 1865–2000*, Christine Woyshner and Chara Haeussler Bohan, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 57–77; Jarvis Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021); Zimmerman, *Whose America*, 38–49. For primary sources, see Imani Perry, Jarvis Givens, and Micha Broadnax, The Black Teacher Archive, <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/black-teacher-archive>.

⁵³ Ian Rocksborough Smith, *Black Public History in Chicago: Civil Rights Activism from World War II into the Cold War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 15–48; Michael Hines, *A Worthy Piece of Work: The Untold Story of Madeline Morgan and the Fight for Black History in Schools* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022).

Social studies endured multiple rounds of direct criticism during the late 1930s and 1940s. Rugg's textbooks came under concentrated attack from organized conservative activists, who characterized the books as a bundle of "collectivist theory" and New Deal propaganda, and ultimately achieved their removal from some districts.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, wartime fueled concerns that social studies was being used, as historian Allen Nevins worried, "to slight, evade, and mangle the study of American History," sapping Americans of their unity of national spirit.⁵⁵ The *New York Times* amplified these fears in a series of reports, claiming to show an absence of US history in typical K–12 courses of study and a "striking ignorance" of US history among college freshmen.⁵⁶ In a two-year Rockefeller Foundation–funded study, published in 1944, the AHA demonstrated that social studies had not in fact killed US history, which they found to be a nearly universal requirement in elementary and high school that was in fact receiving increased attention. The report's authors struck a conciliatory tone regarding social studies, which they admitted had "caused some uneasiness" among historians. Social studies, they clarified, was a field of instruction or "federation of subjects" (just like mathematics or science)—neither a socialistic project nor antithetical to history.⁵⁷

From Cold War to Culture War

While the subject of social studies had been securely installed in American curricula, the national security scripts of the Cold War supplied critics with renewed rationale for purging the field of its social reconstructionist roots and its assumed softness as a nondiscipline. While local anticommunists ran vigilance campaigns against allegedly "un-American" textbooks, popular authors bashed the bland fusion of progressive education with life adjustment classes, lumping social studies into the mix.⁵⁸ The National Defense Education Act of 1958 may have been aloof to social studies, but its federally funded effort

⁵⁴ Ronald W. Evans, *This Happened in America: Harold Rugg and the Censure of the Social Studies* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2006); On the 1930s, see Christine K. Erickson, "'We Want No Teachers Who Say There Are Two Sides to Every Question': Conservative Women and Education in the 1930s," *History of Education Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 487–502. On the 1940s, see Charles Dorn, "'Treason in the Textbooks': Reinterpreting the Harold Rugg Textbook Controversy in the Context of Wartime Schooling," *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 44, no. 4 (August 2008): 457–79; Zimmerman, *Whose America*, 50–73.

⁵⁵ Nevins, as quoted in Evans, *The Social Studies Wars*, 88.

⁵⁶ Evans, *The Social Studies Wars*, 84–92.

⁵⁷ "History among the Social Studies," chapter 5 in *The Report of the Committee on American History in Schools and Colleges of the American Historical Association, the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, and the National Council for the Social Studies* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), <https://www.historians.org/resource/chapter-5-history-among-the-social-studies/>.

⁵⁸ Evans, *The Social Studies Wars*, 97–116.

to sharpen America's intellectual edge against the Soviets ushered in a wave of curricular reform, including the "New Social Studies" developed at the turn of the 1960s. Promising to engage teachers and students in "inquiry projects" that mirrored the disciplinary structures and scholarly methods in history and the social sciences, the New Social Studies ultimately proved difficult and expensive to implement.⁵⁹ Successful mobilizations by religious conservatives against the anthropology-themed Man: A Course of Study (MACOS) curriculum in the early 1970s forced an end to federal funding for curricular experimentation in social studies.⁶⁰ More influential and enduring was the growth of College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) program, organized along the lines of traditional subject areas and a marker of high-status schools and districts throughout the late 20th century.⁶¹ With materials and testing created by College Board and the Educational Testing Service (ETS), and presumably aligned with introductory college courses, the AP program became a unique example of a nationally pervasive, if also exclusive, US history curriculum.⁶²

As the social upheavals of the late 1960s wound their way into the schoolhouse, journalists and liberal policy scholars declared a rolling crisis in urban education. This sent educators scrambling to reinvent curricula to reach the "culturally deprived" and confront the social change that swirled around them.⁶³ New countercultural subdisciplines and epistemological interventions launched by campus protests—such as ethnic studies, Black studies, and Chicano studies—promised precisely the curricular relevance sought by urban educators.⁶⁴ Even as urban liberal coalitions ruptured over K–12 initiatives that emphasized Black consciousness and community control, some within

⁵⁹ Evans, *The Social Studies Wars*, 122–34. For an analysis of the New Social Studies' delicate fusion of student-centered, scientific, and anticommunist impulses, see Campbell F. Scribner, "'Make Your Voice Heard': Communism in the High School Curriculum, 1958–1968," *History of Education Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (August 2012): 351–69.

⁶⁰ For a first-hand account, see Peter Dow, *Schoolhouse Politics: Lessons from the Sputnik Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). For technological contexts, see Victoria Cain, *Schools and Screens: A Watchful History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), chapters 2, 3, and 4.

⁶¹ For a critical account of AP's rise and growth, see Annie Abrams, *Shortchanged: How Advanced Placement Cheats Students* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023).

⁶² See Eric Rothschild, "Four Decades of the Advanced Placement Program," *History Teacher* 32, no. 2 (February 1999): 175–206.

⁶³ For some of the influential literature, see James Bryant Conant, *Slums and Suburbs: A Commentary on Schools in Metropolitan Areas* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961); Frank Reissman, *The Culturally Deprived Child* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962); Herbert Kohl, *36 Children* (New York: New American Library, 1967); Jonathan Kozol, *Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970); Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

⁶⁴ See Michael Soldatenko, *Chicano Studies: The Genesis of a Discipline* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009); Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); (Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Rodolfo F. Acuña, *The Making of Chicana/o Studies: In the Trenches of Academe* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

the social studies coalition identified strongly with the insurgent themes of the moment.⁶⁵ Institutional voices at the NEA, the NCSS, and new faculty cohorts in teachers' colleges borrowed the critiques and vocabulary of Black Power, assigned critical pedagogy texts, formed antiracism and social justice committees, and published annual compendia of scholarship and teaching guides for ethnic studies.⁶⁶ By the mid-1970s, the new disciplines had built a home on some university campuses, but political energies had clearly shifted to conservatives, inducing many ethnic studies proponents to mute the more critical notes of their interventions in favor of a more palatable "multiculturalism."⁶⁷

For conservatives, multiculturalism was but one example of the damage that post-1960s liberalism had done to public schools and universities. In the era of Ronald Reagan, policymakers hitched these cultural critiques to the longer-running movement among international groups like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to establish standard international metrics for educational progress.⁶⁸ Taking wide aim at the softening of rigor and a fracturing of common experience they saw across the American curriculum, the authors of the influential 1983 publication *A Nation at Risk* notably refused to mention social studies, preferring traditional subject labels like history, geography, and economics.⁶⁹ Harnessing *A Nation at Risk*'s high-profile portrayal of mediocrity, educational historian Diane Ravitch and policy analyst Chester Finn Jr. built networks and arguments that fused a modernizing agenda for "outcome standards" in history with a call for reviving the humanities core.⁷⁰ For Ravitch and Finn, the rise of a "skill training" approach in social studies and language arts (in contrast to history and literature) had allowed educators and policymakers to hide from the central question that

⁶⁵ Daniel Perlstein, *Justice, Justice: School Politics and the Eclipse of Liberalism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004); Russell Rickford, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Elizabeth Todd-Breland, *A Political Education: Black Politics and Education Reform in Chicago since the 1960s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

⁶⁶ Andrew Hartmann, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 25–28; James A. Banks, ed., *Teaching Ethnic Studies: Concepts and Strategies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1973).

⁶⁷ Hartmann, *A War for the Soul of America*, 253–54.

⁶⁸ See Daniel Tröhler, Heinz-Dieter Meyer, David Labaree, and Ethan Hutt, "Accountability: Antecedents, Power, and Processes," *Teachers College Record*, 11, no. 9 (2014): 1–12; Ethan Hutt, "'Seeing Like a State' in the Postwar Era: The Coleman Report, Longitudinal Datasets, and the Measurement of Human Capital," *History of Education Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (November 2017): 615–25; Christian Ydesen and Sherman Dorn, "The No Child Left Behind Act in the Global Architecture of Educational Accountability," *History of Education Quarterly*, 62, no. 3 (August 2022): 268–90.

⁶⁹ The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform, a Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1983), 12.

⁷⁰ See Diane Ravitch, Chester E. Finn Jr., and Robert T. Fancher, *Against Mediocrity: The Humanities in America's High Schools* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984); Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).

any good humanities curriculum needed to answer: What was worth knowing? Finn and Ravitch indicted the educational establishment for a “tragic downward spiral that can only erode the culture, trivialize the intellect, and in time pauperize our civic life.”⁷¹ But they also appealed to a broad common sense among history teachers and the general public: concepts could not be learned free of facts; a common culture required common knowledge.

The Age of Accountability

By the early 1990s, aspects of the traditionalist critique had spread beyond the conservative base that had sparked the movement, as prominent historians like those writing for the Bradley Commission on History in the Schools echoed the disenchantment with the “do-your-own-thing formlessness of social studies,” blaming both early 20th-century Progressives and the science fair-style inquiry of the 1960s and 1970s.⁷² Meanwhile, on the college campus, the question of what was worth knowing was more contentious than ever, as multiculturalists sparred with traditionalists over the content of liberal education itself.⁷³

In contrast to campus and canon, K–12 education policy was increasingly becoming a zone of consensus for liberals and conservatives. The growth of the education state—at both the state and federal level—had occurred under both Democratic and Republican leadership.⁷⁴ Under the bipartisan movement eventually known as accountability, education policymakers urged managerial competence over teacher labor, higher academic standards in clearly defined subject areas, and regular rounds of

⁷¹ Ravitch and Finn, *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*, 20. Similar and influential themes were raised in E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987).

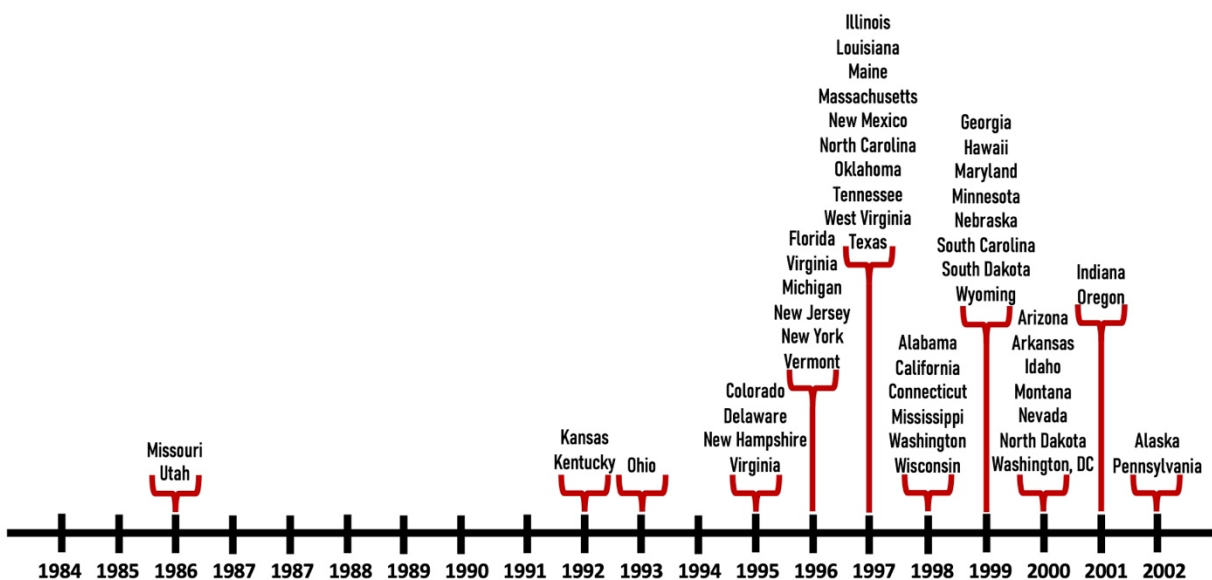
⁷² Kenneth T. Jackson and Barbara B. Jackson, “Why the Time Is Right to Reform the History Curriculum,” in *Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education*, Paul Gagnon and the Bradley Commission for History in the Schools, eds. (Boston: Educational Excellence Network, 1989), 6. Subsequent scholarship cast doubt on the claim advanced by many writing in the moment of the Bradley Commission that social studies had ever displaced history in most K–12 courses of study. See Jenness, *Making Sense of the Social Studies*, 255–58; Fallace, “Did the Social Studies Really Replace History in American Secondary Schools?”

⁷³ For influential shots in the culture war, see Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Sex and Race on Campus* (New York: Free Press, 1991); Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (Knoxville, TN: Whittle Direct Books, 1991).

⁷⁴ See Gareth Davies, *See Government Grow: Education Politics from Johnson to Reagan* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007). For critiques of the growth in educational bureaucracy from the left, see David C. Berliner and Bruce J. Biddle, *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1996). From the right, see Benjamin Scafidi, “The School Staffing Surge: Decades of Employment Growth in America's Public Schools,” Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, October 2012, <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/11-2012-Staffing-Surge-WEB.pdf>.

standardized assessment.⁷⁵ As presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton announced federal education initiatives, the work of developing academic standards for history and social studies would take place at the state level but with substantial input and assistance from the national networks of expertise built by social studies educators and education agency administrators since the 1960s. Beginning with a small trickle in the early 1990s, a wave of states adopted social studies standards in the middle of the decade, mounting to a flood at the turn of the century. By 2002, all but two states had a set of adopted standards for social studies, with US history earning a place in each (Fig. 6).⁷⁶

Fig. 6: Timeline of Social Studies Standards Adoption by State, through 2002



The movement for content-rich state standards and subject-specific course requirements reaffirmed history's distinct role in the curriculum. But partisan conservatism famously reasserted itself in 1994, when National Endowment for the Humanities director Lynne Cheney led a lethal high-profile attack against the National Standards for History initiative that her own agency had funded, condemning the product as insufficiently celebratory of American heroes and institutions.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ On the origins and rise of late 20th-century education reform sponsors, see Jack Schneider, *Excellence for All: How a New Breed of Reformers Is Transforming America's Public Schools* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011).

⁷⁶ The latecomers to social studies standards were Iowa (2010) and Rhode Island (2019).

⁷⁷ See Lynne Cheney, "The End of History," *Wall Street Journal*, October 22, 1994, A22, <https://online.wsj.com/media/EndofHistory.pdf>; Gary B. Nash, Charlotte A. Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn. *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

The lesson was clear: recommending which history should be taught was likely to put you at the center of a culture war. The most prolific and successful effort to change the subject came from cognitive psychologist Sam Wineburg. Summarizing a decade of research in 1999, Wineburg stressed that *thinking* like a historian was a deeply humanizing project; beyond “names, dates, and stories,” he argued, history’s chief contribution was teaching “the virtue of humility in the face of limits to our knowledge and the virtue of awe in the face of the expanse of human history.”⁷⁸

The rise of standards effectively brought history back as the lead subject within the mix of social studies. Social studies was still the prevailing term, and the NCSS launched an ongoing effort to generate model standards aimed at a multidisciplinary civic competence—becoming durable and top-selling references used by local education agencies.⁷⁹ But the codification of state graduation requirements gave a renewed prominence to history, especially American history, as a specified content area. New groups like the National Center for History in the Schools (founded in 1988), the National Council for History Education (1990), National History Day (founded in 1974 and moved to the nation’s capital in 1992), the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History (founded in 1994), and the Stanford History Education Group (founded in 2002) drew private and public funding to feed a national culture of history teaching. Popular appetites for heritage and history appeared to be mounting as well.⁸⁰ Blockbuster filmmaking during the 1980s and 1990s dwelled extensively on historical topics, landing in classroom VCRs and DVD players.⁸¹ Meanwhile, an ongoing academic job crisis sent professional historians off campus and into high-profile projects of community history, oral history,

⁷⁸ Sam Wineburg, “Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 80, no. 7 (Spring 1999): 488–99, quotation 498. For early appearances of Wineburg’s approach, see Samuel Wineburg, “On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach between School and Academy,” *American Educational Research Journal* 28, no. 3 (Autumn 1991): 495–519. For an exemplary collection of essays synthesizing both the cognitive turn in history teaching and the history-not-heritage emphasis at the turn of the millennium, see Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg, eds., *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

⁷⁹ See NCSS, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1992); NCSS, *Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).

⁸⁰ Michael G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 618–89; Michael J. Hogan, “The Enola Gay Controversy: History, Memory, and the Politics of Presentation,” in *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, Michael J. Hogan, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 200–32; Paul A. Shackel, ed., *Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001); Steven Conn, “Heritage vs. History at the National Museum of the American Indian,” *Public Historian* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 69–74. For histories, see Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Hartmann, *A War for the Soul of America*, 253–54.

⁸¹ Jeremy D. Stoddard and Alan S. Marcus, “More Than ‘Showing What Happened’: Exploring the Potential of Teaching History with Film,” *High School Journal* 93, no. 2 (January–February 2010): 83–90.

and official commemoration.⁸² Over the first decade of the 21st century, the US Department of Education's Teaching American History grants program channeled nearly one billion dollars of federal funds to thousands of projects nationwide, drawing local education agencies, history nonprofits, university scholars, and history teachers into episodes of collaboration.⁸³ Despite the technical earmarking of federal funding for "traditional" history, much of the curricular and professional development of the era delicately pushed schoolhouse history away from heritage and collective memory and toward more sophisticated disciplinary notions of history "as a way of knowing."⁸⁴ But as an emphasis on testable skills came to dominate the accountability initiatives of the early 21st century, these definitions could also conveniently be pitched as a series of "reading strategies."⁸⁵

Within the expanding ecosystem of think tanks, philanthropies, and educational nonprofits that grew in the accountability era, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (led by Finn) assumed the mantle of auditor of the new state standards documents for US history. Five times over two decades, Fordham's team assessed each state with a letter grade. From their first assessment, Fordham established a strong preference for detailed, content-rich standards, concluding in 1998 that most state standards left many students "shortchanged of their own and the nation's heritage."⁸⁶ By 2021, Fordham's reviewers still saw inadequacy across the board but gave Ds and Fs to fewer than half of the states.⁸⁷

Social Studies Redux

Throughout the era of bipartisan harmony on accountability, fault lines rumbled beneath social studies education. Even as textbook publishers calibrated their products to align with the seemingly uncontroversial lists of content being assembled in state capitals, the

⁸² Theodore Karamanski, "Making History Whole: The Future of the Public History Movement," *Public Historian* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 3–12.

⁸³ Rachel Ragland, "Sustaining Changes in History Teachers' Core Instructional Practices: Impact of 'Teaching American History' Ten Years Later," *History Teacher* 48, no. 4 (August 2015): 609–40. For critique, see Rick Shenkman, "OAH 2009: Sam Wineburg Dares to Ask If the Teaching American History Program Is a Boondoggle," *History News Network* (April 2009), <https://www.historynewsnetwork.org/article/oah-2009-sam-wineburg-dares-to-ask-if-the-teaching>.

⁸⁴ Peter Seixas, "Schweigen! Die Kinder! Or Does Postmodern History Have a Place in the Schools," in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History*, 19–37; Steven Conn, "Heritage Is Not History," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 10, 2015, <https://www.inquirer.com/philly/blogs/thinktank/313315391.html>.

⁸⁵ Sam Wineburg, "Thinking Like a Historian," *Teaching with Primary Sources Quarterly* 3, no.1 (Winter 2010).

⁸⁶ David Warren Saxe, *State History Standards: An Appraisal of History Standards in 37 States and the District of Columbia* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 1998), viii. For ongoing commentary about the blurred lines between history and heritage, see Steven Conn, "Heritage Is Not History."

⁸⁷ Jeremy Stern, Alison E. Brody, José A. Gregory, Stephen Griffith, Jonathan Pulvers, David Griffith, and Amber M. Northern, *The State of State Standards for Civics and US History in 2021* (Washington DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2021), 14.

circulation of books like historian Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* (1980) and sociologist James Loewen’s *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (1995) fed a popular appetite for unsettling received narratives, regardless of whether those narratives were in fact being taught. While fields of Black studies and Africana studies secured their institutional standing within the academy, a strong commercial market in popular Black history kept a range of critical perspectives on US history alive and available to a broad public.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, the inheritors and offshoots of multicultural education—reconceptualized in the mid-1990s as “culturally relevant pedagogy” and “culturally responsive pedagogy”—were achieving substantial influence in education colleges.⁸⁹ The institutionalization of these concepts and approaches within educational research and teacher preparation would continue into the 21st century.⁹⁰

The collapse of the 1994 National Standards for History effectively sidelined questions of historical content knowledge from the ongoing movement to define academic standards at the national level. In the ambitious national education initiatives of the 21st century—George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act (2002), Barack Obama’s Race to the Top grants (2009) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), and the National Governors Association’s Common Core initiative (2010)—history and social studies were largely left

⁸⁸ For accounts of Black studies, African American studies, and Africana studies in the post–civil rights era, see Robert L. Harris Jr., “Coming of Age: The Transformation of Afro-American Historiography,” *Journal of Negro History* 67, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 107–21; Robert L. Harris Jr., “The Intellectual and Institutional Development of Africana Studies,” *The Black Studies Reader*, Jacqueline Bobo, Cynthia Hudley, and Claudine Michel, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15–32; Pero Gaglio Dagbovie, *African American History Reconsidered* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Martha Biondi, “Controversial Blackness: The Historical Development and Future Trajectory of African American Studies,” *Daedalus* 140, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 226–37. On the reach of Black popular history in the late 20th century, see Vincent Harding, “Power from Our People: The Sources of the Modern Revival of Black History,” *The Black Scholar* 18, no. 1 (January/February 1987): 40–51; David Chioni Moore, “Routes: Alex Haley’s *Roots* and the Rhetoric of Genealogy,” *Transitions*, no. 64 (1994): 4–21; Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory and Identity in Black America since 1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); E. James West, *Ebony Magazine and Lerone Bennett Jr.: Popular Black History in Postwar America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

⁸⁹ For an account of this era of mounting influence, see Django Paris, “Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice,” *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 3 (April 2012): 93–97. For the influential literature, see Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” *American Education Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 465–91.; Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education,” *Teachers College Record* 97, no.1 (1995): 47–68.

⁹⁰ As one set of researchers concluded in 2018, nearly all states had incorporated some culturally responsive “competencies” into their professional teaching standards; a “respect for student differences” and the call to “draw on students’ culture to shape curriculum” were nearly unanimous, while critical or systemic approaches to bias were rarer. See Jenny Muniz, “Culturally Responsive Teaching: A 50-State Survey of Teaching Standards,” *New America*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/culturally-responsive-teaching/>. For an additional indicator of the subfield’s expanding prestige, see the presidency of the American Educational Research Association between 2009 and 2025; all but two presidents have had a research profile rooted in multicultural/culturally responsive education methods or centered on race, ethnicity, and culture.

aside.⁹¹ With national discussions of history focused on skills, cultural fights over history content stayed local.⁹²

With new money and new enthusiasm for standards coursing through networks of curriculum professionals and state agency administrators at the turn of the 2010s, proponents of interdisciplinary social studies found a chance to regain their footing. Beginning as a working group within the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in 2010, an expanding coalition of state agency officials, social studies experts, nonprofits, and professional associations (including the AHA) developed new guidance for social studies standards. The C3 Framework published in 2013 by NCSS, articulated core competencies for each discipline (history, civics, geography, and economics) while braiding them together in an interdisciplinary “inquiry arc”—a model for classroom routines meant to apply to any social studies subject area. The C3 Framework struck a delicate balance: distinguishing social studies against the mission creep of English and language arts while also demonstrating its coherence with the literacy expectations of the Common Core; promoting social studies as training for “the arts and habits of civic life” while asserting its nonpartisan character; and keeping various factions and disciplines inside the broad social studies tent.⁹³ With the C3 Framework’s emphasis on inquiry, its history section focused on the components of historical analysis, rather than the lists of content knowledge common to many state history standards.⁹⁴ The authors drew on the various schema of historical thinking skills that had flourished since the 1990s, including those developed by the AHA.⁹⁵ With content knowledge once again avoided, Finn and the traditionalists offered their dissent, but the C3 Framework’s authors and proponents

⁹¹ Common Core included a collection of sample readings or “text exemplars” in an appendix for use in history and social studies. These included several primary and secondary source readings relevant to a US history class. But the rationale for their inclusion was to demonstrate how these “informational texts” could be used to facilitate performance tasks that assessed nonfiction literacy. See Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association, “Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: Appendix B: Text Exemplars and Sample Performance Tasks,” June 2010, https://www.thecorestandards.org/assets/Appendix_B.pdf.

⁹² These included a ban on high school Mexican American studies in Arizona in 2010 and a largely Texan movement against Islamic influence in curriculum. Zimmerman, *Whose America*, 216–26.

⁹³ NCSS, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K–12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), 6.

⁹⁴ For accounts of the C3 drafting process, see Ryan New, Kathy Swan, John Lee, S. G. Grant, “The State of Social Studies Standards: What Is the Impact of the C3 Framework?,” *Social Education* 85, no. 4 (September 2021): 239–46; Merry E. Weisner Hanks, “Teaching World History in a Swirl of Standards,” in *Encounters Old and New in World History*, Laura J. Mitchell, Anand A. Yang and Kieko Matteson, eds. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017), 42–53; Kathy Swan in “Ten Years of C3: The Past, Present, and Future of State Standards” [video recording], AHA, November 15, 2023, https://youtu.be/QHTcdMG_YZM.

⁹⁵ For influences on the history section of C3, see Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, “What Does It Mean to Think Historically,” *Perspectives* 45, no. 1 (January 2007), <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/what-does-it-mean-to-think-historically-january-2007/>; Sam Wineburg, Daisy Martin, and Chauncey Monte-Sano, *Reading like a Historian: Teaching Literacy in Middle and High School Classrooms*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011).

carried the day.⁹⁶ Benefitting from a strong support network among state and local social studies specialists and seed money from a Race to the Top grant in New York, the C3 Framework gradually became the new lingua franca of social studies curriculum development in the 2010s.⁹⁷ By 2017, 23 states had incorporated C3 into either standards or frameworks.⁹⁸

Across the first two decades of the 21st century, civics, rather than history, rose to prominence as the fulcrum for new social studies initiatives. Perennial declarations of the nation's poor civic health drew fodder from periodic reports of dismal civics scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).⁹⁹ Major historical conjunctures—including the military campaigns of the global War on Terror, the China shock to American industry, the financial crisis and economic recession of 2007–10, the information revolution brought on by social media and smartphones, and the unexpected success of antiestablishment political movements—rippled across survey data to reinforce experts' diagnoses of civic sickness.¹⁰⁰ Beginning in the mid-2010s, state legislators passed dozens of new civics requirements, including 19 states that now mandate that students be tested using the civics portion of the US naturalization test.¹⁰¹ By the late

⁹⁶ Chester E. Finn Jr., “Social Studies Follies,” Fordham Institute, November 20, 2012, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/social-studies-follies>.

⁹⁷ Interview with social studies curriculum developer (CD 1), June 6, 2023.

⁹⁸ Michael Hansen, Elizabeth Mann Levesque, Jon Valant, and Diana Quintero, “2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: An Inventory of State Civics Requirements,” Brookings Institution, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/2018-brown-center-report-on-american-education-an-inventory-of-state-civics-requirements/>.

⁹⁹ NAEP began assessing civics among 8th graders in 1998. That year, 23 percent of students scored “proficient” or “advanced.” In the last round of NAEP scores in 2022, 22 percent scored in the same range. Collected six times over the 24 years, NAEP's civics scores have moved only slightly in either direction, with the 2022 scores being the lowest. See “Explore Results for the 2022 NAEP Civics Assessment,” NAEP Report Card: Civics, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/civics/>.

¹⁰⁰ For successive declarations of poor civic health, see Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001); “Broken Engagement: America's Civic Health Index,” A Report by the National Conference on Citizenship in Association with Circle and Saguaro Seminar, September 18, 2006, <https://ncoc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2006BrokenEngagementCHI.pdf>; Jonathan Gould, ed., *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools* (Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania and the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2011); Pew Research Center, “Public Trust in Government: 1958–2017,” May 3, 2017, www.people-press.org/2017/05/03/public-trust-in-government-1958-2017/; Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, “Freedom in the World, 2021: Democracy Under Siege,” (Freedom House, 2021), https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FIW2021_World_02252021_FINAL-web-upload.pdf; Michael Abramowitz, John Bridgeland, Seema Shah, Ian Vásquez, and Margaret Brennan, “How Can We Measure the Health of Democracy,” [webinar] University of Virginia Karsh Institute of Democracy, March 16, 2022, <https://millercenter.org/news-events/events/how-can-we-measure-health-democracy>; Global State of Democracy Initiative, “United States of America,” International Idea, May 2024 <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/country/united-states>.

¹⁰¹ Our legislative research tallied 172 separate pieces of state legislation passed between 2006 and 2022, with significant spikes in 2015 and 2021. See also various reports by from the Education Commission of the States tracking the push for increased civics requirements, “50-State Comparison: Civic Education Policies 2016,” December 2016, <https://www.ecs.org/citizenship-education-policies-2016-archive/>. By our count, states that have legislated a recommended or required use of the USCIS test are Arkansas, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, and Washington.

2010s, civic education reformers had joined older characterizations of disengagement and apathy to fresh portrayals of a citizenry they viewed as polarized, unruly, and misinformed.¹⁰² For agency administrators and foundation grantmakers seeking a curricular response, civics and citizenship education provided a ready-made reply, seeding a dense crop of new nonprofits and nonpartisan coalitions including iCivics (2009) and the Civics Renewal Network (2013).¹⁰³ Educating for American Democracy (2019), notably included historians among its leadership and has framed its effort to integrate civics and history as an urgent crosspartisan project.

Conflicts over the last five years signal a potential reheating of the last generation's culture wars over US history, and ambitious players have attempted to shape both the revision of academic standards and the development of curriculum.¹⁰⁴ The 2014 revisions to the College Board's curriculum framework for AP US History afforded a brief national

¹⁰² See Abby Kiesa and Peter Levine, "Why America Urgently Needs to Improve K–12 Civic Education," *The Conversation*, October 30, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/why-america-urgently-needs-to-improve-k-12-civic-education-66736>; Louise Dube, "Can Civics Education Repair a Failing Democracy?," Yale Insights, June 5, 2019, <https://insights.som.yale.edu/insights/can-civics-education-repair-failing-democracy>; Orrin Hatch, "We Must Fix Civics Education to Protect American Democracy," *USA Today*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/10/30/orrin-hatch-fix-civics-education-protect-american-democracy-column/6067447002/>; Anya Kamenetz, Cory Turner, and Sylvie Douglis, "Now Is a Good Time to Talk to Kids about Civics," National Public Radio, January 15, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/31/929578004/anxious-about-the-election-your-kids-can-tell-heres-how-to-talk-about-it>; Sarah Garland, "Can We Teach Our Way Out of Political Polarization?," Hechinger Report, January 25, 2021, <https://hechingerreport.org/can-we-teach-our-way-out-of-political-polarization/>; Adnan Karim, "Recent Events Reveal Urgent Need for Civics Education in the US," *Common Dreams*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2021/02/16/recent-events-reveal-urgent-need-civics-education-us>; Megan Brennan, "Americans Remain Distrustful of Mass Media," Gallup, October 7, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/355526/americans-trust-media-dips-second-lowest-record.aspx>; Sam Wineburg and Nadav Ziv, "What Happens When TikTok Is Your Main Source of News and Information," *Los Angeles Times*, August 1, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2022-08-01/gen-z-misinformation-tik-tok-instagram-social-media>.

¹⁰³ There are dozens of others. See the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (2001), the National Constitution Center (2003), the Jack Miller Center (2007), the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics (2008); the Civics Education Initiative (2017), the CivXNow Coalition (2018), and Arizona State University's Center for American Civics (2019).

¹⁰⁴ See Hillsdale College, *The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum: American History and Civics Lessons for K–12 Classrooms* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College, 2021), <https://k12.hillsdale.edu/Curriculum/Hillsdale-K12-American-History/>; National Association of Scholars, "Model Acts to Enhance K-12 Civics Education," Civics Alliance, <https://civicsalliance.org/model-k-12-civics-code/>; Heritage Foundation, "Model Legislation: Protecting K–12 Students from Discrimination," <https://www.heritage.org/model-legislation/protecting-k-12-students-discrimination>; National Association of Scholars, "Reform at Scale: A Map of NAS Initiatives by State," July 20, 2023, <https://www.nas.org/blogs/article/reform-at-scale-a-map-of-nas-initiatives-by-state>. As political deliberations regarding state standards revisions moved forward in the early 2020s, the AHA intervened on multiple occasions. See, for example, Julia Brookins's testimony to the Texas State Board of Education, August 30, 2022, https://www.adminmonitor.com/tx/tea/committee_of_the_full_board/20220825/ [at 1:49:15 of part 1]; "AHA Letter to Virginia Board of Education Urging Adoption of Proposed History Standards," October 19, 2022, <https://www.historians.org/news/aha-letter-to-virginia-board-of-education-urging-adoption-of-proposed-history-standards/>; "AHA Letter Opposing Proposed South Dakota Social Studies Standards," April 12, 2023, <https://www.historians.org/news/aha-letter-opposing-proposed-south-dakota-social-studies-standards/>; "AHA Testimony on Maine Social Studies Standards Review," April 30, 2024, <https://www.historians.org/news/aha-submits-testimony-on-maine-social-studies-standards-review/>; "AHA Testimony on Idaho Social Studies Standards," May 1, 2024, <https://www.historians.org/news/aha-testimony-on-idaho-social-studies-standards-review/>; "AHA Urges Oklahoma Retain Current Social Studies Standards," August 26, 2024, <https://www.historians.org/news/aha-urges-oklahoma-retain-current-social-studies-standards/>.

platform for cultural and pedagogical conservatives to condemn what they saw as a replacement of traditional content with the “vagaries of identity-group conflict” and “abstract and impersonal forces.”¹⁰⁵ Distinctive in years since 2016 has been the reduced salience of the accountability arguments that so dominated discussions between the 1990s and the 2010s. Widespread disenchantment with assessment regimes has deprived both political factions of constituencies with enthusiasm for talk of 21st-century career skills or the like.¹⁰⁶ Recent proponents of curricular reform tend instead to make their arguments on the basis of moral reckonings over justice, equity, liberty, or patriotism.

Still, it is telling that flashpoints for debate in the early 2020s in Texas, South Dakota, and Virginia were occasioned by cycles of state standards revisions. Meanwhile, competing camps have released documents that seek to translate their ideological commitments into “standards” documents of their own, illustrating the enduring structures that the accountability movement has built around civic debate.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Zimmerman, *Whose America*, 216–26; “RNC Condemns AP Exam’s ‘Radically Revisionist View’ of US History,” *Talking Points Memo*, August 13, 2014, <https://talkingpointsmemo.com/livewire/rnc-ap-exam-revisionist-history>; National Association of Scholars, Scholars Concerned About Advanced Placement History, “Letter Opposing the 2014 APUSH Framework,” June 2, 2015, https://www.nas.org/storage/app/media/images/documents/Historians_Statement.pdf. The AHA publicly disputed claims of anti-Americanism and registered its support for the College Board’s revisions. See “Statement of Support for College Board’s Revised Advanced Placement US History Course Framework,” August 20, 2014, <https://www.historians.org/news/statement-of-support-for-college-boards-revised-advanced-placement-us-history-course-framework/>.

¹⁰⁶ While political pushback from educational localists, parents, and teacher unions were instrumental in setting the accountability juggernaut back on its heels, some of the most public criticism was led by former standards booster Diane Ravitch. See Diane Ravitch, *Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

¹⁰⁷ On the progressive side, see Learning for Justice, *Social Justice Standards: The Learning for Justice Anti-Bias Framework* (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2022), <https://www.learningforjustice.org/frameworks/social-justice-standards>. On the conservative side, see Civics Alliance, *American Birthright: The Civics Alliance’s Model K–12 Social Studies Standards* (New York: National Association of Scholars, 2022), <https://civicsalliance.org/american-birthright/>.

Part 2: National Patterns

Struggling to describe the US education state, scholars and policy advocates have mixed their metaphors to invoke complexity, fragmentation and even frustration—a “crazy quilt” of “marble cake federalism,” “bureaucratization without centralization,” a “game of telephone,” “too many chefs in the school governance kitchen,” “set up to thwart policy success.”¹ Others find energy in the mix, noting the enduring “dynamism” of James Madison’s compound republic.² The clutter of educational governance notwithstanding, a national view of US history education reveals meaningful patterns and notable divergences. This section maps these institutional contexts, which shape the local and teacher decisions cataloged in Parts 3 and 4.

¹ Quotes come from Paul E. Lingfelter, “It’s Time to Make Our Academic Standards Clear,” *Viewpoint*, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (May 2011); Kenneth K. Wong, “Federalism Revised: The Promise and Challenge of the No Child Left Behind Act,” *Public Administration Review* (December 2008): S175–85; John W. Meyer, W. Richard Scott, David Strang, and Andrew L. Creighton, “Bureaucratization without Centralization: Changes in the Organizational System of American Public Education, 1940–1980,” in *Institutional Patterns and Organizations: Culture and Environment*, Lynne G. Zucker, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1988), 140–67; Gail L. Sunderman, Ben Levin and Roger Slee, “Evidence of the Impact of School Reform on Systems Governance and Educational Bureaucracies in the United States,” *Review of Research in Education* 34, no. 1 (2010): 226–53; Edward Crow, “Measuring What Matters: A Stronger Accountability Model for Teacher Education,” Center for American Progress, 2010; Morgan Polikoff, *Beyond Standards: The Fragmentation of Education Governance and the Promise of Curriculum Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2023), 12; Dara Zeehandelaar and David Griffith, “Schools of Thought: A Taxonomy of American Educational Governance” (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2015).

² See Paul Manna, *School’s In: Federalism and the National Education Agenda* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007) 6–7.

Courses of Study

In the courses of study across 50 states and the District of Columbia, 43 introduce US history content for the first time somewhere within grades 3 through 5, with 5th grade the most common. Fifteen of those states combine students' first dose of US history with state history. Thirty-nine states require or recommend more US history in middle school, most often in grade 8, or with far less frequency in a two- or three-part sequence. All states that provide guidance require at least one US history course in high school, typically in one year, with a few in a two-year sequence (Fig. 7). A handful of states offer no state-level guidance or description of courses of study.

Despite consistencies regarding when students take US history, there is important variation in the scope of the content covered at these different grade levels. Most K–8 US history courses cover content from the so-called “first-half” of US history, starting somewhere between the original inhabitants of the Americas and the US Constitution and continuing to the end of Reconstruction.³ Only 18 states appear to cover the full span before the beginning of high school. In 23 states, the required high school US history course covers content only from the “second half” of the timeline, picking up wherever students left off in middle school (Fig. 8).

³ There is some variation in the end points applied to mark first and second parts of US history. In the 5th grade, a significant number of courses end around 1800, while Massachusetts's 5th grade course goes to the Civil War and then jumps to the Civil Rights Movement. In acknowledgment of its own history, West Virginia has a state and US history course that goes from the Civil War to the early 20th century. In middle school, there are a few outliers as well. Some Pennsylvania districts cover two separate courses divided at 1914, while Arkansas splits the course at 1930. Washington offers a primarily 19th-century course, Kansas goes to 1900, and Illinois has a course from 1858 to the present. In high school, Arkansas picks up in 1929, and the courses in Maryland, Nebraska, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania begin around the late 1890s. In Washington state, the focus is primarily on the 20th and 21st centuries, whereas Oklahoma starts from the Civil War instead of Reconstruction.

Fig. 7: Sequence of Required and Recommended Courses in US History

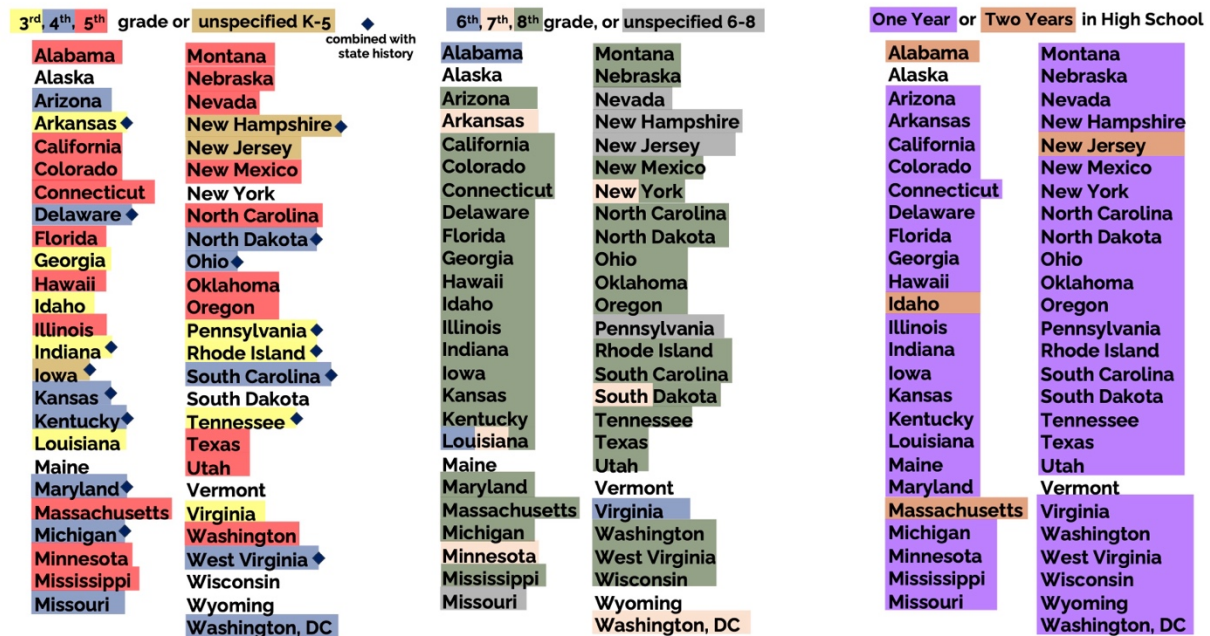
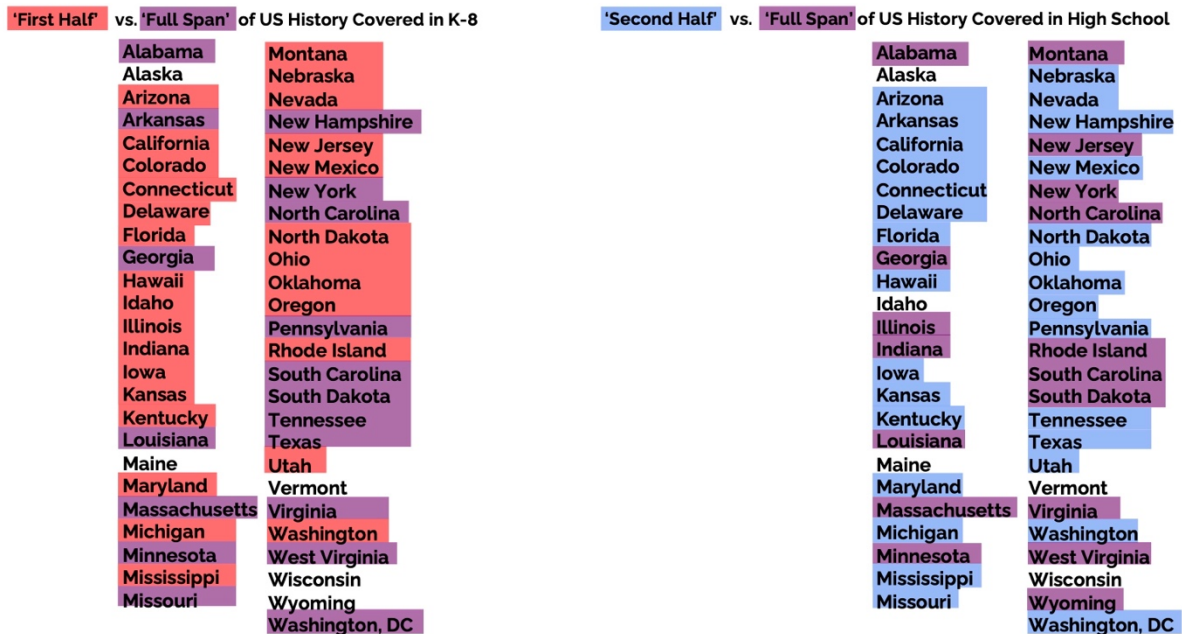


Fig. 8: Scope of US History Content Coverage



Color coding these course sequences across all 50 states and DC and adding state history requirements yields a clear clumping of coursework and content across common grade bands (Fig. 9). This pattern of state history in K–4 and US history in 5th grade, 8th

grade, and again in high school (often junior year) is as clear today as it was to AHA researchers 80 years ago.⁴

The legacy framework for US history is unobjectionable in many regards. Students benefit from repeated exposure to the same historical content, with increasing depth and sophistication, across their K–12 experience.⁵ The pivot point around the end of Reconstruction is one that few historians would dispute. Still, the structural limits and sequencing quirks of the typical US history course of study often persist without reflection or revision. When reforms do occur, the subject is buffeted by peripheral forces—a new civics requirement, a change in state exam schedules, or the expansion of AP offerings to a wider and younger cohort of students. One concern is the time lapse between students’ experience with the first and second halves of US history, a lag that can last a single summer or as much as six years. In states where only the second half is covered in high school, the events of early American history are stranded in fifth or sixth grade, depriving students of the opportunity for more mature treatment and advanced study of crucial episodes. Meanwhile, second-half history content only grows every year, leaving events of the recent past likely to be crammed in before summer break. In one class document, a teacher had only six class days for a half-century sprint from the Selma to Montgomery marches to Donald Trump’s presidency. Scheduled stops (at the Great Society, Malcom X, Vietnam, Ronald Reagan, 9/11, and Barack Obama) were likely dizzying. Indeed, when surveyed teachers identified the topics where they felt the need for more support, six of the top ten came from the post–civil rights era.⁶

⁴ “American History in the Classroom,” chapter 3 in Edgar B. Wesley, committee director, *The Report of the Committee on American History in Schools and Colleges of the American Historical Association, the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, and the National Council for the Social Studies* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), <https://www.historians.org/resource/chapter-3-american-history-in-the-classroom/>.

⁵ On spiraled curriculum, see Jerome S. Bruner, *The Process of Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 33–54. On the challenges of integrating learning science into teacher preparation, see Daniel Willingham, “A Mental Model of the Learner: Teaching the Basic Science of Educational Psychology to Future Teachers,” *Mind, Brain, and Education* 11, no. 4 (December 2017): 166–75.

⁶ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22.

Fig. 9: US History Course of Study by Grade Level and State



Despite these difficulties, this model predominates, with 76 percent of surveyed teachers describing their course as chronologically organized. Eighteen percent of surveyed teachers reported that they organize their exposition thematically. We came across few examples of thematically organized curriculum in the materials we collected. When thematic approaches appeared, big questions—about democracy, equality, federalism, labor and business, foreign policy, and civil liberties—seemed well designed for the task. At the level of individual activities, however, the thematic approach can invite anachronism. Asking, for instance, whether James Madison would agree with Barack

Obama’s proposal for reforming gun laws may illustrate vividly distinct historical contexts but without an account of how those contexts were produced.⁷

State Standards and State Agencies

Even though the rise of state social studies standards was historically concentrated at the turn of the 21st century, formats varied; there was no standard for standards. Subsequent professionalization among curriculum specialists built on broad points of consensus, borrowed and referenced standards from other states, and established a set of common patterns. When states and districts offer a rationale for the study of history, preparation for participation in a democratic society is the common refrain. State standards trend toward a definition of social studies that centers inquiry. In addition to being consonant with the various nonfiction reading and writing skills stressed in federal policy, inquiry has been an explicit focus of NCSS, whose 2013 C3 Framework and “inquiry arc” have been widely adopted or cited as reference for recent rounds of standards revision.⁸

The influence of the C3 Framework highlights the important role that networks of education professionals (such as teachers, administrators, and publishers) have taken in sustaining a national culture related to social studies instruction. In every state, individual people, not standards documents, carry out the work of developing and aligning curriculum. The work that curriculum leads and supervisors have done to associate with each other, to develop professional norms, and share best practices is how “alignment” actually happens—a fact not generally acknowledged in media coverage of education issues. A great many teachers carry on with minimal awareness of the state agency’s alleged role in their work. Some teachers view it with suspicion or distrust (one referred to the state agency as “the Death Star”), while others look forward to helpful emails from their state social studies specialists promoting professional development opportunities (Table 1).

⁷ “Thematic US History, 2022–2023: Summit Portfolio,” district document, Illinois, Suburb: Large, (2022).

⁸ In 2017, the Brookings Institution counted 23 states that incorporated the NCSS C3 Framework into either standards or frameworks. Michael Hansen, Elizabeth Mann Levesque, Jon Valant, and Diana Quintero, “2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: An Inventory of State Civics Requirements,” Brookings Institution, accessed December 15, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/2018-brown-center-report-on-american-education-an-inventory-of-state-civics-requirements/>. By our count, six states cite C3 as their primary model, nine mention C3, and another 12 show evident but uncited influence. In 2017, Vermont forewent adopting academic content standards, adopting the C3 Framework itself.

Table 1: Teacher Commentary on the State Agency and State Standards

Positive Quotes	Negative Quotes
<p>“Standards helped when I started out.” —Alabama teacher</p> <p>“We teach the Virginia and US History SOL curriculum, and my school division designs curriculum maps that are helpful for teachers to follow.” —Virginia teacher</p> <p>“I have them open right here. I use them to make sure I’m hitting everything. They are very helpful—it’s my handbook.” —Alabama teacher</p> <p>“Instructional mandates are helpful in that they are pushing us to consider multiple perspectives.” —Illinois teacher</p> <p>“I prefer to be able to link what I’m teaching to a standard.” —Alabama teacher</p> <p>“They reach out to us and we reach out to them. I’m one of the few social studies teachers in the area . . . seeking out PD. . . . I know the AEA person well. . . also met the state [person], she’s good at sending out stuff.” —Iowa teacher</p> <p>Great emails about in-service opportunities. . . . They [the state] do as much as they can. —Alabama teacher</p>	<p>“We have state-level requirements, but I basically ignore them.” —Virginia teacher</p> <p>“The state standards are really broad. . . . Teachers who don’t have much historical training will look at a standard and not know what they really need to do and are too lax in how they evaluate the kids.” —Colorado teacher</p> <p>“No contact from or oversight from the state besides the state standards.” —Illinois teacher</p> <p>“If I got paid in acronyms, I’d be a rich man.” —Washington teacher</p> <p>“The standards are basically useless. . . . If you are a good teacher you are definitely covering all this anyway.” —Connecticut teacher</p> <p>“Just changed buzzwords...I would be lying if I didn’t say we jump through the hoop, it sits on a shelf somewhere so some school board member can look at it if they want to.” —Pennsylvania teacher</p> <p>“The Washington state standards are garbage.” —Washington teacher</p> <p>“The state standards are stupid. I can’t teach them all—It’s impossible.” —Alabama teacher</p>

While we refrain from giving letter grades to states on their documents, some state social studies standards do offer clearer guidance than others. Standards documents are artifacts of messy compromises struck among diverse stakeholders across multiple rounds of revision, not necessarily an expression of professional consensus among historians or even of the priorities of history educators. Some documents succeed in wrapping these compromises within a more coherent rhetorical package, while others show traces of disharmony.

Of the many tugs of war apparent within standards documents, the most recognizable is that between content and skills. State standards fall into three categories: skills-focused, content-focused, or a content-skills hybrid. Of the three, the hybrid model is most likely to speak to historians' preferences. By our count, 10 states emphasize skills to the exclusion of content, nine states hide skills beneath heavier content, and 31 choose a balance.

This research inspired the AHA to revise its official guidance on state social studies standards in 2024, adding new emphasis on the inseparability of factual content from historical thinking.⁹ This emphasis is neither novel nor controversial. History teachers have long understood the reciprocal notion of teaching “the general concept through the specific fact.”¹⁰ Experts as distinct as core content monitor Chester Finn Jr. and inquiry skills booster Kathy Swan have described the phony choice between knowing and thinking.¹¹

Teachers take notice of the relative strength, clarity, and consequences of academic standards at the state level. Sixty percent of surveyed teachers say they actually use state standards directly in their teaching—although there are important differences from state to state (Fig. 10). Their use as a reference depends on the level of detail in the document as well as the specifics of state assessment and accountability mandates. Among our nine sample states, over three quarters of teachers in Alabama, Texas, and Virginia report using their state standards, while only half or fewer of teachers in Connecticut, Illinois, and Pennsylvania say the same. New teachers were more likely (65 percent) than veteran teachers (57 percent) to report that they regularly use state standards documents to guide their teaching. Teachers will complain about standards that are too overwhelming in their detailed lists of trivia as well as those that are so broad and abstract that they describe nothing (Table 2).

⁹ Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, “What Does It Mean to Think Historically,” *Perspectives* 45, no. 1 (January 2007), <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/what-does-it-mean-to-think-historically-january-2007/>. As a discipline, history depends at a fundamental level on a set of core concepts that encompass both content and analysis. Conceptual frameworks at the core of history highlight connections between social, cultural, economic, technological, and political factors and changes in human experience. These disciplinary concepts also address how historians apply analysis to refine an interpretation, including context, change, and continuity; the ability to access, interpret, and apply evidence from historical documents; and the ability to evaluate different historical perspectives and interpretations.

¹⁰ Mary Sheldon Barnes, “General History in the High School,” *The Academy: A Journal of Secondary Education* 4, no. 5 (June 1889), 286.

¹¹ See Finn and Ravitch, *What Do Our 17-Year Olds Know*, 9; Swan in “Ten Years of C3: The Past, Present, and Future of State Standards” [video recording], AHA, November 15, 2023, https://youtu.be/QHTcdMG_YZM.

Fig. 10: Teachers Reporting That They Use State Standards to Teach US History

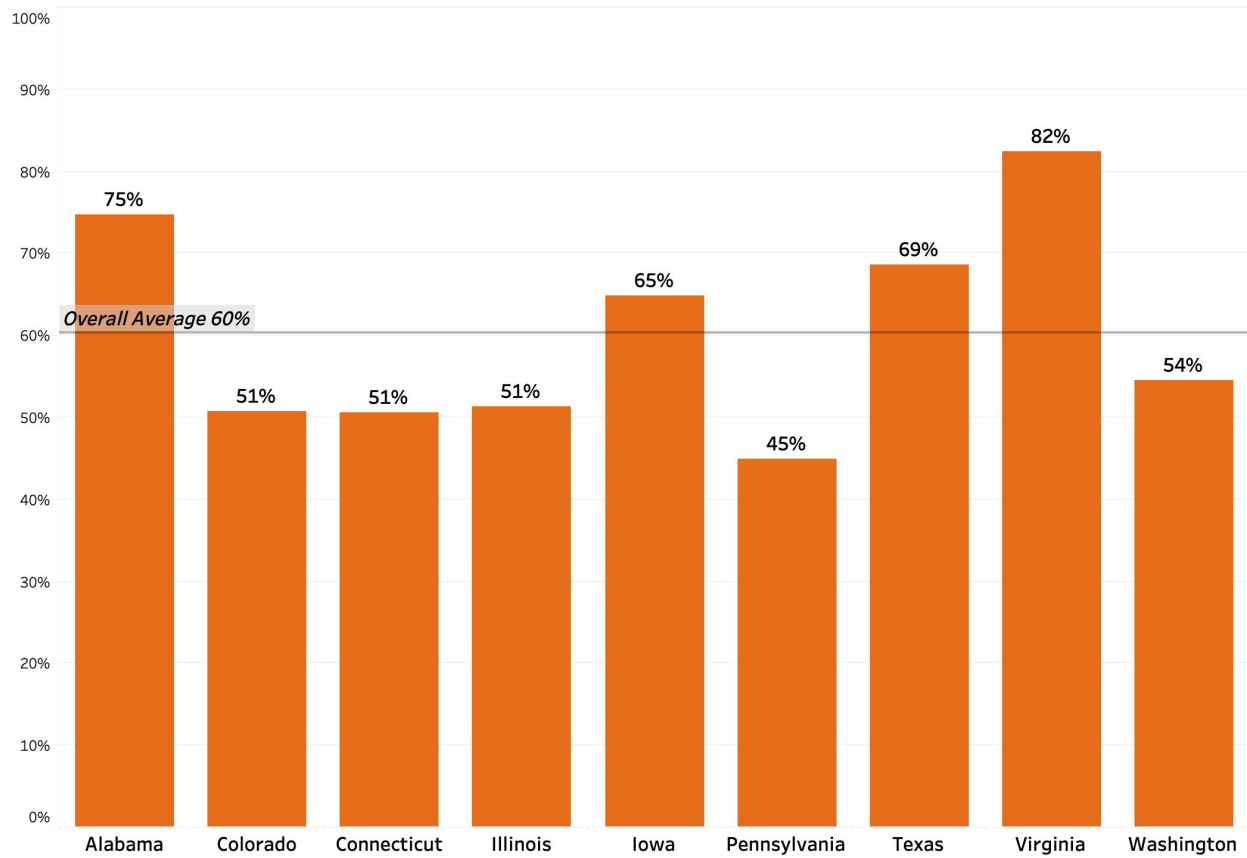


Table 2: Examples of Social Studies Standards Language

Tennessee	Illinois
<p>The 1920s (1920-1929)</p> <p>Overview: Students will describe how the battle between traditionalism and modernism manifested in the major historical trends and events post-World War I.</p> <p>US.28 Analyze the impact of the Great Migration of African Americans that began in the early 1900s from the rural South to the industrial regions of the Northeast and Midwest. (T.C.A. § 49-6- 1006) C, E, G, H, T, TCA</p> <p>US.29 Describe the growth and effects that radio and movies played in the emergence of popular culture as epitomized by celebrities such as Charlie Chaplin, Charles Lindbergh, and Babe Ruth. C, H</p> <p>US.30 Examine the growth and popularity of country and blues music, including the rise of: the Grand Ole Opry, W.C. Handy, and Bessie Smith. (T.C.A. § 49-6-1006) C, H, T, TCA</p> <p>US.31 Describe the impact of new technologies of the era, including the advent of air travel and spread of electricity. C, E, H</p> <p>US.32 Describe the impact of Henry T. Ford, the automobile, and the mass production of automobiles on the American economy and society. C, E, H</p> <p>US.33 Describe the Harlem Renaissance, its impact, and important figures, including (T.C.A. § 49- 6-1006): Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston. C, H, TCA</p> <p>US.34 Describe changes in the social and economic status of women during this era, including: flappers, birth control, clerical and office jobs, and the rise of women's colleges. C, E, H</p> <p>US.35 Examine challenges related to civil liberties and racial/ethnic tensions during this era, including (T.C.A. § 49-6-1006): First Red Scare, Efforts of Ida B. Wells, Immigration Quota Acts of the 1920s, Emergence of Garveyism, Resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, Rise of the NAACP C, E, G, H, P, T, TCA</p> <p>US.36 Describe the Scopes Trial of 1925, including: the major figures, two sides of the controversy, the outcome, and legacy. C, H, P, T</p> <p>US.37 Describe the impacts of Prohibition on American society, including: the rise of organized crime, bootlegging, and speakeasies. C, E, H, P</p> <p>US.38 Analyze the changes in the economy and culture of the U.S. as a result of credit expansion, consumerism, and financial speculation. C, E, H</p>	<p>SS.H.2.6-8.LC. Explain how and why perspectives of people have changed over time.</p>

Most standards offer a rationale focused on preparing students for citizenship with critical thinking skills and an understanding of a complex world. As a typical rationale explains, students should “understand America’s past and what decisions of the past account for present circumstances, using historical thinking skills to confront today’s problems, be informed on taking an active position on issues and make sense of the interconnected world around them.”¹² While a common ground exists, different political and ideological environments can influence how standards committees and state officials frame their standards. Take the Louisiana state superintendent’s introduction to the 2022 Social Studies standards, in which he underscores the “fragility of liberty” and the mission to “teach our students to appreciate the majesty of our country and their obligations as citizens to safeguard America’s founding principles.”¹³ Or consider Rhode Island’s 2023 standards, which claim to “validate and affirm individuals’ diverse and intersectional identities,” and help students “critique the world around them . . . and move to act against bias, stereotypes, and inequities.”¹⁴ Each of these formulations provides cues for how policymakers expect teachers to read and interpret the specific historical content included in the standards for each grade level.

Partisan differences certainly shape public debates over historical content in state standards. But state agencies in the majority of states roughly agree about which major events and moments constitute the essential history of the nation. In general, standards succeed or fail on the basis of their own organization; consistency, readability, and a moderate level of specificity will often endear them to teachers. New teachers or teachers working in states with fewer resources especially benefit from solid standards that provide a sense of the order and emphasis of historical content within a given class. As a Texas teacher put his view of standards, “I know the way to San Antonio, but it’s nice to have a map.”¹⁵

State Assessment

The decisive variable in aligning instructional practice among teachers to any standard, whether issued from the state or the district, is assessment. During the accountability era,

¹² Kentucky Department of Education, *Kentucky Academic Standards for Social Studies* (2022), 2.

¹³ Louisiana Department of Education, *Louisiana Social Studies Standards* (2022), 1.

¹⁴ State of Rhode Island Department of Education, *Rhode Island Social Studies Standards* (2023), 7.

¹⁵ Interview with high school teacher, HST 729, October 24, 2023.

assessment mandates landed unevenly and sometimes only temporarily in the social studies world. Bold plans to test everyone on everything were often abandoned before they started. The Keystone Exam in Pennsylvania, for example, has never included social studies content, even though legislators have passed four different laws promising to make it happen.¹⁶ As education researchers often lament, assessment requirements are a moving target, with state legislatures and boards of education making new decisions about which tests will be added or dropped from year to year.¹⁷

As of 2024, 21 states require some testing in US history, with 10 of those states testing students on history content at least twice over the course of their K–12 experience. A testing requirement does not always equate to a required test, however. In several testing states, assessment instruments are designed and scored locally or chosen from a menu that may include a state-designed test. Some of these assessment mandates are almost purely ceremonial, producing very little record of what was assessed or how students performed. Among states that test, only some could be described as imposing high stakes (for students, for teachers, for school districts) to their testing requirements (Fig. 11).

Despite a blip of enthusiasm for civics testing in the 2010s, the general trend is away from standardized testing in social studies, with a number of more recent laws scaling back or removing assessment mandates (Fig. 12).¹⁸ Accountability rituals have been slow to reassert themselves following the interruption of the COVID-19 pandemic or have reemerged in less rigid forms.¹⁹

¹⁶ See Pennsylvania HB 1901 (2012); HB 564 (2018); SB 1095 (2018); SB 1216 (2020).

¹⁷ S. G. Grant and Cinthia Salinas, “Assessment and Accountability in the Social Studies,” in *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education*, Linda S. Levstik and Cynthia Tyson, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 220.

¹⁸ For example bills illustrating the wave of reduced assessment requirements, see Ohio HB 555 (2012); California AB 484 (2013); Indiana SB 62 (2015); Louisiana HB 616 (2017); Pennsylvania SB 1095 (2018); North Carolina SB 621 (2019); Georgia SB 367 (2020).

¹⁹ See, for example, Erica Breunlin, “Colorado Democrats Want to Ax Social Studies from State Standardized Tests. Here’s Why,” *Colorado Sun*, January 27, 2023, coloradosun.com/2023/01/27/social-studies-standardize-testing-colorado/; Colorado SB 23-061 (2023), <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/sb23-061>.

Fig. 11: States with Mandated Assessment in US History

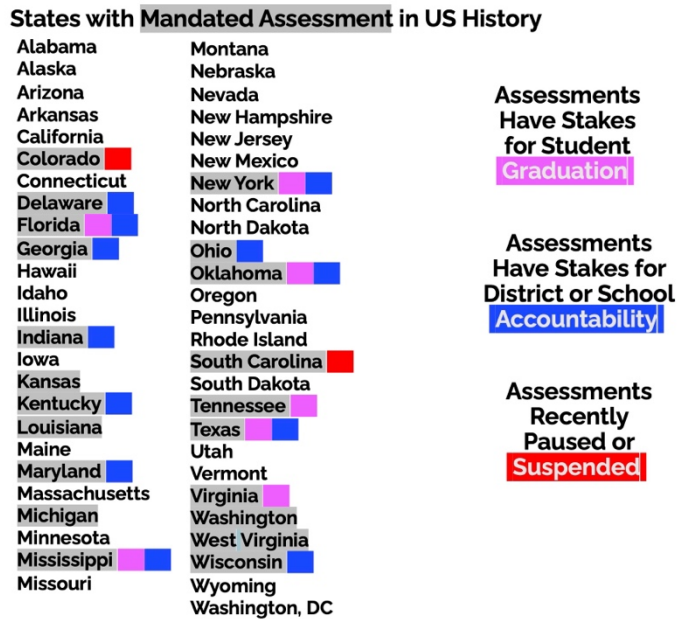
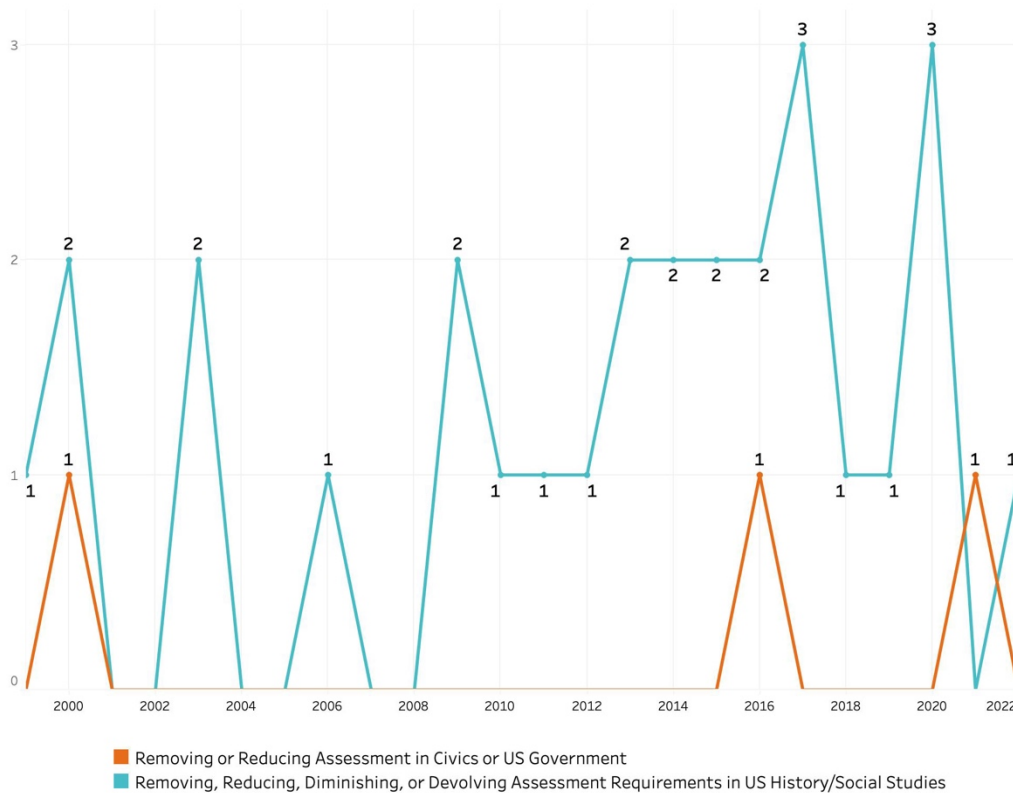


Fig. 12: State Laws Reducing Assessment Mandates in US History, Social Studies, and Civics, 1999–2022 (n = 33)



Teachers give mixed signals about history's position in the accountability landscape. In interviews, teachers consistently cite social studies' low priority status (as compared with more frequently tested subjects) as a source of frustration, using phrases like "back burner" and "afterthought."²⁰ Teachers in states without state social studies testing even wished that history would be tested, if only to boost its status and instructional time with their administrators.²¹ As one Pennsylvania teacher put it, "I'm not a fan of standardized testing, but there is some benefit to having it."²²

When states do mandate and administer a common testing instrument, assessment cuts recognizable patterns across the curricular and labor landscape. Teachers in Virginia were far more likely to cite the state's Standards of Learning (SOLs) as something that drives their teaching (83 percent) than teachers elsewhere (average of 58 percent across the other eight sample states). Virginia teachers were also more likely to describe the state standards as having *more* decisive power over their curriculum than district directives. As one teacher explained, "Our state specifies the content of the curriculum; our district doesn't really do that."²³ Plenty of other Virginia teachers described a role at their district office, but as another teacher explained, "you can teach what you want at whatever pace you want, but if your [SOL test] scores are consistently low, you may be looking for another job."²⁴

In Texas, our sample state with the most detailed standards (the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS), the most unified assessment regime (the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or the STAAR test), and the highest-stakes accountability system (the Texas Academic Performance Reports, or TAPR), the trickle-down effects of testing were even more apparent. District-produced documents and in-use curricula showed a great deal of consistency and were far more likely to make itemized reference (or even direct repetition) of state standards language than in other states. The TEKS and the STAAR test indeed shape important Texas-specific practices: the comprehensive statewide resources produced by the Texas Curriculum Management

²⁰ For "afterthought": Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 731), November 6, 2023; Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 731), September 13, 2023. For "back burner": Interview with high school social studies administrator (SSA 406), April 21, 2023; Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 422), June 1, 2023; Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 422), June 1, 2023.

²¹ Interview with high school teacher (HST 614), September 19, 2023; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 615), October 17, 2023.

²² Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 401), April 20, 2023; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 614), September 19, 2023.

²³ Rural Virginia Teacher, "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 6.

²⁴ Rural Virginia Teacher, "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 6.

Program Cooperative (TCMPC); the enhanced role of district-level curriculum coordinators; the high frequency of common benchmark unit tests for grade-level course teams; specialized test-prep vendors; and the sense of pride that some teachers and administrators take in delivering high scores every spring. One teacher recalled feeling charged with energy when he saw his middle-class school's scores approach those of the wealthier school in the district: "we wanted to beat them and win."²⁵ A suburban administrator described his approach to managing his teachers in similar terms: "I'm super competitive, and I want us to be the best."²⁶ Not all teachers respond positively to the competitive conditions set by testing, with some likening their context to "a factory. . .[where] we're turning out a product."²⁷ Whether teachers find themselves buoyed or burdened by statewide assessment and accountability mandates, testing remains the key point of leverage for state agencies as enforcers of state standards.

State Legislation

Caveats about loose coupling and local control notwithstanding, what happens in the schoolhouse often begins in the statehouse. In order to track historical and regional patterns of lawmaking related to US history education, we visited the digital archives of all 50 state legislatures and assembled a database of 808 individual legislative acts passed between 1980 and 2022. The database is extensive but likely not exhaustive with regard to every relevant mandate, and it can speak only to the activities of state legislatures (as opposed to the actions of State Boards of Education). Still, this large corpus affords a view of identifiable trends, waves, and swings of attention paid and emphasis given to the topic of US history education by American state lawmakers. In many cases, swells of state legislative activity synchronize with federal priorities and national education reform fashions (as with the rise in standards-making and assessment mandates straddling the turn of the 21st century or the swell of new civics mandates in the 2010s). On other topics, lawmakers respond to hyperlocal concerns, state-specific constituencies, or bigger civic and popular history media events. Figures of local history and folklore earn mention as namesakes for special days or weeks of topical study: Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass in Maryland; John Henry in West Virginia; George Rogers Clark in Indiana;

²⁵ Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 720), June 26, 2023.

²⁶ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 712), February 28, 2023.

²⁷ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 720), June 20, 2023.

Harvey Milk, Ronald Reagan, and Larry Itliong in California; cowboys and cowgirls in Wyoming.²⁸ Laws encouraging the study of Hispanics in American history cluster primarily in states with histories of Spanish colonization or Latin American immigration.²⁹ Mandates to cover Francophone heritage are on the books in Louisiana, Vermont, and Maine.³⁰ Holocaust education laws appeared earliest in states with established Jewish populations and alongside the opening of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and the release of the film *Schindler's List*, both in 1993.³¹ Three states have an Amistad Commission on African American history that originated around the release of the 2002 film *Amistad*.³² A 2001 New Jersey law requiring Italian American history seems to have been designed in part as a counterweight to ethnic depictions on *The Sopranos*.³³

Given our primary research questions, we were particularly interested in those legislative mandates that sought to assert state control over elements of curricular content—whether by initiating new testing and accountability procedures for social studies, by prescribing a certain topic or tone regarding American history, or by addressing the state's role in instructional materials. The spikes in new legislation related to requirements and assessment in civics in the mid-2010s and in 2021 (Fig. 13) followed an organized push by civics nonprofits, including a model legislation lobbying drive requiring that students be tested using the citizenship naturalization test.

²⁸ See Maryland SB 879 (2019); West Virginia HB 4491 (2000); Indiana HB 1228 (1975); California SB 572 (2009), SB 944 (2010), and AB 7 (2017); Wyoming HB 130 (2019).

²⁹ States with laws on the books regarding Hispanic and Latino history include California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, and Utah.

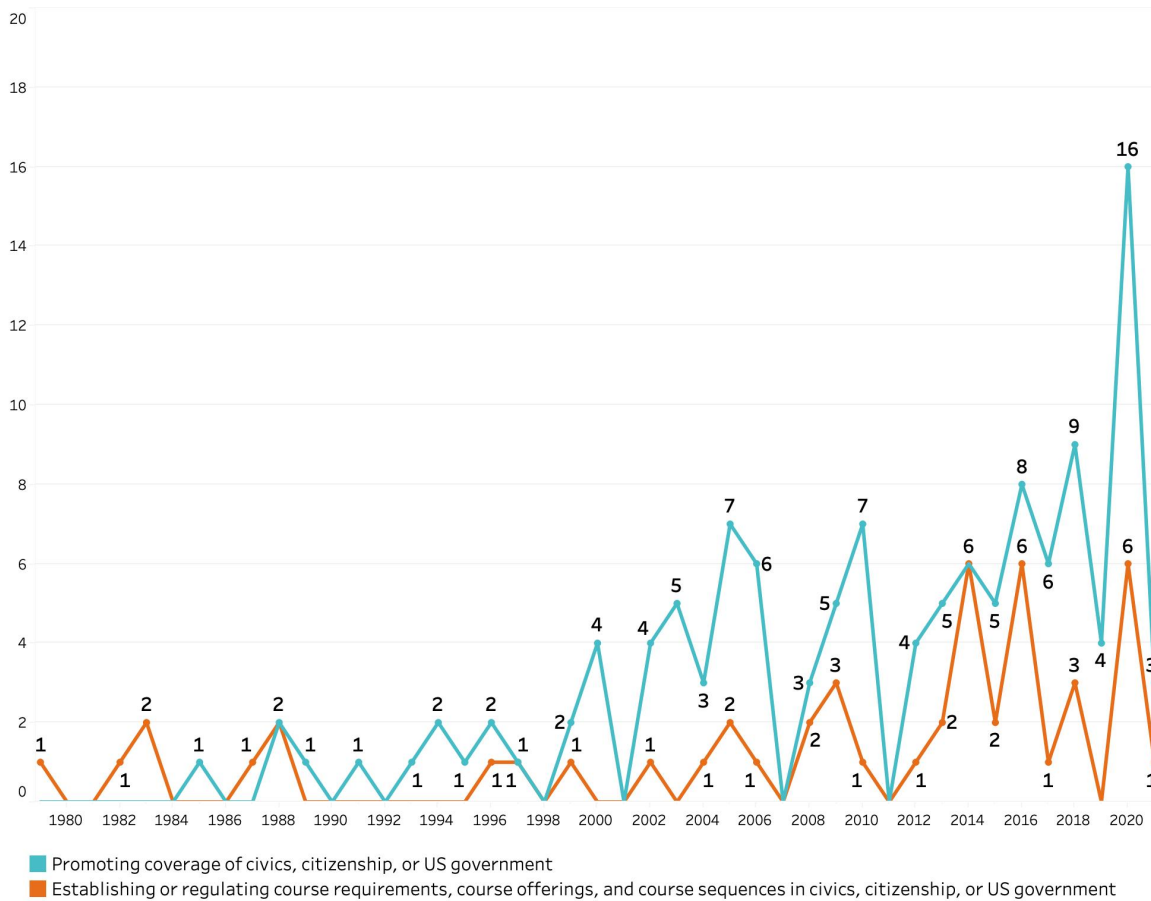
³⁰ Louisiana RS 17-272 (1968); Vermont R-5 (1981); Maine HP 0310 (2009).

³¹ The earliest states with Holocaust education commissions or mandates were California (1985), Ohio (1987), Illinois (1989), New Jersey (1991), New York (1993), Florida (1994), Connecticut (1995), Pennsylvania (1996), and Tennessee (1996). For a deeper history of Holocaust education in the United States, see Thomas D. Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). For a wider cultural history, see Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999). On reception and influence of *Schindler's List*, see Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 125–58.

³² Amistad Commissions were established in New Jersey (2002), Illinois (2005), and New York (2005).

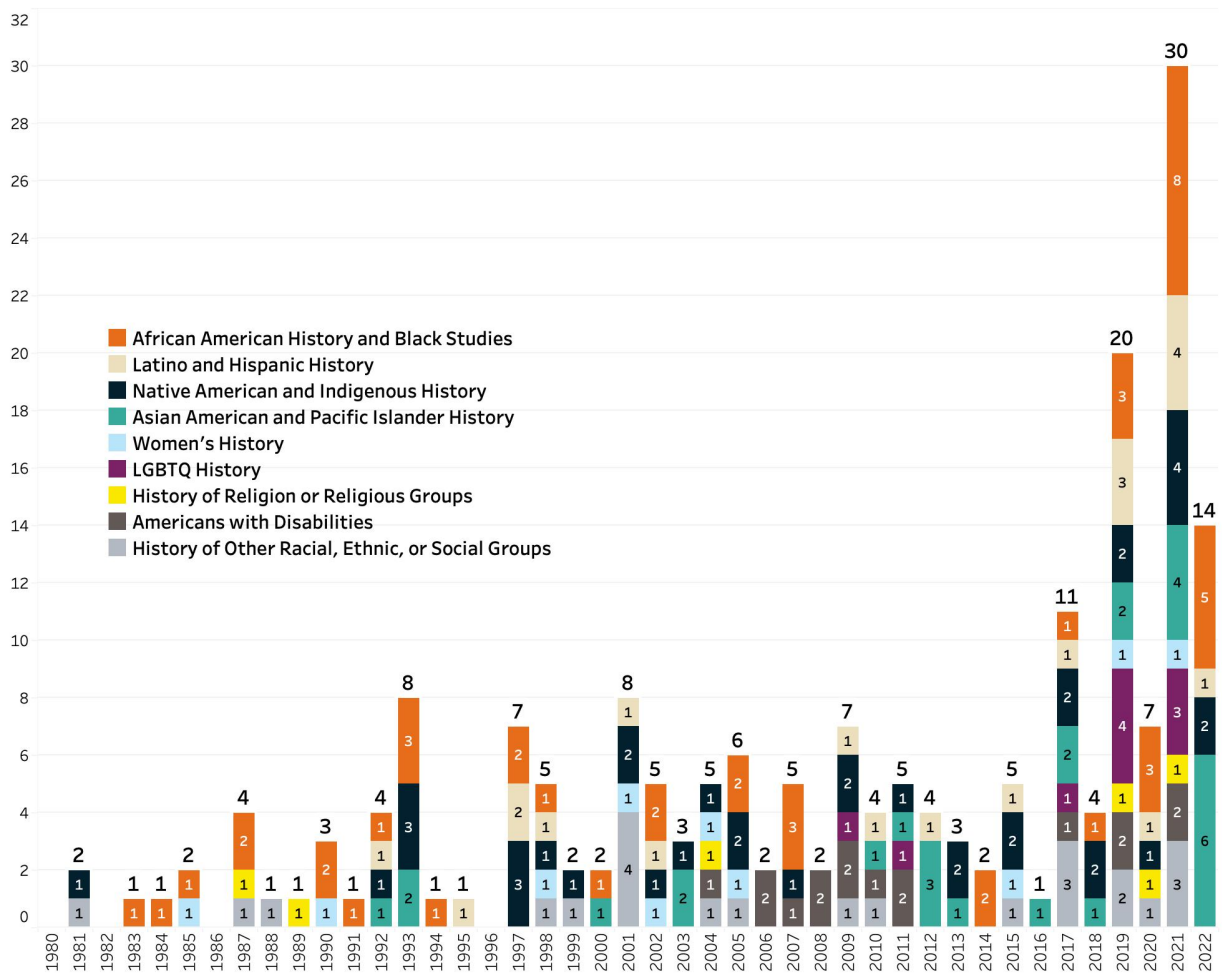
³³ New Jersey NJA 3963 (2001).

Fig. 13: State Legislative Activity Promoting Civics Content, Coursework, and Assessment, 1980–2022 (n = 173 instances across 146 distinct laws)



There’s also the much longer and quite widespread effort to incorporate diversity—namely the notion that the narrative of American history should incorporate stories from multiple perspectives, inclusive of the various groups that constitute the national population. Across our existing database of laws, we have identified 199 separate instances between 1980 and 2022 of state legislatures requiring that specifically named groups be accorded coverage in US history curriculum (Fig. 14).

Fig. 14: State Legislative Activity Promoting Social Studies Coverage of Diverse Groups, by Group and by Year, 1980–2022



The route and rationale for the inclusion of various subgroups of Americans in state laws has varied across time and across states. In some cases, routes to inclusion came by way of an ever-expanding list of “contributions” by subgroups. A 1967 Illinois law requiring US history classes to cover “American Negroes” and 12 European ethnic groups has since been added to multiple times, with women, Hispanics, labor unions, LGBT Americans, religious groups, and people with disabilities earning a mention in the school code.³⁴ California, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey, Oregon, and Washington stand out as producing high levels of legislated directives related to the coverage of specific groups.

In other states, space for subgroups has been opened with direct reference to histories of exclusion, oppression, or atrocity. The mold for this approach was cast by the most frequently mentioned atrocities in state law: the Holocaust and American slavery.

³⁴ Illinois Compiled Statutes (105 ILCS 5/) School Code, (from ch. 122, par. 27-21).

Twenty-nine states passed laws requiring or promoting the study of the Holocaust and genocide, while nine require the specific study of slavery and emancipation. Laws mandating the study of the Irish Famine, the Armenian genocide, Italian fascism, or the deportation of Mexicans during the Great Depression have made their case with reference to, or even as addenda to, existing laws mandating the study of slavery or the Holocaust.³⁵ In some instances, a legislative initiative on behalf of one group became a model for another. In New York, a law mandating Holocaust and slavery education in 1993 was followed in 1995 by a law requiring the study of the Irish Famine, another in 1997 to include study of the Underground Railroad, and the formation of the Amistad Commission to survey and develop curriculum on slavery in 2005.³⁶ In California, the legislature expanded required study of the Vietnam War to include Asian and Asian American groups and incorporated the Bracero program into legislative mandates on the study of World War II.³⁷

Sometimes, policy initiatives without an explicit social studies content agenda have expanded into curricular mandates. In New Mexico, legislative attention to bilingual schoolchildren in the 1970s paved a route for a cascade of multicultural educational programs, including coursework in Native and Hispanic studies.³⁸ In other instances, concerns about concentrated disadvantage among certain students have underwritten curricular focus on an ethnic history. Lawmakers in Washington state originally justified their call for coursework on Native American history by pointing to dropout rates and low academic achievement among American Indian students.³⁹ Subsequently, these initiatives have grown into the nation's most extensive state-developed curriculum on tribal history, culture, and government.⁴⁰

State legislators have targeted US history course requirements as the vehicle for other political signals, sometimes sparring along ideological lines. Seven states have laws requiring the history of labor unions; seven others have named “free enterprise” as a theme to be emphasized in the study of American history. More widespread is a reverence for the nation's founding documents, with 32 states requiring that certain works of civic

³⁵ See California AB 146 (2015); Rhode Island HB 7397 (2000).

³⁶ New York SB 7765 (1993); AB 6510 (1995); AB 8458 (1997); BA 6362-B (2005).

³⁷ California AB 78 (2003); AB 895 (2018); SB 993 (2012).

³⁸ Mariela Nuñez-Janes, “Bilingual Education and Identity Debates in New Mexico: Constructing and Contesting Nationalism and Ethnicity,” *Journal of the Southwest* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 61–78.

³⁹ Washington HB 1495 (2005); SB 5973 (2009).

⁴⁰ See Washington SB 5433 (2015) and “John McCoy (lulilaš) Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty in Washington State,” Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, <https://ospi.k12.wa.us/student-success/resources-subject-area/john-mccoy-lulilas-time-immemorial-tribal-sovereignty-washington-state>.

scripture (typically the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights) be studied. Divergent ideological emphases may end up combined into an initiative once established. A special Colorado commission on the “Inclusion of American Minorities” and “the intersectionality of significant social and cultural features” was amended to tag on a traditional list of founding documents.⁴¹

Specific encouragement by lawmakers unexpectedly includes at least 13 separate calls for the use of oral history resources in instruction, most often from military veterans.⁴² State legislatures are particularly fond of designating specific times of year (holidays, weeks, or months) as moments for concentrated study or appreciation of a particular historical event, theme, group, or person. We have found 79 of these laws scattered throughout the nation, passed between 1980 and 2022. While some mark important historical events and figures, the laws’ insistence that study coincide with a civic calendar, rather than the chronological pacing of a typical US history course, seems likely to encourage a series of ceremonial non sequiturs, rather than a historical exploration of context and significance.

State legislators’ many gestures toward US history instruction have clustered into discernable patterns along the historical timeline, but their influence on local curricular decision-making has been uneven. More recently, some lawmakers and state agency officials appear to have realized that legislated content mandates can be paired with standards revisions and funding for model curricula and professional development to leverage more influence over local instructional decisions. In Connecticut, Illinois, and Washington, all states with strong traditions of local control, laws enacted in the past decade have begun to assign more substantive curricular tasks to the state education agency on select topics of US history. A 2015 law in Washington required all districts to use state-developed resources on Native American history (which later developed into the Since Time Immemorial curriculum) and to consult with local federally recognized tribes in order to teach about Native history and tribal sovereignty.⁴³ Since 2020, Connecticut has mandated that the new Black and Latino studies high school elective would be the

⁴¹ Colorado HB 19-1192 (2019); SB 21-067 (2021).

⁴² See, for example, California AB 2003 (2002) on oral histories in Holocaust and genocide instruction; AB 146 (2015) on oral histories of unlawful deportations of Mexican Americans during the Great Depression; and SB 895 (2018) on oral histories of Vietnam War refugees and Cambodian genocide survivors. Florida HB 5 (2021), or the “Portraits in Patriotism Act,” requires the State Board to “curate oral history resources . . . which provide portraits in patriotism based on the personal stories of diverse individuals who demonstrate civic-minded qualities, including first-person accounts of victims of other nations’ governing philosophies who can compare those philosophies with those of the United States.”

⁴³ Washington SB 5433 (2015).

first and only course taught using a state-designed common curriculum.⁴⁴ A series of inclusive history mandates in Illinois—mandating study of LGBTQ history in 2019, requiring expanded treatment of Black history in 2021, and mandating study of Asian American history also in 2021—authorized the state agency to set up new a statewide commission, nonprofit partnerships, and professional development grants to promote uptake of the new mandates.⁴⁵

No amount of analysis of state mandates, however, will indicate much about how history is actually taught. Local district contexts—regarding who is in charge, how teachers work together, and what materials are in use—are where the action is.

⁴⁴ Connecticut Public Act 19-12 (2020).

⁴⁵ Illinois HB 246 (2019); HB 2170 (2021); HB 376 (2021). See also “The Inclusive American History Commission Final Report: Pursuant to PA 102-0209,” Illinois State Board of Education (2022), https://www.isbe.net/Documents_IAHC/Inclusive-American-History-Commission-Report.pdf; Communications Office, University of Illinois College of Education, “Faculty Viewpoint: Leading Inclusive, Inquiry-Based Teaching and Learning,” May, 24, 2022, <https://education.illinois.edu/about/news-events/news/article/2022/05/24/faculty-viewpoint-leading-inclusive-inquiry-based-teaching-and-learning>.

Part 3: Curricular Decisions

The pace of curricular change in American classrooms is typically sluggish, slinking unevenly across an archipelago of school boards, district officials, and classroom teachers. Even when an initiative can traverse the layers of policymaking that run from national priorities to local bureaucracies, reform has the chronic tendency, as one historian puts it, to “bounce off the classroom door.”¹ The global rise of more ambitious administrative approaches to assessment and accountability since the 1990s has sent educational researchers into the field to discover (and sometimes to shape) how policy decisions most effectively transmit through the system.² Scholars pose a range of questions. Do standards do anything at all? How do teachers comprehend what they’re obligated to do versus what they can ignore? Are social studies teachers classic “street-level bureaucrats” with mostly discretionary authority over instruction, or can they be ordered, encouraged, nudged, teamed up, or disciplined into aligning their practice with a scripted administrative vision?³ What conditions make social studies teachers (and US history content in particular) more or less susceptible to managerial directives? Contemporary culture warriors (and much of the media coverage that attends to them) tend to leave these questions offscreen, but they are fundamental to judging whether the efforts of education

¹ David Labaree, “The Dynamic Tension at the Core of the Grammar of Schooling,” *Kappan*, September 27, 2021, <https://kappanonline.org/dynamic-tension-grammar-schooling-change-reform-labaree/>.

² See, for instance, James P. Spillane and Patricia Burch, “Policy, Administration, and Instructional Practice: ‘Loose Coupling’ Revisited” in *The New Institutionalism in Education*, Rowan Heinz-Dieter Meyer and Brian Rowan, eds. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 87–102. For attempts to clarify a “practice-theory-context nexus” in curriculum theory, see Zongyi Deng, “Contemporary Curriculum Theorizing: Crisis and Resolution,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 50, no. 6 (2018): 691–710. For international and comparative contexts, see Antoni Verger, Lluís Parcerisa, and Clara Fontdevila, “The Growth and Spread of Large-Scale Assessments and Test-Based Accountabilities: A Political Sociology of Global Education Reforms,” *Educational Review*, 71, no. 1 (2019): 5–30; For recent confirmations of the old thesis, see Julia H. Kaufman, et al., “How Instructional Materials Are Used and Supported in U.S. K–12 Classrooms: Findings from the American Instructional Resources Survey” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR134-1.html.

³ For the original formulation, see Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980).

reformers and curricular activists even have a shot at succeeding or if they are, as some of our teacher interviewees described them, “rushed and trendy.”⁴

Who’s the Boss?

In the typical organizational chart for a superintendent’s office or school administration, structures of authority and chains of command may seem clear-cut. When it comes to curriculum, however, local conditions are far more complicated. Long-standing traditions of teacher autonomy over their classrooms collide with more recent efforts by state and local agency officials to standardize, synchronize, and align instruction to state standards. The daily work associated with these initiatives within local school districts and state agencies is often performed by staffers known as curriculum specialists or instructional coordinators. National education surveys since the turn of the 21st century show a clear trend of increasing administrative staffing in curriculum across all areas of instruction. Since 2000, the number of instructional coordinators working in public school districts and state education agencies has increased by 155 percent (from 39,433 in fall 2000 to 100,715 in fall 2022). Over that same period, teacher staffing increased by only 9 percent. Current national average ratios of teacher to instructional coordinators come in at 32 teachers per coordinator.⁵

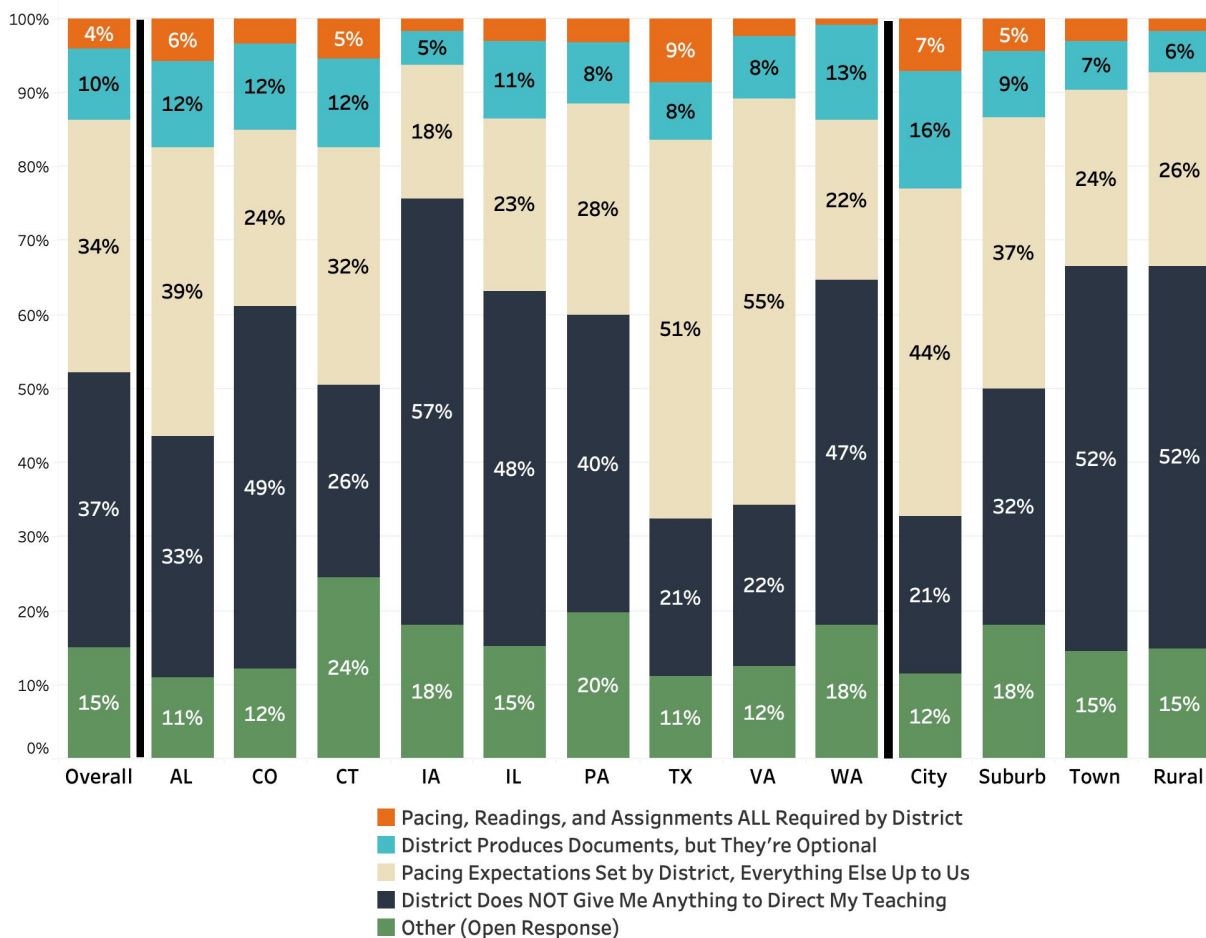
A low priority in terms of assessed subjects, social studies is less likely to receive managerial attention than mathematics and language arts. When districts do designate curricular or instructional staffing in social studies, the role varies significantly in terms of how much authority and direction they provide. Direction from district administrators, when present, generally focuses on the broad outline of the US history course. Only 4 percent of surveyed teachers said that the district requires anything more than pacing,

⁴ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 913), September 18, 2023.

⁵ Among our sample states, Colorado, Connecticut, Iowa, Virginia, and Washington averaged more instructional coordinators per teacher than the national average, whereas Alabama, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Texas had fewer. Hall Dillon, “Instructional Coordinators,” *Occupational Outlook Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 20–22; US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), “State Nonfiscal Public Elementary/Secondary Education Survey,” 1999-00 v.1b, 2022-23 v.1a. Due to variations in coding, the May 2022 report from the Bureau for Labor Statistics shows instructional coordinator employment in state and local elementary and secondary schools at 78,500. US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics,” “Instructional Coordinators Code 259031,” May 2022. Alabama’s Department of Education changed how they coded instructional coordinator employment after the 2013–14 school year, resulting in very few instructional coordinators; however, their previous trend also showed them with fewer coordinators per teacher than the national average. Jeffrey Beams, Alabama Department of Education, email message to Scot McFarlane, March 25, 2024.

and 37 percent of teachers said that they don't receive anything at all from their district that directs their teaching (Fig. 15).⁶

Fig. 15: Curricular Direction Teachers Receive from Their District, Overall, by State, and by Locale Type (n = 2,805)



The role of the district administrator varies by locale type. In both rural and town districts, the number of teachers with no district paperwork jumps to 52 percent. Meanwhile, only 32 percent of suburban teachers and 21 percent of city teachers said the same thing (Fig. 15). Larger and better-resourced districts are more likely to have a heavier bureaucracy and, in some cases, an ambition for more top-down control—evidenced by slightly higher rates of reported district requirements among city teachers. Within these larger districts, administrators expressed a range of how much control they wield. An administrator in a well-resourced, mid-sized suburban district can be led to

⁶ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 6.

believe that they have the capacity, vision, and duty to align all their teachers to a single curricular document.⁷ In larger urban or suburban districts, there may be central office personnel, but there are also lower expectations (at least among more seasoned and realistic administrators) of alignment and uniformity throughout the system.⁸ On their power, urban and suburban administrators had the following to say:

- “My position has no authoritative power.” (Washington)⁹
- “Central office doesn’t really give guidance. . . . Nothing is required. The assessments are not required. They are all suggested.” (Illinois)¹⁰
- “Teachers rebelled at attempt to make unit plans. Some teachers ask for assistance, but mostly teachers did not want to be told ‘how to teach.’” (Alabama)¹¹
- “[I’m] less confident that the older high school teachers are following along.” (Virginia)¹²
- “[I] can’t speak to what’s actually happening on the ground . . . Lots of siloed work happening.” (Illinois)¹³

At the school level, teacher perceptions of curricular authority also varied across locale type. Sixty-six percent of town and rural teachers said a principal had a role in directing their curriculum, compared with 56 percent of suburban teachers and 55 percent of urban teachers.¹⁴ Suburban and urban teachers reported slightly more emphasis on course teams in curricular decision-making. Seventy percent of town and 65 percent of rural teachers described their course team as influential in their own teaching, whereas 87 percent of suburban and 82 percent of urban teachers said the same.¹⁵

Administrators rarely take a one-size fits all approach to directing teachers, focusing their efforts on newer and less experienced teachers, with an understanding that

⁷ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 705), November 17, 2022; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 712), February 8, 2023; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 206), March 15, 2023; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 502), September 20, 2022; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 508), September 26, 2022.

⁸ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 800), August 25, 2022; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 814), July 17, 2023; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 820), October 16, 2023; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 602), February 16, 2023; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 406), April 21, 2023.

⁹ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 918), September 26, 2023.

¹⁰ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 406), March 21, 2023.

¹¹ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 100), June 15, 2023.

¹² Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 817), August 23, 2023.

¹³ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 408), March 30, 2023.

¹⁴ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 7.

¹⁵ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 7.

longer-tenured teachers might be less receptive to their work. As one Texas coordinator put it, he and his team of instructional coaches “have newer struggling teachers that they work with more on a regular basis.”¹⁶

Administrators navigate both the structural limits of their position and the interpersonal dynamics of the workplace. In many cases, a district-level curriculum coordinator will oversee multiple subject areas, have no background in history, and work “more closely with English,” as one teacher explained.¹⁷ On the other hand, if the administrator had worked previously as a history teacher, their teachers tend to trust them more. In Colorado and Washington, curriculum coordinators are hired as Teachers on Special Assignment, a horizontal position that may come with collegial trust but limits their authority over other teachers. As one former Colorado specialist said of the position, “You are not anybody’s boss.”¹⁸ Given their experience and place within the team, school-level department chairs or course team leads are more likely to be valued by their peers. Chairs mainly serve as a link between the department and the principal or district curriculum office, and other teachers rely on them for their wisdom and experience. In some cases, they benefit from a small reduction in course load, but many do not. One Virginia teacher contrasted her course lead with her unfavorable view of the district office: “She’s part of my team. I listen to HER.”¹⁹ In a few wealthier districts, department chairs may be relieved of teaching duties and take a more active part in curriculum development.²⁰ Authority over teacher alignment also depends on the strength of unions within the state or district. An Illinois administrator described “their union” rather than “the teachers” as the reason he cannot require a common assessment for each unit.²¹ Likewise, in Washington, another administrator cited union rules as a limitation on “what can be asked of [teachers]” during course team meeting time, adding that she could attend meetings only at the invitation of the team.²² In these contexts, coordinators may have a better sense of what they cannot do than what they can do.

The lack of clarity around administrative roles contributes to confusion. As one Virginia teacher marveled, “It’s a mystery to us how they fill their entire year.”²³ A

¹⁶ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 711), February 28, 2023.

¹⁷ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 104), June 21, 2023.

¹⁸ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 203), January 30, 2023.

¹⁹ Suburban Virginia Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 6.

²⁰ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 417), April 3, 2023.

²¹ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 411), February 14, 2023.

²² Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 909), February 9, 2023.

²³ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 813), August 15, 2023.

Washington teacher described administration as “someone up in a cubicle . . . rewording the requirements to justify their salary.”²⁴ Of the multiple reformatting and alignment tasks that administrators asked for, a Pennsylvania teacher remarked, “It’s a gajillion bunch of letters and numbers that no one outside of the social studies department knows what they mean. I could write anything in my lesson plans, and no one would know the difference.”²⁵

Teachers express a range of skepticism and appreciation for their administration. Unsurprisingly, teachers’ perceptions depend on who fills the role, warming up to one coordinator more than another—though the same could be said about how curriculum coordinators view their teachers. Speaking of the administration more broadly, teachers appreciate when they receive affirmation. As an Illinois teacher put it, “I seek out my administrators for advice when I need it regarding my lessons and units. They enjoy what and how I teach my lessons [and] are always willing to support me.”²⁶

While standardized assessment may be the exception rather than the rule for social studies, three decades of accountability initiatives have nonetheless left their mark on the management of social studies teachers. Large districts tend to grow heavier bureaucracies, and in some cases, an ambition for more top-down control. Veteran teachers report a clear trend away from autonomy and idiosyncrasy and toward course team alignment and common assessment over the course of their careers.²⁷ Commenting on the decrease in teacher autonomy, one Pennsylvania administrator admitted that, while he saw the value of oversight and alignment, “as a teacher, I would have hated it.”²⁸

Even as state agencies, curriculum coordinators, and school principals have sought to synchronize and discipline instruction, many administrators confessed that history teachers, especially at the high school level, feel at liberty to resist directives that they find burdensome or intrusive. In some districts, administrators feel “confident” that teachers “are following the curriculum,” but they will also admit that they have “no authoritative power” and often “can’t speak to what’s actually happening on the ground,” especially in larger districts.²⁹ Union rules certainly enhance teachers’ confidence in pushing back, but

²⁴ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 916), August 29, 2023.

²⁵ Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 617), November 1, 2023.

²⁶ Rural Illinois Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 8.

²⁷ Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 816), August 9, 2023; Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 209), April 2, 2023; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 505), January 24, 2023; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 108), September 14, 2023.

²⁸ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 615), October 17, 2023.

²⁹ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 817), August 23, 2023; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 918), September 26, 2023; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 408), May 30, 2023.

even in right-to-work states, teachers will resist increasing directives. When one Alabama administrator attempted to go beyond pacing guides and create unit plans, “teachers rebelled” because they “did not want to be told how to teach.”³⁰ A Texas teacher who considered himself a “Lone Ranger” boasted that he could fend off administrators’ “new fandango stuff” by pointing to his students’ performance on state tests.³¹ The increase in alignment and oversight strikes differently across generations, with more resistance from the older teachers. As one teacher put it, there will not be as much alignment as he’d like or other “big changes” until the older teachers “retire.”³² Teachers often described a whiplash effect over the course of their careers; one administrator might assist their course team’s continual improvement with helpful resources, while the next simply pushes the latest trend, requiring paperwork rituals that teachers comply with in a perfunctory way. Ultimately, teachers ride these waves of attention and neglect, while retaining substantial discretion in deciding what they teach, how they teach it, and what materials they use.

The tug of war between administrators and teachers sometimes expresses a deeper contest over the purpose of teaching history, with sharp differences between management and labor. Among curriculum coordinators, an emphasis on developing skills of literacy, inquiry, and argumentation prevails. One veteran district administrator in Illinois recounted the “productive struggle” he had as he implemented successive rounds of reform with his teachers: backward design, literacy coaching, Socratic discussion, and thematic teaching.³³ The emphasis on skills reflects profession-wide trends in curriculum and instruction and the ongoing pressures of standardized English and language arts (ELA) assessment. Administrators often express frustration with teachers focused on content rather than skills. Meanwhile, teachers typically define their expertise in terms of knowing their content. The clash may be especially pronounced if the administrator lacks a social studies background. As one Connecticut administrator complained, he would prefer a focus on “transferable history skills” but instead gets stuck working “with history teachers [who] love their content.”³⁴ In fact, history teachers have no objections to transferable skills: almost all surveyed teachers cited critical thinking (97 percent) and

³⁰ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 100), January 31, 2023.

³¹ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 725), August 30, 2023.

³² Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 419), June 7, 2023.

³³ Interview with high school social studies administrator (SSA 410), March 9, 2023.

³⁴ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 305), May 23, 2023.

informed citizenship (94 percent) as *the* top learning goals for their students.³⁵ They are far less enthused, however, when they perceive that an administrator treats their social studies classes as an extra period of “nonfiction literacy” training for the next ELA exam.

Though few districts offer consistent professional development opportunities in social studies, administrators view this as an opportunity to increase teacher buy-in. A former Colorado coordinator said, “The tension was teacher autonomy and finding the best quality potential resources in front of teachers for the professional learning moments.”³⁶ Still, districts tend to organize professional development around pedagogy and technology, leaving teachers on their own to learn new content and cultivate their historical expertise.

To the extent that a district develops curricular materials, teachers are likely to be the primary authors. In many cases, administrators organize teacher teams over the summer to create curriculum documents. Elsewhere, teachers lead the development of these documents and are invested in ensuring their fellow teachers adhere to them. A Colorado teacher recalled it being “extremely frustrating” when district and school-level administrators were not “enforcing the teaching of” the curriculum they had created.³⁷ State authority over history education also shapes the duties assigned to curriculum coordinators. In Texas, the heavily detailed TEKS leave little room for curriculum coordinators to develop new materials, a fact reflected in district-created curriculums that were often just a reformatting or color-coding of the TEKS. But Texas administrators can insist more firmly that teachers stick to what the state and district expect them to teach. Intricate state mandates also give coordinators more opportunities for professional association, such as the state-level Texas Social Studies Supervisors Association, as well as a Dallas–Fort Worth Metroplex conference where administrators work together to define their roles.³⁸ As one Texas administrator explained, “You are never in this by yourself.”³⁹ The Virginia Social Studies Leaders Consortium serves a similar function,

³⁵ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 34.

³⁶ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 203), January 30, 2023.

³⁷ Town Colorado Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 6.

³⁸ Oklahoma, Michigan, and New Jersey also have (or have had) state-level associations specifically for social studies supervisors. See “NSLA: State Level Affiliated Groups,” <https://www.socialstudiesleaders.org/state-level-affiliated-groups.html>. Meanwhile, social studies administrators from 10 large districts have begun affiliating under the “Big City Social Studies Group.” See “Grant awarded to Big City Social Studies Group (BCSS) which was co-founded by Loyola professor Dr. Charles Tocci,” Loyola University Stories, <https://www.luc.edu/education/about/newsandevents/stories/archive/bcssawardannouncement.shtml>.

³⁹ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 712), September 9, 2023.

bringing enterprising district-level specialists in regular contact with state agency supervisors and social studies nonprofits.⁴⁰

For administrators who desire to effect broader changes across the system, networks of like-minded managers feed a shared sense of mission and a shared vocabulary. In addition to various local and regional conferences that they organize among themselves, social studies coordinators constitute a sizable and active proportion of membership in the NCSS and its associated group, the National Social Studies Leaders Association (formerly the National Social Studies Supervisors Association).

National and statewide debates about the teaching of history can shape the contest over power between teachers and administrators within the schoolhouse. The recent rise in politicized challenges aimed at the teaching of US history has become an effective tool for some administrators to encourage alignment with their expectations. As one Texas administrator put it, “Let’s teach to the TEKS and don’t get on the news. Don’t worry about CRT or the 1776 Project. We are not teaching those things.”⁴¹ Another Virginia administrator made it clear that they used the threat of “this world of controversy” to create a new set of “student-centered” materials. Teachers were told “if you want to ensure we’re on your side, always use our materials.”⁴²

No I in Team?

Ultimately, classroom teachers remain the decisive curricular policymakers. The “resource” most commonly referenced among surveyed teachers was “materials that I write myself” (Fig. 16). This isn’t the same as working alone. Teachers work together by choice and force. Forty-three percent of teachers described some form of voluntary collaboration and 36 percent said they were required to work together as a course team (Fig. 17).⁴³ The professional learning community (PLC) terminology—coined by a suburban Illinois superintendent in the 1990s—is now widespread.⁴⁴ Only 21 percent of surveyed teachers said they plan their lessons and curriculum alone, and most of this solitary work occurs because they are the sole US history teacher in their building.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ See “Mission and Vision,” Virginia Social Studies Leaders Consortium, <https://www.vsslc.org/mission--vision.html>.

⁴¹ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 712), February 28, 2023.

⁴² Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 819), September 18, 2023.

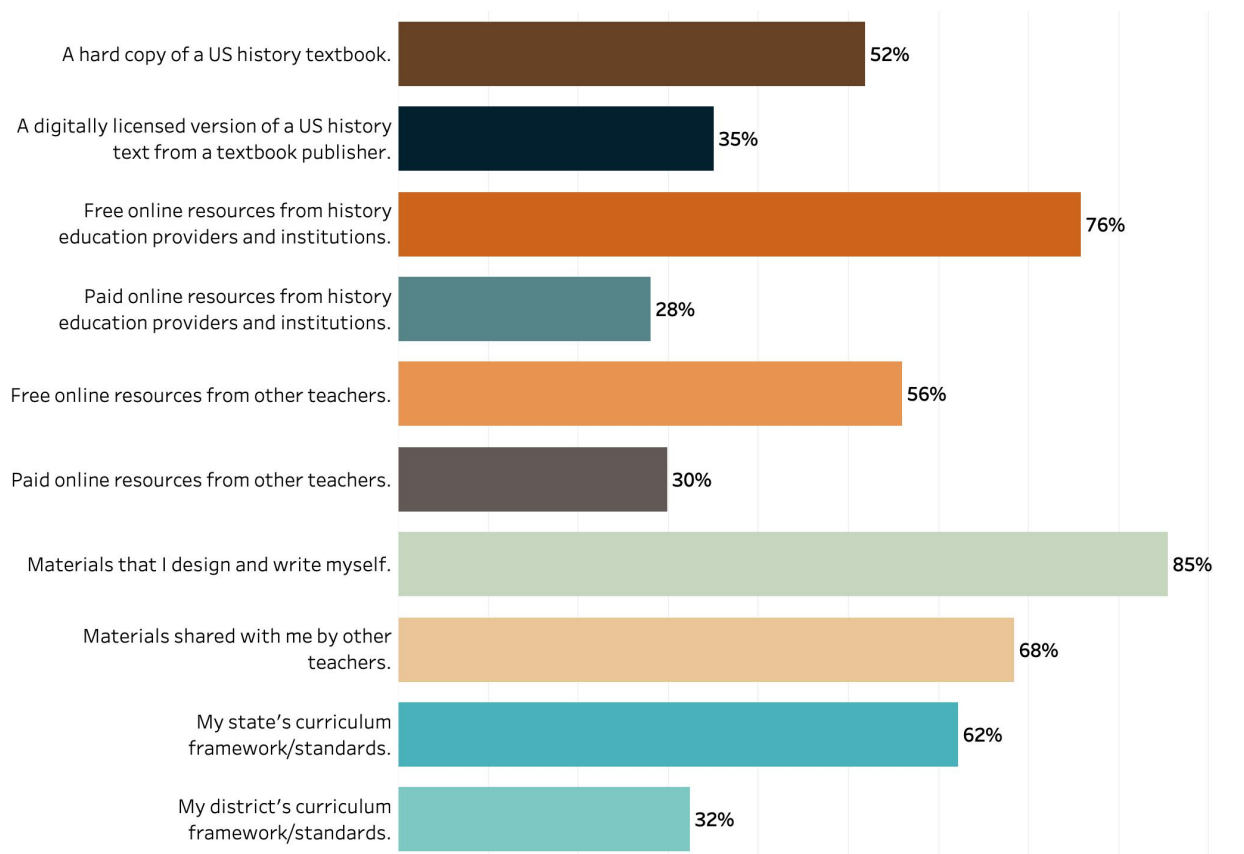
⁴³ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 5A.

⁴⁴ Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker, *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree, 1998).

⁴⁵ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 5A.

Thirty-four percent of teachers surveyed said that their US history team was either a solo act or a duet—a condition most common in smaller-town and rural settings (Fig. 18).⁴⁶ Regardless of team size, teachers appear to rely on their colleagues more than administrators when it comes to content. When asked whose decisions matter most in terms of curriculum at the school, the top answer was the course-level team. In this sense, social studies departments function more as lesson-sharing ecosystems than structures of command and control. A Colorado teacher summed up how this process works for many teachers: “While I make the vast majority of decisions on what to teach from our state standards and how to do that, I collaborate in PLCs and with [the] administration to determine best practices.”⁴⁷

Fig. 16: Teachers on What They Use to Teach US History



⁴⁶ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 4.

⁴⁷ Rural Colorado Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 8.

Fig. 17: Teachers on Collaboration (n = 3,012)

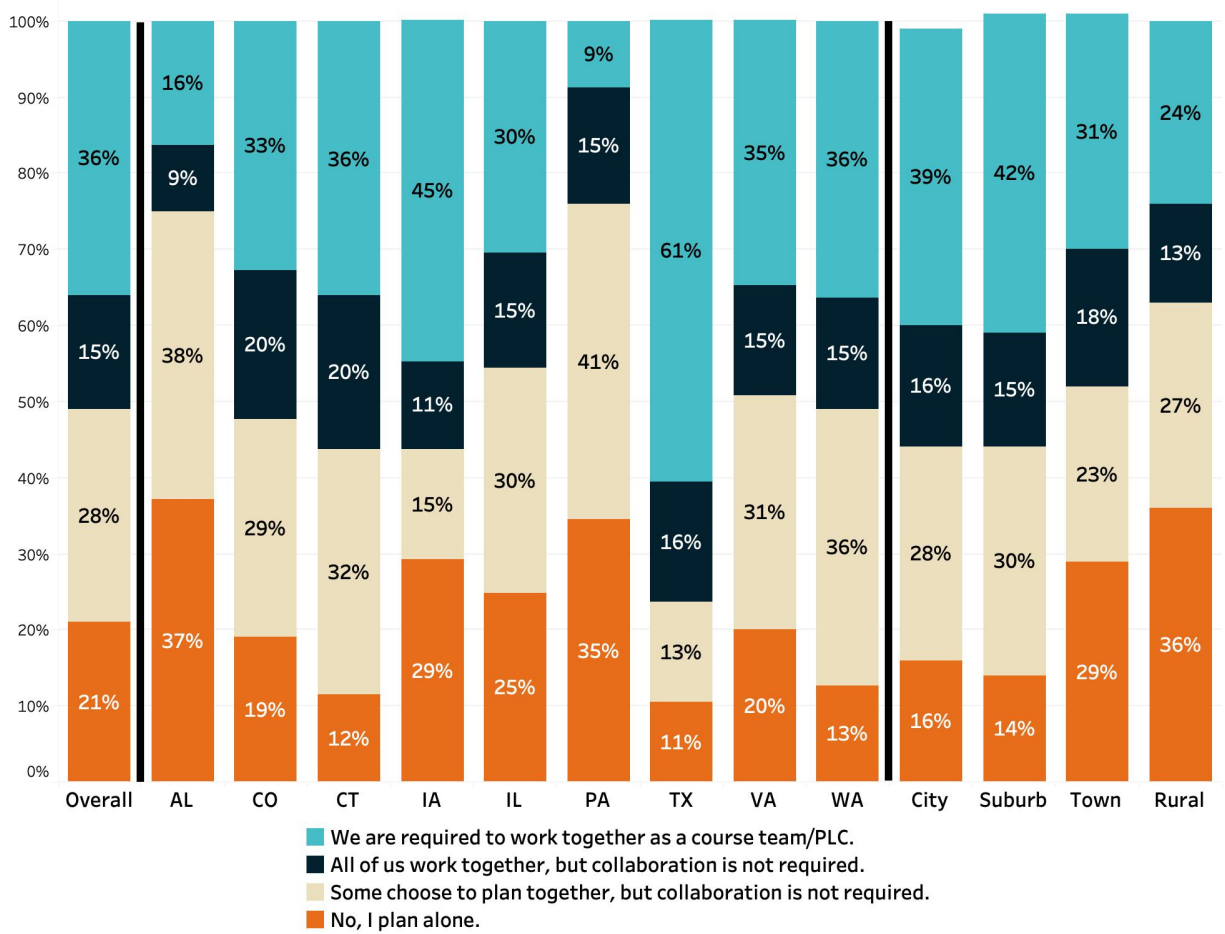
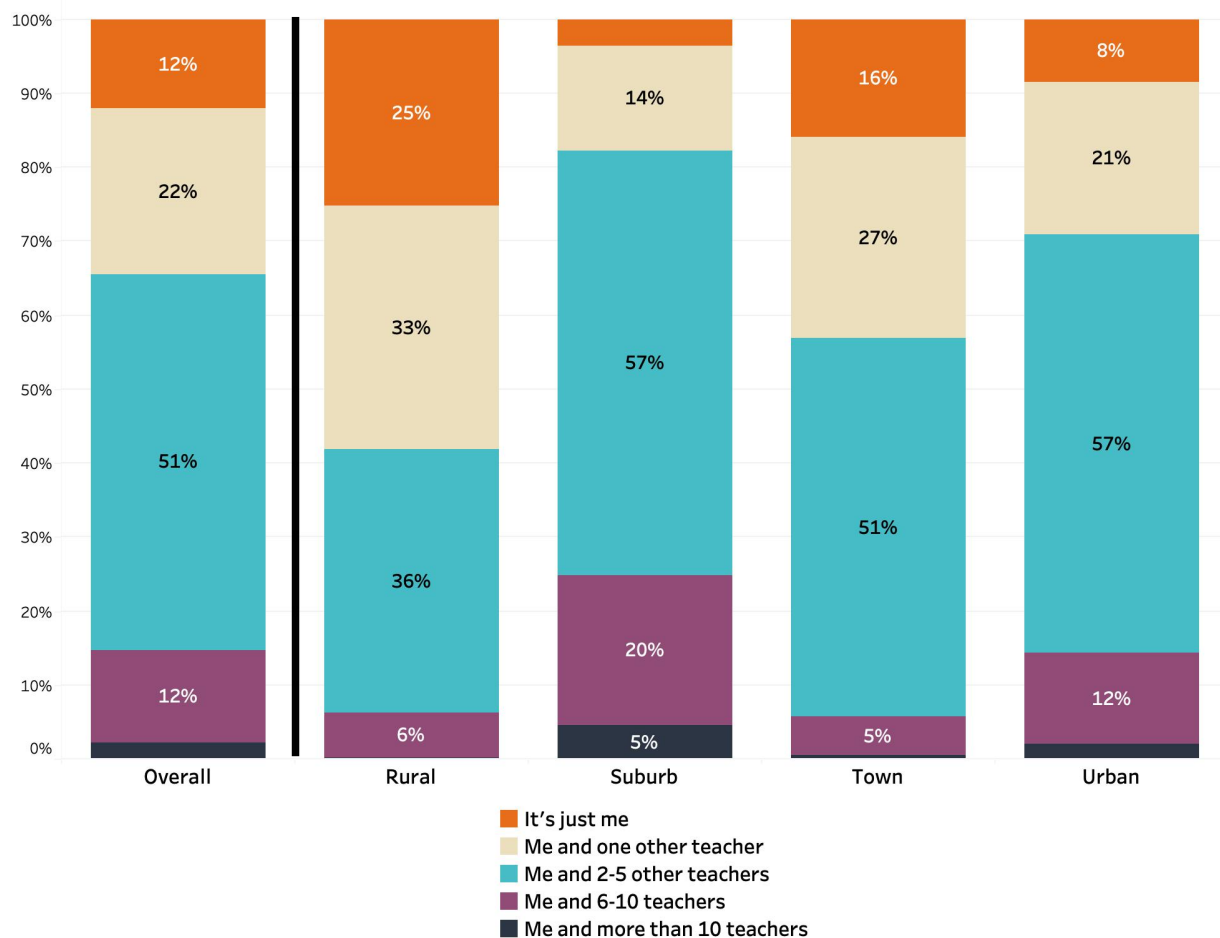


Fig. 18: How Big Is Your US History Team?



Through the survey and interviews, administrators and teachers revealed an increasing level of collaboration and alignment over the last few decades. An Illinois curriculum coordinator reflected that 16 to 17 years ago, “Teachers would fight on everything.” His teacher team would claim “you don’t trust us,” but then over time, in his view, they appreciated the value of working on a common curriculum.⁴⁸ Even when the extent to which teacher teams actually align is uneven, teachers who had taught for more than 20 years described increasing cultural norms of alignment from their colleagues alongside new requirements from administrators. For some teachers, course teams can also be sites of meaningful collaboration—sometimes as a respite or a defense from administrations that they perceive as misunderstanding or devaluing social studies as compared with reading or STEM.

⁴⁸ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 411), February 14, 2023.

Of those who collaborate, virtually all have some measure of alignment on pacing.⁴⁹ Fewer report alignment on other aspects of curriculum, but when they do, assessments and projects are more likely (78 percent of team-aligned teachers) to be held in common. Unsurprisingly, the day-to-day structure of lessons are the least aligned, with 59 percent of respondents reporting relatively or no alignment (Figs. 19 and 20).⁵⁰ As some teachers expressed, their team works “off of the same unit map, but they do different activities and use different methods to get there.”⁵¹ Indeed, more alignment could even accommodate autonomy. As an Iowa teacher put it, “Our PLC has a common plan, and we genuinely follow it, but if we want to emphasize different things, we do.”⁵² Whether a common assessment was given every unit, every semester, or once a year, teachers used common assessments to norm themselves and gauge student achievement. The presence of a state-mandated assessment exerts a strong influence on local conditions. Texas’s annual STAAR test, for example, sustains the rationale for more alignment and more interim testing at the district and school levels. Seventy-four percent of surveyed teachers in Texas report giving a common test every unit, while only 33 percent of the other eight sample states report a similar condition (Fig. 21).

⁴⁹ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 5B. Some teachers in interviews described pacing as an equity and efficiency measure, designed to facilitate easy transfer of students between classes or schools.

⁵⁰ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, questions 5B and 5C.

⁵¹ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 419), June 7, 2023.

⁵² Town Iowa Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 8.

Fig. 19: Collaboration on What? (n = 1,933)

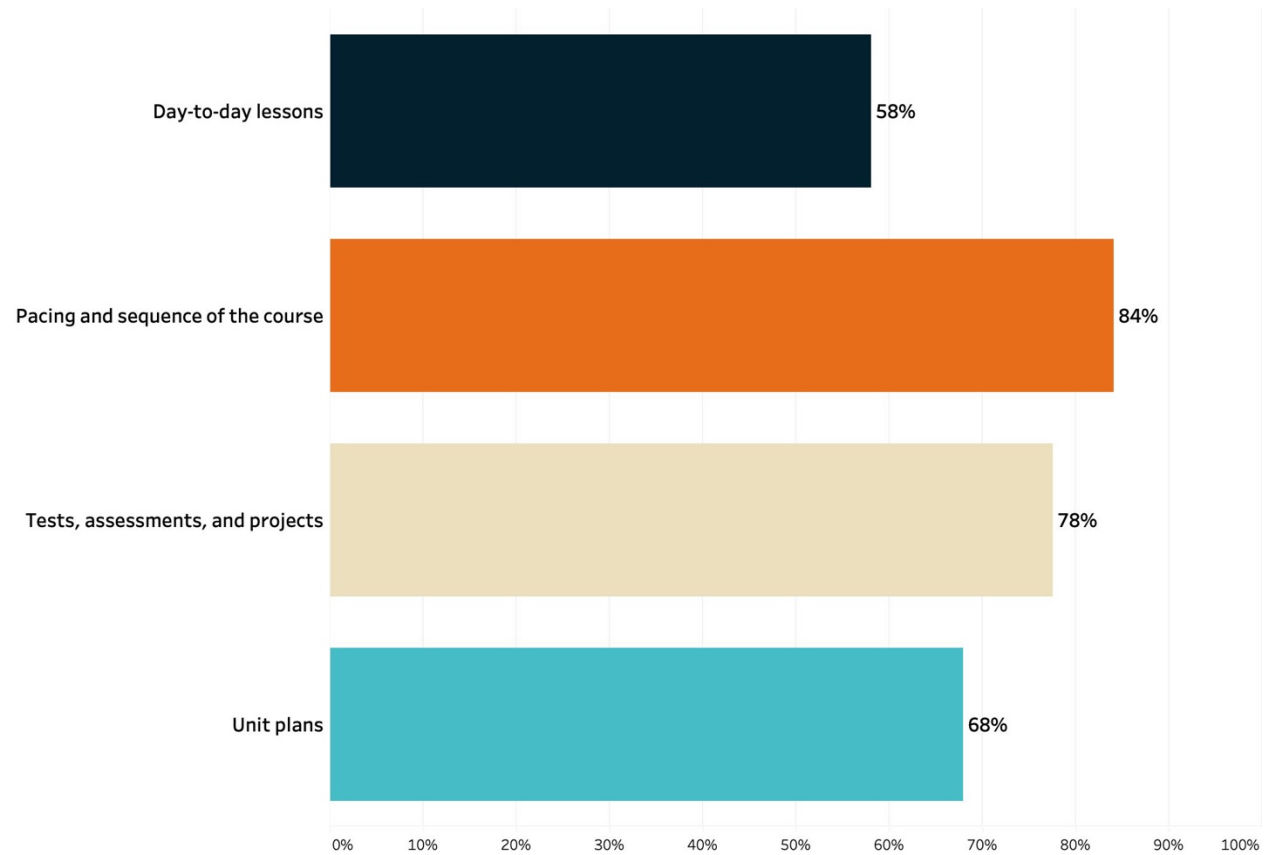


Fig. 20: How Much Alignment? (n = 1,933)

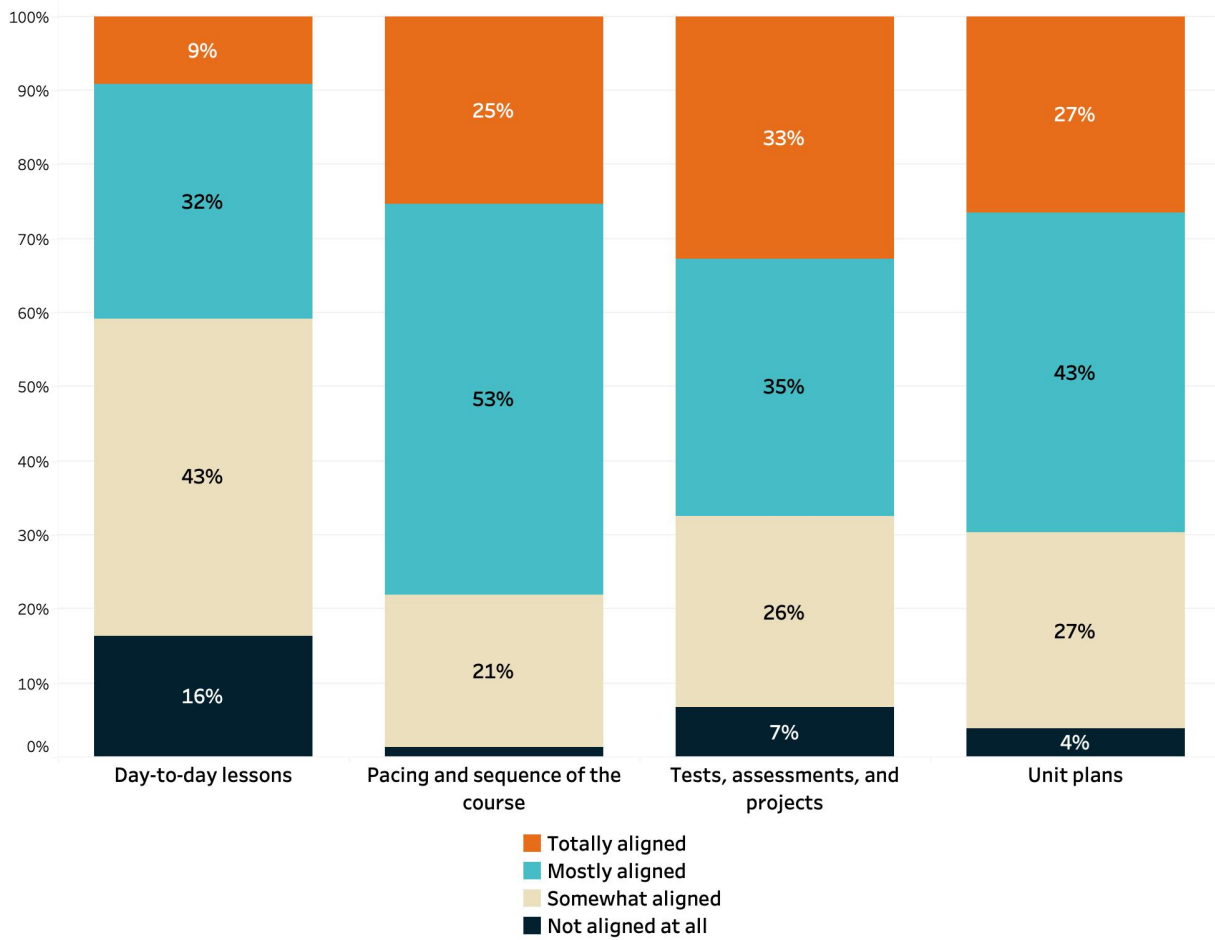
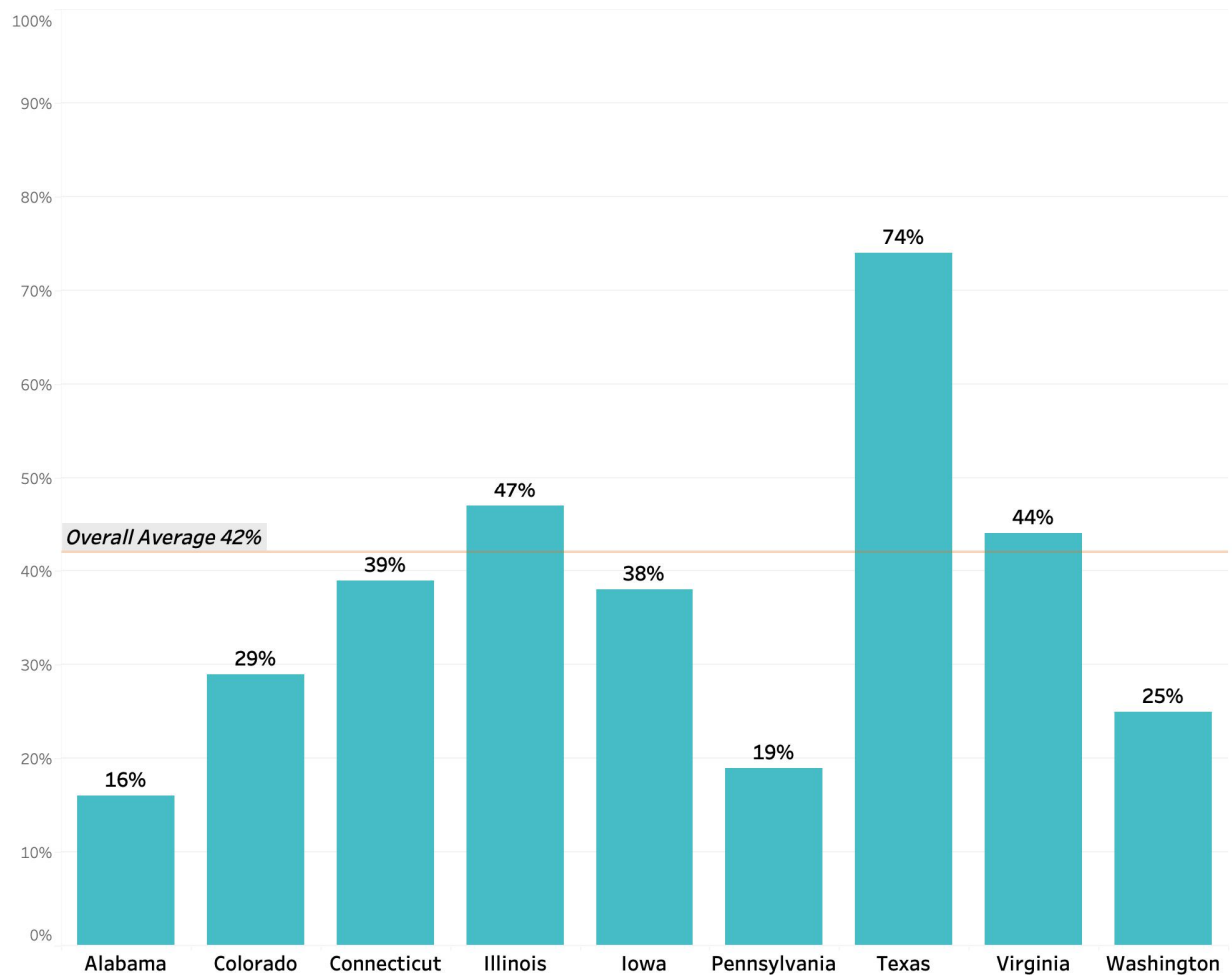


Fig. 21: Teachers Who Report Giving a Common Assessment Every Unit (n = 2,457)



Teacher perceptions about the usefulness of alignment vary by local contexts and individual preferences. One Illinois administrator described creating assessments that could “be used by any school” even if they did not use the full curriculum he recommended.⁵³ Meanwhile, a teacher in the same district complained that a different standardized test just for the course team in his building “probably wouldn’t work very well.”⁵⁴ While some teachers indicated all or most of their assessments had to be “identical,” others noted no such requirements.⁵⁵ “We should probably be more aligned,” admitted one Pennsylvania teacher who gave a common midterm but no other common assessments, indicating the slow, but unmistakable trend toward alignment.⁵⁶ The benefits of course team alignment are in the eye of the beholder. Teachers in Texas

⁵³ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 406), April 21, 2023.

⁵⁴ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 407), April 6, 2023.

⁵⁵ Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 613), August 30, 2023.

⁵⁶ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 612), August 22, 2023.

districts with long histories of PLC alignment seemed strikingly accustomed and unperturbed by expectations of standardization—conditions that teachers elsewhere would greet with resistance. Two teachers in the same Illinois school had very different views of their PLC; one spoke positively of her course team’s weekly collaborations, while her colleague described feeling “policed.”⁵⁷

In schools where administrators see a value in maintaining common curricular documents, teachers still tend to write these materials themselves. As one Pennsylvania teacher noted, “We create the curriculum and it gets approved by central office and they look in to make sure we follow it.”⁵⁸ Administrators, lacking time and background in social studies, will require a particular format for a course team’s curriculum but delegate to teacher teams what will go into them. These team documents may be “living documents” that are updated from year to year and owned by new teachers in each instance—and this is certainly understood as best practice for most administrators. But after the initial momentum, they can also sit unrevised and unevenly used in subsequent years, dated by the instructional idiosyncrasies of the teachers who happened to have worked on it in a given year.

Alignment often succeeds or fails because of personal idiosyncrasies. In several instances, interviewees mentioned that their fellow US teacher had been their student teacher and that they continued to work closely on lesson plans. In some cases, teachers reported splintered teams, with one contingent doing their own thing while another team worked together on recent trends in social studies education such as inquiry and an active classroom. As one teacher complained, some of his colleagues “were not really interested in furthering themselves as educators.”⁵⁹ In rare instances, interviewed teachers described ideological differences between themselves and a colleague, feuds that they had managed for over a decade.⁶⁰

On-the-job norms and mandates are not the only means by which curriculum and instruction can align across multiple school settings. Professional networks and alignment among teachers can extend beyond the school building, district, and state. District-wide professional development, although rarely organized by “job-alike” (i.e.,

⁵⁷ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 404), April 5, 2023; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 407), April 6, 2023.

⁵⁸ Suburban Pennsylvania Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 6.

⁵⁹ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 906), May 2, 2023; Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 803), April 27, 2023.

⁶⁰ Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 912); July 23, 2023; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 518), July 12, 2023.

grouped by subject) or “course-alike” (i.e., grouped by course) categories, can grant history teachers the chance to connect with colleagues during institute days at the beginning of the school year. More informally, veteran teachers who changed schools often reported maintaining contact and collaborating with former colleagues. State-level professional organizations for social studies teachers pull a small but committed number of teachers into regular contact at annual conferences. Several interviewees said they valued both the learning and the connections they made at these conferences. For teachers active on social media, the #SSchat on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) have become an important source of information and community. The AP program also has built significant networks of professional practice among teachers. As one Texas teacher enthused, the annual AP US history grading sessions are places to meet “awesome friends and collaborators” from across the country who continue to convene “on Zoom to make tests together.”⁶¹

For ambitious teachers who identify as lifelong learners and history nerds, professional development trips (offered by organizations like the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National World War II Museum, Founding Forward—formerly the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge—with like-minded educators. Several years into her teaching career, one Iowa teacher recalled her realization that professional development supplied both a personal and professional boost: “Holy crap, this is amazing.”⁶² Others refrain from engaging with wider networks of social studies teachers. Some lamented their isolated state, wishing that they had the time, energy, ambition, or funding to link up with other professionals. Others seemed content to be alone with their content and their students. As one small-town Iowa teacher put it, the “weakness on my evaluations is that I don’t attend conferences, but I know that I am constantly learning and reading.”⁶³

Credible Sources

Just a few years ago, the question of what US history teachers use in their classrooms might have been answered by pointing to a short stack of textbooks from four or five publishers. Educational publishing is still a big business, but now traditional textbooks

⁶¹ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 731), November 6, 2023.

⁶² Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 520), October 4, 2023.

⁶³ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 518), July 12, 2023.

are unlikely to occupy the center of history instruction. Thirty-two percent of teachers surveyed say they never use a textbook, and those that do are far more likely to describe them as “a reference” (45 percent) than something that they expect students to read regularly in class (16 percent) or for homework (11 percent) (Fig. 22). While these trends appear consistent across locale types, usage of hard-copy textbooks varies widely from state to state, ranging from a high of 63 percent in Alabama to a low of 37 percent in Virginia. Veteran teachers remain friendlier to textbooks than newer teachers. Among veteran teachers with 21 years or more in education, 54 percent said they have copies of a textbook in their classroom, and 48 percent reported using it “as a reference for in-class work;” meanwhile, teachers with five or fewer years of experience reported rates of 42 percent and 35 percent, respectively. Conversely, 41 percent of newer teachers reported that they never use textbooks, while only 25 percent of veteran teachers reported such avoidance.⁶⁴

Notwithstanding these local and generational variances, textbooks clearly are diminishing in influence. Assumptions that century-old state-level textbook adoption rules in a couple of large states are the dog that wags the tail of curriculum nationwide is a persistent anachronism in public discourse.⁶⁵ At the turn of the 21st century, 21 states, mostly in the south and west, had centralized adoption or recommendation processes.⁶⁶ Today, 19 states maintain state rules for textbook adoption, but most settle somewhere between approving a lengthy list of textbooks from which districts can select or providing procedures for district textbook selection.⁶⁷

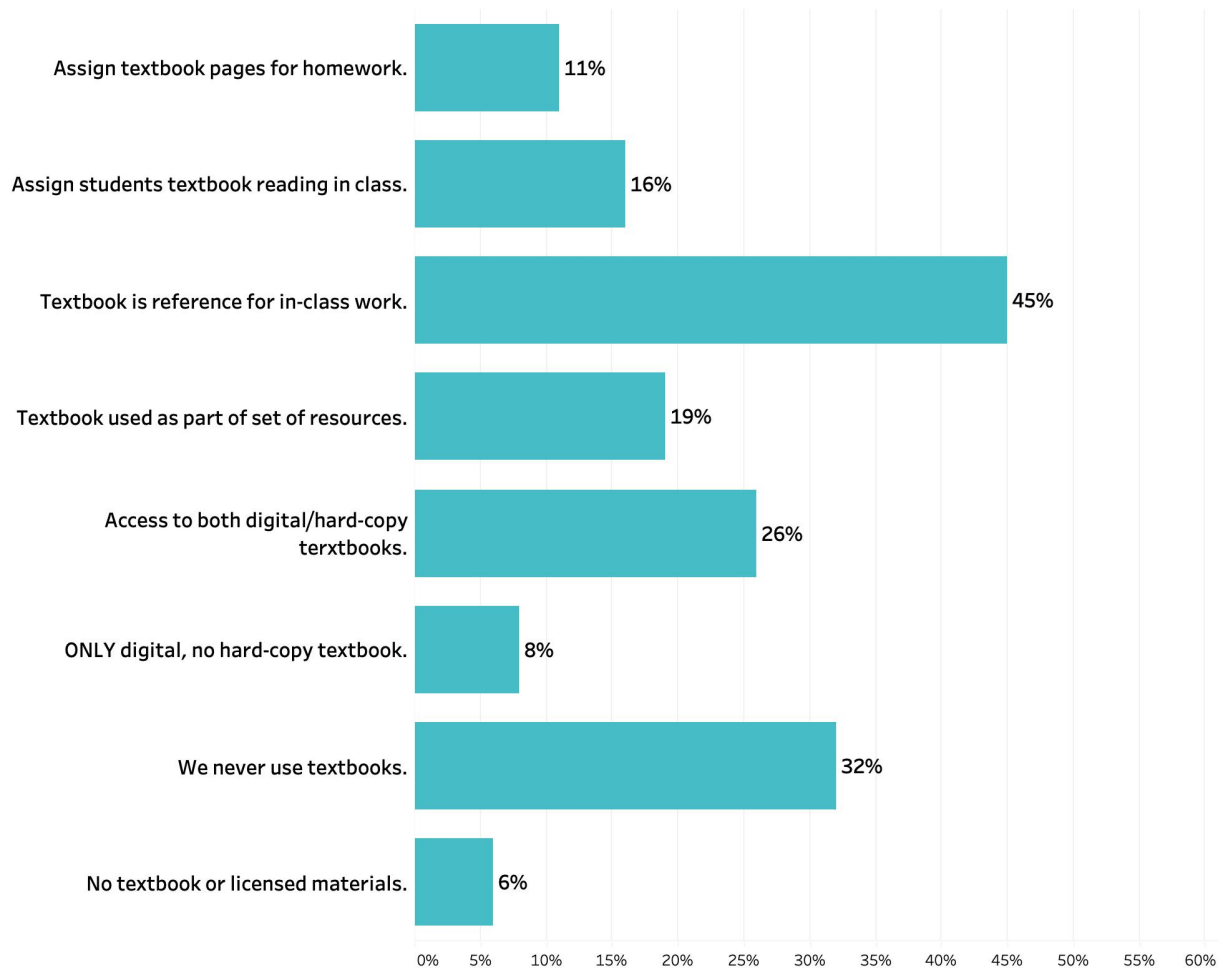
⁶⁴ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 26.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Gail Collins, “How Texas Inflicts Bad Textbooks on Us,” *New York Review of Books*, June 21, 2012, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/06/21/how-texas-inflicts-bad-textbooks-on-us/>; Laura Isensee, “How Textbooks Can Teach Different Versions of History,” *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, July 13, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/07/13/421744763/how-textbooks-can-teach-different-versions-of-history>; Dana Goldstein, “Two States. Eight Textbooks. Two American Stories,” *New York Times*, January 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/01/12/us/texas-vs-california-history-textbooks.html>.

⁶⁶ “The Mad, Mad World of Textbook Adoption,” Thomas B. Fordham Institute (September 2004).

⁶⁷ See “The Review and Adoption Process,” Texas Education Agency, <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/instructional-materials/review-and-adoption-process/the-review-and-adoption-proces>. For discussion, see Vincent Scudella, “State Textbook Adoption,” Education Commission of the States (September 2013). The current count of 19 comes from Erin Whinnery, Lauren Bloomquist, and Gerardo Silva-Padron, “Your Question: You Asked for Information on Textbook Adoption Policies,” Response to Information Request (Education Commission of the States, 2022); Emily Schmidt, “Required Reading: How Textbook Adoption in Three States Influences the Nation’s K–12 Population,” American Public Media, June 2, 2022, <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/10x-textbook-adoption>.

Fig. 22: How Do You Use Your Textbook? (n = 2,361)



Curriculum scholars might be tempted to credit the disappearance of textbooks to a long-running critique that derides textbooks as bland bargains or triumphal fables.⁶⁸ But teachers offer more idiosyncratic testimony: they might prefer a book different from the one their district purchased; they might have only enough copies for a single class set; their district may have skipped over the last adoption cycle to fund a math or language arts purchase; their students may be too underprepared, distracted, or impatient to read them.⁶⁹ When asked which textbook they had available, surveyed teachers most frequently responded that they could not recall the title. Those who could remember

⁶⁸ See James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1995); Diane Ravich, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn* (New York: Vintage, 2004).

⁶⁹ Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 405), May 31, 2023; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 700), March 1, 2023; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 725), August 24, 2023; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 728), October 16, 2023; MST (424), Interview with middle school social studies teacher August 8, 2023; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 916); August 21, 2023; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 119), October 6, 2023.

named the usual suspects: Teachers Curriculum Institute (TCI), Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt (HMH), McGraw-Hill, Pearson/Savvas, National Geographic/Cengage, and Discovery Education. Some publishers make a play for a particular state, as Five Ponds Press has in Virginia. In Alabama and Illinois, a number of teachers said they preferred to hold onto older copies of McDougall-Littell's *The Americans*.⁷⁰

The eclipse of textbooks reflects the rise of digital LMS and OER, and a relentless push for a “one-to-one” ratio of computing devices to students. Supplementary resources are not in themselves new; even in states with centralized adoption rules and scheduled cycles of review by local school boards (and even before the internet revolution), schools licensed “supplementary materials” on an ongoing basis and outside of approval procedures.⁷¹ Teachers’ tastes for more modular, and eventually digital materials—which district officials also found less costly—helped the case for nontextbook resources. These trends have only accelerated over the past decade, as computing technology and web access has become a policy priority, and was supercharged during COVID-19 school closures, when computer screens became the primary vehicle for instruction.⁷² Today, all six major textbook publishers offer digital-only licenses of their core US history titles.⁷³

Over the past decade, concerns among state agency officials about the uneven rigor and patchwork quality of local instructional materials has spurred a movement to reassert a state role as gatekeeper and curator in the marketplace. Among state and local education agency officials and education researchers, terms like “high-quality instructional materials” (HQIM), “guaranteed and viable curriculum”(GVC), and “instructional system coherence” express administrators’ various ambitions for a tighter grip on the curricular steering wheel.⁷⁴ Drawing on initiatives undertaken by Louisiana’s Department of

⁷⁰ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 27.

⁷¹ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 27.

⁷² See Benjamin Herold, “How Tech-Driven Teaching Strategies Have Changed During the Pandemic,” *Education Week*, April 14, 2022, <https://www.edweek.org/technology/how-tech-driven-teaching-strategies-have-changed-during-the-pandemic/2022/04>. For longer histories, see Victoria Cain, *Schools and Screens: A Watchful History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021).

⁷³ “United States History, Spanish Student Inquiry Bundle, 6-year subscription,” McGraw Hill, accessed June 28, 2024, <https://www.mheducation.com/prek-12/product/united-states-history-spanish-student-inquiry-bundle-6-year-subscription-mcgraw-hill/9781265248604.html>; “myWorld Interactive: American History,” Savvas Learning Company, accessed June 28, 2024, <https://www.savvas.com/solutions/social-studies/core-programs/myworld-interactive-american-history-middle-school-us-history>; “HMH Social Studies,” Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, accessed June 28, 2024, <https://www.hmhco.com/programs/hmh-social-studies>; “Social Studies West Virginia State Catalog,” National Geographic Learning Cengage, accessed June 28, 2024, https://ngl.cengage.com/states/wv/AE_BRO_WV-Adoption-Catalog_2018_web.pdf; “Social Studies Techbook,” Discovery Education, accessed June 28, 2024, <https://www.discoveryeducation.com/solutions/social-studies/techbook/>; “High School (9–12) Social Studies Student License,” TCI, <https://shop.teachtci.com/hs-ss-sl>.

⁷⁴ For a literature review, see Elaine Lin Wang, Julia H. Kaufman, Sabrina Lee, Brian Kim, and V. Darleen Opfer, “Instructional System Coherence: A Scoping Literature Review,” (Rand Corporation, 2024), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR279-5.html.

Education in the early 2010s—where the state contracted reviewers to produce tiered ratings reports on common math and English textbooks—committees within the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and Chiefs for Change undertook an effort to spread the model beginning in 2017. The CCSSO’s Instructional Materials and Professional Development Network (IMPD) now includes 13 states, supplying research and talking points to boost state agencies’ clout as arbiters of instructional content, with recent initiatives specifically aimed at social studies.⁷⁵ As one advocacy brief argues, “The level of control that a state has over curriculum decisions matters less than a state’s willingness to play an active role.”⁷⁶ Leveraging connections between research nonprofits and professional networks, a few states are now experimenting with state-level review tools for social studies materials.⁷⁷

Edtech startups and nonprofits now elbow in alongside legacy publishing houses for curricular provision. In addition to a flock of catch-all tech tools with lighthearted names (BrainPop, Edpuzzle, Quizizz, Nearpod, Kahoot, and Peardeck), our survey data registered clear favorites among paid and licensed social studies resources (Fig. 23).⁷⁸

Content aggregation and curation service Newsela is by far the most recognized paid resource among surveyed teachers, with Discovery Education’s social studies “Techbook” in second place. Punching above its weight as a social studies–specific vendor is the influential DBQ Project, whose units appear in multiple places and are ranked as a highly used resource by 15 percent of surveyed teachers. Outside of Pennsylvania and Connecticut (where only 9 percent and 10 percent of surveyed teachers reported using the DBQ Project, respectively), at least 23 percent of teachers in all other sample states reported usage, with a high of 38 percent of surveyed teachers in Colorado (Fig. 24). The DBQ branding holds no relationship to the College Board’s famous AP testing instrument, but the name association undoubtedly boosts the product’s appeal.

⁷⁵ EdReports and the AIR have been tapped by the CCSSO’s social studies collaborative to produce pilot “evidence guides” for social studies.

⁷⁶ “Choosing Wisely: How States Can Help Districts Adopt High-Quality Instructional Materials,” Chiefs for Change (April 2019), <https://chiefsforchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/CFC-ChoosingWisely-FINAL-1.pdf>.

⁷⁷ See Nebraska’s “Instructional Materials Review Rubric”; Louisiana’s “Instructional Materials Evaluation Tool for Alignment in Social Studies Grades K–12”; Iowa’s “Draft Rubric to Evaluate the Quality of Units in Social Studies”; and Texas’ Instructional Materials Review and Approval (IMRA) process, set forth in HB 1605 (2023). See EdReports and AIR, “Criteria for High-Quality Instructional Materials for Social Studies,” January 8, 2024, https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/23-23505_HQIM_for_SS_Final.pdf.

⁷⁸ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 32.

Fig. 23: Reported Teacher Access to Selected Paid Resources

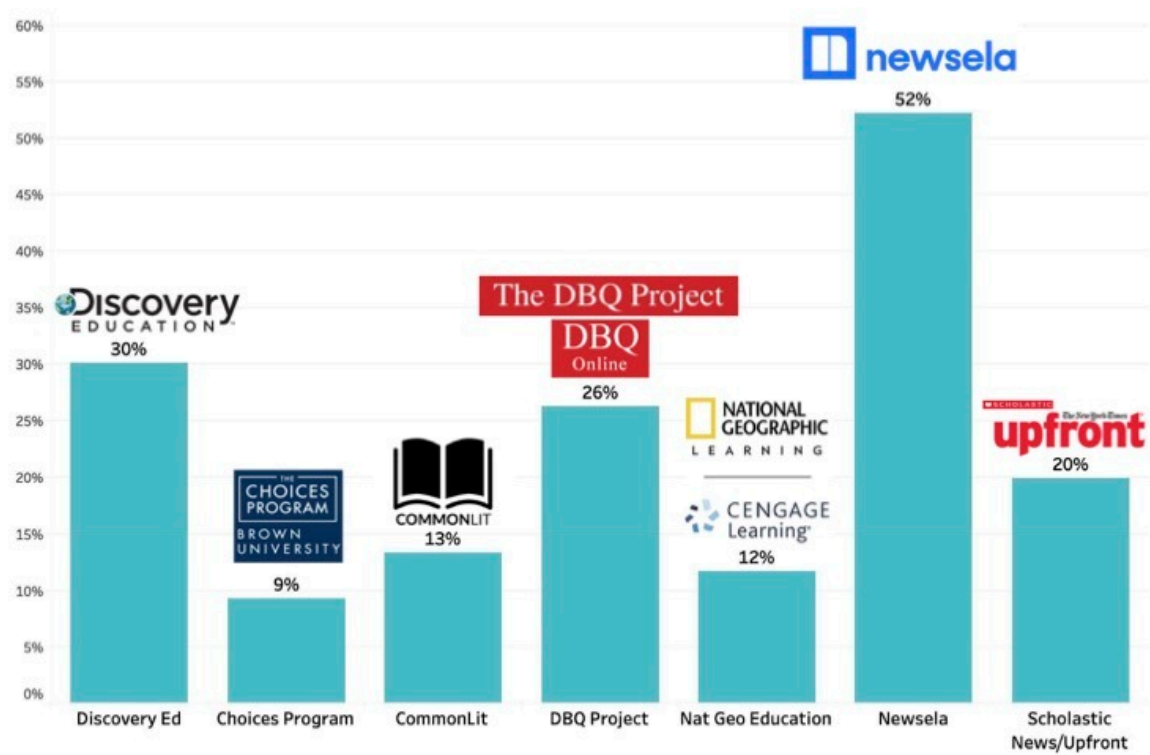
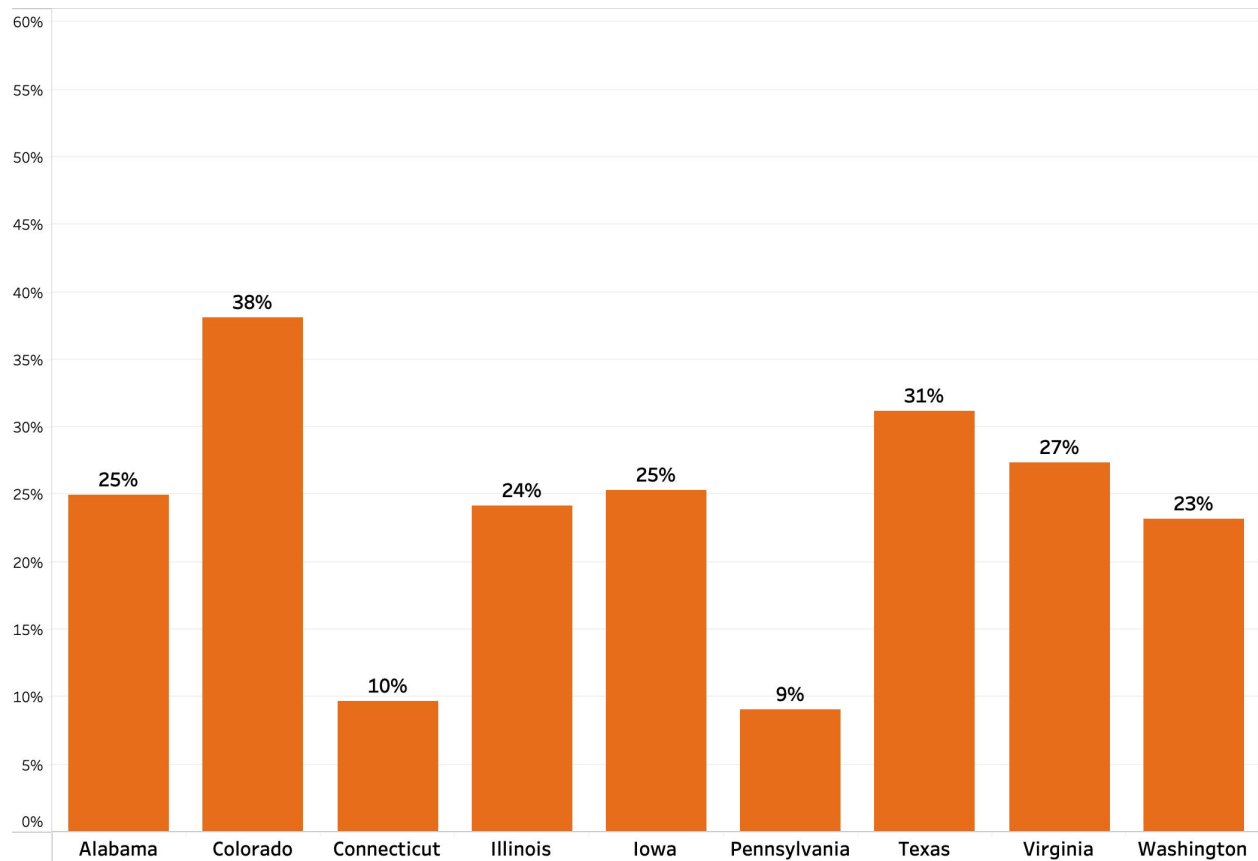


Fig. 24: Reported DBQ Usage by State (n = 1,677)



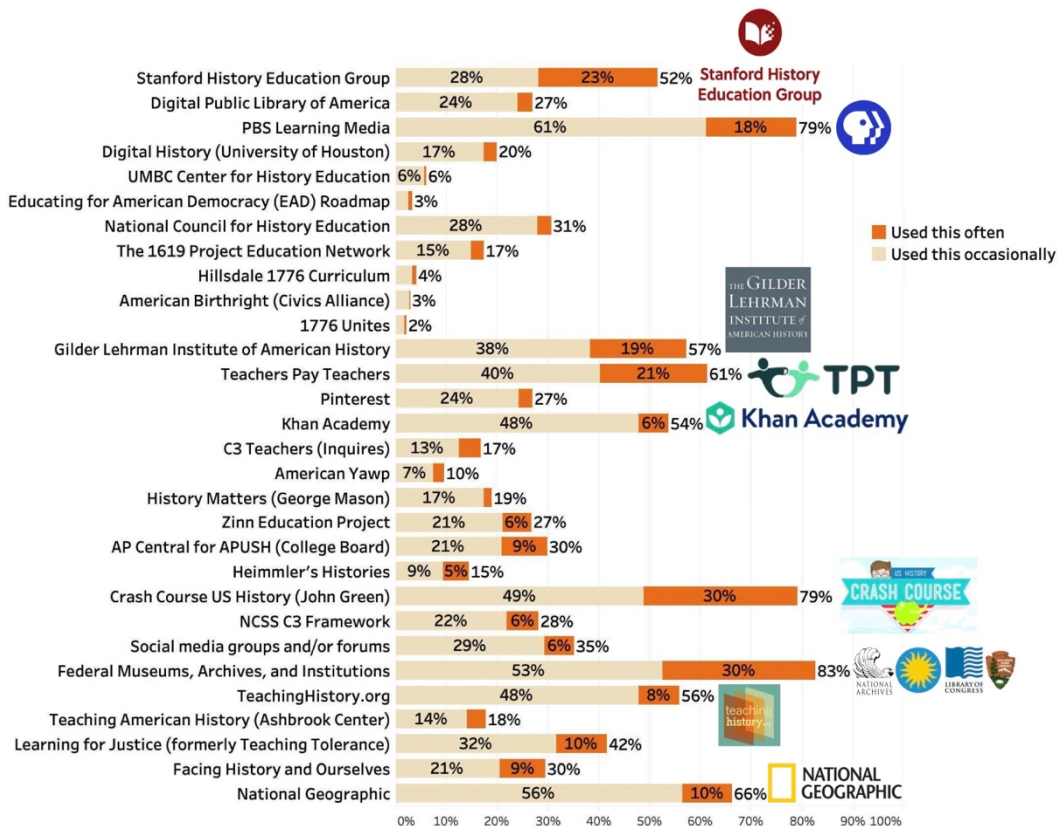
Some products have made headway in certain states and locale types over others. Only 44 percent of rural and 49 percent of town teachers work in schools subscribed to Newsela, compared with 58 percent in cities and 52 percent in suburbs. For Discovery Education, about two of five teachers in Pennsylvania, Texas, and Virginia report having access versus fewer than one of five in Illinois, Iowa, and Washington. One in two surveyed Connecticut teachers have a Scholastic News/Upfront NYT subscription compared with fewer than one in 10 in Iowa and Texas. In Washington and Connecticut, between a quarter and a third of respondents (24 percent and 34 percent, respectively) reported using Brown University's *Choices* curriculum, compared with 2 percent or less in Alabama, Texas, and Virginia.⁷⁹

Perhaps the most significant force driving teachers and districts away from textbooks is the proliferation of free stuff (Fig. 25). Fifty-nine percent of surveyed teachers said they make use of no-cost materials from a decentralized online universe of history education providers and institutions, while another 45 percent said they use free

⁷⁹ "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 28.

resources from other teachers.⁸⁰ In interviews, some teachers knew their favorites right away; others paused in bewilderment, realizing that they weren't always sure where the material they use had come from. Surveyed teachers registered a high degree of trust in materials that come from federal institutions, such as the Library of Congress or the Smithsonian.

Fig. 25: Reported Teacher Usage of Selected No-Cost Resources



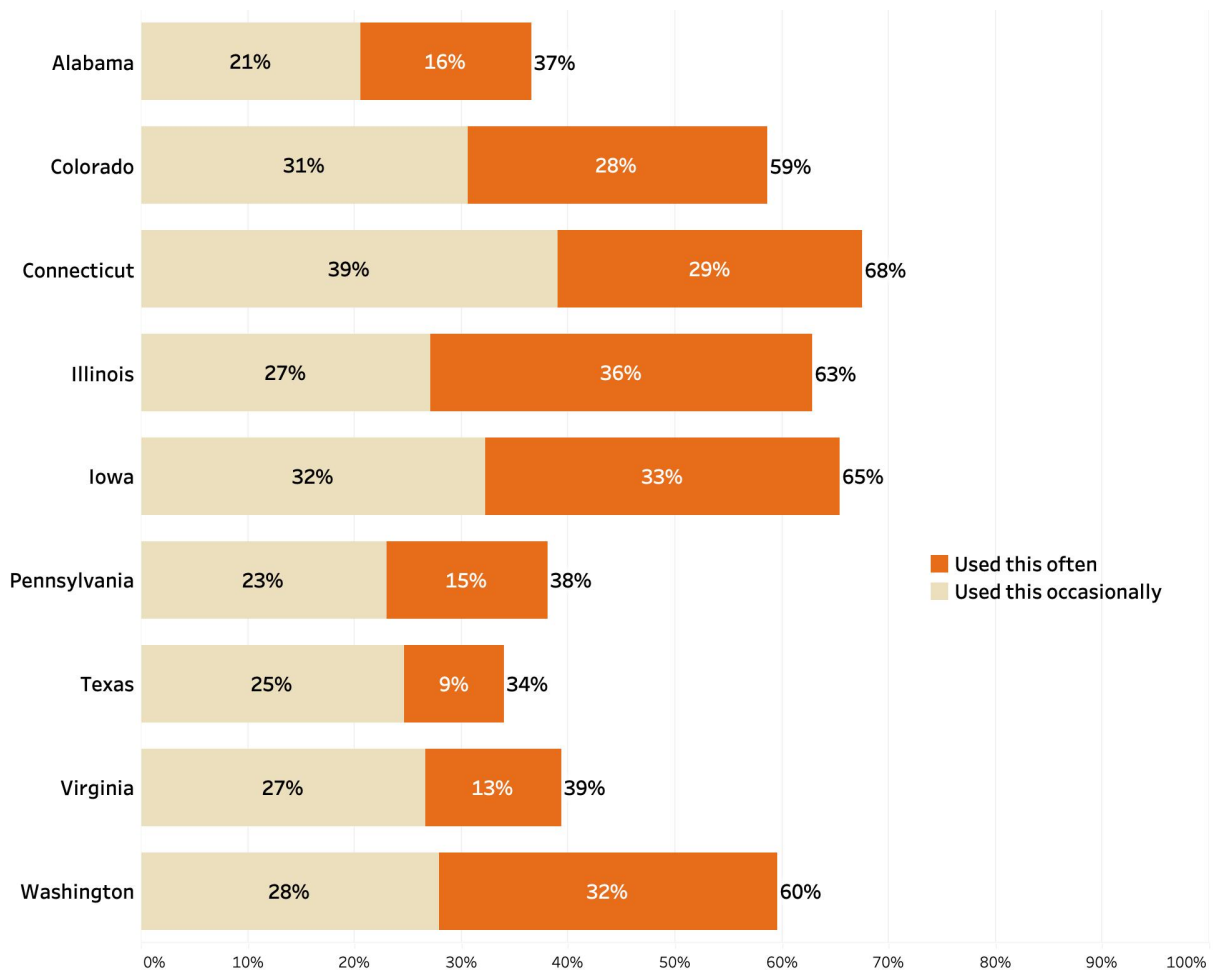
After that, the list of repeatedly used US history freebies begins with two names that most teachers outside history won't recognize: John Green and Sam Wineburg. Green is a novelist and YouTuber, whose Crash Course US History, a 48-episode series launched in 2013, is cited as an often-used resource by more surveyed teachers than any other single digital resource listed in our survey. A smaller set of teachers find Green's snarky quick-cut edutainment style too fast for their students to follow or too annoying to put up with.⁸¹ Wineburg is a cognitive psychologist and emeritus professor of education

⁸⁰ "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 25.

⁸¹ Alabama Teacher, "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30; Alabama Teacher, "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30; Connecticut Teacher,

whose two-decade-old Stanford History Education Group (SHEG, recently reorganized as the Digital Inquiry Group, or DIG) has shown up at every level of our research. State websites link to it, district curricula recommend it, and teachers have SHEG worksheets scattered across their personal files. Among those who have heard of it, SHEG/DIG attracts repeated use and a loyal following, but its reach is not universal. High recognition and usage in Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Virginia, and Washington contrasts with a lower profile in Alabama, Pennsylvania, and Texas (Fig. 26).

Fig. 26: Reported SHEG Familiarity/Usage by State (n = 2,260)



While Crash Course and SHEG have loyal followings, many other resources fell into the category of widely recognized and occasionally used: PBS, National Geographic,

“Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30; Pennsylvania Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30; Connecticut Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30; Illinois Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30; Pennsylvania Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30.

Khan Academy, teachinghistory.org, and the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History all made strong showings in our survey.

Producing the most polarized data was TeachersPayTeachers (TPT), a popular online education marketplace where teachers buy and sell homemade instructional materials. TPT split teachers into two camps: 61 percent of teachers who said they use it regularly, and 36 percent who either don't use it or purposefully avoid it. One teacher liked TPT's ability to search for specific lesson formats, especially simulations.⁸² Others appreciated it as a time-saver, freeing up "time I can use helping and engaging with students instead of planning."⁸³ Those that purposefully avoided TPT tended to express their disapproval in strong moral terms, characterizing it as "a minefield of half-cooked ideas made by people trying to sell a hastily made pdf for \$5" or "unscrupulous people taking other teacher's work and selling it as their own."⁸⁴ Some expressed offense at "a neoliberal scheme" that contrasted with traditional norms of cost-free lesson sharing among teachers.⁸⁵ As one teacher put it, "I come from mentors who retired and left all of their material to the next teacher because that is what we do."⁸⁶ Others were incredulous that teachers would pay for materials when there's "a ton of free stuff out there and I also have a brain and skills myself."⁸⁷ Attitudes toward and usage of Teachers Pay Teachers varied widely across states. Teachers reporting frequent or occasional usage ranged from a high of 72 percent and 73 percent in Alabama and Texas, respectively, to a low of 49 percent in Connecticut. There was even sharper divergence with regard to locale type, with 29 percent of teachers in rural districts reporting regular TPT usage versus only 16 percent in suburbs. Teachers who purposefully avoided TPT were fewer but still substantial, ranging from 8 percent in Alabama to 23 percent in Connecticut, and again reflected in locale data (9 percent in rural districts and 19 percent in suburban ones). Newer teachers reported a good deal more usage of TPT (75 percent of those with fewer than five years' experience) than veteran teachers (53 percent of those with at least 21 years' experience). Midcareer teachers (11 to 20 years' experience) were most skeptical of

⁸² Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 423), May 31, 2023.

⁸³ Texas Teacher, "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 32.

⁸⁴ "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 32: Illinois Teacher; Pennsylvania Teacher.

⁸⁵ "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 32: City Colorado Teacher; City Pennsylvania Teacher.

⁸⁶ City Pennsylvania Teacher, "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30.

⁸⁷ Rural Iowa Teacher, "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30.

TPT, with 20 percent reporting a refusal to use it; only 9 percent of newer teachers reported avoiding it.⁸⁸

Social media was also polarizing, with 35 percent of teachers reporting getting lessons from online groups or forums while 65 percent never used them (18 percent said they swore off social media purposefully). Pinterest ranked highly as an occasional source of lessons in Alabama, Texas, and Virginia but earned more skeptical responses from teachers in Colorado and Connecticut. Some teachers were simply not on social media, while others voiced concerns that recommendations in online forums were unvetted, “unreliable,” and “opinionated.”⁸⁹ As one Illinois teacher explained, “I warn kids that social media is no place to get their information, so I follow the same rule.”⁹⁰

Notes on Form

[Part 4](#) of this report offers substantive appraisals of historical content in curricular materials. But the *forms* in which curriculum developers and social studies specialists choose to present this content matter as well. These choices express publishers’ and edtech companies’ informed judgments of the K–12 instructional materials market: a complex mix of agendas and funding streams set by education agency officials at the local, state, and federal level; the publicized advice of well-placed academic experts in curriculum and instruction; the tech and budget priorities of local administrators; and the tastes and work habits of rank-and-file teachers.

Instructional materials designed for US history classes imply an array of assumptions about how students are supposed to learn and how teachers are supposed to teach. Regarding student learning, materials range from the expository and descriptive (as in a textbook that students will read or a video that students will watch) to the inquisitive and active (directing students to conduct outside research and create a project, for instance). On teaching, materials run from plug and play (leaving questions of implementation entirely to the instructor) to highly prescriptive (with tight scripts for the teacher’s actions and utterances).

⁸⁸ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 29.

⁸⁹ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30: Suburban Colorado Teacher; Suburban Pennsylvania Teacher.

⁹⁰ Rural Illinois Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 29.

Expository Formats

Textbooks are the classic expository plug-and-play system, synthesizing various subfields of history into a chronologically arranged, image-enhanced narrative. As our survey results and interviews make clear, textbooks are rarely assigned to students as single-dose ingestions of knowledge. Teachers combine textbooks with other sources, use them for their maps and visuals, borrow their review questions and assessments, and access them via a combination of desk copies, teacher guides, and digitally interactive formats. Textbooks from leading publishers provide a spectrum of style and detail, from exceedingly dry to highly readable, and reflective of editorial judgments about the degree and type of historical contexts worth including. Publishers revise textbook editions to reflect ascendant vocabulary in curriculum and instruction, with recent editions framing units with essential questions, offering inquiry activities, and including subsections that highlight the perspectives of ethnic groups or invite students to apply historical insights to current civic issues. The visual landscape of the typical textbook can feel like a cluttered web page, with main bodies of text flanked or pierced by maps, images, insets, sidebars, section titles, question prompts, and boldfaced vocabulary. Frenzied layouts might not be conducive to focused, independent reading, but, as teachers report, this is not usually how textbooks are used.

Even when leafed through, glanced at, or used as a reference, the textbook transmits an image bank of American history, with patterns discernable across the major products from the big five publishing houses (Teachers Curriculum Institute, McGraw Hill, Savvas-Pearson, National Geographic-Cengage, and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). Regardless of which textbook they read, students are likely to encounter a map of the triangular trade, a reproduction of Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre, a photo of Martin Luther King Jr. at the March on Washington, and other classic visual icons. Some publishers have spliced more specialized imagery into their visual repertoire. National Geographic's products brim with maps, cutaway diagrams of technological inventions, and elegant photographs of present-day historic sites and artifacts.⁹¹ TCI extends the life of 19th-century textbook illustrations, adorning its first-half edition with a throughline of Currier and Ives prints and paintings by illustrators like Howard Pyle

⁹¹ Fredrik Hiebert, Peggy Althoff, and Fritz Fischer, *American Stories* (Chicago: National Geographic Learning, 2017); Fredrik Hiebert, Peggy Althoff, and Fritz Fischer, *America Through the Lens: US History, 1877 to Present* (Mason, OH: National Geographic Learning/Cengage, 2023).

and Jean Leon Gerome Ferris.⁹² Savvas-Pearson excels in by-the-numbers infographics, supplying stylized charts and graphs of everything from the Salem witch trials to nuclear proliferation.⁹³

Overall, in their chapter-structured periodization, key events, famous personalities, and boldface terms, textbooks portray a mostly uncontroversial (if not always dynamic) professional consensus about the scope and sequence of content that belongs in a US history course. In this sense, textbooks are unobjectionable as a classroom resource, precisely the way that many teachers report using them. On many topics, textbooks offer more detail than the typical teacher-created or district-produced material. The social history of enslaved people, the labor history of unions in the Gilded Age, or various legal challenges to segregation before *Brown v. Board of Education* are all standard fare in textbooks but might not make it into a teacher PowerPoint or district pacing guide.

While textbooks languish on the shelf, narrative exposition is alive and well on YouTube. Even when districts pay for licensed digital repositories of video content, teachers default to the instantly searchable, no-cost familiarity of YouTube, where they can collect clips from the latest edutainment influencers and find many of the documentary films they used to have on a VHS tape.⁹⁴ Traditional producers of documentary films (PBS, Smithsonian, History Channel) still command teacher tastes, but the YouTuber genre exemplified by Crash Course now includes an array of creators (on channels such as Hip Hughes, Heimmiller's History, Ducksters, Mr. Betts, and You Will Love History) that some teachers have grown fond of, even as others reject them as too "cute."⁹⁵ As a classroom resource, history videos function (like textbooks) in the expository mode, providing a single voice of narrative synthesis, but with a flair that textbooks rarely match.

⁹² Diane Hart, *History Alive! The United States Through Industrialism* (Rancho Cordova, CA: Teachers Curriculum Institute, 2017). These images are regrettably decontextualized, however, with modern image stock vendors like Alamy and Granger earning credit rather than their 19th-century creators.

⁹³ Emma J. Lapansky-Werner, Peter B. Levy, Randy Roberts, and Alan Taylor, *US History Interactive* (Paramus, NJ: Savvas Learning Company, 2022).

⁹⁴ Asked to specify any free history teaching resource that we did not offer as a multichoice option on the survey, YouTube was the second most frequently named, surpassed only by iCivics. "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 32.

⁹⁵ Suburban Illinois Teacher, "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30.

*Document-Based Inquiry*⁹⁶

With textbooks in retreat, the ascendant instructional format is the document-based lesson, increasingly referred to as an “inquiry task” or simply “an inquiry” in social studies circles.⁹⁷ Defined broadly, the document-based inquiry lesson is a learning module centered on a central question, a set of excerpted primary documents, and a structured sequence of supporting questions, note-taking, and facilitated discussion. The lesson typically concludes with some culminating task in which students, either individually or in a group, deploy their readings of the primary documents as evidence in support of a position, a response to the central question posed at the outset. These central questions are designed to speak to big debates—unresolved issues that can motivate class discussion and set terms for a final assessment. As a catchall for these approaches, “inquiry” is everywhere, dovetailing with curriculum experts’ insistence on “essential questions” and “enduring understandings.”⁹⁸ Professional networks put inquiry at the center of their descriptions of best practices, and social studies standards in multiple states now echo the C3 Framework—produced by a coalition of professional organizations including the AHA and NCSS—in centering inquiry as both process and goal.⁹⁹

The basic intellectual and pedagogical moves of the document-based lesson date to the 19th century, when the first generation of professional historians called on schoolteachers to depart from the blunt moralism of many textbooks. Instead, historians endorsed more direct encounters with primary sources and even “topical study” by way of individual research projects with preselected source bases.¹⁰⁰ As teacher educator and historian Mary Sheldon Barnes advised as early as 1891, “Give the student a little

⁹⁶ Portions of this section appeared previously in Whitney E. Barringer, Scot McFarlane, and Nicholas Kryczka, “Good Question: Right-Sizing Inquiry with History Teachers,” *American Historical Review* 129, no. 3 (September 2024): 1116–27.

⁹⁷ The category of document-based lesson (DBL) originates in Avishag Reisman, “Reading Like a Historian: A Document-Based History Curriculum Intervention in an Urban High School” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2011).

⁹⁸ An essential question, in Wiggins and McTighe’s widely adopted advice, is a “provocative and generative” question meant to “stimulate thought, provoke inquiry, and to spark more questions,” which move students away from the details and toward “key concepts, themes, theories, issues, and problems that reside within the content.” Grant P. Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Essential Questions: Opening Doors to Student Understanding* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2013), 3, 5; Grant P. Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1998). See also Heather Lattimer, “Challenging History: Essential Questions in the Social Studies Classroom,” *Social Education* 72, no. 6 (October 2008): 326–29.

⁹⁹ See, for instance, NCSS, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K–12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: National Council for the Social Studies, 2013) “The Inquiry Design Model.” C3 Teachers, <https://c3teachers.org/idm/>; “C3 Framework: Inquiry Showcase,” NCSS, <https://www.socialstudies.org/professional-learning/inquiry-showcase>; “2023 Conference Resources,” National Social Studies Leaders Association, <https://www.socialstudiesleaders.org/>.

¹⁰⁰ *Report of the Committee on Secondary School Studies Appointed at the Meeting of the National Educational Association*, 169, 185. Andrew C. McLaughlin, et al., *The Study of History in the Schools: A Report to the American Historical Association of the Committee of Seven* (1898), 26.

collection of historic data, and extracts from contemporary sources, together with a few questions within his power to answer from these materials. Then let him go by himself.”¹⁰¹ Skeptical of a purely source-driven approach, the AHA’s Committee of Seven stressed in their 1899 report that textbooks were indispensable, advising “limited contact with a limited body” of primary sources—mainly as a way to vitalize the subject and not as an effort to reenact “investigation.”¹⁰²

If investigation remained a dirty word to some historians, by 1920 it had become a mantra for an interdisciplinary coalition of New History proponents, social studies advocates, and progressive curriculum developers.¹⁰³ Seeing history’s proper role in general education as “understanding the most vital problems of the present” and informed by scientific curriculum design, social studies specialists designed courses like Community Civics and Problems of Democracy with “problems” or “issues” at their core.¹⁰⁴ By midcentury, government and foundation-funded “New Social Studies” projects that promised to sharpen history’s intellectual profile by foregrounding inquiry as a process. Drawing from the latest in cognitive psychology, curriculum specialists produced templates for “inductive” or “discovery” approaches to history education, even as many proved too ambitious or expensive to enact at scale.¹⁰⁵ Among the era’s lasting legacies was the AP US History exam’s document-based question (DBQ), first introduced in 1974.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Mary Sheldon Barnes, “General History in the High School,” *The Academy: A Journal of Secondary Education* 4, no. 5 (June 1889): 285–91.

¹⁰² Andrew C. McLaughlin, et al., *The Study of History in the Schools: A Report to the American Historical Association of the Committee of Seven* (New York: McMillan, 1899), 101–10.

¹⁰³ See for example, Thomas H. Kilpatrick, “The Project Method,” *Teachers College Record* 19 (September 1918): 319–34.

¹⁰⁴ On “vital problems,” see James Harvey Robinson, “The New History,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 50, no. 199 (May–August 1911), 190. On Robinson’s influence, see Michael Whelan, “James Harvey Robinson, the New History, and the 1916 Social Studies Report,” *The History Teacher* 24, no. 2 (February 1991): 191–202. On Community Civics, see Julie Reuben, “Beyond Politics: Community Civics and the Redefinition of Citizenship in the Progressive Era,” *History of Education Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 399–420. For a genealogy of scientific curriculum design within social studies, see Thomas Fallace, “The Rise and Fall of Scientific Curriculum Movement in the Social Studies, 1916–1929,” *The Social Studies* 106, no. 3 (2015): 83–91.

¹⁰⁵ For cited influences on the inquiry approach, see Jerome Bruner, *The Process of Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Joseph A. Schwab, “The Practical: A Language for Curriculum,” *The School Review* 78, no. 1 (November 1969): 1–23. For examples of output, see Edwin Fenton, “The New Social Studies: Implications for School Administration,” *National Association of Secondary School Principals Journal* 51, no. 317 (March 1967): 62–73; Edwin Fenton, *Teaching the New Social Studies in Secondary Schools: An Inductive Approach* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966); “Inquiry Techniques in the New Social Studies,” *The High School Journal* 55, no. 1 (October 1971): 28–40. For accounts of the collapse of the era’s grander visions, see Hazel Hertzberg, *Social Studies Reform, 1880–1980* (Boulder, CO: Social Science Education Consortium Publications, 1981), 115–18; Larry Cuban, *Teaching History Then and Now: A Story of Stability and Change in Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2016), 79–87.

¹⁰⁶ Stephen F. Klein, “The Genesis of Shorter Document-Based Essay Questions in the Advanced Placement American History Examination,” *Perspectives* 21, no. 5 (May/June 1983): 22–24; Eric Rothschild, “The Impact of the Document-Based Question on the Teaching of United States History,” *The History Teacher* 33, no. 4 (August 2000): 495–500.

Today's document-based inquiry powerhouses, SHEG/DIG and the DBQ Project, have intellectual roots in the New Social Studies era, but they owe their success to the particulars of the early 21st century. SHEG, founded in the internet age and reared in an era of ambitious new federal educational accountability initiatives, was the curricular expression of Wineburg's thesis about character and value of historical thinking.¹⁰⁷ As Abby Reisman, an education scholar and one of SHEG's early curricular designers, saw it, prior attempts to install history-as-inquiry in the classroom were unrealistically grandiose. Scrutinizing the rhythms of teachers' daily grind, SHEG was forthrightly pragmatic, offering a finite set of "classroom-ready materials" to plug into "a predictable and repeatable sequence" that teachers could recognize.¹⁰⁸ In the language of education scholarship, SHEG's developers leaned confidently into the "grammar of schooling," rather than imagining that they could disrupt it.¹⁰⁹

SHEG's extensive (and free) collection of lessons anchored historical thinking in the cognitive encounter with primary documents. Its widely used chart of mental moves—sourcing, contextualization, corroboration, and close reading—help teachers and students ask the right questions about primary sources. SHEG's "HATs" (Historical Assessments of Thinking) push the skills-training idea further, suggesting that teachers track a single aspect of students' historical thinking across successive formative assessments. As sophisticated as SHEG became at disaggregating the cognitive components of document reading, its designers remained largely aloof from (and occasionally antagonistic to) narrative synthesis.¹¹⁰ SHEG's document-based learning approach proved a comfortable fit with the emphasis on nonfiction literacy that dominated the accountability era.¹¹¹ In the Common Core era, SHEG's advice about how to "read like a historian" could also be pitched as preparation for the next standardized test.

¹⁰⁷ For a sample of broader reform influences of the era, see Lee S. Shulman, "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform," *Harvard Educational Review* 57, no. 1 (February 1987): 1–22; Suzanne M. Wilson, Robert E. Floden, and Joan Ferrini-Mundy, "Teacher Preparation Research: An Insider's View from the Outside," *Journal of Teacher Education* 53, no. 3, (May–June 2002): 190–204.

¹⁰⁸ Quotes in Reisman, "Reading Like a Historian," 127.

¹⁰⁹ See David Tyack and William Tobin, "The 'Grammar' of Schooling: Why Has It Been So Hard to Change?" *American Educational Research Journal* 31, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 453–47.

¹¹⁰ See Wineburg's characterization of SHEG as "not driven by a single, unified narrative" and its posing of questions that "don't have a single right answer." Stanford History Education Group, "Teaching Students to Think Like Historians" [video recording], (2012), <https://youtu.be/zSey4WALf8I>. Or that "no attempt to teach students 'how historians read' can coexist with a textbook's voice-from-on-high narrator." Sam Wineburg, "Opening Up the Textbook," *Education Week*, June 5, 2007.

¹¹¹ Stanford History Education Group, "Reading Like a Historian" [video recording], (2015), <https://youtu.be/CnWnLNSZTAQ>.

The DBQ Project’s approach shares much with SHEG but pays extra attention to evidence-based argumentative writing, another focus of Common Core. The DBQ Project’s method combines a focused historical question or “hook,” with a background information essay, a primary source collection with guiding questions, an analysis stage with folksy euphemisms (e.g., “Bucketing,” “Chickenfooting,” and “Thrashing-out”), and a writing product, which often takes the form of a thesis-driven essay or occasionally a creative exercise.¹¹² In some modules, students (and teachers) weigh historical and historiographical arguments. Like SHEG, the DBQ Project’s lessons are modular, designed to be inserted into an existing curriculum, but they are generally less likely to fit within a single class period.

DBQ and SHEG are no longer the only inquiry products available. Curriculum vendors and nonprofits pitch various branded versions: “DBQuests” from iCivics, “Inquiry Journeys” from InquireEd, “Investigations” from Read.Inquire.Write. Teachers can also find bundles of material with document-based or inquiry-focused tags on TeachersPayTeachers. Over the past decade, C3 Teachers, a startup launched by three of the lead authors of the C3 Framework, has been particularly successful at promoting its “inquiry design model” (IDM) blueprint across a network of state-based hubs. Some state agencies have made document-based inquiry a centerpiece of their efforts to encourage alignment to the C3 Framework.¹¹³ In Virginia, recent changes to the state’s assessment rules now allow local districts to use IDM-branded inquiries instead of traditional multiple choice tests for “verified credits.”¹¹⁴ In some districts, document-based inquiry has become a part of teacher evaluation rituals. A large Illinois district requires its social studies teachers to administer a beginning-of-year and end-of-year performance task that sits outside of chronological content coverage and assesses students’ skills at document-reading and claim-making. Student growth between each assessment accounts for a portion of the teacher’s evaluation rating.¹¹⁵

¹¹² See “The DBQ Project Method,” The DBQ Project, <https://www.dbqproject.com/about-us/dbq-project-method/>.

¹¹³ See Washington OSPI OER Project, <https://oercommons.org/profile/268799>; “New York State K–12 Social Studies Field Guide,” State Education Department, University of the State of New York, (undated), <https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/programs/standards-instruction/nys-ss-field-guide.pdf>; “Alignment Guides for the 2019 South Carolina Social Studies College and Career Ready Standards,” South Carolina Department of Education, (2020) <https://ed.sc.gov/instruction/standards/social-studies/instructional-resources/>.

¹¹⁴ See Superintendent’s Memo #276-21, Virginia Department of Education, September 24, 2021, <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/3376/638119607672230000>. See also “Unpacking the Inquiry Design Model: Pilot Opportunity for State-Developed Performance Tasks,” [webinar] Virginia Department of Education, October 4, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8L24noYHGw>.

¹¹⁵ “SY23–24 EOY High School Performance Tasks: United States History Performance task,” district document, Illinois, City: Large (2024).

*No Such Thing as a Bad Question?*¹¹⁶

In many instances, the prevalence of essential questions and document-based inquiry seems likely to deliver on its promise of promoting historical thinking.¹¹⁷ Asking about historical circumstances—how the shift to the factory system affected American workers, or what motivated US policy during the Cold War—encourages an exploration of multiple scales and genres of context.¹¹⁸ Asking about historical outcomes—whether the American Revolution was avoidable, why the Montgomery Bus Boycott succeeded, or why the Equal Rights Amendment was defeated—requires students to deal with complex causation in chronological sequence and to think through the structural constraints on historical agency.¹¹⁹ Good questions like these appear across a variety of units and lessons.

Not all questions are created equal, however. Forced choices between moral absolutes, abstract queries of moral or civic concern, and overly fanciful counterfactuals abound. Stark and uncomplicated question constructions can too easily speed the inquiry process straight to argument, reducing history to a series of positions that one must take and defend.

Too many lessons ask students to stake a position on a moral binary, rendering judgment on a past policy or person from the perspective of a national (and present-tense) “we.” Questions that ask whether slavery was bad or if American imperialism sacrificed freedom for power seem prebaked to generate only one conclusion, a litmus test to see if students have absorbed the right set of feelings about past events or an invitation to assume that they would have been “on the right side” had they lived at the time.¹²⁰ Inquiries that ask students to render a verdict on whether the Boston Tea Party or the US War with Mexico were “justified” can spur consideration of causes and consequences, but

¹¹⁶ The following section originally appeared in Whitney E. Barringer, Lauren Brand, and Nicholas Kryczka, “No Such Thing as a Bad Question?” *Perspectives on History* 61, no. 6 (September 2023): 28–30, <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/no-such-thing-as-a-bad-question-inquiry-based-learning-in-the-history-classroom-september-2023/>.

¹¹⁷ For a useful distillation, see Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, “What Does It Mean to Think Historically?” *Perspectives* 45, no. 1 (January 2007), <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/what-does-it-mean-to-think-historically-january-2007/>.

¹¹⁸ “US History Curriculum Map,” district document, Illinois, Suburb: Large; “Curriculum Framework and Pacing Guide: 11th grade: US History II,” district document, Alabama, City: Midsize.

¹¹⁹ “Was the American Revolution Avoidable?” United States History 11th: Grade, Unit 1,” district document, Washington, City: Midsize; Avishag Reisman and Bradley Fogo, “Why Did the Montgomery Bus Boycott Succeed,” *Thinking Like a Historian*, Stanford History Education Group (2009); “Why Was the Equal Rights Amendment Defeated?” The DBQ Project (2008).

¹²⁰ Teacher document, Iowa, Rural: Fringe; C3 Teachers Inquiry, “Was it right for the U.S. to sacrifice freedom for power?” district document, Iowa, City: Midsize.

they privilege lawyerly thinking over historical understanding.¹²¹ Even more blunt are the recurring assignments that require historical figures to be rated as heroes or villains. (Andrew Carnegie and Andrew Jackson are frequent defendants in such trials of character).¹²²

The good intentions behind such prompts should not be dismissed. Engaging students with history often begins with indelicate provocation—a hook to awaken their own sense of what feels foreign and familiar about the past. Teachers can indeed encourage students to sit with a sense of moral disgust (slavery *was* wrong!), policy judgment (the US War with Mexico was *not* justified!), or psychic connection (Carnegie *is* my hero!). But such feelings and judgments are reminders that people in the past made choices within particular and peculiar contexts. And they should ideally serve as a preface for bigger, better questions that plumb the past *and* unsettle the naturalness of our present. When, why, and for whom did slavery become a moral problem? To whom were arguments justifying (and opposing) the US War with Mexico convincing, and why? How, when, and why did Americans develop their taste for rags to riches stories? How did industrial capitalists like Andrew Carnegie use their wealth to shape their legacy?

In some cases, a compelling question will edit out the historical characters, contexts, and events in order to build headier metaphysical stakes. Asking “what it means to be equal” or “how democracy should work” or “whether compromise is fair” are certainly compelling questions.¹²³ Our skepticism does not amount to dissent from the longstanding article of faith among historians that historical inquiry sharpens students’ capacities for judgment, capacities that they will ultimately turn toward moral and civic issues. In class, however, the overheated stakes of backward-design-style “compelling questions” set up a mismatch between philosophical dilemmas and the tiny set of historical excerpts under study. History should help foster the skills and perspective necessary to historicize ourselves and our present, but it cannot be expected to resolve such fundamental questions or to speak its counsel in aphorism, analogy, or moral lesson.

¹²¹ C3 Teachers Inquiry, “Boston Tea Party: Activism or Vandalism?,” “6th Grade History Scope and Sequence,” Virginia, Suburb: Large (2023); “Mini-Q: Was the United States Justified in Going to War with Mexico?” The DBQ Project (2013).

¹²² “Defend, challenge, or qualify this claim: Andrew Carnegie should be considered a hero of the working people,” teacher document, Connecticut, City: Midsize; “Did Andrew Jackson advance or retard the cause of democracy? (autocrat v. democrat),” district document, Alabama, City: Midsize.

¹²³ C3 Teachers Inquiry, “What Does It Mean to Be Equal”; “Is republican democracy the best form of government?,” district document, Texas, City: Midsize.

Moreover, historical thinking should help students to learn that judgement generally must be preceded by informed understanding.

A clearly positive effect of document-based inquiry has been teachers' unanimous embrace of using primary sources with students. But the rush to turn primary sources into digestible and deployable units of evidence has produced collateral damage in the form of decontextualization. In the typical document-based lesson, sources come disembodied from their original contexts and in heavily excerpted formats. Far from staging a textured and stirring encounter with the past, many document-based lessons are designed toward more instrumental outcomes (extract the main idea; use this detail to support a claim). Responding to the reasonable concern that students may be unprepared to decode the challenging language found in many primary documents, lessons tend toward passages that have been plucked, trimmed, and even altered from the original. Unavoidable choices about how to edit, curate, and transcribe are one thing; the washing out of rhetoric and the wiping out of context is another.

Several online resources and digital textbooks now boast of customizable reading levels, but content aggregator Newsela is an especially popular paid resource with this feature. With content scraped from news and history websites (many of which are the popular free resources that teachers use on their own) and arranged in traditional chronological units or searchable by topic, Newsela can generate customized document packets with introductory remarks and scaffolded questions—with a note that their “suggestions have been generated by an AI model.”¹²⁴ Teachers appreciate Newsela for its on-demand plug-and-play modularity and the five different reading levels that could be applied to any text, including primary sources. Some of Newsela's contextual information is so broad that it may offer students little guidance; “The Civil War had a profound impact on American society, economics, and politics” borders on the banal.

A more serious problem arises when a provider changes the actual words of a primary source in accordance with reading levels, negating the aesthetic and distinctly human encounter with the past that a historical document is meant to provide (Table 3).

¹²⁴ “United States History: Pre-Contact to Modern Times,” *Newsela*, accessed April 20, 2024, <https://newsela.com/>.

Table 3: The Gettysburg Address Adjusted for Reading Level

Original	Adjusted to 880 Lexile ¹²⁵
<p>Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.</p> <p>Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.</p> <p>But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.</p>	<p>Eighty-seven years ago, our Founding Fathers created a new nation on this land. The country was born out of freedoms that we fought for. It was dedicated to the idea that all men are created equal.</p> <p>Now, this nation is engaged in a great civil war. The fighting between the North and the South is testing whether this nation, or any nation that shares our values, can last. Today, we stand on one of the great battlefields of this civil war. We have come to dedicate a part of this field, as a final resting place for the soldiers who gave their lives here. They died so this nation might continue to live. It is right for us to honor them.</p> <p>However, in a way, we cannot call these grounds holy or divine. Brave men fought here, and some lived and some died. Those who struggled here have already made this land holy. These soldiers did much more than we are able to do today.</p> <p>The world will not write or talk much about what we say here. The world will not remember what was said here for long. However, the world can never forget what the soldiers did here.</p> <p>It is us, the living, who are called here. We are called to the unfinished work which our soldiers have begun so nobly. For these honored dead we must increase our devotion to the cause that they died for.</p> <p>We must make sure that these men shall not have died in vain, so that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom. We must decide that the government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not disappear from the earth.</p>

Note: MetaMetrics, the developer of Lexiles, considers the 880 Lexile within the range of “proficient” (on grade level) for students from 4th through 7th grades.

Other Formats

Other curricular products bill themselves under the inquiry banner, but their materials are better understood as historical simulations. Whether in the form of roleplay, case studies, or RAFT (Role, Audience, Format, Task) writing exercises, these lessons place students in the role of historical figures. Role-playing lessons are typically designed either to help students imagine the inner lives of historical actors or to reenact the stakes and

¹²⁵ “Famous Speeches: Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address,” [880L], *Newsela* (March 29, 2016), accessed September 11, 2024, <https://newsela.com/>.

choices surrounding a critical decision. A range of typical classroom activities gesture toward roleplay and reenactment at small scales, from “write a journal as” assignments to encounters with local living history sites and any query that asks “what would you have done?” More elaborate curricular versions of the concept create games or cases out of a specific historical scenario. Formats and quirks initiated by *The Oregon Trail* computer game persist in some of these simulations.¹²⁶ More distinguished role-playing products like Brown University’s Choices Curriculum and Harvard Business School’s Case Method are marked by complex multistep, multicharacter formats. In Choices units, the “options” moment—when a student is tasked with making a decision as a historical actor—is preceded by substantial historical and historiographical context. With lengthy and challenging units pitched at college preparatory markets, Choices advertises its connection to the Brown University history department, its access to experts, and “up-to-date historiography.”¹²⁷ Because of the complex sequence of roles and tasks involved, these curricula tend to be highly prescriptive and resistant to the modular plug-and-play approach. Both Choices and Harvard Case require a subscription, and Harvard Case requires that teachers attend a training institute before accessing materials.¹²⁸

While some teachers noted a “big move toward buying packaged curriculum,” districts are increasingly looking for more customized products that suit their stated priorities. When curriculum developers are contracted by districts to develop instructional materials, a tendency toward heavily scripted, all-inclusive packages prevails. A large Illinois district’s contract with a major textbook publisher to collaboratively build a fully digital product has attracted controversy for its high price tag and low buy-in from teachers.¹²⁹ A set of suburban Washington districts contracted with a smaller developer to create project-based units centered on essential questions, progressive values, and multimedia student projects.¹³⁰ A classical charter school network in Colorado stays closely tied to a common US history curriculum rooted in primary documents, annotation, and a tight script of questions.¹³¹ Radically different from each other in form and philosophy, these examples share a common goal of creating a

¹²⁶ “Oregon Trail Simulation: A Westward Adventure,” teacher document, Illinois, Suburb: Large (undated).

¹²⁷ “About the Choices Program,” Choices Program: Brown University, <https://www.choices.edu/about/>.

¹²⁸ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 608), July 11, 2023.

¹²⁹ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 404), April 5, 2023; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 406), April 21, 2023; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 408), March 30, 2023.

¹³⁰ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 908), May 17, 2023.

¹³¹ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 913), August 15, 2023; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 211), March 20, 2023; *The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum: American History and Civics Lessons for K–12 Classrooms* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College, 2023).

centralized choreography for the individual moves and methods deployed in the act of teaching, pushing the page count of some of these documents into the thousands.

Every sample of local instructional material we reviewed revealed new idiosyncrasies. Official paperwork issued by a district often bore little resemblance to what a course team or department chair handed in to their principal, what an individual teacher used to plan their units, or what was handed out to students in class. If the typical district document was a gridded matrix crowded with number-coded standards and skills-aligned learning objectives, the typical teacher document was an endless cascade of folders and hyperlinks—a multimedia mashup of experiences accumulated and amended over the years. A single folder might contain viewing guides and YouTube links to clips of a Ken Burns documentary, photoscanned handouts from an older textbook, a full-length mp4 of Edward Zwick’s *Glory*, a teacher-authored DBQ assessment featuring Thomas Nast cartoons from *Harper’s Weekly*, and a modular thinking assessment from a curriculum developer like SHEG.

This decentralized miscellanea may be uncomfortable to many education agency administrators. But based on our interviews with hundreds of teachers and administrators, we are skeptical of the value of turning teacher guides or unit plans into extravagantly detailed scripts. Administrators are right to be concerned about the quality and rigor of in-use materials, but overbearing standardization runs counter to the longstanding and widely embraced goal of social studies: to foster new generations of independent-thinking, self-governing citizens. If teachers are too regimented to enact these habits as professionals, they will have little hope of modeling them for their students.

Vibes and Pressures

A fuller view of everyday teaching contradicts media accounts that portray the typical American school district as engulfed in a politically charged war for the core values and identity of our nation.¹³² With the exception of those working in certain hotspots, most teachers report that they do not face politicized pressure at their job with any consistency. Only 2 percent of surveyed teachers said that they regularly face criticism related to the

¹³² See Laura Pappano, *School Moms: Parent Activism, Partisan Politics, and the Battle for Public Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2024); Mike Hixenbaugh, *They Came for the Schools: One Town’s Fight over Race and Identity, and the New War for America’s Classrooms* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2024).

way they teach topics in US history, while 40 percent report having encountered an objection only once or twice in their career and 45 percent report having *never* encountered an objection to anything they’ve taught (Fig. 27).¹³³ Punitive legislation, public tip lines, book bans, and angry activists: these are real threats with serious implications for teachers across the country, but thus far much of their direct influence has remained localized in certain states and districts. Many of the educators we interviewed expressed alarm about reports of extreme conditions in Florida and other hot spots.¹³⁴ Comparatively few have extensive personal experience with direct challenges to educational decisions. Far from fending off throngs of energized and oppositional parents, many social studies teachers struggle to get parents, students, and even administrators to care about history at all. When teachers do encounter politicized pushback, many express confidence in defending the integrity of good history and commit themselves to praiseworthy principles of neutrality and nonpartisanship. On the importance of neutrality, teachers said:

- “[I am] going to teach the good, the bad and the ugly. I’m going to tell it like it is and how it happened.” (Texas)¹³⁵
- “I will cover things that are politically difficult and controversial. You can’t teach it well and do that. But . . . I’m very careful to be non-partisan.” (Texas)¹³⁶
- “I would tell a younger teacher—you have to stay neutral when you teach and then the parents don’t have a leg to stand on. If you stay neutral and you’re not clearly on one side or the other of an issue then you can push back.” (Virginia)¹³⁷
- “I try to be as neutral as I can. I also don’t want students knowing my views.” (Illinois)¹³⁸

This good news notwithstanding, politics and ideology are indeed part of the mix of vibes and pressures that shape the work of history teaching. Teachers have idiosyncratic passions that inflect the plotlines of the stories they tell. Curriculum

¹³³ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 37.

¹³⁴ In a 2023 survey, 55 percent of Florida teachers reported that legal limitations affected their decisions about curricular materials or instructional practices in the classroom compared to a national average of 26 percent. Ashley Woo, Melissa Kay Diliberti, Sabrina Lee, Brian Kim, Jing Zhi Lim, and Rebecca L. Wolfe, *The Diverging State of Teaching and Learning Two Years into Classroom Limitations on Race or Gender: Findings from the 2023 American Instructional Resources Survey*, RAND Corporation, 2024, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA134-22.html.

¹³⁵ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 726), September 2, 2023.

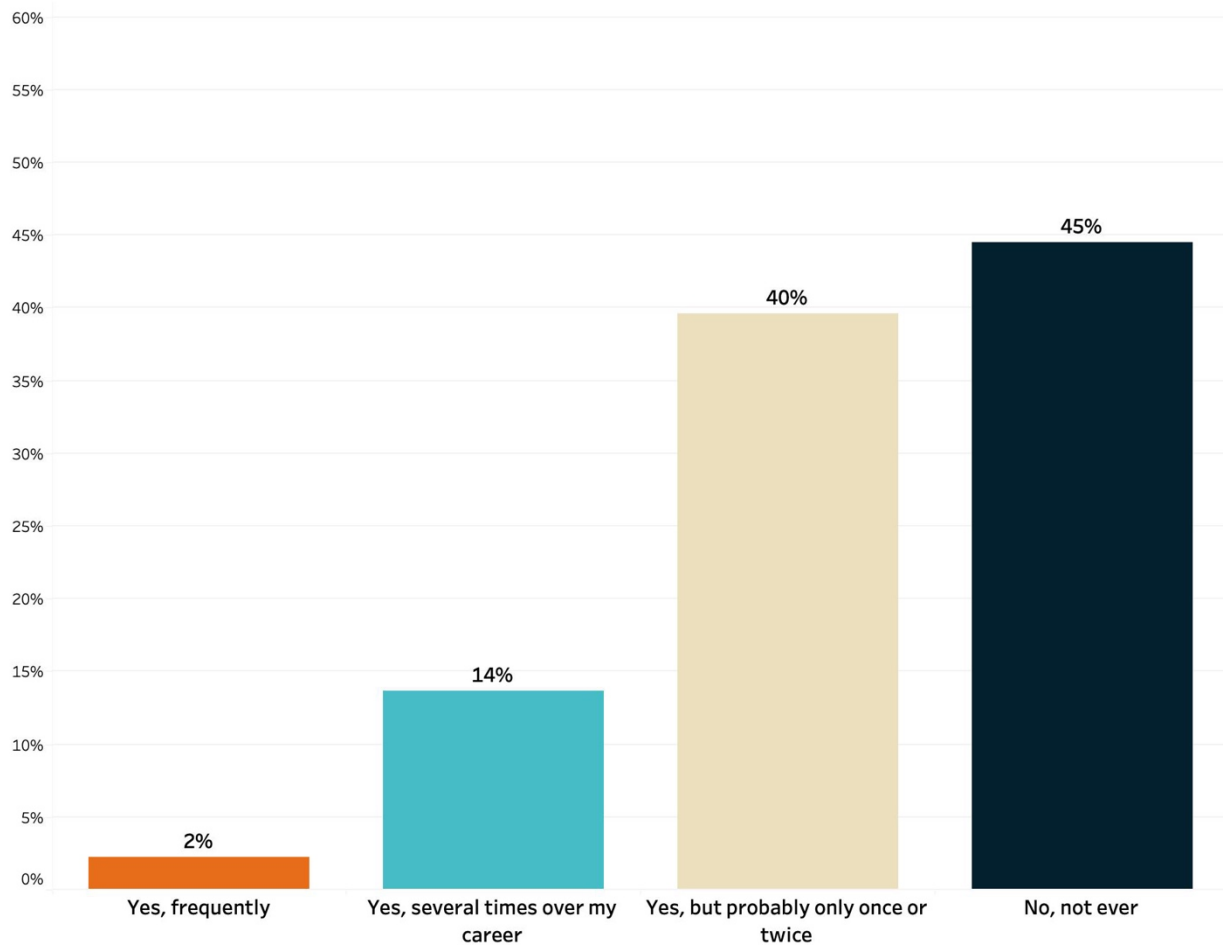
¹³⁶ Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 723), July 25, 2023.

¹³⁷ Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 810), April 27, 2023.

¹³⁸ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 418), May 22, 2023.

publishers aiming to sell to particular social enclaves sometimes design products matched to the ideologies of niche markets. Administrators face pressure to reflect the political currents that hold sway in their communities or within their professional networks. Parents will object when something bothers them. Activists will seize on opportunities to organize discontent. And teenagers will resist a great deal of what any of these adults try to pitch to them.

Fig. 27: Have You Faced Objections or Criticisms to the Way You Teach US History? (n = 2,258)



Polarization and Pandemic

The AHA began interviewing educators in 2022 as some districts were completing their first full year of normal schooling following the COVID-19 pandemic closures and remote instruction policies of 2020 and 2021. In early interviews, teachers shared fresh memories of pandemic-era challenges and ongoing frustrations with postpandemic

adjustments. For some, the cascade of challenges introduced during the COVID era were still present: the wholesale move to digital platforms had rendered their older materials and methods unusable; an “everyone passes!” policy on assessment and promotion had fostered “lazy learners;” parents with an activist impulse had become more politicized, organized, and sometimes confrontational; and student misbehavior was rampant.¹³⁹ By the time we completed our final interviews in 2024, mentions of COVID-associated challenges had faded, even as a general sense of students’ diminished capacities remained.¹⁴⁰

The sigh of relief with which many teachers greeted the return of normal schooling expressed, in some cases, a wish that certain political dynamics would also abate. A few teachers noted that political polarization predated the pandemic, recalling the 2016 election as a moment when they noticed students expressing themselves in more overtly politicized terms than previously. Recalling the heightened debates over immigration policy, one Illinois teacher described her classroom: “Some kids were like ‘send ‘em back’ and the other students say ‘hello, we’re right here.’”¹⁴¹ Several teachers credited students’ enhanced political awareness to the reach of technology and social media, making students “so much more connected,” and thus more fluent with the various sides and slogans that constitute political opinion.¹⁴²

Teachers’ experience with direct criticism varies. Teachers in Texas, Virginia, and Alabama were most likely to report that they had never had any pushback during their careers (56 percent, 49 percent, and 47 percent of those surveyed, respectively) (Fig. 28). While low overall, rates of reported experience with direct criticism among surveyed teachers revealed some correlation with the social profile of their communities. Teachers working in wealthier districts (as measured by the rates of free-and-reduced-lunch-

¹³⁹ Quote on promotion from interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 806), May 15, 2023. Quote on learning from interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 725), August 30, 2023.

¹⁴⁰ Multiple analyses of assessment data in the wake of the pandemic appear to confirm teachers’ perceptions. See Erin M. Fahle, Thomas J. Kane, Tyler Patterson, Sean F. Reardon, Douglas O. Staiger, and Elizabeth A. Stuart, “School District and Community Factors Associated With Learning Loss During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *The Education Recovery Scorecard* (May 2023), <https://educationrecoveryscorecard.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/ExplainingCOVIDLosses.pdf>; Erin M. Fahle, Thomas J. Kane, Sean F. Reardon, and Douglas O. Staiger, “The First Year of Pandemic Recovery: A District-Level Analysis,” *The Education Recovery Scorecard* (January 2024), <https://educationrecoveryscorecard.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ERS-Report-Final-1.31.pdf>; Maciej Jakubowski, Tomasz Gajderowicz, Harry Patrinos, “Policy Research Working Paper 10666: COVID-19, School Closures, and Student Learning Outcomes: New Global Evidence from PISA,” World Bank: Education Global Practice (January 2024), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099534004242341552/pdf/IDU0807776730889d04a240ad3305c282c112fe8.pdf>.

¹⁴¹ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 426), July 21, 2023; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 607), July 24, 2023.

¹⁴² Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 428), July 18, 2023.

qualified students) were the most likely (17 percent) to report having experienced objections “several times” over the course of their career. Meanwhile, teachers working in low-income districts were far more likely to report (51 percent) that they had never experienced any criticism. Suburban teachers were likeliest to report experiencing challenges at some point in their careers, while other locales showed little variation. In interviews, teachers supplied anecdotal analysis of these patterns. As one Colorado teacher put it, the “toughest population are the very, very affluent suburbs” where parents have lots of free time on their hands.¹⁴³ An Illinois teacher noted that when people asked him why his district seemed so calm, he replied, “My wife thinks it’s because we’re such a blue-collar area, that people are just busy.”¹⁴⁴ A Washington teacher agreed: “Parents working two or three jobs [have] no time to get into my face.”¹⁴⁵ For some teachers, the passing of the pandemic era appears to be dispersing political pressures. As one Virginia teacher guessed, “Maybe parents are more busy or not working from home, but they aren’t paying too much attention anymore.”¹⁴⁶

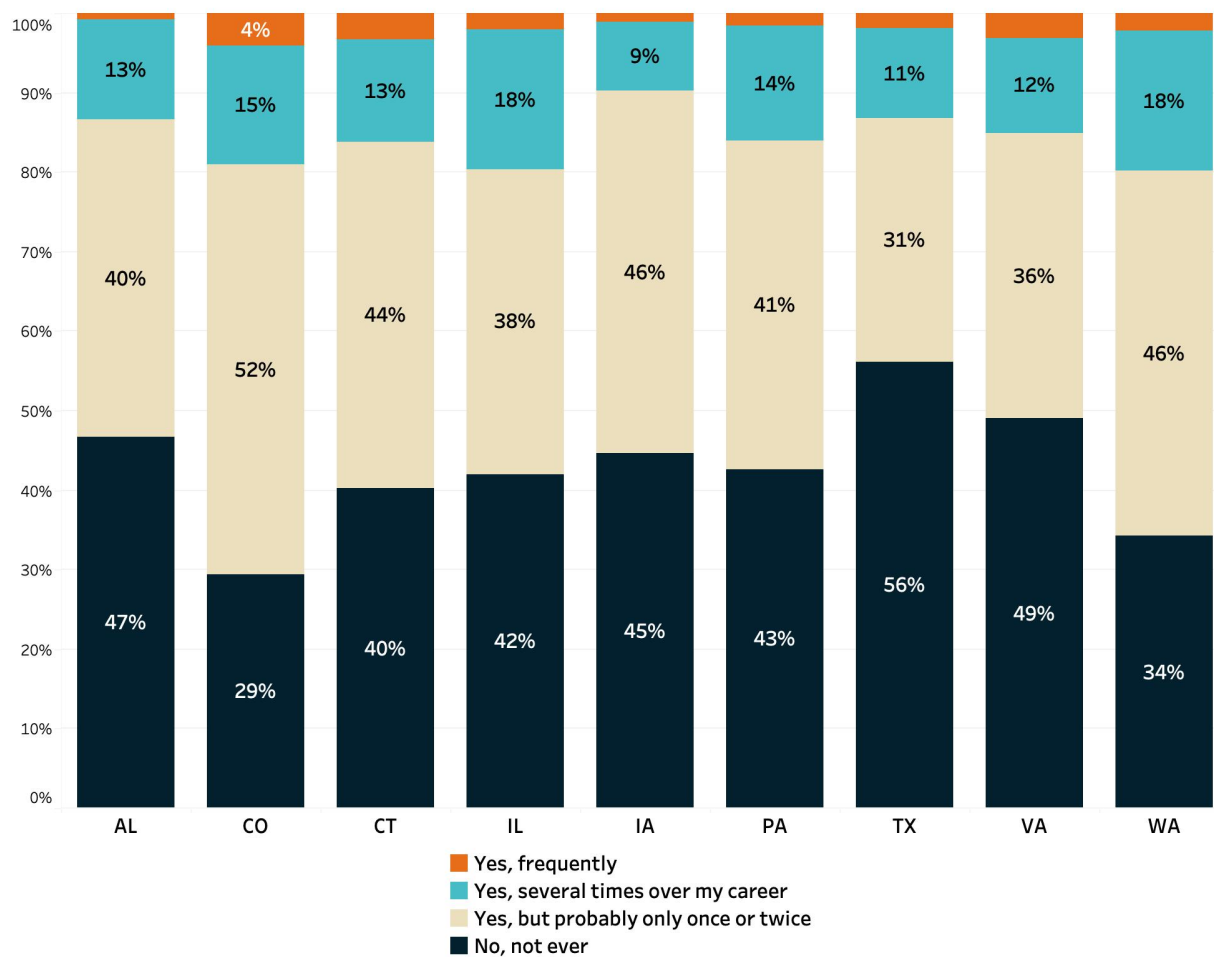
¹⁴³ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 210), March 16, 2023.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 402), April 18, 2023.

¹⁴⁵ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 916), August 25, 2023.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 822), January 26, 2024.

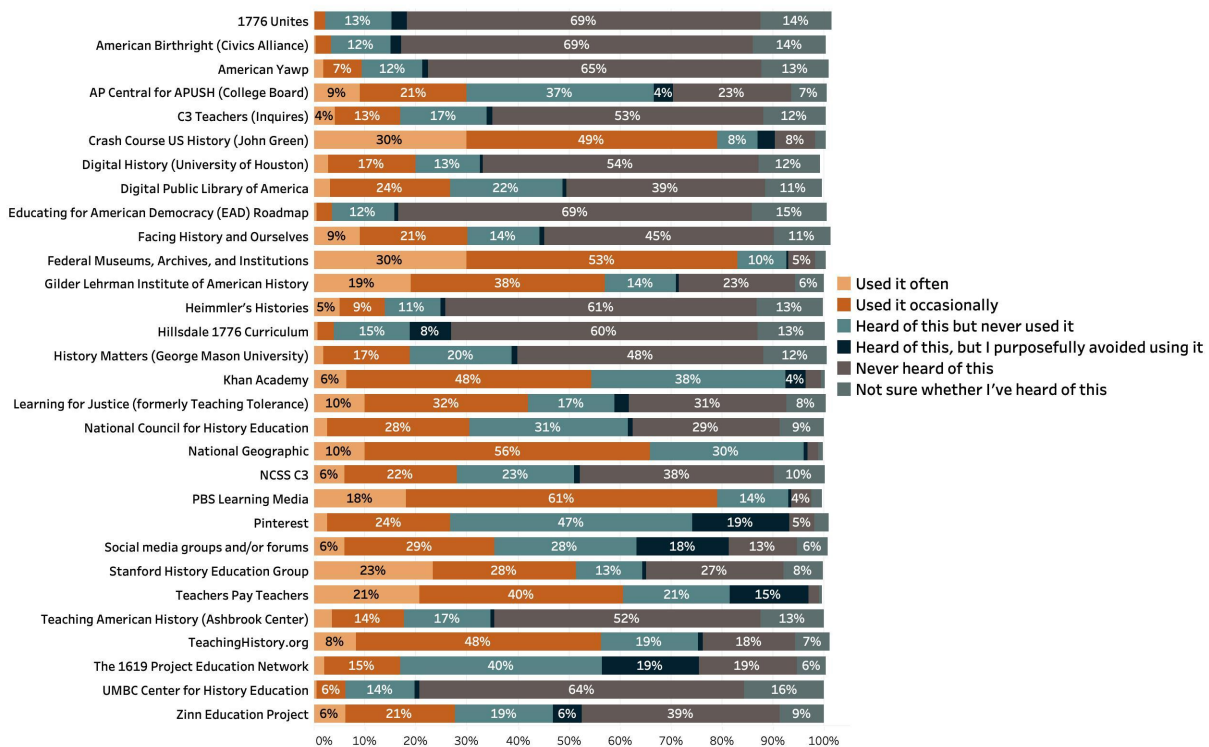
Fig. 28: Teachers' Reported Experience with Objections and Criticism, by State and Locale (n = 2,258)



Materials Teachers Avoid

Unlike Pinterest or Teachers Pay Teachers, which detractors critiqued as shoddy or mercenary, a few resources earned suspicion from surveyed teachers because of what they or others judged as an ideological bias. The short list of resources that teachers reported avoiding are in [Fig. 29](#).

Fig. 29: Reported Usage and Avoidance of Social Studies Resources (n range = 2,233–2,286)



Among the sites that provide a centrally coordinated collection of materials, two registered noticeably higher rates of purposeful avoidance. The 1619 Project Education Network, a hub of teacher-produced materials hosted by the Pulitzer Center and spun off from *The New York Times Magazine's* 1619 Project, earned the top spot on the list of resources that teachers reported purposefully avoiding.¹⁴⁷ There were sharp variations along lines of geography and teacher tenure with regard to the 1619 Project, with far more avoiders than users in some more politically conservative states, while other traditionally liberal states tallied more occasional users than those keeping their distance.¹⁴⁸ The longer a teacher's career, the cooler their reaction to the 1619 Project was likely to be, with veteran teachers (22 percent) slightly more likely to report avoidance and newer teachers (13 percent) showing the least avoidance. Though significantly less recognized, the Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum, a K–12 civics and history curriculum produced by Hillsdale

¹⁴⁷ Another 19 percent reported having never heard of it; to what degree the use of the official name of the “1619 Project Education Network” potentially complicated the results here, we cannot say.

¹⁴⁸ Alabama, Iowa, and Texas had far more reports of avoidance than usage. Reports of frequent usage were still low (never over 6 percent), but in Colorado, Connecticut, and Illinois, there were more teachers reporting occasional use than teachers avoiding the materials. Meanwhile, data from Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Washington showed a divided reaction, with closer to even tallies of teachers who occasionally used the resource and those who purposefully avoided it.

College, a Christian liberal arts college in Michigan, also registered strong negative reactions.¹⁴⁹

When asked to elaborate on why they avoided these resources, teacher responses converged on the issue of political bias. Among the teachers who elaborated on their avoidance of the 1619 Project, responses fell into three categories. Most common was a perception that the project contained politically motivated inaccuracies—an “agenda-driven” “slant” that was “ideological and not factual.”¹⁵⁰ A few within this group noted the critiques that the 1619 Project had earned from professional historians; these teachers described the work as “academically irresponsible,” “race reductionist,” or inattentive to historical agency and economic history.¹⁵¹ Another substantial set of teachers assigned their choice to avoid the 1619 Project to “the temperature of the current community,” either describing their sense that it was a “trigger” for “controversy” that they did not want, or that state law or local district authorities expressly prohibited them “from using 1619 project materials.”¹⁵² A third, smaller set of teachers used stronger language to signal their sympathies with the efforts of conservative activists. In these responses, teachers described the 1619 Project as “fake,” “racist,” “divisive,” or “anti-white.” As a Texas teacher put it, “I do not indoctrinate my students with liberal ideology.”¹⁵³

As for the 1776 Curriculum, reactions were far fewer (60 percent of surveyed teachers had never heard of it), but similar suspicions about partisan bias underwrote teacher motives of avoidance.¹⁵⁴ A number of teachers associated Hillsdale with an “intentionally political” “Christian conservative” bias that was “not academically sound.”¹⁵⁵ Others used more strident terms, condemning Hillsdale as “fascists,” or “right-wing nutjobs.”¹⁵⁶ A few teachers took the opportunity to explain that they saw pedagogical value to polarized curricular products like these. As one Pennsylvania teacher remarked, “My students have great fun reading the Intro [to] the 1619 project alongside the 1776

¹⁴⁹ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 26, n = 2,208 for teacher tenure percentages.

¹⁵⁰ City Washington Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30.

¹⁵¹ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30, multiple responses: Suburban Washington Teacher; City Washington Teacher; Rural Connecticut Teacher; City Alabama Teacher; Suburban Illinois Teacher.

¹⁵² “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30, multiple responses: City Texas Teacher; Suburban Illinois Teacher; Rural Texas Teacher; City Virginia Teacher; City Texas Teacher; Suburban Texas Teacher; Rural Texas Teacher; Rural Pennsylvania Teacher; Suburban Texas Teacher; Suburban Texas Teacher.

¹⁵³ City Texas Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30.

¹⁵⁴ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30.

¹⁵⁵ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30, multiple responses: City Virginia Teacher; Suburban Virginia Teacher; Suburban Texas Teacher.

¹⁵⁶ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30: City Connecticut Teacher; Suburban Connecticut Teacher.

project manifesto.”¹⁵⁷ Another teacher in Virginia agreed, having done a similar activity with college-level students, but that “this is not something that I would do in my regular level history courses.”¹⁵⁸ Referring to both the 1619 Project and 1776 Curriculum as “propaganda,” one Iowa teacher characterized them as “either left ideology that just isn’t true [or] right wing, ‘everything about America is awesome’ bull.”¹⁵⁹ In general, the data support a conclusion that anyone with access to local classrooms might have predicted: curricular products that come precoated with politicized associations can expect a cool reception from teachers. There are other curricular providers whose ideological leanings are present but less extreme, and they enjoy far warmer reactions as a result. Facing History and Ourselves leans into progressive multiculturalism but registers no strong signals of avoidance. The Ashbrook Center’s Teaching American History emphasizes a traditionalist view of civic virtue, but teachers showed no evidence that they associated its resources with a political position.¹⁶⁰

As a result, very few of the prescribed or in-use materials that we examined could be described as containing a strong ideological skew. Exceptions worthy of mention tended to occur in settings where administrators and active community members shared a set of political outlooks. As one Washington teacher observed of his deep-blue district, it was easy to teach a “very progressive curriculum” with “little blowback about it.”¹⁶¹ Similarly, teachers in a conservative Colorado charter network described their sense that parents were “on board” for their school to have “a clear perspective” and “speak to [the] moral formation and character” of students. As one teacher put it, “We say who we are.”¹⁶²

Seen from one angle, these convergences are precisely what local educational governance is meant to deliver: school communities where adult stakeholders agree on a coherent curricular vision. With class, culture, and politics mapped onto to school district boundaries, however, curricular vision can slide into an ideological mission. When learning goals become more affective than academic, historical content suffers.

¹⁵⁷ City Pennsylvania Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30.

¹⁵⁸ Rural Virginia Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30.

¹⁵⁹ Rural Iowa Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30.

¹⁶⁰ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 29.

¹⁶¹ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 913), August 15, 2023.

¹⁶² Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 221), October 11, 2023; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 220), September 27, 2023.

Pressures in Blue and Red

A tour of unproductive ideological pressure passes through both progressive and conservative enclaves, as well as through the many enigmatic or heterodox political positions that teachers encounter in their communities. Whatever its slant, partisan polarization reveals itself differently at distinct levels of educational decision-making: legislative and bureaucratic agenda-setting, ideologically earmarked curricular products, direct political confrontation, and general chilling effects related to a local or national climate of opinion.

Teachers flagged a variety of topics as sources of tension in the classroom (religion and sexuality high among them), but none matched slavery and race as a source of consistent and heated resistance from multiple angles¹⁶³ Race talk in schooling may seem a novelty to some, but educational institutions have long served as a stage for Americans to enact various racial anxieties, aspirations, conflicts, reckonings, and research projects.¹⁶⁴ The unique place of schools as a theater of struggle during the civil rights movement and as a site of social policymaking in the half-century that followed only served to confirm public education's status as the venue where Americans expect questions of race and inequality to be adjudicated.¹⁶⁵ The rising profile of antiracist

¹⁶³ Forty-three percent of surveyed teachers who said slavery was a challenging topic specified that it provokes conflicts—a significant outlier as compared with the generally low rates of teachers citing controversy as a source of challenge (11 percent across all other topics). "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22. There was significant variation by state, with only 17 percent of teachers in Virginia identifying slavery as a challenging topic, as opposed to 29 percent of teachers in Iowa and Pennsylvania. "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 21.

¹⁶⁴ On race and education in the early to mid-20th century, see Oliver Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1948); Walter A. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938–1987* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880–1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1997); Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in Twentieth-Century US History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Daryl Michael Scott, "Postwar Pluralism, *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the Origins of Multicultural Education," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (June 2004): 69–82; Lani Guinier, "From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (June 2004): 92–118; Zoë Burkholder, *Color in the Classroom: How American Schools Taught Race, 1900–1954* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). On the curricular and administrative implications of the civil rights revolution, see John D. Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002); Guadalupe San Miguel, *Contested Policy: The Rise and Fall of Federal Bilingual Education in the United States* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2004); Daniel Perlstein, *Justice, Justice: School Politics and the Eclipse of Liberalism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004); Desmond King, "America's Civil Rights State: Amelioration, Stagnation or Failure" in *Developments in American Politics*, Gillian Peele, Christopher J. Bailey, Jon N. Herbert, Bruce E. Cain, and B. Guy Peters, eds. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014); R. Shep Melnick, "The Odd Evolution of the Civil Rights State," *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 113–34; Russell Rickford, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Elizabeth Todd-Breland, *A Political Education: Black Politics and Education Reform in Chicago since the 1960s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

¹⁶⁵ On the educationalization of social policy, see Harvey Kantor, "Education, Social Reform, and the State," *American Journal of Education* 100, no. 1 (November 1991): 47–83; David Labaree, "The Winning Ways of a Losing Strategy: Educationalizing Social Problems in the United States," *Educational Theory* 58, no. 4 (2008): 447–60; Douglas Reed, *Building the Federal Schoolhouse: Localism and the American Education State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

education initiatives in the 2010s and anti-CRT activism in the early 2020s are both iterations of longer-running disagreements about the role of race in public policy and civic memory.

Forty-two states have legislated some commitment to covering the nation's history with attention to aspects of cultural pluralism. In 25 states, laws specifically mandate teaching African American history in some form, 19 require that history instruction address Hispanics/Latinos, and 13 include Asian Americans.¹⁶⁶ The case for the inclusion of ethnic histories or histories of racial oppression had been advanced with distinct rationales during different eras, but during the 1990s and 2000s these mandates were passed by legislatures dominated by Democrats and Republicans alike.

More recently, a case for inclusive history in some states has dovetailed with emphases on “culturally relevant/responsive/sustaining” teaching practices, antiracist priorities, or ethnic studies offerings. Laws passed by Democratic-majority legislatures in the 2010s and 2020s enshrined these as state-level priorities.¹⁶⁷ Locally, district and school administrators translate these tendencies into a unique species of document, sometimes called an equity audit tool. Examples of these include the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's widely used rubric for districts to screen for biases in their curriculum or their “Anti-racism Resources for the Social Studies Classroom.”¹⁶⁸ In Illinois, draft toolkits connect C3-style inquiry methods to the state's new inclusive history mandates but also foreground resources with a lens of “systems thinking and social justice.” In these materials, teachers are instructed to reflect on their own bias, while creating “opportunities [for students] to evaluate systems of inequity and power.”¹⁶⁹ In a large suburban Colorado district, administrators directed teachers to examine all of their curricular materials to “look for patterns and pervasive messaging that may serve to reinforce stereotypes or bias.”¹⁷⁰ In Pennsylvania, a large district aligns its US history curriculum maps to both the state academic standards and the Justice Anchor Standards, an intricate template of affective learning outcomes that the nonprofit

2014); David P. Baker, *The Schooled Society: The Educational Transformation of Global Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

¹⁶⁶ Mapping the Landscape Legislative Database.

¹⁶⁷ See, for example, Minnesota HF 2397 (2014); California AB 2016 (2016); Nevada AB 234 (2017); Nevada SB 107 (2017); Oregon HB 2835 (2017); Oregon SB 13 (2017); Colorado HB 19-1192 (2019); Illinois HB 246 (2019).

¹⁶⁸ “Anti-racism Resources for the Social Studies Classroom,” state document, Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (2022).

¹⁶⁹ “Towards Inquiry and Inclusion in Social Studies: A Toolkit for Social Studies Teachers,” state document draft, Illinois State Board of Education (2023).

¹⁷⁰ “Equity Audit: Curriculum,” district document, Colorado, Suburb: Large (2022).

Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance) describes as “a road map for anti-bias education at every grade level.”¹⁷¹

In the hands of a thoughtful administrator, some of these instruments can and have been used constructively to update curricula that, for example, were lacking in content on Native American or African American history.¹⁷² But we also spoke to teachers struggling amid relentless administrative pushes for more superficial displays of social justice and antiracism, efforts they described as frivolous at best and stifling at worst. Even teachers sympathetic to social justice “as a goal” complained that their school board insisted on pushing it “in all curriculum,” an effort described by one Washington teacher as “a lot of white performative work.”¹⁷³ A teacher in an affluent liberal Colorado district agreed, describing her administrators’ insistence on “the right equity buzzwords” as largely “about optics” and “meet[ing] customers’ needs.”¹⁷⁴ Deployed bluntly, equity tools have also discouraged coverage of precisely those topics that they were designed to amplify. A Washington district’s audit committee interpreted a bias rubric as prohibiting coverage of the first half of US history because “[t]his time frame in history was extremely biased and showed a lack of ethnic equality.”¹⁷⁵ The teacher team seemed to conclude that US history content could not be taught unless the teacher was constantly and explicitly “calling out” the injustices of the era.¹⁷⁶

In other instances, the case for inclusive social studies has taken aim at existing curriculum, as in a Washington district’s suggestion that teachers “[question] the conventional narrative presented in most textbooks to see a more comprehensive understanding of all peoples’ experiences.”¹⁷⁷ Some reformers go further, caricaturing history itself as a master narrative in need of decolonization or deconstruction. Efforts to replace historical content and historical thinking with the counternarratives and perspectives of ethnic studies and affiliated subjects may be driven by earnest desires for a critical and diverse curriculum, but they tend to ignore the breadth and diversity of the last half century of historical scholarship.

¹⁷¹ “Grade 11 Quarter 3 Anti-Racism and Social Justice Resources,” district document, Pennsylvania, City: Large (2021).

¹⁷² “Raising Voices Master ARS List,” district document, Colorado, Suburb: Large (2022).

¹⁷³ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 913), September 18, 2023.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 210), March 16, 2023.

¹⁷⁵ “Social Studies Audit Committee, 8th grade, One Pager,” district document, Washington, Suburb: Large (2022).

¹⁷⁶ “Social Studies Audit Committee, 8th grade, One Pager,” district document, Washington, Suburb: Large (2022).

¹⁷⁷ “Guidance for Educators Teaching Racially Sensitive History,” district document, Washington, City: Large (2021).

Advocates for ethnic studies have explicitly underscored its political implications. California’s model ethnic studies curriculum, released in 2022, stresses a goal of building “a post-racist, post-systemic-racism society that promotes collective narratives of transformative resistance, critical hope, and radical healing.”¹⁷⁸ Minnesota’s state social studies standards, revised in 2021, make similar gestures, deploying “ethnic and Indigenous studies . . . [to] apply lessons from the past in order to eliminate historical and contemporary injustices.”¹⁷⁹ In locales where US history course guidelines are being replaced with what administrators refer to as a “racial lens,” learning outcomes have sometimes been reframed to “confront systems and problems of power, privilege, and oppression” or social justice “action projects.”¹⁸⁰

Meanwhile, some state and district officials have committed to placing social justice themes at the center of teacher preparation and ongoing professional development. In Pennsylvania, a large school district launched multiple “Anti-Racism and Social Justice” professional development sessions to equip social studies teachers with a “foundational vocabulary” reflective of district declarations issued in 2020.¹⁸¹ In Illinois, the State Board of Education’s “Culturally Responsive State Teaching and Learning Standards” (2021) justified its mandates for intensive training on identity, representation, and bias by asserting that schooling is itself a “system of oppression” and that “current curriculum and approaches to teaching impact students who are not a part of the dominant culture.”¹⁸²

The claim promoted by some conservative activists—that these initiatives have “institutionalized the philosophy of social justice and codified political activism into every aspect of the bureaucracy”—is unconvincing.¹⁸³ “Every” sets a very high bar. Still, when activist parents closely align with administrators on progressive priorities, some teachers clearly experience an encroachment on their autonomy and a chilling effect on classroom discussion. As a teacher in a Washington district recalled, “complaints of racial insensitivity” had been amplified multiple times against teachers by a network of local

¹⁷⁸ California Department of Education, *Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum* (Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2022), 16.

¹⁷⁹ Minnesota Department of Education, *2021 Minnesota K–12 Academic Standards in Social Studies (Commissioner Approved Draft)* (2021), 3.

¹⁸⁰ “Course Information Eth Studies US Hist,” district document, Washington, City: Large (2022).

¹⁸¹ “December 2020 Professional Development,” district document, Pennsylvania, City: Large (2020).

¹⁸² Illinois Administrative Code, 24 Subtitle A, Subchapter b.

¹⁸³ Christopher F. Rufo, “Child Soldiers of Portland: Public Schools Are Training Children to Become Race-Conscious Revolutionaries,” *City Journal* (Spring 2021), <https://www.city-journal.org/critical-race-theory-portland-public-schools>.

social justice activists, leading her to limit her students' discussion of controversial topics. In her view, the pressure to "be so anti-racist, pro-everything," had become "limiting to kids' education."¹⁸⁴ In Connecticut, a teacher complained about her school's move to a progressive restorative justice approach in 2021. "I'm not a social worker," she said, "I teach social studies."¹⁸⁵ Upon moving to a wealthy liberal Virginia district from out of state, another teacher was surprised to encounter parents and colleagues' heightened sensitivity around race, navigating accusations that "as a minority" herself, she needed to teach slavery with a more somber tone and that she "shouldn't like Andrew Jackson."¹⁸⁶ For administrators invested in antiracist education, they anticipate a long haul and plenty of teacher pushback. As one Washington administrator explained regarding her push for "decolonized US History," if the idea meets resistance the first time, "then you press it the next year."¹⁸⁷

Some curricular developers, recognizing the appetite for more progressive-leaning materials in certain states and locales, have tailored their products accordingly. Materials from the progressive-oriented Zinn Education Project earned a warmer reception in certain states and locales than others, with urban teachers and teachers in Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, and Washington reporting higher rates of occasional usage (between a quarter to just over a third of teachers).¹⁸⁸ But it was in those same states that other teachers shared their skepticism of the Zinn Project's "people's history" approach, citing their view that its lessons were "selective" and tended to "oversimplify" the history that they wanted to teach. As one Connecticut teacher described Zinn Project lessons, "they say more about . . . political debates people want to have today . . . than what people said, thought, and did in the past."¹⁸⁹

In some progressive enclaves, curricula grounded in critical perspectives introduce moralistic cues, combining coverage of racialized violence and dispossession with emotional introspection, as in a Connecticut curriculum's emphasis on journaling on slavery as part of a "deeply personal, reflective unit."¹⁹⁰ Elsewhere, a district-contracted curriculum map tags traditional chronological lessons to emphasize an overtly critical approach: "A System of Racism, Greed, and Violence"; "Your Treaty Is a Lie"; "Power,

¹⁸⁴ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 905), June 7, 2023.

¹⁸⁵ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 312), August 22, 2023.

¹⁸⁶ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 815), July 26, 2023.

¹⁸⁷ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 917), September 18, 2023.

¹⁸⁸ "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 29.

¹⁸⁹ Suburban Connecticut Teacher, "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30.

¹⁹⁰ "Stamped Unit overview/competencies addressed," district document, Connecticut, Suburb: Midsized.

Privilege, and Oppression Contested.”¹⁹¹ A curriculum adopted in several suburban Washington state districts treats traditional US history topics in a series of project-based modules, some emphasizing “liberatory mindsets” and “indigenous ways of knowing.”¹⁹² Critical framing can indeed supplement a robust historical treatment; honest history often requires critical perspective. But the best lessons in this vein help students learn how to think historically instead of defining how they should feel about past injustices.

Ideological pressure on US history instruction operates differently in deeply conservative locales. Well before 2020, conservative legislatures had their own educational watchwords; multiple mandates insisted that history and social studies should highlight freedom, opportunity, sacrifice, and free enterprise. Laws reminding history teachers to emphasize individualism, capitalism, and Christian religion are almost exclusively red-state artifacts.¹⁹³ Legislation focused on the display and veneration of founding documents similarly tied to legislatures controlled by the Republican Party. Celebrate Freedom Week, a Constitution-focused curricular observance designed by religious conservatives in Texas in 2001, has since spread to seven other states, all with Republican-controlled legislatures.¹⁹⁴ Emphasis on religiosity within founding documents appears to be the motivation behind a number of laws preemptively specifying that the display or study of religious language in schools does not constitute a violation of the first amendment establishment clause.¹⁹⁵

Activists have expended substantial political energy on K–12 curricular issues since 2021. Republican-controlled state governments have deployed executive orders, legislation, and administrative policies to threaten punishment for teachers whose lessons depart from their ideological vision. In addition to the wave of anti-divisive concepts bills, enterprising state officials have enlisted the assistance of conservative

¹⁹¹ “Social Science Grade 7: Overview”; “Social Science Grade 8: Overview”; “US History 9–12: Overview,” district document, Illinois, City: Large.

¹⁹² “Unit at a Glance,” district document, Washington, multiple districts, Suburb: Large (2023).

¹⁹³ Mapping the Landscape Legislative Database. We identified nine laws promoting an interpretation of American values based in religious foundations: California ACR 11 (1987); Kentucky HB 230 (1992); Utah HB 14 (1996); Kentucky SJR 57 (2000); Utah HB 79 (2002); Texas HB 219 (2003); Kentucky HB 46 (2019); West Virginia SB 4780 (2020); North Dakota SB 2308 (2021). On capitalism and free enterprise, see Texas HB 319 (2003); Utah HB 22 (2004); Minnesota HF 141 (2005); Florida HB 7087 (2006); Texas HB 4509 (2021); Texas SB 3 (2021); Tennessee HB 2742 (2022). On anticommunism, see California SB 895 (2018); Nebraska LB 399 (2019); Arizona HB 2008 (2022); Florida HB 395 (2022); Tennessee HB 2742 (2022).

¹⁹⁴ See Texas HB 1776 (2003); Florida HB 885 (2002); Arkansas HB 2756 (2003); Oklahoma HB 2229 (2008); Kansas HB 2261 (2013); Georgia HB 502 (2015); Tennessee HB 287 (2017); West Virginia HB 2422 (2019).

¹⁹⁵ See Arkansas HB 1328, Act 295 (1995); Florida SB 458 (1997); North Carolina HB 195 (2001); North Dakota SB 1277 (2001); South Carolina H 3745 (2001); Arkansas SB 57 (2003); Minnesota HF 141 (2005); North Carolina HB 588 (2011); Kansas HB 2261 (2013); West Virginia HB 4069 and SB 4780 (2020); North Dakota SB 2308 (2021); South Carolina S 969 (2022).

think tanks in attempts to overhaul state social studies standards in the name of traditional values and American exceptionalism, and often in contravention of the established procedures for standards revision. In 2022, conservatives could claim credit for an ambitious instructional materials transparency law in Florida, an aborted standards revision cycle in Texas, and an executive takeover of the process in South Dakota, whose newest standards stand out for their self-assured traditionalism.¹⁹⁶ Oklahoma's superintendent of public instruction has promised an overhaul of social studies in line with conservative principles.¹⁹⁷

Elsewhere, initiatives met with mixed results. Conservative members of the Virginia Board of Education wrested control over standards revision but, faced with public opposition, settled for a compromise version in 2023.¹⁹⁸ The Colorado State Board of Education narrowly voted down a proposal to replace the revised standards developed by the state Department of Education with an untested model from the conservative Civics Alliance. In Ohio, state lawmakers proposed legislation to achieve a similar goal by creating a special task force to take control of the standards revision process.¹⁹⁹ Iowa legislators succeeded in passing new Western Civilization mandates but had to scale down the long list of content that they had adopted from Civics Alliance.²⁰⁰

Faced with education agencies that they view as captured by liberal or progressive dispositions, some conservatives have funded and built an active counterpublic—publishing curricular materials for US history that are used by a growing network of private, charter, and homeschooling communities. The fullest expression of these initiatives comes in the comprehensive *Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum*, encountered just once

¹⁹⁶ See Florida HB 1467 (2022); Becky Fogel, "Texas State Board of Education to delay revisions to social studies standards," KUT News, August 31, 2022, <https://www.kut.org/education/2022-08-31/texas-state-board-of-education-to-delay-revisions-to-social-studies-standards>; On South Dakota, see Stephen Jackson, "Standards of Revision: Partisan Politics Comes to South Dakota's Schools," *Perspectives on History*, October 26, 2022, <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/standards-of-revision-partisan-politics-comes-to-south-dakotas-schools-january-2022/>; Benjamin F. Jones, "The South Dakota Social Studies Standards Debate: Arguing from Authority or From Evidence?" *Social Education* 88, no. 3 (May/June 2024): 138–41; For the AHA's objections, see James Grossman to the South Dakota Board of Education, September 15, 2022, <https://www.historians.org/news/aha-letter-to-south-dakota-board-of-education-opposing-social-studies-standards-revision-process/>.

¹⁹⁷ Haley Weger, "Walters Advocates 'Patriotic Training' for Oklahoma Teachers," News on 6 (Tulsa), October 5, 2022, <https://www.newson6.com/story/63586d692eeed0b4a02200a/walters-advocates-patriotic-training-for-oklahoma-teachers>.

¹⁹⁸ Anna Bryson, "Virginia Board of Ed Compromises on Final K-12 History Standards," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 20, 2023, https://richmond.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/virginia-board-of-ed-compromises-on-final-k-12-history-standards/article_fe32418a-df84-11ed-9279-4b28fc14cd2e.html.

¹⁹⁹ "AHA Submits Testimony Opposing Ohio Learning Standards Legislation," May 9, 2023, <https://www.historians.org/news/aha-submits-testimony-opposing-ohio-learning-standards-legislation/>.

²⁰⁰ Iowa HF 2545 (2024). For the AHA's objections, see James Grossman to Governor Kim Reynolds, April 25, 2024, <https://www.historians.org/news/aha-urges-veto-of-social-studies-bill/>.

in our investigation. The authors of *Hillsdale 1776* distinguish their values and methods from those “promulgated through preparation programs and bureaucratic agencies” and “corporate textbook publishers and state and federal mandates.”²⁰¹ Combining a narrative approach to content (“gravitas, seriousness, and drama”) with an emphasis on essential primary sources, *Hillsdale 1776* frames its American history as a patriotic inheritance for students, showing them “the wonder, opportunity, and capacity to honor and preserve what is good in their country, while condemning and correcting its flaws.”²⁰²

Because they tend to stand outside of (and in opposition) to state and local education agencies, movement conservatives simply have not left visible ideological marks on district-level curriculum documents to the extent that blue-state progressives have. The vestiges of older, reactionary narratives are not any easier to come by. An Alabama district document describing the South “defend[ing] her homeland, states’ rights and an agrarian way of life spanning two centuries” during the Civil War and characterizing Reconstruction as the moment when “mercy turn[ed] to vengeance,” was striking for its unreconstructed aura—and for the fact that it was the only example of such ideas that we could find.²⁰³ This research uncovered nothing to indicate that significant numbers of districts and teachers continue to rehash widely discredited accounts of US history in the tradition of the Dunning school or Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis.

Contemporary political pressures in conservative locales create a distinct set of misfortunes. Judging by our encounters with teachers, the legislative movement aimed at prohibiting the teaching of “divisive concepts” and CRT has been extremely corrosive of teacher morale and detrimental to the integrity of good history teaching.²⁰⁴ At best, these initiatives have been an exercise in ideological shadow-boxing; when Republican-controlled legislatures began their push in 2021, they were targeting a set of ideas that likely had very little influence on their own local education agencies. More consequentially, divisive concepts legislation has stoked fear and confusion. Even when laws had no technical application to K–12 instruction, rumor and panic spread quickly, with educators worried that teaching standard topics in American history would lead to

²⁰¹ *The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum*, 42, 46.

²⁰² *The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum*, 25.

²⁰³ “Curriculum Map—US History 10th grade,” district document, Alabama, Town: Distant (undated).

²⁰⁴ Free expression nonprofit PEN America has tracked 40 laws, policies, and executive orders restricting teaching in K–12 and higher education that have gone into effect since the beginning of 2021. PEN America Index of Educational Gag Orders, updated November 1, 2023,

<https://airtable.com/appg59iDuPhlLPPFp/shrtwubfBUo2tuHyO/tbl49yod7l0100TCk/viw6VOxb6SUYd5nXM>.

the loss of their jobs. One teacher even described asking the author of a divisive concept law directly about its application to his teaching; the legislator could not give him a clear answer.²⁰⁵

Virginia and Pennsylvania—where opposing factions contend for control of some local school boards—stood out as sites of conflict and angst. Some Virginia teachers and administrators shared their recollections of Governor Glenn Youngkin’s Executive Order 1, issued in 2022, which aimed to curb the promotion of “Critical Race Theory and its progeny” and established a “tip line” for parents to report divisive practices by phone.²⁰⁶ Conditions became “exhausting and . . . scary,” as one teacher recalled, with regular rounds of “yelling about CRT and Marxism” at school board meetings.²⁰⁷ Another Virginia teacher claimed to have “lost friends” and argued with neighbors because of what “they see on TV.”²⁰⁸ Even with the tip line discontinued, one teacher described his sense that politics had put “a target on our backs. . . . The relationship with parents has been redefined. . . . You find yourself picking words very carefully.”²⁰⁹

Teachers and administrators reported different levels of organization among local conservative activists. In some cases, agitators seemed to repeat talking points they had heard on television or social media or lobbed personal attacks. A Pennsylvania teacher recounted how activists “out for [his] job” posted claims that he was a “groomer [and a] pedophile.”²¹⁰ In other instances, teachers described groups they perceived as more organized and well-networked, with affiliates across the state. A Virginia administrator rehearsed the choreography he followed when meeting with a “very small and uninformed group. You take the meeting, they yell at you, and then they don’t listen to anything you say and that’s it.”²¹¹ In Pennsylvania, an administrator referred to the local Moms for Liberty chapter as a “thorn in my side,” while also noting that his community in general “is very supportive of what we do.”²¹²

Even as most teachers had no personal story to tell about direct confrontations with politicized parents, there is evidence that this latest round of activism (and media

²⁰⁵ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 518), July 12, 2023.

²⁰⁶ Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 811), June 5, 2023; Virginia EO 1 (2022). For AHA commentary, see James Grossman, “What Are Students Learning: ‘Divisive Concepts’ in History Education,” *Perspectives on History* 60, no. 6, <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/what-are-students-learning-divisive-concepts-in-history-education-september-2022/>.

²⁰⁷ City Virginia Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22.

²⁰⁸ Rural Virginia Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 38.

²⁰⁹ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 813), August 15, 2023.

²¹⁰ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 603), May 2, 2023.

²¹¹ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 805), January 20, 2023.

²¹² Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 600), January 18, 2023.

coverage of it) has tainted core topics of US history with a general air of “controversy.” For some teachers, the new mood has triggered concerns where none existed before. A small town Illinois teacher described his surprise at suddenly getting parent emails about CRT. He’d “been teaching for almost 30 years and prior to the last three to four years, no one asked about how I covered race or slavery.”²¹³ While many teachers shared intimate knowledge of the latest state and local laws, nationalized news coverage had left others confused about whether their state had banned anything and hesitant about topics that they were in fact perfectly free to teach. As one Iowa teacher confessed, “I steer clear of things that have been targets of various conservative movements the past several years.”²¹⁴ The chilling effects even affected this research, as multiple Virginians warned that educators would be hesitant to speak to us and several Pennsylvanian administrators dodged requests to see instructional materials.

Mixed Settings and Pressures Outside the Spectrum

In districts with active elements of both conservative and progressive activism, teachers have been particularly worn out.²¹⁵ Administrators can play a decisive role when they choose to defend their teachers and assure parents of the principles grounding their teaching. A Virginia administrator noted how he defused opposition coming from a progressive perspective, rather than “say silly things that cause division to be known and make their mark.” He would “influence teachers” to represent the “humbly reliable expert” alongside “the need for primary source documentation and multiple perspectives.”²¹⁶ In Texas, teachers view the expansive detail contained in the TEKS as a protective shield against activist challenges. Some administrators, however, will use controversy to increase their control over teachers, noting that their support would be withheld unless the teachers adhered tightly to their curriculum script.

Another suburban Colorado teacher described how he’s “gotten complaints from both red and blue . . . [both of whom] want something not taught.”²¹⁷ Living in a district with elements of both sides of the political extremes does not automatically lead to disunity in the classroom. “I have a number of students here who are pro-Trump, and

²¹³ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 916), August 29, 2023.

²¹⁴ Rural Iowa Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 30.

²¹⁵ Colorado Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 38.

²¹⁶ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 801), March 10, 2023.

²¹⁷ Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 213), April 26, 2023.

because of the college I have far-left woke people's kids," a Pennsylvania teacher reflected, yet "they are able to debate rather civilly."²¹⁸

Many teachers' descriptions of the challenges they face to their teaching of American history go beyond the partisan divide. A history teacher in Alabama described pushback from African American parents who disapproved of a class activity on runaway slaves.²¹⁹ In Connecticut, a teacher recalled a Black student union wanting teachers to not "spend so much time on the slavery stuff" and more on the accomplishments of African Americans, a refrain repeated by teachers.²²⁰ A former history teacher and current administrator in Virginia described this as a long-standing pattern: "We very often get pushback from the older African American community once or twice a year who object to teaching" topics that would require students to "re-experience these terrible events" that older relatives had "lived through."²²¹ Teachers and administrators remarked on the role that the racial composition of their classrooms had in producing a heightened sensitivity around the teaching of slavery. As one Illinois administrator put it, a teacher may be "trying so hard to be sensitive" to their Black students when teaching histories of racial slavery that the effort backfires; the student "feels uncomfortable because the teacher is trying too hard to make them comfortable."²²² A Pennsylvania teacher credited a PD experience where they learned to "put it out as a tough issue and name it" with helping them teach the history of slavery better.²²³ Alongside the topic of slavery, images of racist violence appear as a consistent source of pushback from parents who do not want those images shown to students.²²⁴ Likewise, many surveyed teachers mentioned pushback on their presentation of the word "Negro" when discussing baseball's Negro Leagues or in other historical contexts.²²⁵ In general, in these conversations, teachers described an uncomfortable but productive dialogue with parents and students about how they teach American history.

While both interviews and survey responses indicate that most teachers have experienced little to no pushback regarding their teaching, those rare moments remain

²¹⁸ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 608), July 11, 2023.

²¹⁹ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 106), September 13, 2023.

²²⁰ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 106), September 13, 2023; Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 213), April 26, 2023; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 424), June 27, 2023; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 817), August 23, 2023.

²²¹ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 805), January 20, 2023.

²²² Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 411), February 14, 2023.

²²³ Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 613), August 30, 2023.

²²⁴ "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 38. For discussion, see Kidada E. Williams, "Regarding the Aftermaths of Lynching," *Journal of American History* 101, no. 3 (2014): 856–58.

²²⁵ "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 38.

vivid memories that are shared widely with their colleagues. Some of their examples refer back to earlier culture wars and cold wars—such as a complaint of anti-Catholicism over an unheroic portrayal of Christopher Columbus or accusations of communism. Others appear unique if no less memorable. An Illinois teacher described how her description of Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassin as a “Serbian terrorist” set off one parent, since he viewed the assassin as a hero.²²⁶ Regional variation made a difference too—only in farm country Iowa was Monsanto mentioned as a source of contention.²²⁷

Defending History

These examples of politicized pressure on specific topics in US history teaching represent the exception rather than the norm. Even in the more active and divisive locales, teachers split over how to respond to the challenge. Half of surveyed teachers said the pushback changed nothing about their approach. Others pursued further research (21 percent) or sought administrative support (16 percent). Only 15 percent said that they altered their lessons in response to pushback.²²⁸ Often in our interviews, teachers cited relative peace in their district while describing worse examples they had heard about in neighboring districts or states. Teachers’ experience and grade level made a difference in these contexts. As a Virginia administrator reported, high school teachers are often “the most stay firm, be combative” types.²²⁹

Finding peace in communities that are demographically diverse and politically divided often requires teachers to define and present themselves as respectful of diverse views, and to be inscrutable about their own. Even when they find themselves personally out of step with the dominant views in their community, teachers tend to hold firm to a sense of themselves as neutral arbiters and truth tellers. As a Pennsylvania teacher explained, “I tell the parents at the Open House that it’s not my job to tell your kids what to think but how to think. I give them the tools to think for themselves. That’s prevented any conflict up to this point, I think.”²³⁰ Or as a Texas teacher characterized his goal: “teach the good, the bad and the ugly. I’m going to tell it like it is and how it happened.”²³¹

²²⁶ Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 430), July 26, 2023.

²²⁷ Iowa Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 38.

²²⁸ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 40, n = 1,241.

²²⁹ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 819), September 18, 2023.

²³⁰ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 614), September 19, 2023.

²³¹ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 726), September 2, 2023.

Many teachers assume the possibility of a range of reactions from across the ideological spectrum. In Texas, a teacher noted how he has “always been worried about district and state-level pushback” on his forthright coverage of difficult topics, but he also sensed that many parents were “excited” knowing that the “fuller history is being taught.”²³² Not all the increased focus on schools and the teaching of American history has been negative. Several teachers in less affluent locales reiterated that they wished parents of their students had the time and energy to care more about what happened in their classrooms, even if they focused on controversial topics. As one Pennsylvania administrator in a relatively active district remarked, “All of the attention and conversation can be negative, but also good.”²³³ Regardless of how it is interpreted, more attention does mean more work for teachers who are already pushed to their limits.

Educating parents and community members can take time and energy. A department chair in Texas described his efforts to prevent the school board from passing restrictions on what he could teach. He sat down with a vocal school board member and the superintendent to talk through the consequences of limiting their curriculum. As he carefully explained, any perception that a full history might not be allowed would mean that their district would “lose good teachers, who won’t want to work there.”²³⁴ In this case, the school board ultimately backed down. In interviews, veteran teachers tended to express more confidence in their ability to resist or defuse political pressures, citing examples from past experiences, personal credos, or standby lines for responding to angry parents or contrarian students. Describing her reaction to those who claim offense at learning about difficult subjects, one Virginia department chair explained, “We just say, ‘Bless your heart.’”²³⁵

Taking a stand against censorious critics requires a combination of patience and courage. In some cases, teachers and administrators have struggled to find their footing. One unfortunate pattern involved advice given by administrators in moments of political pushback. Rather than defending the notion that teachers should continue to teach a full and true history, some administrators openly counseled teachers to back away from their role as arbiters and interpreters. “To avoid controversy,” an Iowa administrator advised teachers to lean into primary sources, so that students “can make their own

²³² Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 726), September 2, 2023.

²³³ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 607), July 24, 2023.

²³⁴ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 731), November 6, 2023.

²³⁵ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 822), January 26, 2024.

conclusions.”²³⁶ A Virginia administrator fending off criticism from a local Moms for Liberty chapter offered similar guidance to his teachers: “The more we go to the historical record, and the less problems we’re going to have.”²³⁷ Rather than be caught in the act of teaching a divisive or problematic lesson, teachers report that they’ve chosen inquiries of primary documents so that the sources can “speak for themselves” without teacher interpretation.²³⁸ In these instances, the various watchwords of good social studies teaching practice—document-focused, student-centered, inquiry-based, discussion-driven—have been repurposed as ways of keeping the teacher’s voice off the record with regard to certain topics. The result is doubly regrettable; if teachers are encouraged to abandon their obligation to their students as experts in historical content knowledge under one round of political pressure, then they will be ill-equipped to face the next one.

²³⁶ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 508), September 23, 2022.

²³⁷ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 819), September 18, 2023.

²³⁸ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 500), October 12, 2022.

Part 4: Curricular Content

A wide array of forces compete to determine the shape and content of US history curriculum: state legislators, state agency officials, district curriculum specialists, professional associations, educational publishers, and local parents, all while teachers would prefer to be left in charge of the details. Those details—what gets emphasized and what gets minimized—are an expression of those competing forces but with a heavy dose of individual preference.

Teachers' Purposes, Priorities, and Favorites

To discern what teachers thought about the purpose of learning US history, the survey asked them to rate the importance of 20 carefully phrased learning outcomes they might have for their students. Some of these are in essence “skills”; others “goals and values.” Among goals and values, we purposefully included options that signaled various ideological positions, from progressive multicultural to civic nationalist to critical antiracist to centrist optimist to patriotic exceptionalist. This section was designed to reveal what teachers think their students should get from a US history class, in terms of both the narrative arc and core competencies.

These were the prompts and response options provided:

How important are the following skills for US history students to learn in your class?	How important are the following goals and values to teaching US history?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing critical thinking skills • Teaching students to analyze primary sources • Embedding core knowledge of key events, people, and eras in American history • Teaching students to build arguments using evidence from primary sources • Teaching students to think in terms of causes and effects • Teaching students to understand the contingency of historical events • Introducing students to historiographical debates • Getting students to articulate how they feel about the past • Teaching students how to do research • Teaching students how to write a thesis-driven essay 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presenting US history as a story of violence, oppression, and/or injustice • Presenting US history as a series of conflicts over power • Presenting US history as a complex mix of accomplishments and setbacks • Presenting US history as a consistent fulfillment of the promises of the nation's founding • Presenting multiple sides of every story • Making connections to the present • Instilling civic pride in the nation • Building an appreciation for diversity • Instilling core knowledge of national heritage • Focusing on challenging/controversial topics • Developing informed citizens for participation in a democratic society • Expecting students to confront the role of racism in our nation's character • Cultivating an appreciation of the United States as an exceptional nation • Helping students see the role of God in our nation's destiny • Building a shared sense of national identity among students across social groups

The data from these questions tell a clear story, with some regional variations (Figs. 30 and 31). Surveyed teachers almost unanimously see the goals of critical thinking (97 percent), democratic citizenship (94 percent), and making connections to the present (93 percent) as central to their approach to teaching US history. Close behind were the goals of teaching cause and effect (87 percent), presenting multiple sides to every story (86 percent), and analyzing primary sources (82 percent). Less popular learning goals included “seeing the role of God in the nation’s destiny” (13 percent), framing US history as “a story of violence, oppression, and/or injustice” (26 percent), or as a “consistent fulfillment of the promises of the nation’s founding” (26 percent).¹

¹ Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, questions 34, 35, 36, 37.

Fig. 30: Skills Rated as Important/Very Important
by Teachers (n range = 2,187–2,254)

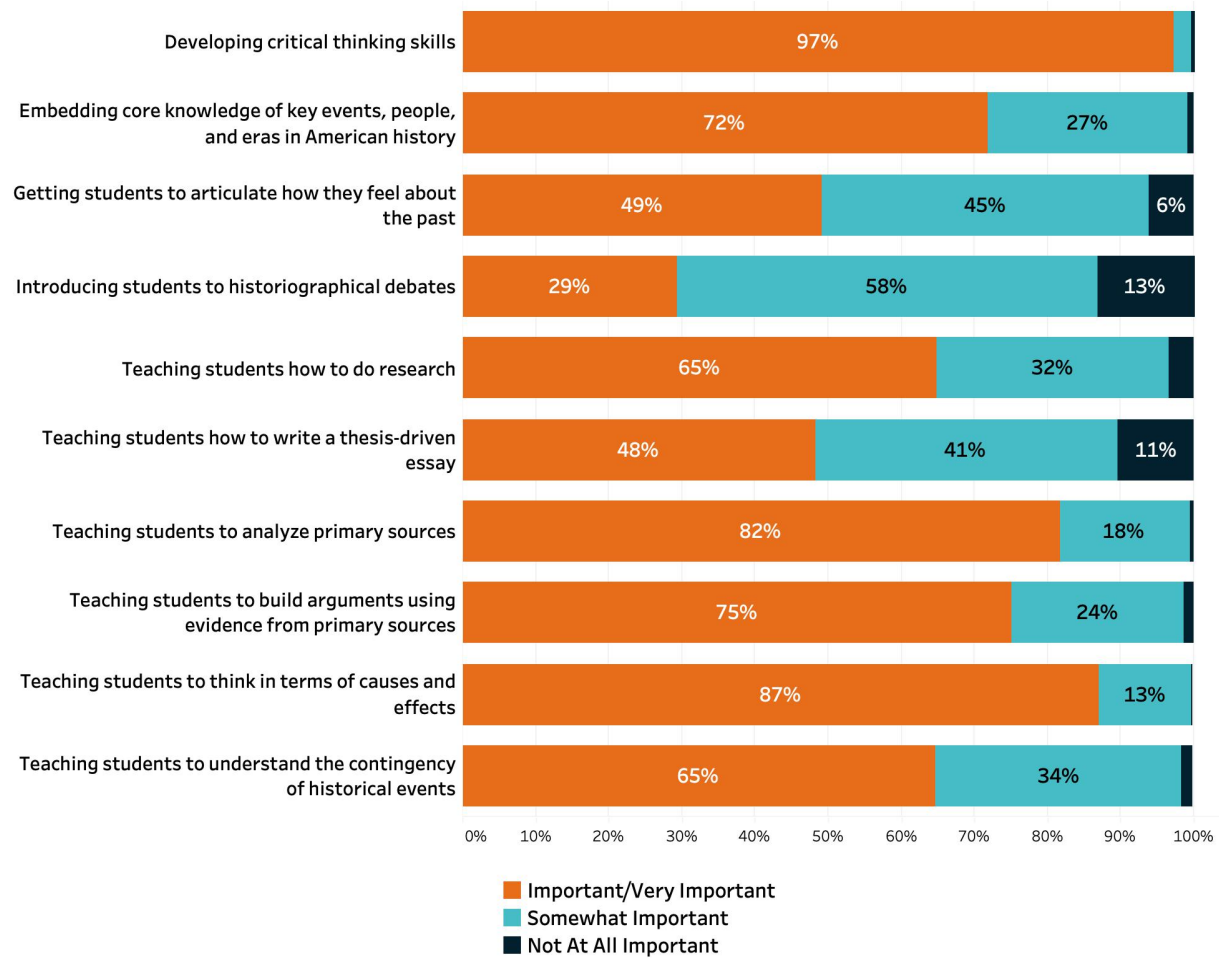
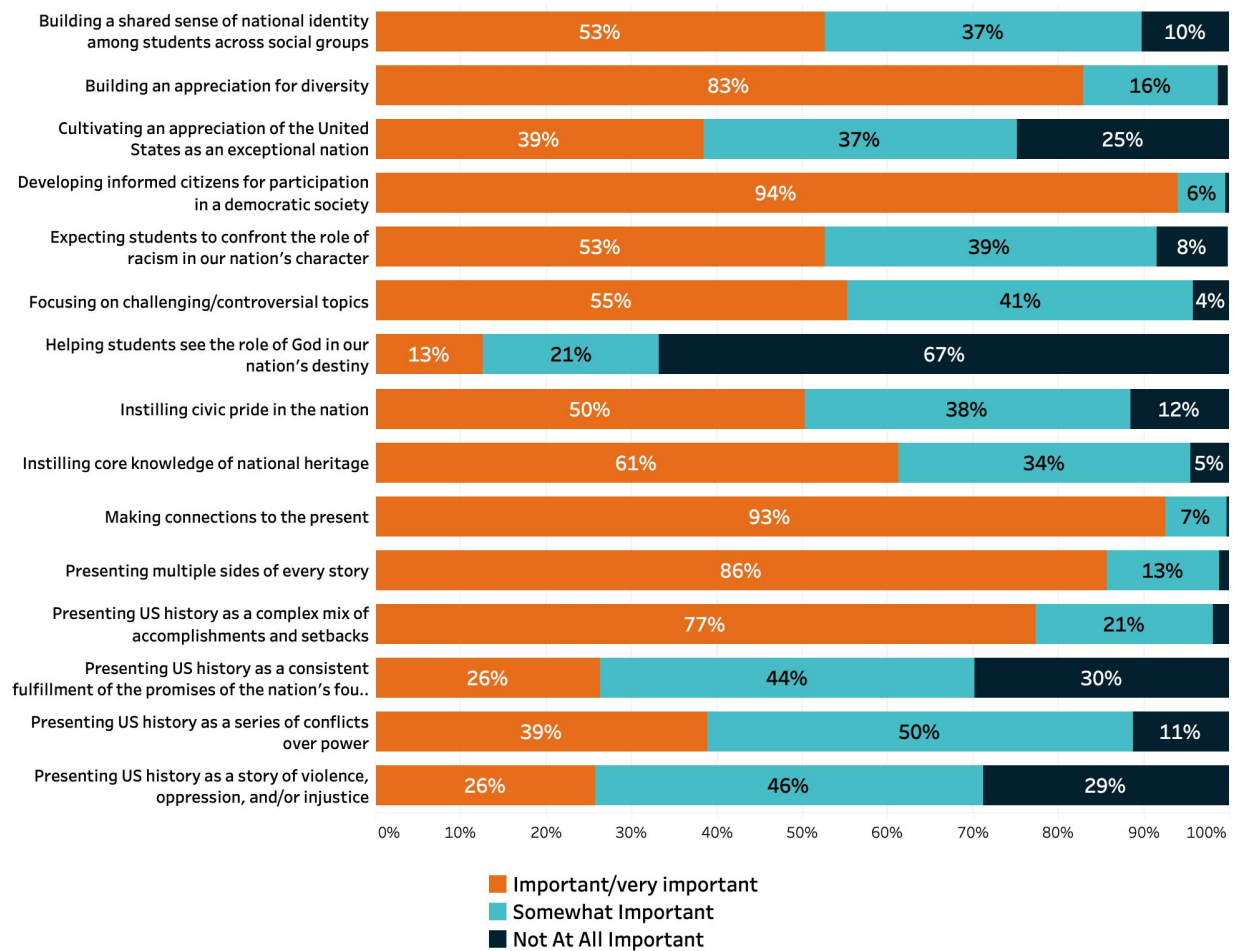


Fig. 31: Goals and Values Rated as Important/Very Important by Teachers (n range =



The specific contours of teacher responses in each state point to distinct cultural and political contexts. Connecticut teachers were more likely than teachers in other states to rate research and writing skills as especially important. In Alabama, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Virginia, more teachers favored core content knowledge than in other states. Alabamans, Texans, and Virginians were more likely to see a value in identifying the United States as an exceptional nation (64 percent within those three states compared with 46 percent in the other six) and to see the role of God in the story (36 percent versus 17 percent in the other states). Fewer teachers in Colorado, Connecticut, and Washington (50 percent) rated civic pride in the nation as an important value as compared with other states (66 percent).²

² Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, questions 34, 35, 36, 37.

Though less pronounced than state contrasts, there was some variation in responses according to locale type, with rural and city teachers differing by as much as 10 percentage points regarding how much negative or positive emphasis should be given in US history. Forty-five percent of urban teachers rated “violence, oppression, and/or injustice” as important, as opposed to 35 percent of rural teachers and 34 percent of town teachers. Seventy-one percent of urban teachers agreed that it was important for students to “confront the role of racism in our nation’s character” as compared with 61 percent of rural teachers and 56 percent of town teachers. “Instilling civic pride in the nation” earned approval from 70 percent of rural teachers but only 60 percent of urban teachers. Sixty percent of rural and town teachers saw value in “cultivating an appreciation of the United States as an exceptional nation,” compared with 50 percent of teachers in cities and suburbs. These variations notwithstanding, what is most striking among these data are their general similarity across environments—an index of a common national teaching culture among history educators.³

Focusing more tightly on content, we also asked teachers which topics and eras were top priorities for coverage and which were their favorites to teach. Their answers (Figs. 32 and 33) show clear points of common emphasis: the American Revolution, the Civil War, World War II, and the Civil Rights Movement. This might be read as a playlist of America’s greatest hits: rejecting monarchy, abolishing slavery, fighting Nazis, and ending Jim Crow. But inevitable triumph isn’t the note that teachers strike when they say why they love these topics. Some teachers cite the value of learning about heroes and heroics. But others stress the notion that these events were exciting, dramatic turning points, that they were full of contradictory and complicated politics, and that something about what Americans are today can’t be understood without comprehending these past events.

³ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, questions 34, 35, 36, 37.

Fig. 32: Topics Teachers Describe as High Priorities for Coverage (n range = 590–2,401)

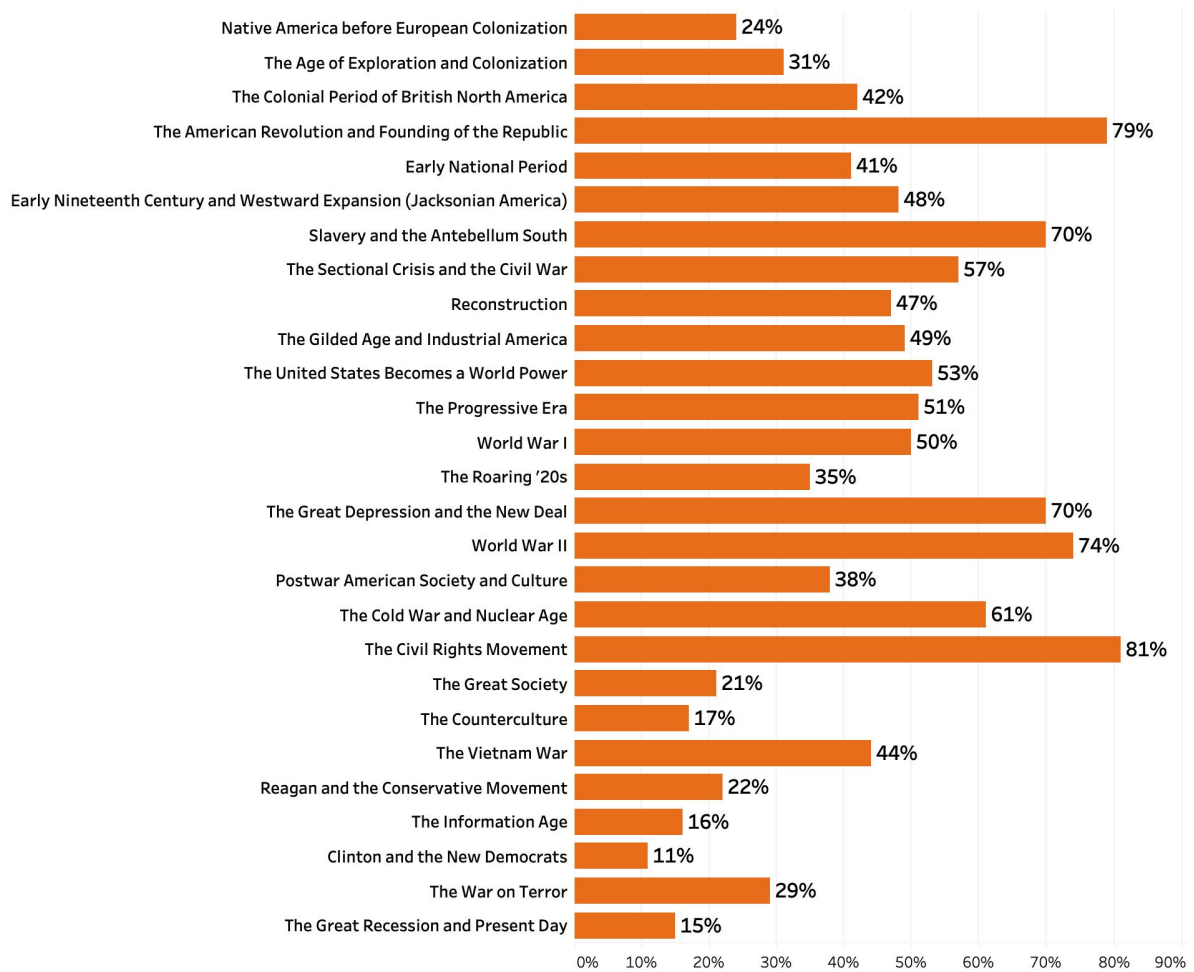
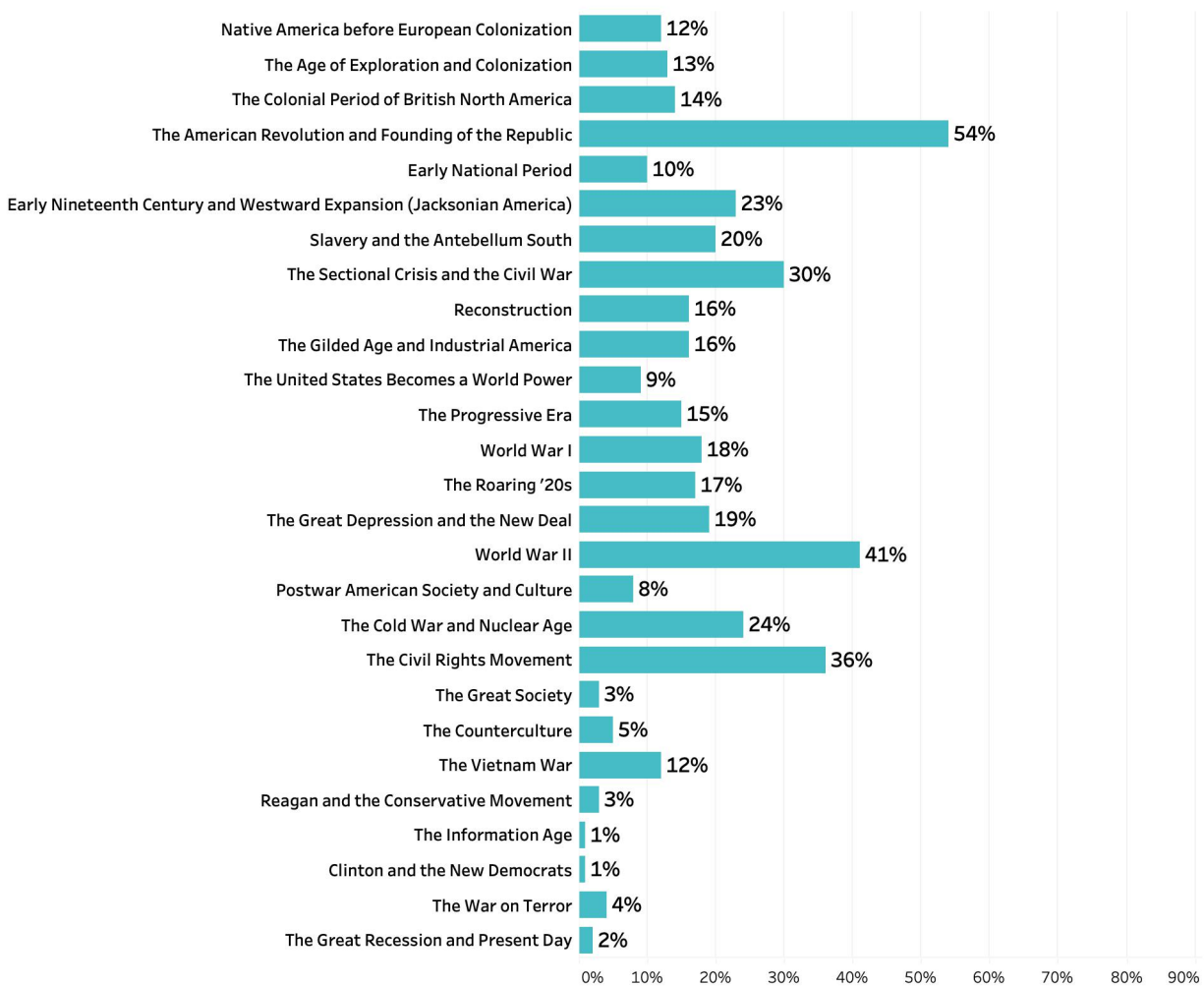


Fig. 33: Teachers' Favorite Topics (teachers were limited to only three choices; n range = 1,532–2,387)



This picture doesn't square with ideological caricatures of politicized classrooms. Teachers (and the resources they use) tend not to align neatly to a partisan "take" on American history. When they succeed, they do so by connecting students with evocative primary sources, promoting patient and empathetic readings of multiple perspectives, and instilling a sense of the contingent and contested nature of historical events.

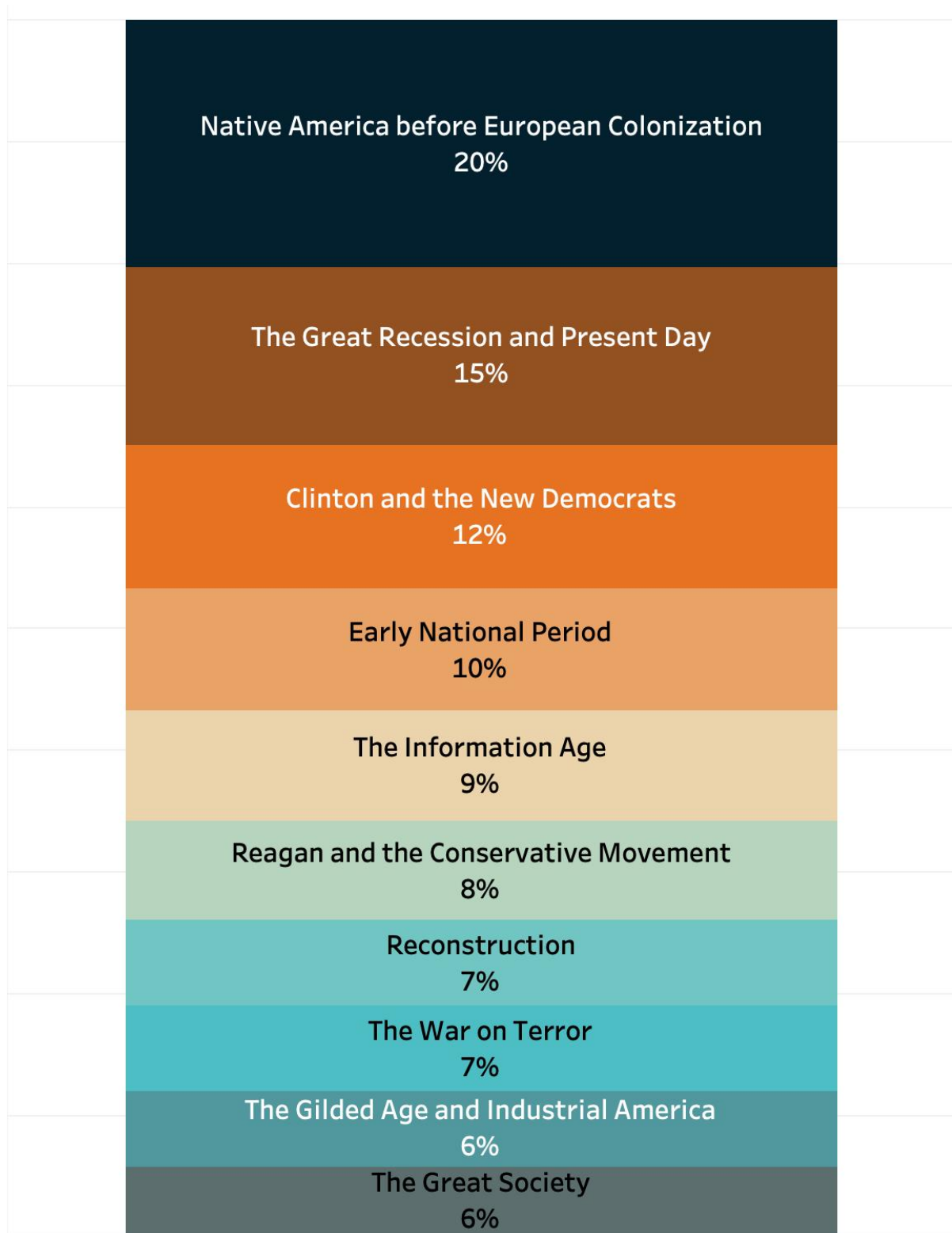
When curricular materials falter, it's typically because detail and complexity have been sacrificed in pursuit of streamlining. Sometimes, these simplifications betray an ideological bias, tacking toward moralistic, fatalistic, or presentist impulses. Too many lessons encourage students to judge whether something was a "blessing or a curse," a "hero or a villain," or is "with us still today." In other cases, specifics have been blurred into a backdrop behind the main stage of skills development, with nonfiction literacy and

evidence-based argumentation prevailing over the stakes and textures of a historical episode.

Undoubtedly, many weaknesses in curriculum are inherent to the task at hand; to teach the typical middle or high school US history course, teachers are obliged to skim the surface of an impossibly deep pool of scholarship and source material. All teachers must be ruthless editors and assemblers, and they are unlikely to be equally expert in every topic. Surveyed teachers were not shy in admitting where they felt the need for more training (see [Fig. 34](#)).

The following sections summarize the strengths, weaknesses, and patterns in various kinds of curricular materials focused on six topics: Native American History; the Founding Era; Westward Expansion; Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction; the Gilded Age and Progressive Era; and the Civil Rights Movement. These topics fall within the standard span of chronologically organized US history, have been known to provoke politicized controversy, or have been perceived by historians as areas where there is likely to be a lag or gap between scholarly consensus and broader public knowledge. We began by assuming that K–12 materials would *not* reflect the latest theoretical disputes within every academic subfield, but that classroom accounts of US history *should* be free from factual errors and ideological distortions. We tracked factual content, looked for discredited interpretations, and took note of any distorting ideological emphases. Our judgments are meant to highlight patterns of strength and weakness across a vast archive of representative material, not to scorn or praise.

Fig. 34: Topics Teachers Identified As Areas Where They Lack Sufficient Background



Between Mythbusting and Historiography

Some subsets of curricula (and a few state standards) adopt a self-aware perspective on the construction of historical knowledge. Some of these gestures—as in Florida standards’ call to have students “describe the roles of historians and recognize varying historical interpretations,” or a Washington unit’s promise to “consider how stories about historical events in US History have changed over time and why”—would likely be appreciated and applauded by historians.⁴ The modern historical discipline would be unrecognizable without the fundamental insight that historical interpretation is itself historically constructed.

But what is common sense among historians is only subtext in most curricula and is notoriously tough to teach.⁵ Metacritique of storytelling is rarely as compelling as a good story. The various inquiry activities or research projects that direct students to construct an evidence-based argument using primary documents (such as C3 Inquiries, DBQ, SHEG, and so on) at least imply that history is an ongoing series of investigative exercises with diverse findings, rather than a fixed monologue about the past. Missing from these modules, however, is an appreciation for how historians argue over, reconcile, or synthesize diverse interpretations, and why (and when) certain accounts become a matter of consensus while others fall out of favor. Historians’ term for this terrain—historiography—is buried in most K–12 curricula. Indeed, among the 10 skill sets whose importance we asked teachers to rate, “introducing students to historiographical debates” was the clear loser, with only 21 percent of teachers rating it as important or very important.⁶ There are certainly glimmers of historiographic consciousness in some materials, and pedagogical initiatives are attempting to provide teachers with sturdier modules for exploring the topic with K–12 students.⁷

More often, however, curricula that aim for the concept of history-as-historical-construction land somewhere outside of the historiographic conversation, striking a generically skeptical posture toward a “mainstream” or “dominant narrative” that is in

⁴ “Untold Stories of the American Revolution,” district document, multiple districts, Washington, Suburb: Large (2023).

⁵ See discussion in Thomas D. Fallace, “Historiography and Teacher Education: Reflections on an Experimental Course,” *History Teacher* 42, no. 2 (2009): 205–22.

⁶ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 34.

⁷ Thomas Fallace and Johann Neem, “Historiographical Thinking: Towards a New Approach to Preparing History Teachers,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 33, no. 3 (2005): 329–46; Agnieszka Aya Marczyk, Lightning Jay, and Abby Reisman, “Entering the Historiographic Problem Space: Scaffolding Student Analysis and Evaluation of Historical Interpretations in Secondary Source Material,” *Cognition and Instruction* 40, no. 4 (2022): 517–39; Agnieszka Aya Marczyk, Abby Reisman, and Brenda Santos, “Teaching Historiography: Testimony and the Study of the Holocaust,” *American Historical Review*, 129, no. 1, (March 2024): 175–97.

need of disruption or redirection.⁸ Such provocations tend toward imprecision, unhelpfully muddying the difference between what historians mean by an “interpretation” (an evidence-based, narrative argument about the causes or implications of social change) and how the broader public applies that term (well, that’s just your interpretation—your opinion).

Among the topics we appraised, the American Revolution and the Civil Rights Movement stood out as the eras most likely to include some historiographic self-awareness. Surveyed teachers made multiple mentions of their commitment to telling a more complete, updated account of these topics than had existed before, and some instructional materials on these subjects included explicit discussions of how distinct generations of historians developed new and competing arguments. Beyond their richness as mature subfields, why would these two eras earn more nuanced treatment in curricula? Doesn’t their role as totems of civic nationalism and moral authority imply the opposite—that they are ripe for sentimentalism, distortion, and instrumentalization? It seems plausible that the civic weight assigned to these subjects are in fact what whets the appetite of the broader public for more sophisticated understandings, directing some historians toward public scholarship. The revolution and civil rights attract big events and big funders, financing opportunities for historians to inject fresh snippets of academic debate into the cycles of media, museums, memorials, movies, and curricular material that cover these topics. This model may be difficult to follow for more neglected topics. Native American history, while certainly an interest for many and a matter of political importance for contemporary tribal nations, sits uncomfortably alongside national civic sensibilities, while events since 1970 merge directly into contemporary political disagreements, a scenario that many teachers prefer to avoid.

Native American History

Of the topics appraised by the AHA research team, curricular coverage of Native American history is the most likely to blur into generalities and the least likely to reflect recent scholarship from professional historians. Surveyed teachers confess to feelings of inadequacy on this topic.⁹

⁸ “Together We Rise: How can we amplify the untold stories of US history?” multidistrict document, Washington, Suburb: Large (2023).

⁹ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, questions 22 and 22E.

In standards and curricula, coverage of Native Americans tends to cluster in a few key moments along the traditional arc of the US history timeline: precolonial North America; the era of encounter and colonization; treaty-making and Indian removal during the pre–Civil War era of US westward expansion and annexation; and the Plains Wars of the 1860s–90s. Coverage of Native American history in these particular eras is usually unobjectionable insofar as accuracy is concerned, but a tendency toward generalization predominates. In state standards, for example, all Native Americans tend to be grouped together (often in a “such as” list alongside women, African Americans, and other “minority groups”) that have “contributed to” or been “affected by” some historical event. Local curricula repeat these broad strokes—referring to a “Native American way of life,” for instance.¹⁰ In other cases, a particularly vivid episode (the Trail of Tears, the Sand Creek Massacre, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School) stands in for a diverse range of temporally adjacent Native histories.¹¹ This approach is preferable to neglect, but curricula seldom include clear guidance about the relative representativeness of a given event with respect to broader understandings of Native history during a particular era. In a handful of curricular materials, an account of the first half of US history somehow is given without any direct mention of Indians.¹²

Our research corroborates findings by other scholars detailing the sharp drop-off of coverage of Indians after the close of the Plains Wars.¹³ A particularly blunt summary in an Alabama unit plan sums up the implied thesis of many curricula: “Conquered, the Native American way of life is all but lost and assimilated into a new American Nation.”¹⁴ Exceptions appear in the civil rights era, where the American Indian Movement notably (but infrequently) receives mention. Time devoted to other 20th-century topics—the Indian Reorganization Act (1934), the Indian Relocation Act (1956), the mobilization of Indian soldiers during World War II, or urban Indian communities—is rarer but tends to appear when making a self-conscious attempt to include Native American history across

¹⁰ “Course Name: US History, 2016–2017,” district document, Iowa, Rural: Fringe (2017), 1.

¹¹ “How Can Words Lead to Conflict,” teacher document, Washington, City Midsize; “Grade 11 US History,” district document, Texas, Suburb: Large (2022); “Carlisle Indian Industrial School Lesson,” Digital Inquiry Group, <https://inquirygroup.org/history-lessons/carlisle-indian-industrial-school>; Colorado Department of Education, “Eighth Grade, Standard 1. History,” *Colorado Academic Standards: Social Studies* (2022), 100.

¹² “Social Studies 6-8 Quarterly Overviews v. 2.10.22, 8th Grade American History, 9–11,” district document, Colorado, City: Large (2022); Assorted Curricular Documents, teacher document, Colorado, Suburb: Large (undated); “Curriculum Map—8th grade, 2022,” district document, Iowa, Rural: Distant (2022); “United States history (11th Grade) Scope and Sequence, 2021,” district document, Washington, City: Midsize (2021), 1–4.

¹³ See Sarah B. Shear, Ryan T. Knowles, Gregory J. Soden, and Antonio J. Castro, “Manifesting Destiny: Re/presentations of Indigenous Peoples in K–12 US History Standards,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 43, no. 1 (2015): 68–101.

¹⁴ “Curriculum Map—US History 10th grade,” District document, Alabama, Town: Distant (undated).

multiple units. If measured simply by the distribution of expository coverage of Native history, US history textbooks reinforce the theme of Native disappearance in the 20th century. Still, 21st-century textbook authors and editors clearly consider Native Americans to be significant historical actors, threading a throughline of maps, images, and special sections covering turning points for Native people in North America. In some cases, paid curricular resources provide teachers and students with detailed histories of specific events that are less commonly cited in standards or broad timelines.¹⁵

One of the most powerful antidotes to the tendency toward the abstract Indian is the required study of state and local history. State history mandates in some places force curriculum into exceptionally specific (and by extension, nuanced and textured) treatments of Native Americans as local peoples with rooted histories in a particular place (Fig. 35). The TEKS, for example, have only broad mention of Indigenous topics in the US history standards but specify coverage of local Native groups in 4th and 7th grade Texas history.¹⁶ Virginia's SOLs likewise show efforts to ground Native history in local contexts.¹⁷ States with a substantial contemporary presence of federally recognized tribes and Native populations are even likelier to reserve more curricular time and space for Native American history. Colorado, Minnesota, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, South Dakota, Washington, and Wyoming all distinguish themselves by including a visible strand of Native American history in their state standards or legislating a curricular inclusion.¹⁸

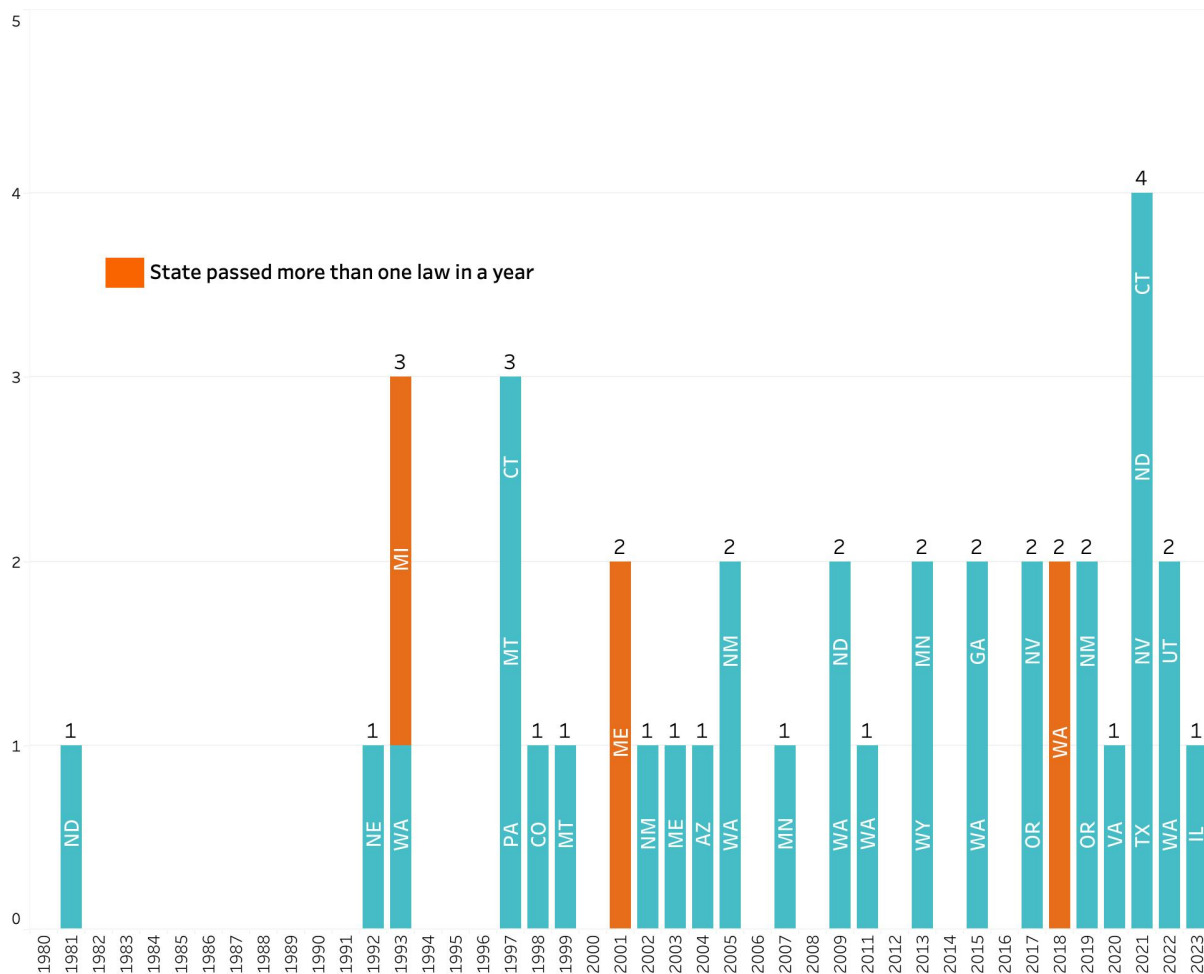
¹⁵ "Westward Expansion: A New History," 2nd ed., Choices Curriculum, Brown University, 2021.

¹⁶ TEKS, *Elementary Social Studies, Grade 4* (adopted 2022); TEKS, *Elementary Social Studies, Grade 7* (adopted 2022).

¹⁷ Grade 4 Virginia Studies, VS.2, *History and Social Science Standards of Learning* (Board of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia 2023), 12–13.

¹⁸ In the cases of Montana and Washington, content mandates for Native American history actually clash with the otherwise content-free tenor of these "skills-focused" standards. Several state education agencies also have developed curricular resources related to teaching Native history. Examples include: Maine Department of Education, "Wabanaki Cultural Systems & History (MLR Content Standard E)," <https://www.maine.gov/doe/learning/content/socialstudies/resources/mainenativestudies/curriculum>; Montana Office of Public Instruction, "Indian Education for All," <https://www.maine.gov/doe/learning/content/socialstudies/resources/mainenativestudies/curriculum>; Nevada Department of Education, "American Indian Curriculum Guide and Lesson Plans," <https://doe.nv.gov/offices/indian-education/curriculum-guide-and-lesson-plans/>; North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, "North Dakota Native American Essential Understandings," <https://www.nd.gov/dpi/education-programs/indian-education/north-dakota-native-american-essential-understandings>; Oklahoma State Department of Education, "Oklahoma Indian Tribe Education Guides," <https://sde.ok.gov/tribe-education-resources>; Oregon Department of Education, "American Indian/Alaska Native Education," <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and-family/equity/NativeAmericanEducation/Pages/Senate-Bill-13-Tribal-HistoryShared-History.aspx>; South Dakota Department of Education, "Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings and Standards," <https://doe.sd.gov/ContentStandards/documents/18-OSEUs.pdf>; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "Wisconsin First Nations Education," <https://wisconsinfirstnations.org/>. Meredith McCoy presented these resources at the AHA Teacher Institute, "Native Peoples and the Architecture of US History," July, 24, 2024, <https://www.historians.org/event/2024-aha-online-teacher-institute-native-peoples-and-the-architecture-of-us-history/>.

Fig. 35: Legislation Mandating or Encouraging Instruction on Native American History in Social Studies, 1980–2023 (n = 39)



In state standards that arrange subject matter chronologically, Native people typically appear in the first named unit of study, a massive span stretching from precolonial Indigenous civilizations of the Americas to the era of European colonization. Unfortunately, a short unit at the opening of a middle school academic year is often the subject's only occasion for advanced study within US history courses. Twenty-four percent of teachers identified this era before colonization as among the most difficult to cover—the third most cited among all topics.¹⁹ Thirty-eight percent of those acknowledged that their difficulties were due to a lack of college coursework and supportive resources. Some teachers said that they simply “need more content

¹⁹ Topics with higher rates of reported difficulty were the Early National Period (31 percent) and the Great Recession to the Present Day (24 percent) “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 21, n = 1,516.

knowledge” and “updated materials.”²⁰ As one Iowa teacher lamented, “I want to make [Native history] a basis for all units and just don’t feel I do it justice.”²¹ Others sensed a disjuncture between archaeological and historical modes of interpretation, with one Washington teacher citing “the lack of precolonial texts” as confounding their construction of “compelling narratives.”²² Others still “struggle with how specific the learning needs to be.”²³ As a Pennsylvania teacher put it, “This is such a long period of time that spans an entire hemisphere. . . . Figuring out what to include is overwhelming.”²⁴

More complete attempts to embrace this immense topic deploy geography to specify and locate Indigenous groups by region and to describe how distinct physical environments influenced Native societies.²⁵ Most textbooks open their Indigenous civilizations unit with an ethnolinguistic map of the continent’s various groups, but such maps tend to present a snapshot of 1492, and curricula will refer to prior eras as broadly “prehistoric.”²⁶ More nuanced curricula also go some way in upending stereotypes of the “ecological Indian,” noting that Native groups transformed North American landscapes at least as much as they adapted to them.²⁷ Guidance from state standards occasionally gestures toward the diversity of Indigenous America by “highlight[ing] the rich culture that existed in the Americas prior to colonization,” for example.²⁸ But teachers in states with content-detailed standards clearly notice the relative vagueness of Indigenous history as compared with other topics. Nearly every teacher from Texas and Virginia who noted difficulties covering precolonial Native America cited its absence in state standards. As one Texas teacher quipped, “It’s not covered on the STAAR test so it ‘isn’t important.’”²⁹

²⁰ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22: Suburban Connecticut Teacher; Rural Colorado Teacher.

²¹ Iowa Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22.

²² Rural Washington Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22.

²³ City Illinois Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22.

²⁴ Suburban Pennsylvania Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22.

²⁵ “13 Colonies Unit Plan,” teacher document, Iowa, Rural: Distant (undated).

²⁶ Alabama Department of Education, *Alabama Course of Studies: Social Studies* (2010), 24.

²⁷ California Social Studies Standards, grade 4, (1998) 14; US History Curriculum Map, “Building the Young Republic,” district document, Illinois, Suburb: Large (2022). For historical work on Indigenous peoples and the environment, see William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Lisa Brooks, *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Joshua L. Reid, *The Sea Is My Country: The Maritime World of the Makahs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Hayley Negrin, “Return to the Yeokanta/River: Powhatan Women and Environmental Treaty Making in Early America,” *Environmental History* 28, no. 3 (July 2023): 522–53. For scholarly critique and complication of the “ecological Indian,” see Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999) and Michael E. Harkin and David Rich Lewis, eds. *Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on the Ecological Indian* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

²⁸ TCMPS, “TEKS Resource System,” TEKS Clarification: 8.23D,” multidistrict document, Texas (2014).

²⁹ Town Texas Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22.

Stronger curricular guidance treats Native history with the dignity of specificity, naming Native groups and anchoring them in regional geography. In curricula covering colonial North America, Native groups are incorporated quite frequently, and individual polities and people do indeed get named and narrated: nations like the Wampanoag, Huron, Mohawk, Iroquois; figures including Metacom, Powhatan, Pocahontas. Still, Europeans are more likely to be granted their regional and cultural diversity (even when isolated to English ventures), while Native nations are collapsed into a single entity. Native groups may even be paired for analysis with other non-Europeans, as in prompts that ask, “What motivated freed Africans and Indigenous people to fight on behalf of the Patriots or the British?”³⁰ Gestures toward disaggregation provide a better start, such as comparing different colonial approaches to relations with Native groups in North America.³¹ But even here, assumptions that colonists called the shots speed past an opportunity to explore the political and commercial conduct of distinct Native groups. Dominant themes in the past generation of historiography on Indigenous America, including the political agency, diplomatic leverage, and sovereignty claims wielded by Native polities deep into the era of Euro-American colonization, lie dormant in many K–12 expositions of Native history.³²

Problems of abstraction and timelessness in Native history have not been solved by various gestures of sensitivity, sympathy, or a decolonized pedagogy.³³ Debates both

³⁰ “Unit 4: American Revolution,” Yearly Overview and Scope and Sequence 2023–24, district document, Virginia, Suburb: Large (2023).

³¹ Alabama Department of Education, *Alabama Course of Studies: Social Studies* (2010), 63.

³² See, for example, Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the US-Mexican War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); John W. Hall, *Uncommon Defense: Indian Allies and the Black Hawk War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Robbie Ethridge, *From Chicaza to Chickasaw: The European Invasion and the Transformation of the Mississippian World, 1540–1715* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Michael Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Colin G. Calloway, *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Pekka Hämäläinen, *Indigenous Continent* (New York: Liveright, 2022); Matthew Krue, *Time of Anarchy: Indigenous Power and the Crisis of Colonialism in Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022); Ned Blackhawk, *The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmaking of US History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

³³ A small handful of social studies curriculum coordinators and teachers identified themselves as motivated to “decolonize” or otherwise audit their instructional practices with an eye toward antiracist principles. Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 102), February 16, 2023; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 917), September 18, 2023; Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 425), August 8, 2023. For public-facing statements to this effect, see Denver Public Schools, “Native American Culture & Education,” <https://equity.dpsk12.org/native-american-culture-education/>; Seattle Public Schools, “Black Studies in SPS” <https://www.seattleschools.org/news/black-studies-in-sps/>; Chicago Public Schools, “Culturally Responsive, Sustaining Curriculum and Instruction,” cps-scce-dashboard-staging.herokuapp.com/social-science-k-12/social-science-vision-and-core-areas/culturally-responsive-sustaining-curriculum-instruction/.

within and between distinct disciplinary approaches to Native North America occasionally echo across K–12 curricula; framings that some Indigenous studies scholars may find acceptable might be resisted by some historians and vice versa.³⁴ On the continent’s earliest human inhabitants, textbooks offer recaps of the latest archaeological evidence about Clovis and pre-Clovis cultures and migrations via land bridges, glacial, and coastal routes.³⁵ Elsewhere, some curricula cloud Indigenous history in mists of uncertainty, as in one big city curriculum that centers Indigenous creation stories while disavowing the question of how the Americas were populated, asserting that historical answers “are still unknown.”³⁶ In another large district, recently introduced curricula reinvest in essentializing depictions of Indigenous and “Judeo-Christian” civilizations as motivated by underlying theological approaches to land use: Indians as “symbiotic,” “cyclical” stewards of the environment and European settlers as inherently obsessed with “dominion.”³⁷ Some recent state standards proposals invoke Indigenous studies as part of a mission of revaluing “marginalized perspectives” and “non-dominant” narratives but articulate no specific historical content about Native people.³⁸ While perhaps well-intentioned, these approaches obscure the political, cultural, and material contexts that shaped diverse Native American societies and empires.

The framing of Native history as a moral quandary for contemporary Americans is a recurrent theme in classroom coverage, expressed clearly in the various essential and

³⁴ For a sample of scholarly debates to this effect, see Devon A. Mihesuah, *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Susan A. Miller, “Native America Writes Back: The Origin of the Indigenous Paradigm in Historiography,” *Wíčazo Ša Review* 23 no. 2 (Fall 2008): 9–28; Alyssa Mt. Pleasant, Caroline Wiggington, and Kelly Wisecup, “Materials and Methods in Native American and Indigenous Studies,” *Early American Literature* 53, no. 2 (2018): 407–44; David J. Silverman, “Living with the Past: Thoughts on Community Collaboration and Difficult History in Native American and Indigenous Studies,” *American Historical Review* 125, no. 2 (April 2020): 519–27; Jean M. O’Brien, “What Does Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS) Do?,” *American Historical Review* 125, no. 2 (April 2020): 542–45.

³⁵ Levels of exposition on Indigenous origins vary across textbooks. For land bridge alone, see Diane Hart, et al., *History Alive! The United States Through Industrialism* (Rancho Cordova, CA: Teachers Curriculum Institute, 2017), 6. For inclusion of land bridge and maritime migrations as competing theories, see James West Davidson and Michael B. Stoff, *American History: My World Interactive* (Boston: Pearson, 2019), 8; Joyce Appleby, Alan Brinkley, Albert S. Broussard, James M. McPherson, and Donald A. Ritchie, *Discovering Our Past: A History of the United States* (Columbus, OH: McGraw Hill Education, 2018), 5; Emma J. Lapansky-Werner, Peter B. Levy, Randy Roberts, and Alan Taylor, *US History Interactive* (Paramus, NJ: Savvas Learning Company, 2022), 4–5. For more deliberate treatment of a “great debate” among scientists about routes and episodes of migration by land, ice, and sea, see Fredrik Hiebert, Peggy Althoff, and Fritz Fischer, *U.S. History: American Stories* (Chicago: National Geographic Learning, 2017), 4–7.

³⁶ “Social Science, Grade 7: Native American Identities: Woven Across Time,” district document, Illinois, City: Large (2022). Vagueness about Native American origins is occasionally reinforced by “time immemorial” framings—most prominent in Washington, where it serves as the title for a state-created curriculum. The phrase also appears in state guidance from Alaska, Montana, and Oregon and is currently up for approval in the Illinois legislature. See Illinois HB 1633 (2024).

³⁷ “Middle School Washington State Tribal History, Since Time Immemorial—Land Based People,” district document, Washington, City: Large (2020).

³⁸ Minnesota Department of Education, *2021 Minnesota K–12 Academic Standards in Social Studies (Commissioner Approved Draft)* (2021).

guiding questions that teachers pose or are encouraged to pose to their students.³⁹ Sometimes these are clumsy rankings or flat binaries, as in an assessment that asks, “Who colonized the New World Best?”, a debate on whether “Sitting Bull [was] an American Hero,” or a resource that asks students to choose whether they want to make a Wanted poster or a Hero poster for a Comanche war chief.⁴⁰ Attempts to squeeze Native history into civic frames are common, as in a prompt that asks how America was “a land of political, economic and social opportunities for indigenous peoples.”⁴¹ Elsewhere, district guidance awkwardly encourages teachers to take a mythbusters approach, asking students to surface their own stereotypes about Indians in order to demonstrate that Native history has been distorted.⁴² In other cases, questions about Native history are posed as policy issues to be debated: “Should the United States have allowed American Indians to retain their tribal identities?” “Have Native Americans been treated fairly by the United States government?” “Why do you think the government does not give back the stolen land to the Native American nations it was taken from?”⁴³

In more than a few instances, questions about Native history take an affective turn.⁴⁴ Some districts have developed lessons around progressive civic rituals, asking students to design their own land acknowledgment or to fill in the blanks on a premade template.⁴⁵ Occasionally, historical Indians are recruited as a set of perspectives through which to evaluate contemporary civic questions. Having students use Native American history to decide whether they “want to be part of the environment or dominate the environment” is likely asking too much of students and of Native history.⁴⁶

Placing episodes of Native American history within larger thematic or comparative units has the potential to move teachers and students away from civic meditations, but here Native American histories also get divorced from their political contexts. Comparing

³⁹ Civic-sentimental approaches to teaching Native history are not new. For early 19th-century examples, see Carolyn Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers: Making an American Public after the Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 104–09.

⁴⁰ “Warm Up to Social Studies, Grade 7: Part 2,” multidistrict document, Texas (2021); “American Heritage Course/Curriculum Guide,” district document, Iowa, Town: Remote (undated).

⁴¹ “Grade 8 United States History,” district document, Connecticut, Suburb: Large (2023).

⁴² “Investigation 2: How Native American Stereotypes Developed Throughout History,” district document, Illinois, City: Large (2022).

⁴³ “Grade 11 Social Studies,” district document, Illinois, Suburb: Large (undated), 1–6; “Social Science, Grade 7: Native American Identities: Woven Across Time,” district document, Illinois, City: Large (2022).

⁴⁴ “Grade 8: Tragedy of the Native,” teacher document, Iowa, Rural: Fringe (undated); “Social Science, Grade 7: Native American Identities: Woven Across Time,” district document, Illinois, City: Large (2022).

⁴⁵ Land acknowledgment activities appear in “Indivisible: What Unites Communities?” district document, Washington, Suburb: Large (2021); “Native Land Teacher Guide 2019,” district document, Iowa, City: Small (2019); “Simulation: Create a Land Acknowledgement,” district document, Illinois, City: Large (2022).

⁴⁶ “Middle School Washington State Tribal History, Since Time Immemorial—Land Based People,” district document, Washington, City: Large (2020).

“Native and Mexican American struggles” or whether “Native American and African American experiences [were] similar in nineteenth-century America” might lead students toward the discovery of unique and contrasting histories. But in listing optional examples of a “struggle for equality over time,” placing Wounded Knee alongside the Seneca Falls Convention and the Freedom Riders likely stretches the thematic tent too far.⁴⁷

More successful attempts at thematic organization take seriously the continuities and consequences that run between successive eras of federal Indian policy and Native social and political life today. A Connecticut unit takes a long view, directing teachers to trace “shifts in policy and social opinion . . . that led to removal in the 1800s and relocation in the 1950s and the impact of these forced migrations . . . reservation sovereignty and the assimilation efforts both desired and forced.”⁴⁸ As with other topics we appraised, stronger lessons on Native history deploy perspective-taking as a constructive route to understanding the historical contingencies and cultural contexts that defined moments of encounter or conflict. These can appear reductive, as in activities that ask students to create fictionalized journal entries or fill-in speech bubbles for both wagon train settlers and Plains Indians in the 1840s.⁴⁹ But insofar as they go beyond the initial act of imagination and invite students to read about the outlooks, interests, ambitions, and anxieties that individuals brought to a crucial moment, this is a step in the right direction. More sophisticated lessons put students directly among Native and US perspectives. A lesson in Iowa on the Horse Creek Treaty and Fort Laramie Treaty asks students to examine the historical peculiarities and civic legacies of 19th-century treaty-making.⁵⁰ Some lessons enrich the era of removal by taking competing perspectives within Native polities seriously. A unit that asks “What path offered the best chance of survival for the Cherokee in the Early 1800s: staying in their original territory or removal to the West?” offers multiple points of view from within a single Indian nation.⁵¹ In contrast to the tendency to assemble a list of Native leaders into a portrait gallery of military resistance, lessons like these give teachers time and space to treat individual Indigenous leaders as historical actors facing complex and contested decisions.

⁴⁷ “US History 1: The Postwar Boom, Chapter 27,” district document, Illinois, Suburb: Large; “US History Course Outline,” teacher document, Illinois, Suburb: Large; “US History Unit Planner: Freedom and Reform, 1–4,” district document, Illinois, Suburb: Large (undated).

⁴⁸ “US History 1 Movements of People, 2–3,” district document, Connecticut, City: Midsize (2018).

⁴⁹ TCMPS, Instructional Focus Document, Grade 8 Social Studies, Unit 7, multidistrict document, Texas (undated), 4.

⁵⁰ “Northern Plains Treaties: Is a Treaty Intended to Be Forever? National Museum of the American Indian,” teacher document, Iowa, Rural: Fringe (2018).

⁵¹ “8 Social Studies Unit 2, 3–4,7,” district document, Iowa, City-Midsize (undated).

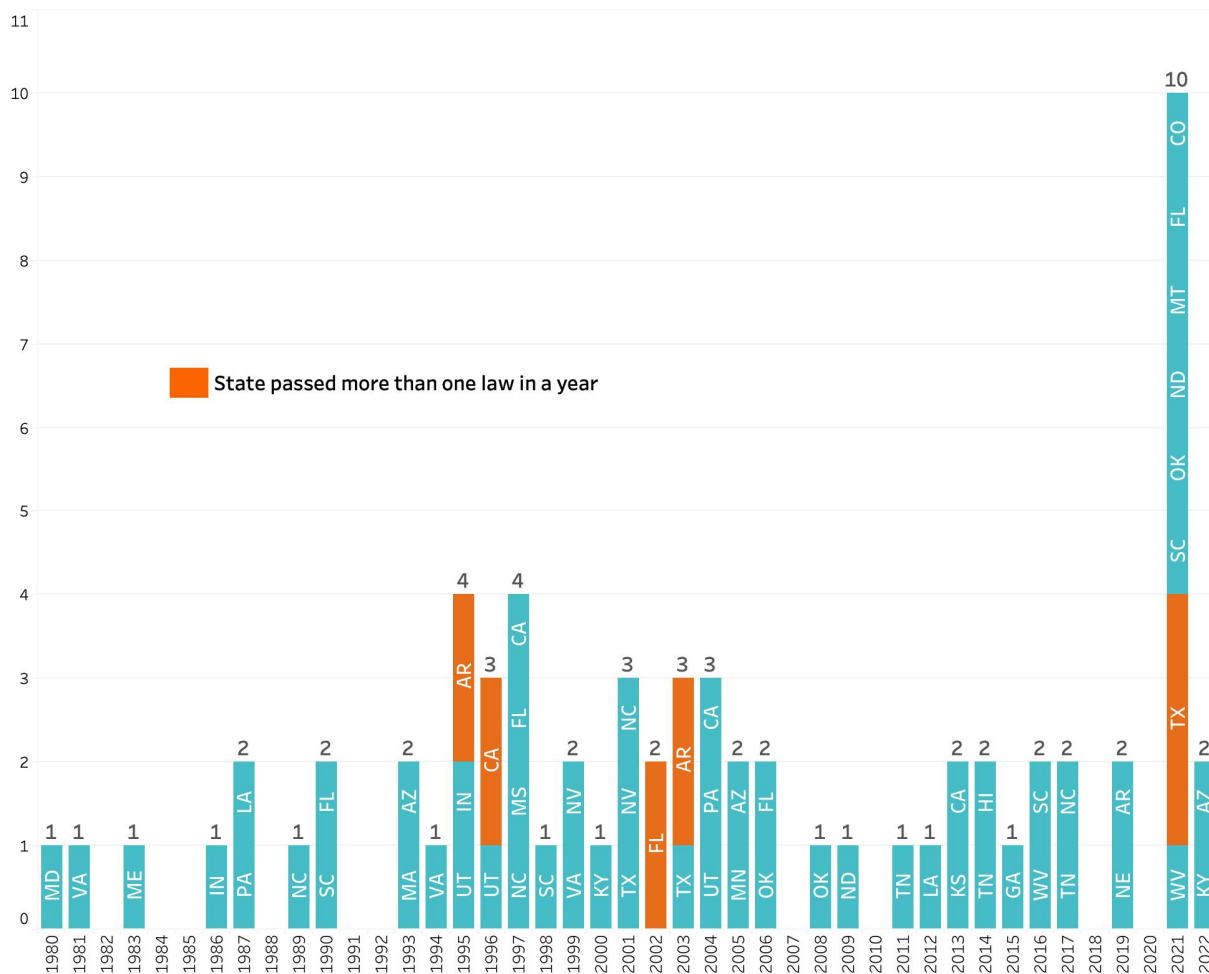
The Founding Era

Of the six topic areas we appraised, the founding era is most readily recruited for acts of popular and civic memory. It is the top producer of recognizable historical figures (Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Hamilton), core texts (the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and Bill of Rights), and political watchwords (freedom, democracy, equality). For state legislators, founding documents are something like a renewable political resource. They are the one set of primary sources that earn explicit mention in legislation aimed at shoring up civic education or patriotism among the young (Fig. 36).

Prominent civic education nonprofits benefit from these waves of attention, producing a high volume of K–12 curricular content that speaks specifically to the founding era. iCivics, the Bill of Rights Institute, and the National Constitution Center provide resources frequently cited by teachers. Over half of surveyed teachers named the American Revolution and founding era among their three favorite topics to teach—the highest of any subject area. The founding was also the second highest ranked topic (after the Civil Rights Movement) for high-priority coverage. Asked to explain, teachers most cited the notion of a civic origin story. As one Connecticut teacher put it, learning about the founding is “knowing what being American was supposed to be and how our government was set up.”⁵²

⁵² Connecticut Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 5.

Fig. 36: Legislation Mandating or Encouraging the Study of Founding Documents, 1980–2022 (n = 69)



Historians of the revolution and early republic have periodically had difficulty squaring their view of a dynamic and diversifying subfield with the folk enthusiasms and civic rationales that have kept the founding era alive in K–12 curriculum and popular culture.⁵³ Since the 1990s, a steady production of consumable histories of the revolutionary generation, including bestselling biographies, HBO miniseries, and a hip-hop Broadway musical, has been fed by the work of some historians while drawing sharp criticism from others.⁵⁴ In the second half of the 2010s, the traditional choreography for

⁵³ For a contemplation, see Jane Kamensky, “Two Cheers for the Nation: An American Revolution for the Revolting United States,” *Reviews in American History* 47 no. 3 (September 2019): 308–18.

⁵⁴ See H. W. Brands, “Founders Chic,” *The Atlantic*, September 2003; David Waldstreicher, “Founders Chic as Culture War,” *Radical History Review* 84 (Fall 2002): 185–94; Ken Owen, “Historians and *Hamilton*: Founders Chic and the Cult of Personality,” *The Junto: A Group Blog on Early American History*, April 21, 2016, <https://earlyamericanists.com/2016/04/21/historians-and-hamilton-founders-chic-and-the-cult-of-personality/>. For a variety of engagements with the *Hamilton* franchise, see the special issue of *Journal of the Early Republic* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2017).

public fights over the founding shifted, with some progressives reviving formerly impolite stances *against* the founding itself.⁵⁵ The most prominent critical take was the *New York Times Magazine*'s 1619 Project.⁵⁶ Conservatives seized on the publication's civic provocation—that Americans should equate their nation's "true founding" with slavery and racism.⁵⁷ As the titles of several rejoinders made clear—President Trump's 1776 Commission, Hillsdale College's 1776 Curriculum, and the 1776 Unites Campaign—some conservatives sought to reassert the virtue and primacy of the revolution against its detractors. The ensuing culture wars, which included 11 state bills that singled out the 1619 Project for prohibition, proceeded without addressing the question at issue: What version of the American founding were students actually learning?

In state standards with specified chronological content, the founding era is never absent. In some cases, the founders even earn a quotation in the introductory statements of state education agencies, as officials invoke free self-government to justify the function of social studies education.⁵⁸ In many states, the era gets a double dose of coverage, with civics and government classes dwelling on the founding and often assessing content knowledge in a state-mandated civics test (on the books in 18 states).⁵⁹ Civic imperatives weigh heavily on the structure of some textbook and curricular units, pitching toward a Constitution-centered exposition. (The widely used iCivics curriculum refers to its revolutionary-era material as the "Road to the Constitution."⁶⁰) In some cases, the pressure to make the era's events relevant to civic questions or contemporary issues

⁵⁵ See, for example, Dylan Matthews, "Three Reasons the American Revolution Was a Mistake," *Vox*, July 2, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/7/2/8884885/american-revolution-mistake>; Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Letter to My Son," *The Atlantic*, July 4, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>; Adam Gopnik, "We Could Have Been Canada: Was the American Revolution Such a Good Idea?," *New Yorker*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/15/we-could-have-been-canada>.

⁵⁶ For the original, see "The 1619 Project," *New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 2019, https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/full_issue_of_the_1619_project.pdf. For supportive commentary, see Ibram X. Kendi, "The Hopefulness and Hopelessness of 1619," *The Atlantic*, Aug 20, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/historical-significance-1619/596365/>; Adam Serwer, "The Fight over the 1619 Project Is Not about the Facts," *The Atlantic*, December 23, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/historians-clash-1619-project/604093/>.

⁵⁷ Historians were immediately divided on whether the project's interpretive flaws were disqualifying or merely distracting. For historians' public critique of the 1619 Project, see Tom Mackaman, "An interview with historian Gordon Wood on the *New York Times*' 1619 Project," *World Socialist Website*, November 27, 2019; Tom Mackaman, "An interview with historian James McPherson on the *New York Times*' 1619 Project," *World Socialist Website*, November 14, 2019; Sean Wilentz, "American Slavery and the Relentlessly Unforeseen," *New York Review*, November 19, 2019; Sean Wilentz, "A Matter of Facts," *The Atlantic*, January 22, 2020; James Oakes, "What the 1619 Project Got Wrong," *Catalyst*, 5, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 8-47. For historians publicly supportive of the 1619 Project, see David Waldstreicher, "The Hidden Stakes of the 1619 Controversy," *Boston Review*, January 24, 2020; Woody Holton, "The Declaration of Independence's Debt to Black America," *Washington Post*, July 2, 2021; Ta-Nehisi Coates, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Martha Jones, "We Stand in Solidarity with Nikole Hannah-Jones," *The Root*, May 25, 2021.

⁵⁸ See, for example, introductory language in state standards for Louisiana, South Dakota, and Virginia.

⁵⁹ "Social Studies Standards Map," AIR, updated June 4, 2024, <https://www.air.org/social-studies-standards-map>.

⁶⁰ iCivics, "Road to the Constitution," <https://www.icivics.org/curriculum/road-constitution>.

produces awkward framings: “What has changed since then? What hasn’t?” Clumsy jumps to the present can be especially jarring in C3-style inquiry arc lessons, which are designed to end with a student-designed plan to “take informed action.” One Washington lesson on the dynamics of loyalty and opposition during the revolution ends with students being asked whether they will stand or kneel the next time the national anthem is played or Pledge of Allegiance is recited.⁶¹ In another, an inquiry centered on the Boston Tea Party is meant to prepare students to “identify an example of injustice in their school or community.”⁶²

While many instructional materials instill a sense of drama in the lead-up to independence, the sudden shift to founding documents after the revolution often drains the early republic of its verve.⁶³ As a Washington teacher explained, the early republic “is the unit that I teach civics and government.”⁶⁴ The “3 branches of Government, Electoral College, 3/5 Compromise, Bill of Rights, impeachment, etc.” was as much as one Alabama teacher said they had time for once past the revolution.⁶⁵ The early national period was far less popular than the revolution among surveyed teachers and selected as challenging by 32 percent. Teachers cited the difficulty of convincing students that “the growing pains . . . [of] being a brand new nation” was in fact a “big deal.”⁶⁶ Others had trouble getting themselves excited about the era. In the words of a Virginia teacher: “War of 1812, Era of Good feelings? Just skip ahead to Jackson.”⁶⁷

As “first half” US history topics, the American Revolution and early republic suffer when course sequences split content between middle and high school. In at least 23 states, advanced study of the founding era is not mandated at the high school level. This might account for some noticeable limitations in coverage. Seen from one angle, curricula on the revolution remain anchored in traditional modes of historical narrative, with a focus on elite political actors, pivotal moments of rebellion, the military chronicle of the War for Independence, and a focus on founding documents. The Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights are sometimes accompanied by excerpts from *Common*

⁶¹ “Loyalty or Opposition: What Is More Important for Citizenship,” teacher document, Washington, City: Small (undated).

⁶² “Boston Tea Party: Activism or Vandalism?,” multiple appearances: district document, Texas, City: Large (undated); district document, Virginia, Suburb, Large (undated).

⁶³ Diane Hart, et al., *History Alive! The United States Through Modern Times* (Rancho Cordova, CA: Teachers Curriculum Institute, 2021).

⁶⁴ City Washington Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22.

⁶⁵ Rural Alabama Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22.

⁶⁶ Suburban Virginia Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22.

⁶⁷ Suburban Virginia Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22.

Sense, the Articles of Confederation, the Federalist Papers, Washington’s Farewell Address, and Paul Revere’s engraving of the Boston Massacre. Textbooks echo these notes by including the standard documents in special sections or back matter. The curricula across our sample states show broad agreement regarding the main characters, events, and documents worthy of coverage.

Consensus doesn’t preclude nuanced treatment, however. Historians might wonder at the persistence of “salutary neglect” as a conceptual frame for 18th-century British North America, but they would find less to argue with in the many lessons that capture the competing perspectives, contingent decisions, and escalating misunderstandings that took colonists from resistance to rebellion to independence.⁶⁸ Indeed, when we asked surveyed teachers to articulate what they felt was most worth remembering about the era, an emphasis on contingency and complex causation prevailed—more so than in their discussion of other topics.⁶⁹ Teachers remind students that “it was a complicated, divisive time” and “that it wasn’t a foregone conclusion” with “no guarantee of success when it all started.”⁷⁰ The notion of “multiple perspectives” can come across as something of a shallow slogan in social studies. But in some units on the American Revolution, the different perspectives among British and colonial actors are presented as dynamic and complex causes of historical change, rather than simply evidence of diverse points of view.⁷¹ Many teachers stressed the notion of divided sentiment (loyalists versus patriots) as an indicator of the conflict’s uncertain outcome.⁷² Asking whether the revolution was avoidable or how the Constitution’s many compromises were generated, as a number of lessons do, pulls students above the fray to

⁶⁸ In K–12 curricula and textbooks, “salutary neglect” remains ubiquitous. For scholarly skepticism, see T. H. Breen, “Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution: Revisions *Once More* in Need of Revising,” *Journal of American History* 84, no. 1 (June 1997): 13–39; Holly Brewer, “The Myth of ‘Salutary Neglect’: Empire and Revolution in the Long Eighteenth Century,” in *The Cambridge History of the Age of Atlantic Revolutions*, volume 1, *The Enlightenment and the British Colonies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

⁶⁹ These are, of course, no less important to scholarship on the era. See John Murrin, “1776: The Countercyclical Revolution,” in *Revolutionary Currents: Nation Building in the Transatlantic*, Michael A. Morrison and Melinda Zook, eds. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 65–90.

⁷⁰ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 14, quotes from Illinois Teacher, Rural: Distant; Washington Teacher, City: Large; Connecticut Teacher, Rural: Fringe.

⁷¹ These lessons might be seen as the durable legacies of now-classic works: Gordon S. Wood, “Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (January 1966): 3–32, and Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

⁷² “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 14, multiple responses: Rural Illinois Teacher; Rural Illinois Teacher; City Illinois Teacher; City Connecticut Teacher; Suburban Connecticut Teacher; City Pennsylvania Teacher; Suburban Pennsylvania Teacher; Town Pennsylvania Teacher; City Iowa Teacher; Rural Iowa Teacher; Rural Iowa Teacher; City Texas Teacher; Town Texas Teacher; Rural Alabama Teacher; Rural Colorado Teacher; City Virginia Teacher; Rural Virginia Teacher; Rural Virginia Teacher; Rural Washington Teacher.

see how differing points of view actually propelled conflict, why chronology matters, and pushes them to contemplate how things might have turned out differently.⁷³

A variety of activities ask students to put themselves in the position of a colonist or a British official at various stages of the conflict: investigating the crime scene at the Boston Massacre; judging the strategic wisdom of the Boston Tea Party; assessing the arguments of loyalists and patriots; deciding whether to quit or persevere at Valley Forge; reenacting the Constitutional Convention debates over the Great Compromise.⁷⁴ Role-playing lessons have become more and more sophisticated, aided by video-gamified platforms and an expansion of roles beyond binary choices (loyalist versus patriot; Federalist versus Antifederalist). One newer unit on the revolution divides the question of independence into three options—loyalty, neutrality, or rebellion—and then further disambiguates each position with sources from colonists, Native people, and enslaved and free Black people. Rather than render a single judgment, students are assigned distinct historical roles—such as a Quaker merchant, an immigrant barmaid, a frontier farmer, an enslaved teenager, or a female Wampanoag sachem—with the expectation that each will come to a distinct conclusion about the conflict.⁷⁵ In another widely used unit, a gamified version of the ratification debates puts students in the role of a pamphleteer who, on the basis of interviews with various social types from across the newly independent states, must make a case either for or against the Constitution.⁷⁶ These approaches offer advantages: an emphasis on the social geography of colonial and postrevolutionary societies; a sense of the distinct material and intellectual problems that Independence and the Constitution were proposing to solve; and the notion that the outcome was “far

⁷³ “Was the American Revolution Avoidable?” (2015), multiple appearances: “United States History 11th: Grade, Unit 1,” district document, Washington, City: Midsize (undated); 6th Grade History Scope and Sequence, Virginia, Suburb: Large (2023); “U.S. History 8th Grade, Unit 2,” Texas: City, Midsize (2021); “Unit Outcomes,” Colorado, Town: Remote (undated); “Yearly Planning Guide,” Texas, City: Large (2021). It should be noted that one of these often-used inquiries contains an erroneous date (a document is dated 1766 when it should be 1776). A teacher who misses this may have students making the wrong argument.

⁷⁴ “Historical Scene Investigation: The Boston Massacre,” district document, Texas, City: Large (undated); “Inquiry: Boston Tea Party: Activism or Vandalism?,” 6th Grade History Scope and Sequence, Virginia, Suburb: Large (2023), 4; “Loyalist Lesson Plan,” SHEG, district document, Washington, City: Midsize (undated); “Unit: Revolutionary Era,” Grade 8 American History, district document, Texas, Suburb: Large (2021), 3.; “Primary Source Lesson Plan-Patriots and Tories,” “U.S. History 8th Grade, Unit 2,” district document, Texas: City, Midsize (undated), 1; “DBQ Project: Mini-Q: Valley Forge: Would You Have Quit?,” multiple appearances: district document, Colorado, Suburb: Small (undated); Texas, Suburb: Large (undated); teacher document, Iowa, Rural: Distant (undated); Virginia, Suburb: Large (undated); “6th Grade History Scope and Sequence,” Virginia, Suburb: Large (2023).

⁷⁵ “The American Revolution: Experiences of Rebellion,” Choices Curriculum, Brown University, 2016, <https://www.choices.edu/curriculum-unit/american-revolution-experiences-rebellion/>.

⁷⁶ iCivics, “Race to Ratify,” (2019), <https://www.icivics.org/node/2599424/resource>, multiple appearances: district document, Pennsylvania, City: Large (undated); Pennsylvania, Rural: Fringe (undated); Pennsylvania: City: Small (undated).

from certain.”⁷⁷ But a full immersion in inclusive role-playing scenarios may blur the real distinctions of status, power, and leverage that distinct social groups wielded during the 18th century. A sense of the real events may be tough to discern after a student has chosen their own adventure. From what we can infer about actual teacher practice, these are likely minor concerns; teachers deploy role-play as a supplement, not a substitute, for direct instruction about the course of events.

A few lessons address historical interpretation and introduce students to historiographic debates. Sometimes, debates are framed too bluntly, as in a side-by-side (and perhaps unfair) choice between Howard Zinn and Bernard Bailyn.⁷⁸ Elsewhere, as in an inquiry task that asks students to assess the radicalism of the American Revolution, a spread of historiographic positions is summarized—but the scholarship referenced ends in the 1990s.⁷⁹ More common than historiographic engagement were surveyed teachers’ many references to a set of “myths” that they suspected their students may have absorbed in elementary school or by way of “marble statues” that freeze the founders in civic memory. In broad strokes, surveyed teachers expressed a commitment to nuance and complexity, reminding students that the revolution resists a “good guys versus bad guys” plot, and that an appreciation for the great leaders and great achievements of republicanism requires a sense of what now might appear “flawed” and “imperfect.”⁸⁰ Mythbusting, however, often requires teachers to cover the myth in order to refute it. A worthy ambition in one Washington unit to “tell untold stories” of the revolution relies on portraying the 1975 cartoon *Schoolhouse Rock* as if it were still a “commonly told” version of the founding.⁸¹ A unit in a large Illinois district extends critical postures into blunt abstractions, setting the revolution and early republic under an umbrella of “Power, Privilege, and Oppression.”⁸² The unit exemplifies the tensions between “critical” and “inclusive” histories; the names of ordinary and marginal people earn mention while revolutionary leaders are disappeared into “systems of power.”⁸³

⁷⁷ Town Iowa Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 14.

⁷⁸ “Assessing the Historical Truth behind the Declaration of Independence,” teacher document, Colorado, Suburb: Large (2019).

⁷⁹ “How Revolutionary Was the American Revolution,” teacher document, Washington, City: Small (2015).

⁸⁰ For “flawed,” “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 14, multiple responses: Town Alabama Teacher; Town Iowa Teacher; Suburban Illinois Teacher; City Virginia Teacher; City Washington Teacher; Town Washington Teacher; Town Washington Teacher. For “imperfect,” Suburban Pennsylvania Teacher; Town Alabama Teacher; Suburban Illinois Teacher; Suburban Virginia Teacher.

⁸¹ “Untold Stories of the Revolution,” district document, Washington, Suburb: Large (2023).

⁸² “Unit 3: Lesson 3: Remember the Ladies,” district document, Illinois, City: Large (2022).

⁸³ “Grade 7 Social Science: Unit 2,” district document, Illinois, City: Large (2022).

Notwithstanding the many incentives to diversify and complicate traditional versions of the founding, many teachers clearly find the high drama of elite politics an irresistible part of teaching the subject. Several positively referenced the popularity of the Broadway musical, enjoying “an excuse to watch *Hamilton* in class.”⁸⁴ A Hamilton versus Jefferson framing of the politics of the early republic provides a durable framework for lessons. Combined with document-based role-playing activities, these are fine opportunities for students to historicize and dramatize the decision-making that drove important events. It’s also clear that teachers and curricular developers are eager to lend that same sense of drama to the disruptions and decisions that nonelites faced during the revolutionary moment. In recent decades, historical scholarship has greatly expanded the revolutionary narrative to include a wide range of participants, a heightened appreciation for the contingency of the imperial crisis, a transnational Atlantic milieu, the disruptions and transformations to land and labor, the consequences for pro- and antislavery politics, a prominent role for Native Americans, and analyses of gender, environment, consumer culture, print culture, and honor culture, to name just a few topics.⁸⁵

The need to present the revolution’s legacy as a balancing act between achievements and flaws suggests a strong urge to draw lessons and legacies from the founding era across longer spans of time. Here, some ideological inflections were apparent. In one subset were teachers who stressed the founding as inspiration, an exemplary story of bravery and unity among underdogs who bore great risks and awful costs to stand against tyranny. For these teachers, the revolution imparts a clear lesson (echoed in teacher responses about the Civil Rights Movement) that Americans must continue to be protective of their rights and “stand up for themselves” against oppression.⁸⁶ Another group of teachers hoped that students would remember the revolution’s limitations: that American notions of liberty, equality, and rights were neither imagined for nor enjoyed by people who were not “rich white landowners.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Iowa Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22.

⁸⁵ See Woody Holton, “American Revolution and Early Republic,” in *American History Now* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); Andrew Shankman, ed., *The World of the Revolutionary American Republic: Land, Labor, and the Conflict for a Continent* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), esp. part 1; Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750–1804* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016); Sean Wilentz, *No Property in Man: Slavery and Antislavery at the Nation’s Founding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); Paul J. Polgar, *Standard-Bearers or Equality: America’s First Abolitionist Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Gordon S. Wood, *Power and Liberty: Constitutionalism in the American Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁸⁶ Quote from Suburban Pennsylvania Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 14; similar sentiments in City Texas Teacher; Suburban Colorado Teacher; Town Iowa Teacher.

⁸⁷ City Texas Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 14.

Other teachers referenced the participation (rather than the exclusion) of nonelites (slaves, women, servants, farmers), making some version of the case that the revolution “was fought by everyone.”⁸⁸ One Virginia teacher split the difference between pluralism and pessimism, explaining, “women and African Americans made significant contributions but did not benefit from the revolution in the same way that white men did.”⁸⁹ The most common ideological synthesis among teachers described the founding as an expansive and unfinished struggle—a combination of teachers’ historical sense of the American Revolution’s unexpected outcome and narrow social origins with their civic faith in democracy and equality. As an Illinois teacher summed up, “it’s a work in progress.”⁹⁰

Westward Expansion

John Gast’s painting *American Progress* is one of the most assigned sources for students studying westward expansion. It appears everywhere from textbooks to document activities and teacher slideshows. Its title and its depictions of light and darkness, Native Americans, buffalo, wagons, trains, settlers, waterways, and the female figure of Columbia leading the way allow students to question the assumptions behind its 1872 creation and explore the stories that 19th-century Americans told about their migration and settlement in the trans-Mississippi West.⁹¹ But the painting is also a handy symbol for the overemphasis on the concept of Manifest Destiny that predominates in K–12 materials.⁹² Some teachers acknowledge, as much recent historiography stresses, the contingency of how westward expansion occurred “in stages for various reasons.”⁹³ Perhaps only a handful of teachers today present westward expansion as “inevitable,” but a certain tragic

⁸⁸ Suburban Illinois Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 14.

⁸⁹ Rural Virginia Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 14.

⁹⁰ Suburban Illinois Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 14.

⁹¹ “Yearly Planning Guide 2021–2022,” Sub-Unit Plan 6.1, Overview of Manifest Destiny, 7 & 2, district document, Texas, City: Large (2021).

⁹² Over 400 surveyed teachers mentioned Manifest Destiny as a key “takeaway” for students during their study of westward expansion, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 15.

⁹³ Pennsylvania Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 15; For historians’ increasing skepticism of the manifest destiny concept, see William Cronon, “Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 2, (April 1987):157–76; Clyde Milner, ed., *Major Problems in the History of the American West: Documents and Essays* (Lexington, KY: D. C. Heath and Company, 1989); Pekka Hamalainen and Samuel Truett, “On Borderlands,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (September 2011): 338–61; Stephen Aron, *Frontiers, Borderlands, Wests (American History Now)* (Washington, DC: AHA, 2012); Andrew C. Isenberg and Thomas Richards Jr., “Alternative Wests: Rethinking Manifest Destiny,” *Pacific Historical Review* 86, no. 1 (February 2017): 4–17; Daniel J. Burge, *A Failed Vision of Empire: The Collapse of Manifest Destiny, 1845–1872* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022); Elliott West, *Continental Reckoning: The American West in the Age of Expansion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023).

fatalism about the history of the West still prevails.⁹⁴ As one teacher put it, “The country had to grow, but unfortunately at the expense of Native Americans.”⁹⁵ Maps of 19th-century territorial acquisitions and dates are a standard visual reference in most textbooks, necessary context that nonetheless can reinforce a deterministic sense of westward expansion. Some teachers and instructional materials have made conscious efforts to avoid this trap, moving beyond the broad outline to root these processes in local stories that do not require an emphasis on Manifest Destiny for students to understand this history.

Many teachers present westward expansion as a mixed bag of “pros and cons” or “good and bad” changes, leaving it up to students to draw their own conclusions about its meaning. A few place significant emphasis on character, telling students that “explorers and settlers were determined and resilient” with “grit,” while still noting “the costs.”⁹⁶ Meanwhile, a different subset of teachers focus on what they see as the injustices of the era, in some cases using academic terms like “settler colonialism” to emphasize systemic and ideological continuities across broader time spans and geographies.⁹⁷ These teachers may point to the ongoing rationale for later imperialist ventures beyond North America as a key to the present, fueling “our belief in American exceptionalism and nationalistic pride.”⁹⁸

Some events most commonly included in this unit are the Louisiana Purchase, the Mexican American War, the Mormon migration to Utah, discoveries of gold, and the Homestead Act. Teachers also cover developing technologies in the form of canals, steamboats, railroads, and telegraphs that accelerated expansion and altered concepts of time and space.⁹⁹ Though much of westward expansion takes place before the Civil War, topics such as the Homestead Act and railroads carry into and past 1865. This can make coverage of the topic into the 1860s and early 1870s challenging, given most teachers

⁹⁴ One-word takeaway from Colorado Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 15.

⁹⁵ Alabama Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 15.

⁹⁶ Colorado Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 15.

⁹⁷ “Westward Expansion: A New History,” 2nd ed., Choices Curriculum, Brown University, 2021. Historians actively debate the utility of settler-colonial theory in American history. See Samuel Truett, “Settler Colonialism and the Borderlands of Early America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (July 2019): 435–42; Jeffrey Ostler and Nancy Shoemaker, “Settler Colonialism in Early American History: Introduction,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (July 2019): 361–68; Rachel St. John, “Reconsidering Expansion,” *American Historian*, no. 40 (Summer 2024): 30–35, <https://www.oah.org/tah/expansion/reconsidering-expansion/>.

⁹⁸ Illinois Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 15; “United States History Unit 2, 6,” district document, Iowa, City-Midsize (undated).

⁹⁹ “Curricular Documents, Legislation for Westward Expansion,” district document, Washington, City: Midsize (undated). Mentioned by 40 respondents as a takeaway, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 15.

focus on the Civil War and Reconstruction in those decades. This break in the focus on westward expansion is further reinforced by the fact that most first-half and second-half US history courses end and begin in 1877—a break that can last several years between middle and high school coursework.

Surveyed teachers want to ensure their students understand the West was “not just barren land,” even if they lack the time to delve into Indigenous history.¹⁰⁰ Indian removal, specifically the Trail of Tears, frequently is taught in this era but often disconnected from the broader story of westward expansion.¹⁰¹ Rarely do standards or curriculum give much detail about the dozens of distinct efforts undertaken by Native tribes to resist or determine the path of their removal. And seldom does the curriculum tie the removal of Indians to other antebellum events, including the expansion of slavery.¹⁰² A significant number of teachers connect westward expansion to slavery and the Civil War, but the common organization of units with titles such as “Road to the Civil War” makes it likely that Native removal will be told as a tragic standalone, while events such as the Missouri Compromise are swept into forward motion as a preface to the war.¹⁰³ Connecting removal, slavery, and sectionalism—as New York’s standards gesture toward—is the exception rather than the rule.¹⁰⁴

While many lesson plans continue to present westward expansion as white people dispossessing Native peoples of their lands, a growing number of resources present the West as a more dynamic and diverse place, especially after the Civil War.¹⁰⁵ Teachers and content providers emphasize the region’s diverse communities to push against “classic Hollywood stereotypes” of white, loner cowboys.¹⁰⁶ Even within the broader outline of this core conflict, some teachers present the topic “not merely a simple one vs. one event but rather a multi-decade long series of conflicts between settlers, state militias, federal

¹⁰⁰ Colorado Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 15.

¹⁰¹ “US History Course Outline, 3,” district document, Illinois, Suburb: Large (undated). “Native Americans of the Southeast,” teacher documents, Alabama, City: Midsize (undated). “Unit 3 Map,” district document, Illinois, Rural: Distant (undated).

¹⁰² Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); John Bowes, *Land Too Good for Indians: Northern Indian Removal* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017); Christopher D. Haveman, *Rivers of Sand: Creek Indian Emigration, Relocation, and Ethnic Cleansing in the American South* (Norman: University of Nebraska Press, 2020); Claudio Saunt, *Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2021).

¹⁰³ “Road to the Civil War Unit Plan,” district document, Iowa, Rural: Distant (undated).

¹⁰⁴ New York State Department of Education, *New York State, Grades 9–12, Social Studies Framework* (2014), 36.

¹⁰⁵ Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom’s Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

¹⁰⁶ “Crash Course US History: Westward Expansion,” Crash Course US History, accessed May 14, 2024, <https://thecrashcourse.com/courses/westward-expansion-crash-course-us-history-24/>.

military, and numerous tribes.”¹⁰⁷ In many cases, lessons try to incorporate as many identities as possible, including women, Chinese, and African Americans, to answer broader questions about the range of actors and how they are described.¹⁰⁸ While Rhode Island’s standards describe westward expansion as the “westward movement of white Americans,” other approaches address immigration as an important part of the story of how Americans moved west.¹⁰⁹ This is also the topic in which teachers are most likely to discuss the history of the environment, including how western landscapes were shaped and altered in this process. For example, one Texas district curriculum asks, “How did westward expansion affect the landscape and people that interacted with it?”¹¹⁰

A local approach to westward expansion helps to ground this vast history in specific and relevant details; this is true even in places outside the West. For example, New York state standards make connections between the history of the Erie Canal and westward expansion.¹¹¹ Michigan’s standards bring in the Treaty of Chicago and the Treaty of Fort Wayne.¹¹² In Colorado, they explore the state’s gold rush.¹¹³ Many states in the West and Midwest credit railroads as the central engine for development, and this is reflected in their lessons.¹¹⁴ A Colorado lesson allows students to explore Denver’s development through city and railroad maps of the surrounding region.¹¹⁵ One Washington teacher noted the relevance of place, writing, “As I live and teach in the West and my school is named to honor a local native chief, the effects of Westward Expansion on the native cultures is always embedded in this topic.”¹¹⁶ National curriculum providers also present in-depth histories of specific places, Native nations, and conflicts while connecting these to themes such as “cultural misunderstanding, adaptation, cooperation, and conflict.”¹¹⁷

On the other hand, some curriculum plans indicate overly general questions and descriptions that give students the wrong impression about the significance of westward expansion. A lesson from one Texas district reads, “Migration of large numbers of people

¹⁰⁷ Colorado Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 15.

¹⁰⁸ “Eighth Grade Social Studies, 2022–2023, Unit Plan 4, An Expanding Nation, Inquiry Kit: Full Steam Ahead! The Tracks of Transformation!” district document, Colorado, Suburb: Small (2022).

¹⁰⁹ State of Rhode Island Department of Education, *Rhode Island Social Studies Standards* (2023), 250.

¹¹⁰ “8.6 Westward Expansion, Human and Environmental Interactions, 2,” district document, Texas, City: Midsize (undated).

¹¹¹ New York State Department of Education, *New York State, Grades K–8, Social Studies Framework* (2016), 55.

¹¹² Michigan Department of Education, *Michigan K–12 Standards: Social Studies* (2019), 80.

¹¹³ Colorado Department of Education, *Colorado Academic Standards: Social Studies* (2020), 89.

¹¹⁴ Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011); John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

¹¹⁵ “Eighth Grade Social Studies, 2022–2023, Unit Plan 4, An Expanding Nation, Inquiry Kit: Full Steam Ahead! The Tracks of Transformation!” district document, Colorado, Suburb: Small (2022).

¹¹⁶ Washington Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 15.

¹¹⁷ “Westward Expansion: A New History,” 2nd ed., Choices Curriculum, Brown University (2021).

tend to create big changes.” The map paired with the lesson goes on to define westward expansion as an inevitable process: “Manifest Destiny led to the settlement of the West and the expansion of American territory to the Pacific Ocean by 1850.”¹¹⁸ More commonly, teachers impose Manifest Destiny as the explanation for all of westward expansion in a way that extends beyond the events that actually occurred.¹¹⁹ Some lesson plans take immigration and “urban crowding” as an inevitable force for westward expansion.¹²⁰ Role playing activities, such as a “Land Run Simulation” regularly with this topic, may give students the wrong impression about westward expansion as a process without costs or allow stereotypes to fill in the gaps.¹²¹ The varied religious, sectional, national, and economic goals that contributed to westward expansion—and the role of Native people in shaping and stalling its dynamics—do not always get the full attention of teachers and students. A close reading of Gast’s *American Progress* is a fine start, but many teachers would be excited to learn how historians of the West now paint a different picture without Manifest Destiny as the core concept.

Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction

The Civil War is a popular topic among teachers, with 30 percent of surveyed teachers choosing it as their favorite—the fourth highest ranked among all eras.¹²² Based on our interviews, surveys, and curricula appraisals, there no longer appears to be any serious controversy among teachers about slavery’s central role as the cause of the Civil War.¹²³ Virtually all teachers we surveyed are teaching their students that the Civil War was “about slavery,” as one respondent put it.¹²⁴ Perceiving that students arrive to the study of slavery with pre-existing assumptions (such as the Lost Cause mythology), teachers pointedly call out these misconceptions. For example, in a classroom activity used in a

¹¹⁸ “8th Grade, Unit 7: Westward Expansion, 2,” district document, Texas, City: Large (2022).

¹¹⁹ Andrew C. Isenberg and Thomas Richards Jr., “Alternative Wests: Rethinking Manifest Destiny,” *Pacific Historical Review* 86, no. 1 (February 2017): 4–17.

¹²⁰ “US History 11, Unit 2, Growth and Industry, 5,” district document, Texas, City: Midsize, (2015).

¹²¹ “Social Studies Curriculum Guide, USHII, Westward Expansion, 1,” district document, Virginia, City: Small, (undated); “Oregon Trail Simulation,” teacher document, Illinois, Suburb: Large (undated).

¹²² “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 23.

¹²³ For accounts of unreconstructed US history, see Cory Turner, “Why Schools Fail to Teach Slavery’s ‘Hard History,’” *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, February 4, 2018,

<https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/02/04/582468315/why-schools-fail-to-teach-slaverys-hard-history>; Nikita Stewart, “Why Can’t We Teach This?” *New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/19/magazine/slavery-american-schools.html>; Joe Heim, “What Do Students Learn About Slavery? It Depends Where They Live,” *Washington Post*, August 28, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/08/28/what-do-students-learn-about-slavery-it-depends-where-they-live/>.

¹²⁴ City Illinois Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 24.

large Texas district, students look at 2011 polling data showing widespread public opinion that states' rights, rather than slavery, was the main cause of the war. Students are asked to compare those results with what they've learned and to discuss how these responses might have changed in recent years.¹²⁵ The signals are clear: teachers expect students to know that slavery was the core issue of the Civil War. Of surveyed teachers, 71 percent listed slavery and the antebellum South as a high-priority topic.¹²⁶

Yet slavery still could be covered more comprehensively. Slavery was singled out by teachers as a uniquely challenging topic due to its potential for controversy. In our survey, 21 percent of teachers reported that slavery was challenging to teach, peaking at 29 percent in Iowa and Pennsylvania.¹²⁷ When asked why, 43 percent of those teachers said it provokes conflict, a much higher percentage than any other content area in our survey. This latter statistic sets slavery even further apart from other challenging topics, where teachers pointed instead to time constraints, lack of training, or lack of student interest as the major hurdles.¹²⁸ For teachers who said they had personally experienced objections to anything they taught, slavery was by far the leading specified topic of controversy.¹²⁹ The pressure that teachers perceive regarding the teaching of slavery can come from a number of directions: conservatives claiming that slavery is divisive, students disengaging because they feel that it's been done too much, or parents preferring that African American history emphasize postemancipation triumphs over the sorrows of slavery.¹³⁰

Unlike most other content areas that can be more neatly periodized (e.g., Jacksonian America, the Civil War, the New Deal), slavery coexists with the entirety of the first half of US history. Even so, curricular coverage of slavery clusters around particular historical moments, especially constitutional debates and plantation slavery in the antebellum South, the latter often standing in for the various practices and cultures of slavery that existed throughout the United States before 1865. In most curricula, these eras are presented primarily as a political story: rising tensions, diverging economies,

¹²⁵ "Yearly Planning Guide 2021–2022, Sub-Unit Plan 7.3, Sectionalism and Causes of the Civil War," district document, Texas, City: Large (2021), 9. Many teachers can make it clear the extent to which the Civil War was about slavery and the states' rights to determine their policy regarding slavery.

¹²⁶ "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, questions 21 and 38. For question 21, responses were divided among a chronological list of 27 content areas, and respondents were allowed to select whether they considered the area to be high, mid, low, or no priority. Question 38 asked respondents to describe objections they had personally experienced through an open response form.

¹²⁷ "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 21.

¹²⁸ "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22.

¹²⁹ "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 38.

¹³⁰ See [Part 3](#), "Vibes and Pressures," for further discussion.

competing interpretations of the Constitution, and an increasing sense of morality. In the classroom, characters like Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, Harriett Beecher Stowe, William Lloyd Garrison, or Robert E. Lee typically drive the story. Students read core documents such as Douglass's 1852 "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" and Lincoln's 1858 acceptance speech for the Republican nomination.¹³¹ Common events include the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Compromise of 1850, and John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. During the war itself, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Battles of Antietam and Gettysburg, and the surrender at Appomattox are presented as the key turning points and events to understand.

Beyond Douglass, the rich historiography regarding free and enslaved Black people's role in abolition rarely appears.¹³² Students often learn about ordinary Black freedmen from a classroom viewing of the 1989 film *Glory*.¹³³ Likewise, evidence of what slavery was like and how it changed appears in some cases but is usually limited.¹³⁴ Textbooks generally include information about the daily lives of enslaved people, though perhaps in recognition of the younger audience, they skirt important violent aspects such as sexual assault. The textbooks we appraised had a separate chapter section dedicated to social life under slavery.¹³⁵ In modular primary source lessons, however, students are more likely to learn about slavery by examining runaway slave advertisements. These sources document the cruelty of enslavement without much sense of the interior lives and desires of the enslaved.

The study of Reconstruction usually occurs at the end of the first half of the US history course, which could come at the end of a semester or school year, depending on state and local course sequencing. This is a logical placement, but it relies on strict pacing to ensure enough time to study the topic. Indeed, 62 percent of teachers who described teaching Reconstruction as challenging listed time constraints as the reason. Many teachers present both the "successes and failures" but tend to focus more on the "challenges and failures of Reconstruction policies."¹³⁶ As one Pennsylvania teacher put

¹³¹ "What Caused the Civil War?" (Evanston, IL: DBQ Project, 2008).

¹³² Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*.

¹³³ Suburban Illinois Teacher, "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 24; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 201), May 16, 2023; "United States I: Chapter 11 Unit Plan," district document, Illinois, Suburb: Large (2014).

¹³⁴ "Grade 8 Social Studies Curriculum," district document, Connecticut, Suburb: Large (2016).

¹³⁵ See, for example, "The Worlds of North and South" and "African Americans in the Mid-1800s" in Hart, et al., *History Alive! The United State Through Modern Times*; "Slavery and Resistance" and "Slavery and Racism" in Hiebert, Althoff, and Fischer, *American Stories*.

¹³⁶ "Common Assessment, Pacing, & Standards for US History, 'United States History Theme 1: The Civil War and Reconstruction,'" district document, Illinois, City: Midsize (2021).

it, “We started a path of change but quit when it was getting hard.”¹³⁷ Students learn not only about the federal government’s role but are frequently asked, “How did African Americans work to improve their lives in Reconstruction?”¹³⁸

In most locales, students are more likely to learn about the daily lives of African Americans during the study of Reconstruction than the Civil War or antebellum era. For example, a common question asks the extent to which the lives of formerly enslaved persons improved after the war. To respond students must first answer “What were the conditions of slavery before the Civil War?”¹³⁹ Students consistently learn about the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments in a Reconstruction unit. The expansion of the federal government in this period is not always explicitly covered, as the spotlight instead falls on the federal government’s failure to protect the lives and rights of freedpeople from racist violence and Redeemer state governments. Rarely do teachers describe why the will to enforce the nation’s laws foundered; there are not individual agents of change in this era so much as a generic sense of “government.” In both the Civil War and Reconstruction units, teachers point to these eras’ lasting consequences and legacy that connects to the present, with Reconstruction often described as unfinished.¹⁴⁰

Despite the national story, local variation and focus provide some of the most engaging lessons that go deeper than the dichotomies of North and South and black and white. Louisiana’s state standards include a study of “the experiences of enslaved people on the Middle Passage, at slave auctions, and on plantations,” as well as the inclusion of the “capture of New Orleans” as a major Civil War battle. In the West, students are more likely to learn about the expansion of the federal government, connecting it to conflicts with Native peoples. Rhode Island’s state standards provide evidence of Black people’s involvement in the war with the 14th Rhode Island Heavy Artillery. The state also has one of the few standards with any mention of women in relation to the Civil War.¹⁴¹

Though teachers and curriculum writers understand and convey the broad political outline of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, there are plenty of moments of misinterpretation. Rarely do curriculum documents reflect on how slavery and racism

¹³⁷ Urban Pennsylvania Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 17.

¹³⁸ “Grade 10 US History Curriculum Guide, Unit 10: Reconstruction, student packet,” teacher document, Alabama, City: Small (undated).

¹³⁹ “C3 materials,” district document, Illinois, Suburb: Large (undated).

¹⁴⁰ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, questions 16 and 17.

¹⁴¹ Louisiana Department of Education, *Louisiana Social Studies Standards* (2022), 49; “Reconstruction and the West,” district document, Iowa, City: Small (undated); State of Rhode Island Department of Education, *Rhode Island Social Studies Standards* (2023), 133. In this case, nurse Katherine Prescott Wormeley and abolitionist Julia Ward Howe are included.

were mutually constructed and how both changed over time and place.¹⁴² White supremacy appears in some histories as a constant, unchanging feature, as opposed to a politically contingent and historically constructed phenomenon.¹⁴³ In some cases, moralistic simplifications for the origins of slavery stand in for a rich historiographic debate, reflecting ahistorical emphases similar to those we found in some Native American history lessons.¹⁴⁴ A unit in one Connecticut district was designed to treat slavery with depth and emotional resonance, but it ends up flattening the origins of racial slavery in the early modern Atlantic world by using a simplified account of “the world’s first racist” in the Portuguese royal court.¹⁴⁵ Elsewhere, the urge to connect slavery to racism’s longer arc in American life encourages imprecise and disorienting analogies. A Pennsylvania unit invites students to interpret a viral birdwatching incident in Manhattan in 2020 with reference to slave laws passed in the wake of Bacon’s Rebellion in colonial Virginia.¹⁴⁶ In contrast, material that engages with recent debates about contextualizing or removing Civil War monuments that celebrated the Confederacy are often more nuanced, sometimes even grounded in the district’s own history.¹⁴⁷ In dispelling “myths” about slavery, another lesson plan wants students to know that slaveowners did not own slaves “just to be mean.”¹⁴⁸ While the premise sounds flippant, such a prompt can be generative as a pivot to explore the matrix of economic motives that sustained slavery. Pure economism has its limits as well; while no teachers we spoke to or surveyed apologize for slavery in their courses, their efforts to explain the economic existence of slavery sometimes give it a sense of inevitability that should not be applied to either its existence or its end. Along these lines, curriculum and textbooks consistently overemphasize the importance of Eli Whitney and his cotton gin to the spread of plantation slavery.¹⁴⁹ The

¹⁴² Barbara J. Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America,” *New Left Review* 1, no. 181 (1990): 95–118; Rebecca Anne Goetz, “Rethinking the ‘Unthinking Decision’: Old Questions and New Problems in the History of Slavery and Race in the Colonial South,” *Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 3 (2009): 599–612; Jason Eden, “Answers to the Question: ‘Who Developed Race?’” *The History Teacher* 44, no. 2 (2011): 169–77.

¹⁴³ “The Civil War and the Meaning of Liberty,” 1st ed., Choices Curriculum, Brown University, 2019.

¹⁴⁴ See Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975); David Brion Davis, “American Slavery and the American Revolution,” in *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*, Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, eds. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1983); Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M. H. Camp, eds., *New Studies in the History of American Slavery* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006).

¹⁴⁵ “Stamped Unit” teacher document, Connecticut, Suburb: Midsize (2023).

¹⁴⁶ “Atlantic Slave War: Investigating the Origins and History Unit by African American History,” district document, Pennsylvania, City: Large (2021).

¹⁴⁷ “Sheff v O’Neill,” teacher document, Connecticut, Suburb: Midsize (2023). “Unit Development Project: Reconstruction and Racial Segregation,” district document, Virginia, Suburb: Small (undated); “Civil War Lesson Plans,” district document, Washington, Suburb: Large (undated).

¹⁴⁸ “Lesson plans grade 7,” teacher document, Iowa, Rural: Fringe (undated).

¹⁴⁹ Peter Coclanis, Review of *Inventing the Cotton Gin: Machine and Myth in Antebellum America* by Angela Lakwete, *Technology and Culture* 45, no. 4, (2004): 834–35; Lapansky-Werner, et al., *US History Interactive*, 198;

curriculum furthest afield came from an Alabama district that described Reconstruction as the era when “mercy turn[ed] to vengeance,” as the North left the South “humiliated and desperate.”¹⁵⁰ Few teachers seem to have an appropriate understanding of sharecropping, calling it among other things “a legal form of slavery,” missing the significance of emancipation. Often the topic of sharecropping is most clearly and accurately presented in textbooks that note its negotiation and explain the range of labor systems including sharecropping, share-tenancy, and tenant farming.¹⁵¹

Finally, a sizable minority of teachers spend excessive time in the Civil War era discussing military history, going beyond the key turning points to discuss upwards of 20 battles.¹⁵² Crash Course even recorded an episode where they “just list some facts” about battles to address teachers’ requests.¹⁵³ For some teachers, the military conduct of the war is clearly a topic of personal interest—a passion that sends them to reenactments on weekends and battlefield sites over the summer.¹⁵⁴ While these hobbies can translate to interesting field trips and artifact show-and-tells, an excessive focus on military history leaves out far too much of the other histories that students should learn about. Rarely do these battle histories explore how enslaved people freeing themselves by running to the US Army, the enlistment of freedmen, and the Emancipation Proclamation were tied to both the military necessities of the war and the process of emancipation.¹⁵⁵ Taken together, instructional treatments of the Civil War and Reconstruction are roughly in line with scholarly interpretations of the era’s political history, but the insights of social and economic history could stand to be more coherently incorporated.

Industry, Capital, and Labor

The most thematic of the six appraised content areas, “Industry, Capital, and Labor” crosses the late 19th century and early 20th centuries. Commonly grouped under the

Hart, et al., *History Alive! The United States Through Modern Times*, 236; “Westward Expansion: UBD,” district document, Virginia, Suburb: Small (2022).

¹⁵⁰ “Curriculum Map—US History 10th grade,” district document, Alabama, Town: Distant (undated).

¹⁵¹ “8th Grade U.S. History, Unit 16: Reconstruction, 1,” district document, Texas, Suburb: Large (2023); Lapansky-Werner et al., *US History Interactive*, 350; Hart et al., *History Alive!*, 309.

¹⁵² “Ch 15 causes of the CW, and Ch 16 and 17 CW part I and II,” teacher document, Texas, Suburb: Midsize (undated).

¹⁵³ “Crash Course US History Battles of the Civil War,” US History Crash Course, accessed May 13, 2024, <https://thecrashcourse.com/courses/battles-of-the-civil-war-crash-course-us-history-19/>.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with middle school social studies teacher (MST 310), May 18, 2023; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 109), September 15, 2023.

¹⁵⁵ Gary W. Gallagher and Kathryn Shively Meier, “Coming to Terms with Civil War Military History,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 4, no. 4 (2014): 487–508; Manisha Sinha, “Architects of Their Own Liberation: African Americans, Emancipation, and the Civil War,” *OAH Magazine of History* 27, no. 2 (2013): 5–10.

umbrella of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, these themes capture the emerging industrialized economy as it radically transformed the United States and American life.¹⁵⁶ Every shift within the economy created both grievances and opportunities. Technology surged, capital accumulated, workers organized, and a class of educated bourgeois reformers tried to dam up the resulting tensions. The many framings of this era as “the making of modern America” underscore the sense among some that the turn of the 20th century is an origin story for the second half of the US survey.¹⁵⁷

Teaching the scale of economic change after Reconstruction alone is daunting, and teachers report struggling to make it digestible. Of the 19 percent (301) of respondents who deemed the Gilded Age and Industrial America one of the three most challenging topics to teach, 66 percent further clarified that they find students too uninterested, disengaged, or academically unprepared.¹⁵⁸ Teachers frequently commented that students struggle to keep up, agreeing with one teacher who acknowledged that the era is full of “so many themes and forces that overlap” that “it can be difficult to have depth and to provide conceptual understanding, without going on and on and on.”¹⁵⁹ Another teacher responded, “There are so many threads to tie together in this time period—westward expansion, Native Americans, industrialization, immigration, fallout from Reconstruction. It’s a lot for the kids to track.”¹⁶⁰ Some reported feeling pressure to streamline the “slog,” as a Virginia teacher put it: “I either have to leave a lot out or just pretend everyone is still excited.”¹⁶¹ The Progressive Era yielded similar results, which is unsurprising given that it is most often positioned in curricula as a direct response to Gilded Age conditions.¹⁶² Teachers made a case for its relevance to students’ lives while simultaneously expressing frustration that they cannot make their students connect to the material. A Texas teacher complained, “A lot of the changes/reforms during this era have been around for 100+ years so [the students] think it is obvious.”¹⁶³ Given these

¹⁵⁶ The threads interwoven in “Industry, Capital, and Labor” present a particular challenge, as themes stretch past 1914 or 1920 (commonly cited endpoints of the Progressive Era), and into the New Deal and the beginning of World War II. Our research focused on coverage of these themes during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era while looking for threads of continuity during the 1920s, Great Depression, and New Deal.

¹⁵⁷ Arizona Department of Education, *Arizona History and Social Studies Standards*, 47; “SMS Social Studies Weekly Lesson Plans,” teacher document, Alabama, Town: Distant (2021); “2022–2023 Curriculum Guide,” district document, Colorado, City: Midsize (undated).

¹⁵⁸ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 21.

¹⁵⁹ Suburban Illinois Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22J.

¹⁶⁰ Suburban Connecticut Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22J.

¹⁶¹ Virginia City Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22J.

¹⁶² The topics earned 14 percent and 57 percent, respectively. “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire 2023, questions 22J and 22L.

¹⁶³ Texas City Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22L.

obstacles, it is no surprise that most Gilded Age and Progressive Era curricula approach the eras by streamlining lesson plans, simplifying coverage, and outsourcing subject matter to documentaries that teachers can manage and students can tolerate.

Teacher sentiment perhaps can be traced to the uneven treatment of the Gilded Age in the K–12 US history sequence. Roughly half of high school US history state standards suggest or require a second-half US history course (the only US history course that the vast majority of high school students must take), usually beginning after Reconstruction in 1877. As the Gilded Age is generally covered in the first month of the semester, often at least three years after students took their last US history class (and with a new-to-them history teacher to boot), it is a difficult task for students to enter the door capable of engaging with the “complex mix of groups, ideas, and agendas that all melt into a ‘soup’ of movements throughout the early 20th century.”¹⁶⁴ Across interviews, teachers spoke of the shaky transitions between middle school and high school history classes. The Gilded Age would, of all subject areas, be the rubric content area most disadvantaged by the scope and sequence structure that constitutes something of a consensus in the United States. Even where there is a mandate for coverage of the Gilded Age, external factors can inflect the seriousness with which it is taught. As one Virginia teacher wrote, “Virginia’s [Standards of Learning] requirements/state test do not really push a lot in this area . . . so I do not stress much of it in class.”¹⁶⁵

Despite evidence of different historiographic strains in Gilded Age and Progressive Era curricula, lessons rarely align entirely with any orthodoxy. One strain is the exploration of “modernity,” a present-focused approach whereby teachers offer a collection of sometimes connected, sometimes stochastic events designed to add up to something that students can recognize in today’s United States. This emphasis is front and center in course and unit titles like the “Beginning of Modern America” or the “Emergence of Modern America.”¹⁶⁶ What “modernity” means is never defined, but its curricular starting line in the Gilded Age communicates a thesis: to understand the United States today, one must understand the history of accumulation—of money, people, land,

¹⁶⁴ Suburban Alabama Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22L.

¹⁶⁵ Suburban Virginia Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire (2023), question 18. Some standards and districts cover the Gilded Age and Progressive Era in middle school, but the frequency and extent of this coverage is unclear. In interviews, teachers consistently noted that first-half classes in the middle grades encounter substantial barriers to make it to Reconstruction by year’s end, from which we can reasonably extrapolate that Gilded Age coverage before high school is even rarer.

¹⁶⁶ Arizona Department of Education, *Arizona History and Social Studies Standards*, 47; “SMS Social Studies Weekly Lesson Plans,” teacher document, Alabama, Town: Distant (2021); “2022–2023 Curriculum Guide,” district document, Colorado, City: Midsize (undated).

resources, influence, and, as teachers often emphasize, social problems.¹⁶⁷ The accumulation of capital, in particular, is linked with the rapidly multiplying ills of Gilded Age society, whether through wealth inequality or the rise of philanthropy, both of which are covered fairly well among collected curricula. While the corporate monopoly and its mechanisms, like vertical and horizontal integration, are standard fare, materials generally avoid deeper discussion of economics or even more developed histories of blockbuster businesses like Standard Oil or J. P. Morgan and Co., while the men behind them, like John D. Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan, appear on the scene already wealthy and influential.

Even as Gilded Age titans appear in curricula as historical forces in themselves, no one seems content to let them off the hook. Instances of soft-pedaling or skipping over some of the more disreputable actions of Gilded Age tycoons are rare. The historically acceptable but nonetheless pejorative term “robber baron” appears frequently. A few teachers note that rationalizations for wealth inequality rested on social Darwinism.¹⁶⁸ Curricula that lean into “haves” and “have-nots” framing are more likely to present one or more of a host of similarly simplified dichotomies—of “good and bad,” “winners and losers,” “positive and negative,” “better and worse”—all of which highlight the inextricable ties between capitalist accumulation and the historical evolution of more sociological or political conceptions of inequality and progress.¹⁶⁹ As five respondents said and others paraphrased, “All that glitters is not gold.”¹⁷⁰ One particularly awkward question—“Which term best describes Andrew Carnegie? Philanthropist or Robber Baron?”—highlights how

¹⁶⁷ For evolution and debate over key terms and efforts at synthesis, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage, 1955); Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966); Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877–1919* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988); Sean Dennis Cashman, *America in the Gilded Age: From the Death of Lincoln to the Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: New York University Press, 1984); John Milton Cooper, *Pivotal Decades: The United States, 1900–1920* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990); Olivier Zunz, *Making America Corporate, 1870–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Leon Fink, *In Search of the Working Class: Essays in American Labor History and Political Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: America in the Gilded Age, 1865–1905* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877–1920* (New York: Harper, 2009); Robert D. Johnston, “The Possibilities of Politics: Democracy in America, 1877 to 1917,” in *American History Now*, Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 98–124; Sven Beckert, “History of American Capitalism,” in *American History Now*, Foner and McGirr, eds., 314–35.

¹⁶⁸ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire (2023), question 18: Suburban Illinois Teacher; Suburban Washington Teacher.

¹⁶⁹ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire (2023), question 18, multiple responses: Rural Texas Teacher; Urban Texas Teacher; Suburban Connecticut Teacher; Suburban Illinois Teacher.

¹⁷⁰ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire (2023), question 18, multiple responses: Suburban Alabama Teacher; Rural Alabama Teacher; Rural Iowa Teacher; Suburban Illinois Teacher; Suburban Pennsylvania Teacher.

curricula lean into moral questions about the Gilded Age.¹⁷¹ In these depictions, the Progressive Era is an attempt to solve the problems of the Gilded Age, often creating more problems of its own through its middle-class standards and embrace of social Darwinism, among other ideologies.¹⁷²

In a complementary framing, the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era are presented with a more sociological approach, populated by masses, systems, and ideologies. These concepts are either distilled into keywords or used as actors to drive much of the era's "plot." These clusters of concepts often appear with lists of nominalized verbs and adjectives: "Industry, Reform, and the West"; "Industry/ Cities/ Progressives/ Immigration"; and "Industrialization, Progressivism, and Immigration."¹⁷³ Framing the era through these broad concepts suggests that to understand the United States today, one must understand how the masses, through mass movement, mass politics, mass protest, mass organization, mass demographics, altered and vied for power within the American social contract.¹⁷⁴

This sociological approach can effectively convey the scale of the Gilded Age. But it is employed with varying amounts of rigor, ranging from a simplified, sociology "lite" to a deeper, more disciplined use of sociological tools in historical analysis.¹⁷⁵ On the more prevalent simplified side of the spectrum, keywords from both the Gilded Age and Progressive Era form a barrier of anonymity that only the most well-known and elite historical actors, like Carnegie and Rockefeller, can breach. Arizona's recommended "course considerations" are representative here, suggesting coverage of the "emergence of Modern America including but not limited to industrialization, immigration and migration, progressivism, Federal Indian Policy, suffrage movements, racial, religious and class conflict, the growth of the United States as a global power and World War I and its aftermath."¹⁷⁶ Lessons using the simplified approach certainly appear more scientific,

¹⁷¹ "Andrew Carnegie," multidistrict document, Texas (2020).

¹⁷² Rural Texas Teacher, "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire (2023), question 18.

¹⁷³ "US History (8th Grade) Unit 5," district document, Texas, City: Midsize (2021); "First Semester Priority Standards and Common Assessments," district document, Iowa, City: Small (undated); "Unit Template," district document, Iowa, Rural: Distant (undated); "Industrialization, Progressivism & Immigration Unit Test," district document, Colorado, Suburban: Large (undated).

¹⁷⁴ For the idea that "there are no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses," see Raymond Williams, *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 18.

¹⁷⁵ The sociological approach takes for granted the existence of these categories, when in fact some were emergent or reformed in this period. For historical accounts, see Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Burton Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976).

¹⁷⁶ Arizona Department of Education, *Arizona History and Social Science Standards* (2019), 47.

with rapid-fire statistics and myriad graphs of varying quality, but agency among the masses is largely missing, as are connections between new immigration, unsafe workplaces, and child labor, particularly within the labor movement. More so than any other moment in US history except perhaps the invention of the cotton gin, many lessons lean into the idea of technology shaping and often “improving” daily life in this era.¹⁷⁷

A small but exemplary number of standards and curricula present industry, capital, and labor as inextricably intertwined with and in reaction to one another and historical conditions. Mississippi’s standards juxtapose these concepts and require students to understand the interaction between big concepts and individuals. Under “Industrialization,” students compare “population changes caused by industrialization,” “the nativist reaction evidenced by the Chinese Exclusion Act,” “the impact of industrialization on workers,” “living conditions linked to urbanization,” the “social gospel,” Jane Addams, and the rise of labor unions.¹⁷⁸ Teachers find ways to frame the complexity of the era through case studies of representative figures (e.g., Andrew Carnegie) or local history (e.g., the spread of technology and its hastening of migration in the post–Civil War West, or the “Silver Kings of Colorado”).¹⁷⁹ As in other content areas, some of the most helpful lessons are grounded in state and local history, asking students to consider nearby industrial sites, which may or may not still be in operation.¹⁸⁰ In one Connecticut district’s case study on the labor movement, students examine the labor context of the Gilded Age and ask “what caused the development of labor unions,” “what issues did labor organizations seek to address and what methods/tactics did they utilize,” “how did industry attempt to deter organized labor,” and “to what degree did labor unions succeed in their goals during the Gilded Age?”¹⁸¹ Other districts add texture to the labor movement, either by requiring students to “analyze the causes and effects of labor conflict in various industries and geographic regions” or learn about the “growth of labor unions and various radical movement which experienced various degrees of success in achieving

¹⁷⁷ Lapansky-Werner, et al., *US History Interactive*, 411, 372; “Unit 2 Planner,” district document, Connecticut, City: Midsize (2018); “Unit 2,” district document, Washington, City: Midsize (undated).

¹⁷⁸ USH-2.2–2.4, *Mississippi College-and-Career-Readiness Standards for the Social Studies* (2022), 93.

¹⁷⁹ “US History Pt 1 BOE Curriculum Guide 22–23,” district document, Colorado, City: Midsize (2022); Rural Colorado Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire (2023), question 18.

¹⁸⁰ “Grade 7 Social Studies Curriculum Map,” district document, Pennsylvania, Suburb: Large (undated); “Avondale Mills: A Change of Life for Alabamians,” Alabama Learning Exchange, Learning Resources, Social Studies, Grade 6 (2022); “Stamped Unit,” teacher document, Connecticut, Suburb: Midsize (2023).

¹⁸¹ “US History (Full Year—Revised),” district document, Connecticut, Suburban: Large (2023).

their goals,” including anarchism, socialism, the American Federation of Labor, and the Industrial Workers of the World among labor’s diverse camps.¹⁸²

Despite evidence that some teachers embrace the breadth of the early eras and iterations of the labor movement, the plurality of appraised materials are anemic on labor history, particularly prior to the New Deal expansion of labor laws. Important events like the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire are included in many US history curricula, but time is rarely taken to explore labor radicalism in New York City or the complex urban politics within which the event occurred. Labeling labor unions as just another reform movement in a roiling sea of reform movements, and as a consequence of a middle-class movement for reform, rather than a complex, multifaceted, and politically diverse movement with its own dramatic narratives and consequences, does not help explain the historical highs and nadirs of workers’ rights in the United States. Teaching the labor movement as another domain of a bourgeois reform movement alongside Upton Sinclair and Theodore Roosevelt not only ignores its early history (e.g., brotherhoods, trade unionism) but cleaves it from its dramatic ascendance during the New Deal. In Pennsylvania, one district provided a packet of primary sources on the Gilded Age and reform efforts, going in-depth on capital, reform, and regulation. In 58 pages, labor unions are mentioned only in passing in sections on social Darwinism and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.¹⁸³ On the other hand, some curricula ask questions such as “To what extent were lower class and working Americans left behind during the Progressive Era?”¹⁸⁴ And some textbooks have entire sections focused on the range of labor unions.¹⁸⁵

Despite relying more on a thematic approach than the five other appraised content areas, several key themes rarely appeared in appraised curricula, reflecting the choices teachers and curriculum providers make to avoid overwhelming students. For instance, international context for the era is rare, an unfortunate fact for the age in which the United States developed a truly global economy. Historians recognize that the era of industrialization was a global age, not just an American one, but curricular materials rarely mention other countries unless as part of a military contest. The global context for 19th-century imperialism is often left to world history classes, and the global origins of

¹⁸² “United States History Grade 11,” district document, Connecticut, Suburban: Large (2017); “9th Grade US History II,” district document, Pennsylvania, Suburban: Large (2021).

¹⁸³ “Unit 2 Resource Packets,” district document, Pennsylvania, Suburb: Large (undated).

¹⁸⁴ “Progressive Era Unit Calendar,” district document, Virginia, Suburb: Small (2022).

¹⁸⁵ Fredrik Hiebert, Peggy Altoff, and Fritz Fischer, *America Through the Lens: U.S. History, 1877 to Present* (Mason, OH: National Geographic Learning/Cengage, 2023), 159.

financial panics go unmentioned. Women are more likely to appear in coverage of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era than in preceding units, but a focus on the achievement of suffrage in 1920 tends to overshadow the diverse extent of women's movements across the 19th and early 20th centuries. Even when important themes like imperialism, immigration, environment, and labor appear, the causal links between them are often left unexplored.¹⁸⁶ Immigrants are pulled to the United States, but what pushes them, beyond the rare mention of famine or war, is underemphasized. The environment and Americans' concerns about environmental changes receive scant attention. Given how Americans' relationship with the natural world transformed in this era, and that economic growth was fueled not simply by technology and ideology but by fossil fuels, these intersections seem particularly relevant to understanding modern America and the modern world.

The Civil Rights Movement

Two aspects set the Civil Rights Movement apart from other content areas under appraisal. The Civil Rights Movement is the only content area that can be critiqued by still-living participants and witnesses. Relatedly, coverage of the Civil Rights Movement enjoys robust and widespread support, as demonstrated across social studies standards, state law, and teacher priorities. The movement's status as living history, civic monument, and historical turning point has put substantial pressure on all levels of public education bureaucracy to encourage curricular coverage.¹⁸⁷ Surveyed teachers ranked the Civil Rights Movement as the clear standout for priority coverage, with 81 percent identifying the topic as a "high priority." Including those who chose "mid-priority," the number rises to 94 percent, as close as teachers came to a unanimous statement regarding any survey question. In Alabama, where the topic's local significance is unavoidable, the number actually reached 100 percent. Among favorites, the Civil Rights Movement ranked third with 36 percent, trailing only the founding era and World War II. Teachers in Washington and Alabama registered the highest affinity for the civil rights movement, with 47 percent

¹⁸⁶ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 2001); Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

¹⁸⁷ For extended (and critical) discussion of the civic weight and political purposes placed on the era, see Peniel E. Joseph, "Waiting till the Midnight Hour: Reconceptualizing the Heroic Period of the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1965," *Souls* 2, no. 2, (Spring 2000): 6–17; Risa L. Goluboff, "The Lost Promise of Civil Rights," *Historically Speaking* 8, no. 6 (July/August 2007): 33–36; Jeanne Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018); Jana Weiss, "Remember, Celebrate, and Forget? Martin Luther King Day and the Pitfalls of Civil Religion," *Journal of American Studies* 53, no. 2 (May 2019): 428–48.

and 44 percent, respectively, citing the topic among their favorites to teach. In state standards with specified historical content, the Civil Rights Movement never fails to make an appearance, and state legislatures have issued multiple signals about the era's importance to civic knowledge.

The curricular dimensions of this topic originated with the organizers themselves. Educator-activists in successive eras forged networks for the promotion of what was then called Negro history and pushed against instructional materials that ignored or denigrated the dignity and agency of Black historical actors.¹⁸⁸ It was during the mass mobilizations of the 1960s that states first enacted laws and rules requiring the study of black (and other ethnic) accomplishments and contributions—and in some instances banning textbooks with racist depictions of African Americans.¹⁸⁹ During the late 1960s and early 1970s, some towns and cities introduced new courses or new materials with gestures toward Black studies, ethnic studies, or Afrocentric topics.¹⁹⁰ The embrace of the civil rights era itself as a pillar of civic education came later—made official in 1983 when Congress created a federal Martin Luther King Jr. Day.¹⁹¹ State legislators in the 1990s and 2000s launched a cascade of mandates, commissions, and supplementary resources on African American history. These initiatives often declined to choose between seemingly conflicting themes of trauma and triumph. As New Jersey's Amistad Commission (2002) put it, Black history embraced “the vestiges of slavery in this country and the contributions of African-Americans to our country.”¹⁹² As Civil Rights Movement

¹⁸⁸ See Hilary Moss, *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Audrey Thomas McCluskey, *A Forgotten Sisterhood: Pioneering Black Women Educators and Activists in the Jim Crow South* (Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014); Jarvis Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023). On local reform efforts in the 1930s and 1940s, see Zoe Burkholder, “Education for Citizenship in a Bi-Racial Civilization: Black Teachers and the Social Construction of Race, 1929–1954,” *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 335–63; Ian Rocksborough Smith, *Black Public History in Chicago: Civil Rights Activism from World War II into the Cold War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 15–48; Ashley D. Dennis, “The Intellectual Emancipation of the Negro: Madeline Morgan and the Mandatory Black History Curriculum in Chicago during World War II,” *History of Education Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (April 2022): 136–60; Michael Hines, *A Worthy Piece of Work: The Untold Story of Madeline Morgan and the Fight for Black History in Schools* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022).

¹⁸⁹ For the wave of Black history mandates and recommendations (some from state legislatures, some from state boards of education), see Rose Marie Walker, “Black Studies in Schools: A Review of Current Policies and Programs,” *Education U.S.A. Special Report* (Washington, DC: National School Public Relations Associations, 1969). Mandates tracked were California (1965), Oklahoma (1965), Michigan (1966), Illinois (1967), New Jersey (1967), Kentucky (1968), Pennsylvania (1968), Nevada (1968), Rhode Island (1968), Nebraska (1969), Maryland (1968), and Connecticut (1969). Walker identified prohibitions on discriminatory depictions in California (1961) and Connecticut (1969). For recent surveys of black history mandates and initiatives, see LaGarrett King, “The Status of Black History in US Schools and Society,” *Social Education* 81, no. 1 (2017): 14–18.

¹⁹⁰ See Rickford, *We Are an African People*; Todd-Breland, *A Political Education*.

¹⁹¹ For more analysis, see Denise M. Bostdorff and Steven R. Goldzwig, “History, Collective Memory, and the Appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Reagan's Rhetorical Legacy,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (December 2005): 661–90.

¹⁹² See [Part 2](#), “[State Legislation](#),” for further discussion.

participants aged (and sometimes became lawmakers), state legislatures passed more legislation requiring the study of the movement and its major figures. Approaches varied by state, with some introducing stand-alone legislation while others married the Civil Rights Movement to existing frameworks, attaching its history to the broader study of human rights or adding the era's key documents to a canon of required readings.¹⁹³

Echoing responses regarding the American Revolution, many surveyed teachers voiced their belief that the civil rights era imparted lessons about national character, sacrifice, and the need for active citizenship. Multiple teachers noted that the rights that students “take for granted” are owed to “the power of nonviolent activism” and the “sacrifices made by Civil Rights warriors” “who put their lives on the line.”¹⁹⁴ A substantial set of surveyed teachers stressed the “unfinished” or “ongoing” legacy of the movement even if they did not always agree on what that legacy was. For some, the relevance of the movement was that “it spread” to “a lot of other movements” for “many minority groups.” Some teachers linked the Civil Rights Movement to its proximate historical peers (e.g., feminism, gay liberation, the American Indian Movement, the Chicano movement) while others spoke more broadly of “issues that are still with us” or “messages [that] still ring true today.” Many teachers seemed interested in exploring the question of the mainstream Civil Rights Movement’s relationship to Black Power, if also divided about how best to achieve this. Some expressed a motive to distinguish Black Power from its more “conservative” precursors; others wanted students to share their view that Black Power “undermined” the broader movement; still others described Black Power as an “evolution” of diverse strands within a coalition.¹⁹⁵ At times, the attempt to expand the Civil Rights Movement into an analytical (rather than historical) concept can skew lessons toward abstraction. A Pennsylvania unit that asks students to “identify the tactics used by different minority groups to obtain equal rights [and] evaluate the success of each group in achieving their desired outcomes” sounds more like a civil rights rubric than civil rights history.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ See New York SB 7765 (1993).

¹⁹⁴ On taking rights for granted, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 19, multiple responses: City Alabama Teacher; City Colorado Teacher; Suburban Illinois Teacher; Suburban Illinois Teacher; Rural Illinois Teacher; Rural Pennsylvania Teacher; Suburban Virginia Teacher; Suburban Washington Teacher. On sacrifice, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 19, multiple responses: Suburban Washington Teacher; Suburban Washington Teacher; Suburban Washington Teacher; City Alabama Teacher; City Alabama Teacher; Suburban Alabama Teacher; Suburban Alabama Teacher; Rural Alabama Teacher; Suburban Iowa Teacher; Town Iowa Teacher; Rural Iowa Teacher.

¹⁹⁵ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 19, multiple responses: Town Alabama Teacher; City Illinois Teacher; Suburban Virginia Teacher; City Washington Teacher.

¹⁹⁶ “11th Grade Contemporary US and World History,” School Document, Pennsylvania, Suburb: Large (2021).

A smaller subset of teachers put a finer point on the notion of unfinished struggle, stressing that the Civil Rights Movement “did not produce full equality,” “did not solve racism,” and that segregated and unequal conditions continue to characterize contemporary life for many African Americans. Some offered political or structural explanations, citing King’s assassination, a “disillusionment with the increasingly violent protests,” a “conservative backlash,” “neoliberalism,” or “income inequality.”¹⁹⁷ Others shared more fatalistic views; as one Iowa teacher insisted, “fights that were fought . . . will still be going on long after we are all dead.”¹⁹⁸

While the Civil Rights Movement did not rank highly as a challenging topic to teach (only 10 percent ranked it a challenge) the subject was still flagged by more than 100 teachers as a flashpoint for controversy. Those who said they had difficulties cited students’ bad attitudes, parents’ pushback, or an ambient expectation that nothing too disturbing or negative (like lynching or massive resistance) be taught. A Texas teacher supposed that some students who resisted her lesson had learned about the Civil Rights Movement “at home with those who have lived through it.”¹⁹⁹ In contrast to those teachers who said they actively sought connections to the present, several teachers reported that they avoid “reference to present day systemic inequalities” for fear of “lead[ing] to current cultural and political disputes.”²⁰⁰ A handful of teachers specified that it was their discussion of recent protest movements associated with Black Lives Matter that had spurred local criticism. Some teachers found themselves saved by the bell. As one teacher admitted, the question of the era’s consequences and legacies is “usually rushed as its [the] last unit of the year.”²⁰¹

The typical instructional unit on the civil rights era anchors its timeline in leadership and law: *Brown v. Board of Education*, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In states where legislative events, key figures, and episodes are named and tested by the state education agency, teachers were even more likely to mention these specifics when we asked about key takeaways.²⁰² Beyond this common ground, however, instructional materials pull from a

¹⁹⁷ “Curriculum Map—US History 10th Grade,” district document, Alabama, Town: Distant, (undated); “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 19, multiple responses: Suburban Washington Teacher; City Colorado Teacher; Suburban Pennsylvania Teacher.

¹⁹⁸ Town Iowa Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 19.

¹⁹⁹ Rural Texas Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22.

²⁰⁰ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22: Rural Texas Teacher; Suburban Texas Teacher.

²⁰¹ Town Iowa Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 19.

²⁰² Responses from Texas teachers were particularly aligned in naming the same set of persons, events, and concepts.

wide spectrum of emphases and examples. Even in heavily standardized Texas, we encountered local variations on key themes, from Cold War contexts to profiles of massive resistance. There are signs that recent historiographic developments and debates—on the social breadth, geographic reach, temporal scope, and political character of civil rights struggles—are finding expression in curricular materials.²⁰³

To varying degrees, recent instructional materials make space for a longer and wider Civil Rights Movement. Some lessons state flatly that “the Civil Rights Movement began in the 1950s,” but even textbooks whose civil rights chapters begin with the *Brown* case in 1954 will introduce the episode with a prologue of preceding contexts and longer struggles.²⁰⁴ Other books go further, chronicling early 20th-century civil rights organizations, shifting legal strategies, and the labor, migration, and wartime contexts that afforded new venues and constituencies for activism in the 1940s.²⁰⁵ A subset of teachers also voiced their awareness that the Civil Rights Movement “isn't just a short term thing,” and that they try not to “start with the 1950s as if the movement just suddenly appeared.”²⁰⁶ Even some state standards have expanded the periodization of civil rights, as in Alabama’s two-part treatment, in pre- and post-1950 units, or the Texas-sized “American civil rights movement” lasting “from the late 1800s through the 21st century.”²⁰⁷ This expanded roster of antecedents and temporalities is a welcome development, so long as distinctive contexts, causes, and consequences remain in focus.²⁰⁸

²⁰³ For successive overviews of civil rights historiography, see Adam Fairclough, “Historians and the Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American Studies* 24, no. 3 (December 1990): 387–98; Steven F. Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement,” *American Historical Review* 96, no. 2 (April 1991): 456–71; Thomas C. Holt, “African-American History” in *The New American History*, ed. Eric Foner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997); Danielle L. Maguire and John Dittmer, *Freedom Rights: New Perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011); Emilye Crosby, ed., *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Thomas C. Holt, *The Movement: The African American Struggle for Civil Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). On longer periodizations, see Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1233–63; Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Dylan Penningroth, *Before the Movement: The Hidden History of Black Civil Rights* (New York: Liveright, 2023). On continuities with Black Power, see Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Peniel E. Joseph, ed. *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights–Black Power Era* (London: Routledge, 2013).

²⁰⁴ “US History, Unit 9: Civil Rights Movement,” Texas, Suburban: Large (2023); HMH Social Studies, *American History*, student edition (Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 717–19.

²⁰⁵ See Lapansky-Werner et al., *US History Interactive*, 487–93; 597–604; 713–18; 806–54.

²⁰⁶ Rural Iowa Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 19.

²⁰⁷ Alabama Department of Education, *Alabama Course of Study: Social Studies*, 2010, 35, 50; Texas Education Agency, *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills: United States History Studies Since 1877*, 2018, c, 9, A.

²⁰⁸ Any usable timeline must attend to the social and political realignments brought on by migration, depression, war, urbanization, education, and technology, and distinguish each generation of advocates from the next in terms of

Describing key takeaways on the topic, a predominant chorus of teachers framed their answers against a classically limited cast of characters, stressing that the movement was “more than MLK and Rosa.”²⁰⁹ More teachers made mention of Parks and King in their free responses explaining why they were *not* the only important figures than to identify that they were important. Multiple teachers stressed that students understand “the collective effort” of “countless activists” and “ordinary citizens” in a “grassroots movement.”²¹⁰ The importance of women’s leadership in the Civil Rights Movement was mentioned by a handful of teachers and is reinforced in some texts.²¹¹ Some districts and teachers linked to teaching materials developed by the nonprofit Teaching Tolerance (now Learning for Justice), which has made an explicit mission of moving teachers away from “a simple story” about the movement.²¹²

Among the stories targeted for complication is the classic historical fight card that pits King against Malcolm X. (The title bout format appears in other topic areas as well: Jefferson v. Hamilton, Garrison v. Douglass, Du Bois v. Washington). A widely used DBQ Project packet titled “Martin Luther King and Malcolm X: Whose Philosophy Made the Most Sense for America in the 1960s?” reveals how curriculum designers have tried to subvert the civic grudge match genre.²¹³ The prompt invites friction, but the selected documents undermine a simple antagonism, bringing the two figures into closer

philosophy, strategy, and opportunity for success. For a careful account of the connections and disjunctures between early 20th-century rehearsals of civil rights tactics and midcentury successes, see Thomas C. Holt, *The Civil Rights Movement: A Brief Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023). For more direct skepticism of the “Long Movement,” see Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies,” *Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 265–88.

²⁰⁹ Responses of this kind were widespread. AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 19, multiple responses: City Alabama Teacher; City Alabama Teacher; City Alabama Teacher; Rural Alabama Teacher; City Iowa Teacher; City Iowa Teacher; Rural Iowa Teacher; Rural Iowa Teacher; Rural Iowa Teacher; City Illinois Teacher; City Illinois Teacher; Suburban Illinois Teacher; Suburban Illinois Teacher; Town Illinois Teacher; Rural Illinois Teacher; City Pennsylvania Teacher; Suburban Pennsylvania Teacher; Suburban Pennsylvania Teacher; Suburban Texas Teacher; City Texas Teacher; City Virginia Teacher; Suburban Virginia Teacher; Suburban Virginia Teacher; Rural Virginia Teacher; City Colorado Teacher; Suburban Colorado Teacher; City Connecticut Teacher; City Connecticut Teacher; Suburban Connecticut Teacher; Suburban Connecticut Teacher.

²¹⁰ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 19, multiple responses: Town Iowa Teacher; Illinois Suburban Teacher; Rural Illinois Teacher; Suburban Pennsylvania Teacher; Rural Texas Teacher; City Texas Teacher.

²¹¹ “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 19, multiple responses; Town Texas Teacher; Suburban Texas Teacher; City Virginia Teacher; Suburban Washington Teacher. “Women Take a Stand” in Hiebert, Altoff, and Fischer, *America Through the Lens: US History, 1877–Present*.

²¹² For publications reinforcing the group’s “five essentials,” see Sara Bullard, ed., *Free at Last: A History of the Civil Rights Movement and Those Who Died in the Struggle* (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, 1989); Maureen Costello, ed., *The March Continues: Five Essential Practices for Teaching the Civil Rights Movement* (Montgomery, AL: Teaching Tolerance, 2014); Teaching Tolerance, *Civil Rights Done Right: A Tool for Teaching the Movement* (Montgomery, AL: Teaching Tolerance, 2016); Learning for Justice, *Teaching the Movement: A Framework for Teaching the Black Freedom Struggle* (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2023).

²¹³ “Martin Luther King and Malcolm X: Whose Philosophy Made the Most Sense for America in the 1960s?” The DBQ Project (2008), multiple appearances.

philosophical alignment.²¹⁴ Some teachers seem to have absorbed these messages. As one Iowa teacher wrote, “Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X are not enemies, rather two different approaches to a common problem.”²¹⁵

With schools and students central to the history of midcentury civil rights agitation and massive resistance, some I ask students to imagine themselves in the movement’s pivotal episodes. Opening questions serve as mood setters: “How would you feel if you experienced segregation in the 1950s?” Some role-playing lessons start well, as in a lesson about Ruby Bridges’s experience with school integration in New Orleans, pairing the famous Norman Rockwell painting with a biography. But the lesson merely declares Bridges a hero, missing a chance to explore the history that she made and the context in which she made it. An awkward role-play about the Children’s March culminates with asking students to pretend that they are walking out of school to march for civil rights in 1963 and then to “take out their phones and call or text their parents,” and see whether they would have gotten permission to participate.²¹⁶

Some of the strongest resources that teachers use to enrich their treatment of the Civil Rights Movement are embedded in their local communities. For Alabamans, the topic is a matter of local heritage—“where it all began” as one teacher put it—with prominent institutions offering professional development, field trips, and curriculum resources.²¹⁷ Alabama teachers also noted that local elders are rich resources, even when their stories exposed painful history in their communities and family histories. One teacher who encourages students to “ask their grandparents” about community history, recalled a student discovering a story of a lynched relative.²¹⁸ Another Alabama teacher makes a point to emphasize how her own town “chose to slow school integration.”²¹⁹ Even when local contexts don’t provide referents for the history of segregation, well-designed lessons can use digital collections to portray Jim Crow’s intimate levels of regulation, as in a Smithsonian collection of laws regarding telephone booths, barber shops, dice and

²¹⁴ “Martin Luther King and Malcolm X: Whose Philosophy Made the Most Sense for America in the 1960s?” In historiography, see Peniel E. Joseph, *The Sword and the Shield: The Revolutionary Lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).

²¹⁵ City Iowa Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 19.

²¹⁶ “1963—Where Would I Be?,” multidistrict document, Alabama (undated).

²¹⁷ The civil rights museums in Montgomery and Birmingham, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, and the Alabama History Institute were all mentioned as popular destinations. Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 105), September 5, 2023; Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 108), September 14, 2023; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 1), December 22, 2022. Quote from Rural Alabama Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 19.

²¹⁸ Town Alabama Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 14.

²¹⁹ “Choose the Era,” teacher document, Connecticut, Suburb: Midsized (2023).

card games, and marriage.²²⁰ While a large and mature body of scholarship now traces the history of civil rights mobilizations in the North, curricula we encountered in Northern states appear less likely to root treatment of civil rights in local history.²²¹ In some states, SEAs have partnered with special commissions and local historical associations and museums to develop resources on lesser-known local histories of civil rights agitation.²²² In general, however, the story of the Civil Rights Movement is told with a southern accent.

If better lessons go some way in reenacting the local details of Jim Crow or the contingent dramas of activist strategy, others begin on less solid ground by framing the Civil Rights Movement in timeless moral terms. Asking “Why didn’t all Americans embrace equality?” or asserting that the “moral arc of the United States [was] bending towards perfection, with fits and starts along the way” discourages historical thinking about racial inequality and rights struggles.²²³ If Jim Crow was so obviously incompatible with American ideals, then the movement that accomplished its undoing requires no historical explanation. Prevalent framings of the Civil Rights Movement as an ongoing struggle also invite teachers to use the movement as a measuring rod for events since 1965. A productive prompt in a Texas district—“How did major legislation and litigation change the idea of equality in America?”—is paired with one more susceptible to tendentious speculation: “Was the civil rights movement successful in achieving its intended goals or do we still have work to do?”²²⁴ An Iowa district lesson that asks students to grade issues in American society (“progress made,” “slow-change,” or “needs work”) with reference to the Civil Rights Movement implies that the late 20th century has no history of its own.²²⁵

²²⁰ “Jim Crow Lesson,” teacher document, Connecticut, Suburb: Midsize (undated). See “Separate is Not Equal: *Brown v. Board of Education*: Resources,” Smithsonian National Museum of American History, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/resources/teachers-guide.html>.

²²¹ For civil rights in the North, see Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, eds., *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008); Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940–1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Mark Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941–1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²²² In Iowa, for example, see “Iowa Civil Rights Toolkit,” Iowa Civil Rights Commission, district document (state-provided), Iowa, City: Small (2015).

²²³ “Choose the Era,” teacher document, Connecticut, Suburb: Midsize (2023); Town Connecticut Teacher, “Survey of US History Teachers,” AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 19.

²²⁴ “US History, Unit 9: Civil Rights Movement,” district document, Texas, Suburban: Large (2023).

²²⁵ “Civil Rights Progress Chart,” district document, Iowa, City: Small (undated).

Over the past 20 years, Civil Rights Movement historiography, robust and contentious, has undergone heavy revision since historians' early work on the subject. As scholarship has grown in expansiveness and complexity, so too have opportunities for classroom coverage. While a traditional focus on laws and leaders still constitutes the spine of coverage, the era's civic prominence has actually subjected it to more scrutiny, and thus it is more reflective of recent historiographic developments than many of the other subjects we appraised. Room for improvement clearly remains, most notably in expanding treatment of events outside of the South. With policymakers, administrators, and teachers committed to maintaining the Civil Rights Movement's high-priority status as required civic knowledge—and despite renewed partisan disputes over the era's political legacies—there likely will be future opportunities for scholars and educators to expand and complicate treatment of the topic.

Thematic coverage of American history content in instructional materials resists sweeping claims and final verdicts. Classroom educators rely on materials of diverse vintage and mixed quality in multiple formats. Teachers play games, assign readings, show videos, organize research projects, click through slide decks, lead discussions, give lectures, and administer tests. Content shines through with different levels of intensity across these modes of instruction. Even at the level of a single district, teacher, or publisher, the breezy or incomplete treatment of one topic can stand in stark contrast to the depth and sophistication applied to another in the same curriculum. Two things can be true at the same time: the historical content sitting on most teachers' desktops (whether physical or digital) steers clear of ideological distortions *and* reveals teachers' most urgent needs for higher-quality resources.

Conclusion

The AHA initiated this study in response to a series of highly visible controversies over the teaching of US history in our public schools. The assumptions underpinning these debates, even when codified into legislation, were just that—assumptions, based more on anecdote than evidence. Without clear agreement about the source of the problem, the prescriptions offered to save history instruction channeled ideological formulations and political ambitions rather than careful and informed analysis of the education landscape.

This report—and the research it summarizes—provides a starting point for new, evidence-driven conversations about history instruction in middle and high schools across the country. The AHA’s participation in these “history wars” led us to think about how noise and outrage can distract from productive discussion about what teachers, schools, and districts actually need to prioritize: student learning. We do not doubt the sincerity of the passions shaping public debate, but the extremely limited data available has left these controversies firmly anchored in the realm of fury and fear rather than constructive conversation.

Speculation and outrage do little to address the many real challenges our schools confront on a daily basis. It is time to get serious about history education.

Meaningful solutions must account for the social context in which students learn. As we began to speak with teachers and administrators, we realized that tensions and conflicts within a school community rarely matched the conflagrations depicted in national or social media. Shouting matches certainly echoed loudly and harmfully in some places, and teachers who followed bad news in other states sometimes felt a vicarious discomfort. But the most acute problems and pressures of teaching typically came with a local accent. Within the same school district, teachers reported starkly different experiences, even if they worked just a few miles from each other. When we asked teachers

to talk about their communities, they described the social worlds that their students came from: the closed meatpacking plant, the new Amazon distribution center; their favorite site for local field trips; the languages spoken by the newest migrants; the rising rents; the military base; the open-air drug market; the disappearing countryside; the jobs at the ski resort; the unequal status clinging to either side of the school district boundaries. These are the realities that shape history instruction in public schools.

Much like the communities they serve, history teachers bring diverse political sensibilities and varied experiences to their classrooms. They might be strongly conservative, strongly liberal, or some idiosyncratic blend of preferences and ideas. Their interest and passion for history probably inform their personal politics (and vice versa), but they appear strongly committed to keeping their contemporary policy preferences from skewing how they teach. We heard repeatedly about the need for neutrality and balance.

History teachers are committed to teaching students how to think, not what to think. They are committed to teaching both inspirational and hard histories and weighing multiple perspectives. These attitudes and commitments outline a politics of history education grounded in evidence as well as empathy, tolerance, and respect for the values and ideas of other people, past and present. The majority of teachers with whom we interacted display pragmatic self-awareness about the need to tell history honestly and to maintain their professional reputations as trusted members of their communities.

Teachers also express concerns when manifestations of the wider culture wars interfere with their professional obligations in the classroom. We spoke with conservative teachers in Iowa who were frustrated with the negativity stirred up by a Republican-sponsored divisive concepts bill. We also talked to self-described social justice-focused teachers in Washington who were equally disappointed with the trendy and performative race talk that their district's progressive administrators had pushed forward. These instances are reminders that historians, teachers, and administrators need to articulate a rationale for good history that can be understood irrespective of partisan identities and political commitments. So long as history is promoted as part of an education for informed citizenship, as 94 percent of teachers we surveyed believe it is, then we also need to take time to distinguish history's insights from civic or political debates.

While there remains considerable room for improvement, the edifice of secondary history education in the United States rests on solid foundations: a diffuse national

culture grounded in shared professional norms, an ambition to cultivate historical thinking and provide core knowledge that accords broadly with recent scholarship, and many passionate and dedicated classroom teachers.

Unanswered Questions and Shared Conclusions

Readers of this report will undoubtedly take note of what it does not do. To return to our culinary cliché, this study of menus and recipes (standards and curriculum) makes no claims about the table service, digestion, and nutrition (how lessons are delivered, what students learn and value from them). Nor does it describe the culinary schools that train the chefs or the health departments that issue certificates (teacher preparation programs and licensure processes).¹ We also acknowledge that aside from standards and legislation, our study could not capture conditions outside of our nine sample states.

The AHA hopes readers of this report will use its evidence and analysis to inform attempts to support student success in public education. The typical tensions of a teacher's job emanate from neither parents nor politics. Instead, difficulties stem from fundamental struggles over authority and autonomy: adolescents who aren't necessarily interested or motivated by what teachers have to offer, and teachers whose view of their work doesn't always match their administrators' expectations.

This report does not speculate on what will endear teachers or their classwork to students. It does, however, offer an informed rejoinder to the declarations of crisis and confrontation in history classrooms that dominate the news. Panic and controversy generate political energy around education reform; they also feed rumor and disable the will for democratic deliberation.

The AHA's research raises skepticism about reforms that rely on overbearing standardization or micromanagement of instruction—whether undertaken in the name of test prep, racial equity, or patriotism. These impulses run counter to the foundational goals of social studies: to train young people for independent thinking and self-government. It is unreasonable to expect students to achieve these outcomes if teachers are censored, too constrained, or too intimidated to model them in the classroom.

We also offer a critique of the overly broad or overly narrow questions that sometimes separate inquiry from narrative interpretation. A curriculum arranged as a

¹ See Appendix 1 for a description of licensure requirements in the nine sample states.

series of inquiry modules probably can more effectively enact the mental moves of history than a series of lectures or videos. But if the “big story” is left out or left blurry in classrooms—because the textbook is gone, the political climate is too touchy, or the teacher isn’t sure what the plot points should be—students’ appetite for narrative might plausibly be filled later in life by well-produced stories whose accountability to historical evidence is less scrupulous. Historical thinking requires historical knowledge.

Finally, our research justifies a call for history-rich professional development for social studies teachers through a variety of means. Since the expiration of the Teaching American History federal grant program in 2011, there has been a desperate need for renewed professional development opportunities for K–12 history teachers. Social studies teachers report uneven access to the high-quality, content-specific programs essential to maintaining their qualifications as historians and their enthusiasm for history. Some states require that teachers fulfill a specific number of hours of programming in this vein. Some others have no requirements at all. A targeted program of professional development would help teachers gain confidence in moving between inquiry and narrative synthesis.

We propose a deliberate, mundane process: restore, reinforce, and reinvest in teachers’ confidence as experts in their subject matter. This work applies across American history but is especially true for areas in which teachers noted their own calls for help: Native American history or anything after the civil rights era. Other vibrant historical fields that are largely missing from K–12 classrooms include environmental history, histories of women and gender, and the United States in a global context. Teachers can benefit from participating in professional learning communities online, at conferences, and through the work of local, state, and national organizations.

Even more than at the AHA’s founding 140 years ago, academic historians today cannot and should not lay exclusive claim to insight or control over curricula. K–12 teachers, local parents, education reformers, journalists, political activists, social studies specialists, publishers, tech companies, nonprofits, philanthropies, and school administrators all expect a seat at the table.

For two centuries, the basic rationale for teaching US history in public schools has been consistent: to instill in students a sense of belonging to the nation and to prepare them for participation as citizens of a republic. As the political realities of who was allowed to fully belong and what it has meant to fully participate have changed, so also has the language that Americans use to frame the value of history education. Watchwords of

successive eras—a tolerant patriotism, global awareness, college readiness, equity and inclusion—imply a shifting admixture of civic values and individual benefits, but they all tend toward a certain shallowness in terms of their application to instruction. Historians might have their own opinions about the value of citizenship, belonging, or “readiness,” but most would agree that history is a thrilling way for students to learn about their communities, whether understood locally, nationally, or globally.

Still, historians must periodically play the counterweight to a narrow civic imperative that often arises in these debates. Advocating for history with integrity sometimes means resisting calls to define history as something urgently relevant, lest it simply become a way of ratifying contemporary ideologies—whether national, partisan, or educational. The value of history education also rests on more humanistic justifications: the encounter with strangers from distant pasts; an appreciation for their ideas and creations; the reconstruction of their sense of surprise. These are adventures that humble the ego and stir the soul; their civic value may not be immediately apparent, but our shared humanity is undoubtedly the better for it.

At the root of recent debates is a welcome affirmation that history matters, in contrast to the testing trends that have made social studies an “afterthought.” A healthy public school system requires public deliberation and administrative oversight over what American students should know and be able to do. History’s special contribution remains similar to the notion that historians offered over a century ago: “the invaluable mental power that we call judgment.”²

² Albert Bushnell Hart, *Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies*, National Education Association (American Book Company: New York, 1894), 168.

Appendixes

Appendix 1: Our Sample

Herein is a description of the various social and institutional dimensions of the states chosen as case studies for this project, inclusive of partisan politics, state agency authority, assessment mandates, and labor and licensure rules for teachers.

Politics and State Oversight

Politically, the nine states selected reflect so-called red, blue, and purple realities (Table A1). Six were carried by Democrats in the 2020 electoral college vote, while three voted Republican. As of August 2024, seven states are governed by trifectas, with a single party controlling the executive office, and two have divided governments. Three states have elected state Boards of Education (AL, CO, TX), four have appointed boards (CT, IA, IL, PA, VA), and one (WA) has a hybrid model.¹ Administratively, three (AL, CT, VA) have what policy researchers have classified as state-centric (as opposed to district-centric) modes of governance.² Without initiating a technical debate about which decisions should be counted as constituting more or less state control, our focus on curriculum means that two state agency roles matter more to us than others: instructional materials adoption and assessment mandates. Two states (AL and TX) specify a role for the state agency in instructional materials adoption, while the other seven leave these decisions to local districts (Table A2).³

¹ Hybrid refers to a mix of elected and appointed members. “Education Governance Dashboard,” Education Commission for the States, accessed June 6, 2024, <https://www.ecs.org/education-governance-dashboard/>.

² Dara Zeehandelaar and David Griffith, “Schools of Thought: A Taxonomy of American Educational Governance” Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2015, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/schools-thought-taxonomy-american-education-governance>.

³ “Response to Information Request,” Education Commission for the States, January 1, 2022, https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/State-Information-Request_Textbook-Adoption-Policies.pdf.

Table A1: Partisan Politics in Sample States

State	US Census Region	Partisan Electoral Vote in 2020	Partisan Control of State Government (as of August 2024)
Alabama (AL)	East South Central	Republican by more than 15%	Republican Trifecta
Colorado (CO)	Mountain	Democrat by 10% to 15%	Democratic Trifecta
Connecticut (CT)	New England	Democrat by more than 15%	Democratic Trifecta
Illinois (IL)	East North Central	Democrat by more than 15%	Democratic Trifecta
Iowa (IA)	West North Central	Republican by 5 to 10%	Republican Trifecta
Pennsylvania (PA)	Middle Atlantic	Democrat by less than 5%	Divided: Governor (D); Senate (R); House (D)
Virginia (VA)	Southeast	Democrat by 10 to 15%	Divided: Governor (R); Senate: (D); House: (D)
Texas (TX)	West South Central	Republican by 5 to 10%	Republican Trifecta
Washington (WA)	Pacific	Democrat by more than 15%	Democratic Trifecta

Table A2: State Agency Authority in Sample States

State	State Board of Education	Educational Governance Model	State Authority over Instructional Materials
AL	Elected	State-Centric	State Board of Education approves a list of adopted titles that LEAs must choose from
CO	Elected	Local-Centric	State Board prohibited from prescribing textbooks to localities
CT	Appointed	State-Centric	No role specified
IL	Appointed	Local-Centric	No role specified
IA	Appointed	Local-Centric	No role specified
PA	Appointed	Local-Centric	No role specified
TX	Elected	Local-Centric	State Board of Education publishes a list of approved titles, but LEAs may choose outside the list
VA	Appointed	State-Centric	State Board of Education publishes a list of approved titles, but LEAs may choose outside the list
WA	Hybrid	State-Centric	No role specified

Assessment

Currently four of these states (CO, TX, VA, WA) have a mandate for state testing in US history (Table A3). As a proportion of our sample (four of nine), this roughly reflects

testing’s footprint on the national landscape (with 21 of 50 states plus DC requiring testing in US history), but our sample also reveals the wide spectrum of accountability contexts that surround assessment.

Table A3: Required US History Assessment in Sample States with State Mandates

State	Number of Assessments	Level	Instrument, Scoring, and Extent
CO	1	High School	Common standardized instrument scored by state agency; spot check of sample districts on three-year cycle
TX	2	Middle and High School	Common standardized instrument scored by state agency; all students assessed yearly
VA	3	Primary, Middle, and High School	Common standardized instrument scored by state agency in primary and middle school; instrument options available for high school state-approved instrument; all students assessed yearly
WA	1	High School	State-designed instruments optional; all students assessed every year; scoring conducted locally

Texas sits at the top with regard to standardization and stakes, with common US history exams (the STAAR test) in middle and high school. The US history exams are required for student promotion and graduation, a fact that sets Texas apart even from other states with a US history test. Schools are motivated to invest in STAAR test preparation, as results factor into annual accountability scores assigned to schools and districts and used by the Texas Education Agency to rate them, compare them, and assign interventions.⁴

Virginia has the most state-required testing of US history content, with one Standards of Learning (SOL) test in the primary grades, one in middle school, and an end-of-course exam in high school.⁵ While SOL tests are tied to the verified credits required for students to graduate, the Virginia Department of Education no longer uses these assessments in their accreditation system for school districts (called “divisions” in Virginia).⁶ Recent policy changes have expanded local discretion over the format and

⁴ “How Accountability Ratings Work,” Texas Education Agency, accessed June 6, 2024, <https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/accountability/academic-accountability/performance-reporting/how-accountability-ratings-work>.

⁵ “Virginia SOL Assessment Program,” Virginia Department of Education, accessed June 6, 2024, www.doe.virginia.gov/teaching-learning-assessment/student-assessment/virginia-sol-assessment-program.

⁶ “School Accreditation,” Virginia Department of Education, accessed June 6, 2024, www.doe.virginia.gov/data-policy-funding/data-reports/statistics-reports/accreditation-federal-reports/soa-school-accreditation; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 800), August 25, 2022.

timing of testing, allowing divisions to use state-designed (but locally scored) performance-based assessments (PBAs) rather than standardized multichoice SOL tests.⁷

In Washington, classroom-based assessment (CBA) instruments for US history are state designed but administered and scored locally. Schools must affirm that students took a CBA but are not required to use the state-offered instrument, and there are no further reporting or accountability requirements for districts.⁸ To some, these expectations leave things “murky.”⁹ As one Washington teacher put it, “CBAs only exist on the form administrators fill out every year.”¹⁰

A Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) assessment in social studies is supposed to be given in all three grade bands (primary, middle, high). It was implemented as a rolling spot check, sampling districts on a three-year cycle, but never attached to any consequences for districts, teachers, or students. Following a systemwide pause and the official elimination of the high school requirement during the COVID-19 pandemic, CMAS social studies is set to resume for primary and middle schools. Legislation to eliminate the social studies testing requirement failed to pass in 2023.¹¹

None of the testing and accountability regimes in the remaining five states have ever included history as a tested area.¹² Many of these state assessment instruments, particularly English and language arts assessments, will include nonfiction reading passages that cover or reference social studies subject matter, but they are neither designed nor expected to deliver data related to student learning in history or social studies.

Labor Relations

With administrators and teachers sometimes at odds about what should be taught and assessed—and how prep and class time should be spent—rules governing public sector labor relations carry important consequences for curricular decision-making, with a wide

⁷ Virginia HB 930 (2014); Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 800), August 25, 2022.

⁸ “OSPI-Developed Social Studies Assessments,” Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, accessed June 6, 2024, ospi.k12.wa.us/student-success/resources-subject-area/social-studies/ospi-developed-social-studies-assessments; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 9), May 1, 2023.

⁹ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 911), June 22, 2023.

¹⁰ Interview with middle and high school social studies teacher (MST 902), May 23, 2023.

¹¹ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 2), February 9, 2023; Erica Breunlin, “Colorado Democrats Want to Ax Social Studies from State Standardized Tests. Here’s Why,” *Colorado Sun*, January 27, 2023, coloradosun.com/2023/01/27/social-studies-standardize-testing-colorado/; Colorado SB 23-061 (2023), <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/sb23-061>.

¹² These are the Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress (ISASP), the Illinois Assessment of Readiness (IAR), the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) and Keystone Exams, and the Connecticut Statewide Summative Assessment System (CSAS).

range among our sample states (Table A4). In Alabama and Texas, collective bargaining agreements are prohibited by law.¹³ Teachers can (and do) join local associations and even affiliates of national unions at high rates in states with “right-to-work” laws, but they exert no leverage over contract terms or working conditions.¹⁴ Virginia’s long-standing right-to-work landscape is changing, with a 2020 law allowing localities to authorize collective bargaining for public employees, which five Virginia school boards have now done.¹⁵ Colorado has had similar local opt-in rules for public sector collective bargaining since the 1960s, with teachers in 39 of 179 school districts currently working under a collective agreement.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Colorado’s school choice laws also limit the reach of unions, with a higher proportion of public school students (13 percent) attending charter schools than in any of our other sample states.¹⁷ At the other end of the spectrum, localities in Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Pennsylvania, and Washington have a state-mandated duty to bargain collectively if a majority of teachers vote for union representation.¹⁸ In Illinois, where public sector workers enjoy the widest scope of bargainable subjects and special constitutional protections, 97 percent of teachers are union members and only a handful of the state’s 853 districts operate without a collective bargaining agreement.¹⁹

Table A4: Labor Regulations for Teachers in Sample States

State	Collective Bargaining	Details
AL	Prohibited	n/a
CO	Opt-in Allowed by Locality	21% of districts allow for collective bargaining agreements
CT	Required	97% of districts under collective bargaining agreement
IL	Required	~97% of districts under collective bargaining agreement
IA	Required	75% of public school teachers represented by a collective bargaining agreement

¹³ Alabama Code, § 25-7-6 (2022); Texas Labor Code, § 101.052 (2022).

¹⁴ “Texas AFT FAQs,” Texas AFT, accessed December 14, 2023, www.texasaft.org/about/faqs/.

¹⁵ The Virginia divisions where teachers are now authorized to bargain collectively are Richmond, Arlington, Charlottesville, Fairfax County, and Prince William County.

¹⁶ “AFT Colorado History,” AFT Colorado, accessed December 14, 2023, co.aft.org/about-us/aft-colorado-history.

¹⁷ “Schools of Choice Unit,” Colorado Department of Education, accessed June 6, 2024, <https://www.cde.state.co.us/choice>.

¹⁸ “Collective Bargaining Rules,” National Council on Teacher Quality, modified January 2019, <https://www.nctq.org/contract-database/collectiveBargaining>; Email correspondence with Mary Howes, Washington National Education Association, December 21, 2023, email message to Nicholas Kryczka.

¹⁹ Email correspondence and telephone interview with Nick Christen, Illinois Federation of Teachers, February 6, 2024, email message to Nicholas Kryczka; Illinois, Senate Joint Resolution, Constitutional Amendment No. 11 (2022). The latest available data from 2011 indicates 16 districts without a collective bargaining agreement. See Tara Malone, “School Districts Without Unions Are Rare in Illinois, but Not Unheard Of,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 7, 2011, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2011-04-07-ct-met-never-a-union-districts-20110407-story.html>.

PA	Required	100% of districts under collective bargaining agreement
TX	Prohibited	Elected consultation allowed
VA	Opt-in Allowed by Locality	4% of districts allow for collective bargaining agreement
WA	Required	96% of districts under collective bargaining agreement

Teacher Licensure

All but one sample state require that teachers pass a test to teach social studies, with Iowa the sole, and recent, exception. Teacher coursework requirements vary with some states requiring specific courses and credit hours and others leaving it up to the teacher preparation programs on college campuses (Table A5). Even in states that do not specify the courses or credit hours a social studies teacher must take, the state-approved teacher preparation programs typically require their graduates to have taken a substantial number of history courses. Among the sample states, state agencies in Texas and Washington are the least specific regarding the number of credit hours required for social studies teachers. In contrast, Virginia's state agency specifies that teachers complete an approved teacher preparation program in history or social science or earn a BA with various specific course requirements including either a major or 18 semester hours in history, with US, Virginia, and world history specified, as well as a course in state and local government. A 2021 law added African American history to the list, but it is still being rolled out following pandemic delays and changes in gubernatorial administrations. In all nine states, alternative certifications and reciprocal agreements with other states further muddy the history course requirements. Still, the alternative certifications typically link to the same requirements after a preliminary period of approval.²⁰

²⁰ Email correspondence with Jenny Gaona, Texas Education Agency, email message to Scot McFarlane, February 28, 2024; "Teacher Assignment Chart," Texas State Board of Educator Certification, 19 TAC Chapter 231, accessed April 8, 2024, <https://tea.texas.gov/texas-educators/certification/teacher-assignment-chart.pdf>; Email correspondence with Andrew Miller, Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, email message to Scot McFarlane, February 26, 2024; "Endorsement competencies," Washington State Professional Educator Standards Board, accessed April 8, 2024, <https://www.pesb.wa.gov/preparation-programs/standards/endorsement-/>; Email correspondence with Charles Tocci, Loyola University Chicago School of Education, email message to Scot McFarlane, March 22, 2024; "Subsequent Teaching Endorsements," Illinois State Board of Education, accessed April 8, 2024, <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Subsequent-Teaching-Endorsements.aspx>; Email correspondence with Blake Busbin, Alabama State Department of Education, email message to Scot McFarlane, March 4, 2024; "Teacher Certification," Alabama State Department of Education, accessed April 8, 2024, <https://www.alabamaachievers.org/teacher-center/teacher-certification/>; Email correspondence with Kerry Helm, Pennsylvania Bureau of School Leadership and Teacher Quality, email message to Scot McFarlane, February 26, 2024; "Colorado Teacher Endorsement Requirements," Colorado Department of Education, accessed April 8, 2024, <https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeprof/endorsementrequirements>; Email correspondence with Stephanie Hartman, Colorado Department of Education, email message to Scot McFarlane, March 8, 2024; "Endorsements List," Iowa Department of Education, accessed April 8, 2024, <https://educate.iowa.gov/educator-licensure/endorsements-list>;

Table A5: Licensure Requirements for Teachers in Sample States

State	Licensure Requirements
AL	Preservice teachers take the ETS Praxis general social studies test. Alabama requires teachers to major in one of the social studies subject areas and to take a course in the teaching of social studies but has not listed requirements specific to history.
CO	Preservice teachers take the ETS Praxis general social studies test. The Colorado secondary endorsement in social studies requires either 1) a bachelor's degree in social studies, history, or political science or 2) the completion of coursework that includes 6 semester hours of history and 3 semester hours of social studies methods, in addition to other social science courses.
CT	Preservice teachers take the ETS Praxis general social studies test. Connecticut requires a minimum of 9 semester hours in history and other social sciences for the middle school endorsement in history and social studies and 12 for the high school level, with a US history course specified for both endorsements.
IL	Teachers must pass the state-designed Illinois Licensure Testing System test in one of the social sciences. They complete a state-approved education program and can meet the course requirement minimum through 18 credit hours in history, political science, or psychology.
IA	No test is required for a social studies endorsement. Iowa requires coursework minimums for teachers enrolled in "a regionally accredited college." For example, the 5–12 Social Sciences-Basic Endorsement requires 9 semester hours each of American history, American government, and world history.
PA	Preservice teachers take the ETS Praxis general social studies test. Teachers must complete an approved teacher education program for their initial certification and then they must earn an additional 24 postbaccalaureate credits to get their Level II certification, of which six credits are associated with their certification or professional practice.
TX	Depending on grade level, teachers must pass the state-designed Texas Examinations of Educator Standards test in English Language Arts and Reading/Social Studies: Grades 4–8 or Social Studies 7–12. Texas does not stipulate credit hours for its state-approved teacher preparation programs.
VA	Pre-service teachers take the ETS Praxis general social studies test. Teachers complete an approved teacher preparation program in history or social science or earn a BA with various specific course requirements including either a major or 18 semester hours in history, with US, Virginia, and World History specified, as well as a course in state and local government. A 2021 law added African American history to the list.
WA	Teachers must pass the state-designed Washington Educator Skills test in either Social Studies, History, or Middle-Level Humanities, depending on the grade level they seek to teach. Washington does not stipulate credit hours for its state-approved teacher preparation programs.

Working Conditions

The workload for a typical American teacher varies greatly across locales and states (Table A6). Measured nationally, the average ratio of public school students to teachers in

Email correspondence with Joanne Tubbs, Iowa Bureau of Education Examiners, email message to XXX, March 1, 2024; "What endorsements apply to secondary subjects?" Connecticut Bureau of Certification, accessed April 8, 2024, https://portal.ct.gov/sdecertification/knowledge-base/articles/resources/endorsements/what-endorsements-apply-to-secondary-subjects?language=en_US; "Teacher licensures," Virginia Department of Education, accessed April 8, 2024, <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/teaching-learning-assessment/teaching-in-virginia/licensure>; Phone call with Christonya Brown, Virginia Department of Education, telephone interview by Scot McFarlane, April 1, 2024.

American classrooms comes to 15.5 students per teacher. Among our sample states, teachers experience a wide range of conditions, with the pupil-to-teacher ratio more than 50 percent higher in Alabama than Connecticut. While the average pupil-to-teacher ratio among our sample states showed greater teacher workloads in city and suburb locales, this also varied by state. For example, the highest ratio by state locales is found in the town locales in Alabama (19.7) and the lowest ratio was rural locales in Connecticut (9.9).²¹

Table A6: Working Conditions in Sample States

State	Pupil-to–Teacher Ratio ²²	Total Current Expenditures per Pupil ²³	Teacher-to–Instructional Coordinator Ratio ²⁴
AL	17.87	\$10,728	742.7*
CO	16.26	\$12,233	14.8
CT	11.67	\$22,216	14.3
IL	13.68	\$18,527	33
IA	14.15	\$12,714	13.9
PA	13.3	\$17,822	62.8
TX	14.78	\$11,049	79.4
VA	13.6	\$13,856	10.1
WA	17.23	\$15,615	15.3

²¹ US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, “Digest of Education Statistics, Table 208.20 Public and private elementary and secondary teachers, enrollment, pupil/teacher ratios, and new teacher hires: Selected years, fall 1955 through fall 2031,” accessed May 6, 2024, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_208.20.asp The national pupil/teacher ratio is projected for 2022; US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), “Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey”, 2022-23 v.1a. In contrast to the growth in administrators, the teacher/student ratio has been relatively flat since the early 2000s. The national public school pupil/teacher ratio in fall 2005 was 15.6 and then 15.4 in fall 2021. “Fast Facts: Teacher Characteristics and Trends,” National Center for Education Statistics, accessed April 11, 2024, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=28>.

²² US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), “Local Education Agency (School District) Universe Survey”, 2022-23 v.1a. In contrast to the growth in administrators, the teacher/student ratio has been relatively flat since the early 2000s. The national public school pupil/teacher ratio in fall 2005 was 15.6 and then 15.4 in fall 2021. “Fast Facts: Teacher Characteristics and Trends,” National Center for Education Statistics, accessed April 11, 2024, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=28>.

²³ US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), “National Public Education Financial Survey (State Fiscal)”, 2019-20 (FY 2020) v.2a, 2020-21 (FY 2021) v.1a; “State Nonfiscal Public Elementary/Secondary Education Survey”, 2022-23 v.1a (this reflects the 2020–21 school year).

²⁴ US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), “State Nonfiscal Public Elementary/Secondary Education Survey”, 1999-00 v.1b, 2022-23 v.1a.

Curricular conditions are also shaped by the level of oversight or direction that teachers receive, which varies from state to state and district to district. The prevalence of instructional coordinators provides a rough proxy for varying degrees of curricular management. Current national average ratios of teachers to instructional coordinators come in at 32 teachers per coordinator. Among sample states, Colorado, Connecticut, Iowa, Virginia, and Washington had more instructional coordinators per teacher compared with the national average, whereas Alabama, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Texas had fewer. Resources also vary widely across our sample states, with a wide range in the current expenditures per pupil, a number which includes salaries, benefits, purchased services, supplies, tuition and other expenditures not related to capital expenditures.

Peculiar Conditions

As we got to know the teachers, administrators, and curricula across our nine sample states, we quickly learned about other peculiar conditions that influence the facts of history teaching on the ground. In Texas, a long history of assessment and accountability (dating back to 1980) has built a unique set of state agency structures and approaches to curriculum alignment. Texas's model of self-funded regional education service centers (ESCs) has facilitated the development of a full bundle of TEKS-aligned curriculum in the form of the TEKS Resource System, in use in hundreds of districts across the state.²⁵ In other states, regional offices have a far more limited role in curriculum development, though some area education agencies (AEAs) in Iowa and intermediate units (IUs) in Pennsylvania will staff a social studies position to develop model materials and connect teachers with professional development.²⁶ Pennsylvania and Illinois reflect the highest levels of fragmentation of local educational governance. In much of suburban Chicagoland, elementary and high schools exist as separate governance units, each with their own school board. Pennsylvania's system is the most loosely aligned among sample states, with course sequencing varying from district to district—the “wild west, man” as

²⁵ “What Is the TCMPC?” Texas Curriculum Management Program Cooperative, accessed December 21, 2022, <https://www.tcmopc.org/about-tcmopc/about>. The publisher of the TEKS Resource System is the Texas Curriculum Management Program Cooperative, a pooled resource entity conjoining all 20 ESCs. The TEKS resource system is the second iteration of such a curriculum. The previous version of this ESC-produced curriculum, CSCOPE, fell victim in 2013 to parental complaints about specific lesson plans designed to teach students about Islam. Public backlash led the Texas legislature to intervene, resulting in a complete redesign into the TEKS Resource System, which only produces unit plan outlines aligned to the TEKS, suggestions for STAAR alignment, “content specificity” (historical context), and some suggested activities, but not lesson plans, which were the main focus of the CSCOPE controversy. See Morgan Smith, “CSCOPE to No Longer Offer Lesson Plans to Texas Schools,” *Texas Tribune*, May 20, 2013, <https://www.texastribune.org/2013/05/20/cscope-will-no-longer-offer-lesson-texas-schools/>.

²⁶ Interview with high school social studies teacher (HST 614), September 29, 2023.

one administrator described it.²⁷ In Alabama and Connecticut, public-private institutions have grown alongside the state agency to address certain educational needs. In Alabama, the A+ College Ready program, a public and privately funded statewide educational nonprofit initiated to upgrade student preparation for Advanced Placement classes in math and science, has since expanded to serve subject areas including US history, running three-year competitive grants for professional learning and curricular support for high school and middle school teacher cohorts at the district level.²⁸ In Connecticut, the quasi-public State Educational Resource Center (SERC), begun in the late 1960s with the goal of serving special needs students, now operates in an occasional tandem with the state department of education on a broad mission related to “institutionalized racism and other issues of social justice in schools and districts.”²⁹ SERC’s role in social studies curriculum was most recently enhanced when it was tapped by the state legislature to lead the development of the new Black and Latino studies course curriculum.³⁰ State-specific oddities like these do not always express themselves in curricular terms, but they can shape the character and density of professional networks that assemble around education policy in different states. Organs like SERC in Connecticut or the Texas Curriculum Management Program Cooperative form distinct constituencies for curricular reform, neither employed in local districts nor directly accountable to the state agency.

Appendix 2: Research Instruments

The report’s questionnaires, rubrics, and release forms can be downloaded online at historians.org/American-Lesson-Plan.

Appendix 3: Survey Methodology Report

The survey methodology report, provided by NORC at the University of Chicago, can be downloaded online at historians.org/American-Lesson-Plan.

²⁷ Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 602), February 16, 2023.

²⁸ “Initial NMSI Investment Started a Program That Has Transformed Alabama,” A+ College Ready, March 24, 2017, <https://aplusala.org/college-ready/2017/03/24/nmsi-program-transformed-alabama/aplusala.org/college-ready/2017/03/24/nmsi-program-transformed-alabama/>; Interview with social studies administrator (SSA 118), June 9, 2023.

²⁹ “SERC: Mission and Vision,” State Education Resource Center, accessed June 6, 2024, <https://ctserc.org/about/serc/mission-vision>.

³⁰ Connecticut Public Act 19-12 (2019).

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Mapping the Landscape of Secondary US History Education Research Team

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Errata

This report was first published on September 19, 2024. It was updated on September 24, 2024, with a corrected Fig. 29 (found on page 113).

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