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FORUM

Changing the Subject in the School Wars: An American Historical Association Research Team Perspective

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"What on earth are our school children learning about US history?" At the turn of the 2020s, American pundits posed the question rhetorically—and then proceeded to answer it, without evidence, and in service of partisan tastes. On the one hand were progressive commentators who declared that the typical US history curriculum was a whitewashed fable that suppressed uncomfortable truths about slavery and race.[1] On the other were conservative activists who claimed the opposite—that today's educators, consumed by a hypercritical obsession with race, taught children to hate their country.[2] High-profile initiatives like the *New York Times Magazine*'s 1619 Project, President Donald Trump's 1776 Commission, and a wave of state-level prohibitions

[1]For commentary and analysis from liberals and progressives, see Valerie Strauss, "It's Back in the Age of 'Alternative Facts': 'Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong,'" *Washington Post*, July 26, 2018; Cory Turner, "Why Schools Fail to Teach Slavery's 'Hard History,'" *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, Feb. 4, 2018, https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/02/04/582468315/why-schools-fail-to-teach-slaverys-hard-history; Nikita Stewart, "'We Are Committing Educational Malpractice': Why Slavery Is Mistaught—and Worse—in American Schools," *New York Times Magazine*, Aug. 18, 2019; 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, https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/erasing-the-black-freedom-struggle/; "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery," Southern Poverty Law Center, 2022, https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/tt_hard_history_american_slavery.pdf.

[2]For critique and analysis from the right, see Newt Gingrich, "Did Slavery Really Define America for All Time?," *Newsweek*, Aug. 27, 2019; David Marcus, "US History Doesn't Need to Be 'Reframed' around Identity Politics; It Already Has Been," *Federalist,* Aug. 20, 2019; Christopher Rufo, "How Critical Race Theory Is Dividing America," interview by Michelle Cordero, Heritage Foundation, Oct. 26, 2020, https://www.heritage.org/progressivism/commentary/how-critical-race-theory-dividing-america; Zach Goldberg and Eric Kaufmann, "Yes, Critical Race Theory Is Being Taught in Schools," *City Journal*, Oct. 20, 2022.

on the teaching of "divisive concepts" expanded the battlefield for an ongoing culture war—but without ever surveying the terrain where actual history teaching took place.[3]

In 2022, the American Historical Association secured grant funding to conduct a two-year study of the national landscape of US history teaching landscape.[4] As the research team charged with this work, our task was put to us simply: establish an empirical grounding for these debates. What was actually happening? Were teachers whitewashing history or brainwashing children?

As we immediately recognized, these were the wrong questions; culture warriors had imposed an analytical framework that obscured the real dynamics of curricular governance in the United States. In light of the sweeping claims made by interested parties about what was or wasn't happening "everywhere," we committed ourselves to clarifying (both to ourselves and to the broader public) the diverse, devolved, and divided nature of curricular decision-making in the American educational system. This mission required a research approach that could shed light on the three levels where consequential curricular decisions are made—the state, the district, and the teacher—and that would facilitate an analysis of how these layers of authority interacted to determine the character of instructional materials.

How We Did It

Our mixed-methods approach combined a fifty-state study of standards and legislation with a nine-state deep dive into local curriculum.[5] For our national picture of state-level patterns, we appraised state academic standards in US history in all fifty states and the District of Columbia, conducted surveys and interviews with state curriculum specialists, compared courses of study and assessment requirements nationwide, and assembled a database of 877 distinct pieces of legislation related to US history education dating back to the 1980s.[6] Diving into local conditions in Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Texas, and Washington, we fielded

[3]"The 1619 Project," *New York Times Magazine,* Aug. 18, 2019, https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/full_issue_of_the_1619_project.pdf; Donald J. Trump, "Remarks by President Trump at the White House Conference on American History" (speech, Washington, DC, Sept. 17, 2020), National Archives, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-white-house-conference-american-history/. On the wave of anti-critical race theory legislation, see Jeremy C. Young and Jonathan Friedman, "America's Censored Classrooms," PEN America, Aug. 17, 2022, https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-classrooms/.

[4]The project's findings, published in a two-hundred-page report in September of 2024, are available for free and in full at American Historical Association, *American Lesson Plan: Teaching US History in Secondary Schools*, 2024, https://www.historians.org/teaching-learning/k-12-education/american-lesson-plan/what-are-american-students-learning-about-us-history/.

[5]Each of the selected states—Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Texas, and Washington—represents one of the nine regional divisions used by the US Census, reflecting our desire for a mix of political, administrative, and social contexts shaping education. In the full report, we include an appendix describing the differences in partisan politics, state agency authority, social studies assessment, and labor and licensure rules across these nine state contexts. The data collection for this project took place between spring of 2022 and summer of 2024.

[6]To assemble a corpus of state laws, AHA researchers used a variety of databases, including HeinOnline, LexisNexis, and state legislative websites. The legislative database, while not exhaustive, provides a wide sample of the variety of approaches that legislatures have taken to affect social studies instruction.

a survey answered by over three thousand middle and high school US history educators in our nine sample states, interviewed over two hundred more, and collected thousands of pages of in-use instructional materials from small towns, suburbs, and big cities.[7] For interview subjects, survey respondents, and curricular materials, we set numerical targets for each of the nine states (one from each of the US census's regional divisions), as well as a representative distribution of school district locale types (rural, town, suburb, city) within each state. The sprawling corpus that resulted (of standards, laws, curriculum maps, lesson plans, slide decks, textbooks, digital resources, survey data, and interview notes) constituted as vivid and textured an archive of US history curriculum in the early 2020s as we could assemble without visiting the classroom.

Notwithstanding the mash-up of social science methods that we used to build our archive, we are, in fact, historians, and history drove our project in terms of both content and context. In appraising actual curricular materials, our job was to see if educators were getting the historical content right. The six topics chosen for appraisal—Native American History; the Founding Era; Westward Expansion; Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction; Industry, Capital, and Labor; and the Civil Rights Movement—had either provoked politicized controversy, or were perceived by historians as areas where gaps persisted between scholarly consensus and public understandings.[8] In our appraisals, we judged materials on their ability to present balanced coverage of broad historical consensus, not against the latest theoretical or

[7]Using AHA, NCSS, National Council for History Education, and National History Day networks and cold calls, we recruited and interviewed 205 educators (147 teachers and 58 administrators) across our nine sample states. All interview subjects signed an agreement confirming their consent to be interviewed and affirming the research team's commitment to protecting their anonymity; all interview materials (notes, releases, and identifying information) will be retained as confidential documents for sixty years, and then transferred to the AHA Archive. In April 2023, the AHA contracted with the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago to conduct an online thirty-minute survey of public middle and high school US history teachers in those same nine states. The survey elicited detailed information on multiple 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 history teaching resources; teaching goals and values; and which areas participants find most important, most rewarding, and most challenging to teach. Teacher contacts for the survey came from a leased directory of teachers from MDR Education, a division of the commercial analytics company Dun & Bradstreet. Between April and August 2023, the survey hit the field, ultimately collecting usable responses from 3,012 participants. The number of teachers returning the survey in either "complete" or "partial" form represented a 13 percent response rate. Special care was taken by NORC to assess the social representativeness of the survey sample—both with regard to teachers and the environments they work in. For teachers themselves, this was achieved using data from the National Teacher and Principal Survey on the teacher population with respect to racial/ethnic background, gender, teaching experience, and degree attainment. For school settings, this was achieved by using Common Core Data figures on free and reduced price lunch recipients and percentages of nonwhite students in school populations. As NORC asserted, the analyses give "some confidence that the survey respondents are generally representative of US history teachers in the different types of locales and student grade levels," as well as "some confidence that the AHA respondents are drawn from a set of schools that reflect the demographics of their respective states and locales."

[8]Scholarly consensus is a moving target, of course, but historians mark the factual and interpretive boundaries of their subfields in a range of formats: volumes of narrative synthesis; historiographic essays; state-of-the-field articles; "major issues" handbooks; and more. See, for example, Eric Foner, ed. *The New American History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997); Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr, eds., *American History Now* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); Elizabeth Cobbs and Edward J. Blum, eds., *Major*

evidentiary disputes within academic subfields. However, we were especially attuned to whether materials contained factual errors, ideological distortions, or misleading generalizations.

History mattered to us as context as well. In order to portray the social world in which teachers answered our questions and chose their instructional materials, we were keen to historicize the multiple strata of policy, ideology, and technology that were clearly shaping the daily work of history teaching. Social studies' role as a front line of culture war has its history, of course.[9] But so also do the various curricular and instructional initiatives that cascade across the social studies workplace: essential questions, nonfiction literacy, performance-based assessment, professional learning communities, culturally sustaining pedagogy, the inquiry design model. Wherever possible, we placed these concepts within the longer arc of historical continuities and contests—some recent, some over a century old—that explained their relative salience in contemporary educational environments. We drew on multiple historiographies—of curriculum theory, of educational federalism and local control, of civil rights and American multiculturalism, of standards and accountability reform, of history and the social studies, of teacher labor and bureaucracy—to sustain these interpretations.[10]

Problems in American History, vol. 1, *To 1877* (Boston: Cengage, 2017); Elizabeth Cobbs and Edward J. Blum, eds., *Major Problems in American History*, vol. 2, *Since 1865* (Boston: Cengage, 2016).

[9]On culture wars in education, see Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, *Classroom Wars: Language, Sex, and the Making of Modern Political Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Adam Laats, *The Other School Reformers: Conservative Activism in American Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America: Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

[10]On the history and historiography of the social studies, see David Warren Saxe, *Social Studies in the Schools: A History of the Early Years* (Albany: State University of New York, 1991); Ronald W. Evans, *The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004); 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; Larry Cuban, *Teaching History Then and Now: A Story of Stability and Change in Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2016); Thomas D. Fallace, "The Intellectual History of the Social Studies," in *The Wiley Handbook of Social Studies Research,* ed. Meghan McGlinn Manfra and Cheryl Mason Bolick (Chichester, UK: Wiley, 2017), 42-67; Steven J. Thornton, "A Concise Historiography of the Social Studies," in Manfra and Bolick, *The Wiley Handbook of Social Studies Research*, 7-41. On educational federalism, see Patrick J. 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); Campbell F. Scribner, *The Fight for Local Control: Schools, Suburbs, and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017). 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: University of North Texas Press, 2004); Daniel H. 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 7*, ed. Gillian Peele et al. (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2014), 263-83; R. Shep Melnick, "The Odd Evolution of the Civil Rights State," *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 37, no. 1 (Jan. 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,

What We Found

Americans should be reassured to learn that most curricular materials are perfectly defensible against charges of chauvinist mythology or liberal indoctrination. Beyond this, we offer a summary of five major claims that emerged from our research that we invite our interlocutors to engage with for this *HEQ* forum.

First, apathy, not activism, is what many teachers spend their time trying to overcome among students and parents. With the exception of some definite hot spots, teachers we engaged with don't typically encounter politicized pressure at their job.[11] Far from fending off throngs of critics, the typical social studies teacher struggles to get parents, students, and administrators to care about history at all. Asked to explain why it might be a challenge to teach certain topics, time constraints and lack of student interest were the leading reasons—not political controversy.[12] Only 2 percent of surveyed teachers reported that they regularly faced direct criticism related to the way they teach topics in US history. When asked to describe how their subject was valued in their school district, teachers echoed each other's favorite euphemisms: *back burner, afterthought, red-headed stepchild*.

These data will give cold comfort to those who have the misfortune of working in school districts where overbearing administrators or organized activists have pushed an ideological agenda—or where an ambient sense of political pressure has spooked teachers away from topics they perceive as controversial. Stories of political pressure we encountered were almost always localized, expressive of the class cleavages and partisan preferences clinging to school district boundaries. In some affluent liberal enclaves, teachers reported exhaustion with stifling anti-racism initiatives launched by their administrators. In some conservative hotbeds, some social studies teachers spoke of being targeted by local activists acting as self-appointed deputies of state-level anti-critical race theory legislation.

2018). On the national and global contexts of accountability reform, see Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Jack Schneider, *Excellence for All: How a New Breed of Reformers Is Transforming America's Public Schools* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011); Daniel Tröhler, *Languages of Education: Protestant Legacies, National Identities, and Global Aspirations* (London: Routledge, 2013), especially chapters 11-12; 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 (Nov. 2017), 615-25; 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. 6 (Oct. 2018), 1-26; Ethan Hutt and Jack Schneider, "A History of Achievement Testing in the United States or: Explaining the Persistence of Inadequacy," *Teachers College Record* 120, no. 11 (2018), 1-32; Maris Vinovskis, "History of Testing in the United States," *Annals of the American Academy of Political Science* 683, no. 1 (May 2019), 22-37; 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 (Aug. 2022), 268-90; John L. Rury, *An Age of Accountability: How Standardized Testing Came to Dominate American Schools and Compromise Education* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2023).

[11] Forty-four percent said that they had never encountered an objection to anything they've taught.

[12] Slavery—identified as a challenge by 21 percent of teachers—was the outlier, with 43 percent of that segment citing controversy as the source of difficulty.

Both of these topics—the perceived excesses of progressive anti-racism within American institutions and the perceived excesses of conservative activists who oppose it—have fed a small boom of field guides and first-draft histories of the culture wars of the 2010s and'20s.[13] But, as we found, most history teachers aren't even on the battlefield of these conflicts, let alone taking up arms as combatants.[14] In interviews, teachers reported a range of frustrations and frictions that had nothing to do with the categories set by the educational culture wars. We also heard repeatedly about teachers' aspirations for impartiality and balance in the social studies classroom: to teach students how to think and not what to think; to commit to teaching both inspirational and unsettling histories; to engage with multiple perspectives. Preparing students for critical thinking and informed citizenship—the top educational goals among the teachers we surveyed—inclines them to keep a political poker face in the classroom and to avoid curricular materials that they associate with ideological bias.[15] This is the good news that no one is talking about.

The bad news is that history teachers continue to perceive the sidelining of their subject in favor of subjects regularly covered by state-mandated assessment. This brings us to a second claim—and perhaps a silver lining, depending on where one sits within

[13]For analysis and strategy from the right, see The Manhattan Institute, "Woke Schooling: A Toolkit for Concerned Parents," June 17, 2021, https://www.manhattan-institute.org/woke-schooling-toolkit-for-concerned-parents; Christopher Rufo, *America's Cultural Revolution: How the Radical Left Conquered Everything* (New York: Broadside Books, 2023); Richard Hanania, *The Origins of Woke: Civil Rights Law, Corporate America, and the Triumph of Identity Politics* (New York: Broadside Books, 2023). From the liberal center, see John McWhorter, *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America* (New York: Portfolio, 2021); Yascha Mounk, *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time* (New York: Penguin, 2023). For critiques from the left, see Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed Jr., *No Politics but Class Politics* (London: Eris, 2023); Susan Neiman, *Left Is Not Woke* (Cambridge: Polity, 2023); Musa al-Gharbi, *We Have Never Been Woke: The Cultural Contradictions of a New Elite* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024). On schools as battlefields, 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); Jack Schneider and Jennifer Berkshire, *The Education Wars: A Citizen's Guide and Defense Manual* (New York: The New Press, 2024).

[14]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 students who qualified for free or reduced lunch) were the most likely to report having experienced objections "several times" over the course of their career. (This group made up 17 percent of surveyed teachers.) Meanwhile, teachers working in low-income districts were far more likely to report that they had never experienced any criticism (51 percent). Suburban teachers, among all locales, were the least likely to say that their careers were without challenge, while teachers in other locales showed little variation. An important caveat: aside from standards and legislation, our study could not capture conditions outside of our nine sample states—or outside of the time that we spent on the project. If, as we note, political flare-ups are local and contingent, then it's altogether possible that things might be worse (or better) beyond the boundaries of the times and places we studied.

[15]On goals, "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 34. In our survey, we asked teachers to register their familiarity and usage of over two dozen digital US history teacher resources. Only a small handful provoked negative reactions. Of those, the only resources that earned suspicion from surveyed teachers because of what they or others judged as an ideological bias were the Pulitzer Center's *1619 Project* Education Network and *The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum*. "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 34.

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the education system. In spite of the various efforts by state and local administrators to standardize and align instruction, history teachers retain substantial discretion over what they use in their daily work. The accountability movement in US education certainly pulled state paperwork into successive rounds of standardization beginning in the 1990s. By 2002, all but two states had a set of adopted standards for social studies. Among administrators, course-team alignment has been promoted as a professional goal for well over a generation.[16] But assessment—the decisive variable in aligning instructional practice to any standard—landed unevenly and irresolutely for history in most states. With a few exceptions, state-mandated testing in US history remains a low-stakes oddity today.[17]

Standards can play a productive role—especially when they specify content in rough accordance with the typical structure of an academic year.[18] As one Texas teacher put it, "I know the way to San Antonio, but it's nice to have a map."[19] Elsewhere, a great many teachers carry on with minimal awareness of (and occasional antagonism to) the state education agency's alleged role in their work. Meanwhile, at the district level, designated staff assigned to social studies are rare. Where social studies curriculum specialists or instructional coordinators do exist, they may recruit teachers into various rituals of alignment: curriculum maps; pacing guides; common assessments. In interviews, however, many administrators confessed that history teachers, especially at the high school level, will resist directives that they find onerous or invasive. Occasionally, these tugs of war revealed deeper contests over the purpose of teaching history, with disagreements visible between management and labor. Among curriculum coordinators, an emphasis on skills of literacy, inquiry, and argumentation prevailed. History teachers hardly seemed opposed: 97 percent of surveyed teachers cited critical thinking as among their top learning goals. But teachers also identified frequently and proudly as history nerds—experts in their subject and sometimes skeptical of pedagogical novelties.[20] Some social studies coordinators clearly experienced frustration with teachers

[16]For the influential literature on professional learning communities and the like, see Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker, *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree, 1998); Robert J. Marzano, Debra J. Pickering, and Jane E. Pollock, *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Improving Student Achievement* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2001); Douglas B. Reeves, *Accountability for Learning: How Teachers and School Leaders Can Take Charge* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2004).

[17]Of the twenty-one states with a testing mandate for US history on the books, only twelve have stakes for districts or schools with regard to state accountability evaluations; only seven have stakes for students with regard to graduation. Among our sample states, Texas was the clear outlier in terms of its accountability environment, having the most detailed standards, the most unified assessment regime, and the highest-stakes accountability system for districts. As we discovered, Texas's system produced strong trickle-down effects on local paperwork and benchmark testing. Seventy-four percent of Texas teachers we surveyed reported that they and their department colleagues gave a common test at the end of every curricular unit, compared with only 33 percent in other surveyed states.

[18]Sixty percent of surveyed teachers said they actually use state standards directly in their teaching—although there are important differences from state to state. Over three-quarters of teachers in Alabama, Texas, and Virginia report using their state standards, while half or fewer teachers in Connecticut, Illinois, and Pennsylvania said the same. Interviews are cited here as either HST (for high school teacher), MST (for middle school teacher) or SSA (for social studies administrator).

[19]Interview with High School Teacher, HST 729, Oct. 24, 2023.

[20]Interview with high school social studies teacher, HST 605, July 10, 2023.

who "love their content" more than they seem to love the latest instructional shift announced by the district office.[21] Other admins hoping to introduce big changes had learned to lower their expectations as they waited out the next wave of teacher retirements.[22] In an unexpected twist, some administrators have found that recent rounds of politicized pressure on social studies have granted them new leverage for enforcing alignment with their expectations. As one Virginia administrator made clear to his teachers, "If you want to ensure we're on your side, always use our materials."[23]

Still, behind the closed door of the classroom, teacher autonomy prevails. What then, do history teachers do with their discretion? Our third claim may seem counterintuitive—that in spite of localized structures of governance, infrequent common assessment, and loosely coupled chains of management, history teachers end up choosing and using many of the same instructional materials as their peers across the national landscape. Traditional textbooks are moving to the margins of history instruction, but not because of the perennial blame they receive for being bland or biased.[24] The eclipse of textbooks appears to be driven chiefly by technological contexts (e.g., one-to-one computing, learning management systems, open educational resources)—and a growing perception among many teachers that the current generation of students are either unprepared or unwilling to read at length. Thirty-two percent of teachers surveyed say they never use a textbook, and those that do are more likely to describe them as "a reference" than something that they assign regularly in class or for homework.

Important regional variations notwithstanding, US history teachers draw from a common pool of sources and activities, accessed chiefly by way of no-cost and low-cost online providers. High rates of reported recognition and usage clustered around the online resources of federal museums, archives, and institutions (the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian, for instance). Also near the top of the chart were cognitive psychologist Sam Wineburg's Stanford History Education Group (SHEG, recently renamed the Digital Inquiry Group, or DIG) and YouTuber John Green's Crash Course US History series. SHEG and Crash Course are a useful shorthand for classroom history's split personality. SHEG's modular "Reading Like a Historian" activities exemplify the ascendent genre of classroom-ready materials: document-based inquiry. Meanwhile, Crash Course videos carry on (with added snark and flash) where textbooks left off: narrative exposition.

[21]Interview with social studies administrator, SSA 305, May 23, 2023; interview with high school social studies teacher, HST 725, Aug. 30, 2023.

[22]Interview with high school social studies teacher, HST 419, June 7, 2023; interview with high school social studies teacher, HST 725, Aug. 30, 2023.

[23]Interview with social studies administrator, SSA 819, Sept. 18, 2023.

[24]On critiques of textbooks, past and present, see 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: The New Press, 2007); James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1995); Diane Ravitch, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn* (New York: Vintage, 2004); Dana Goldstein, "Two States. Eight Textbooks. Two American Stories," *New York Times*, Jan. 12, 2020; Donald Yacovone, *Teaching White Supremacy: America's Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity* (New York: Pantheon, 2022).

The basic ingredients that drive typical history lessons—reading documents, asking questions, making arguments, and telling stories—are unobjectionable. But our prolonged exposure to a variety of bad questions and fragmentary documents led us to a fourth claim: there appear to be some collateral costs to the otherwise productive focus on inquiry in the history classroom. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, contributions from cognitivists like Wineburg promised a productive shift. Rather than endless battles over "which history" would be taught, educators would change the subject to a discussion of "why history" should be taught.[25] To a greater extent than ever before, teachers suddenly had clearer guidance and more sophisticated resources to help students inquire, think, read, and argue like historians. The emphasis on inquiry and literacy kept the culture wars at bay and justified social studies on terms compatible with national accountability initiatives like Common Core. Social studies standards in multiple states now echo the 2013 *College Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework*—produced by a coalition including the AHA and NCSS—in centering inquiry as both process and goal.[26]

On the ground, however, inquiry doesn't always match the ideal form. In the typical document-based lesson, sources come plucked from original contexts, trimmed to snippets, and even altered by AI. Instead of serving as a textured and stirring encounter with the past, many lessons are designed toward more instrumental outcomes (e.g., assessing the validity of the evidence; extracting the main idea; using this detail to support that claim). Meanwhile, prompts that organize inquiry units often soar in the opposite direction, posing "compelling" or "essential" questions that raise the stakes to civic, moral, or metaphysical dimensions. Deciding "how democracy should work" or "whether compromise is fair" may be compelling questions, but they probably ask too much of historical documents.[27] Other inquiries wedge historical actors and events into forced choices between blunt dichotomies—triumph or tragedy, hero or villain—reducing history to a set of positions that students must take and defend. Ongoing dialogue among historians, educators, and the public can sharpen collective understandings of the difference between good historical questions, ahistorical questions, and the questions that history won't answer for us.

This brings us to a final claim, which is that history teachers desire and deserve more high-quality, content-specific professional development. Teachers who took PD

[25]Sam Wineburg, "Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts," *Phi Delta Kappan* 80, no. 7 (Spring 1999), 488-99.

[26]See, for instance, National Council for the Social Studies, *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," National Council for the Social Studies, https://www.socialstudies.org/professional-learning/inquiry-showcase; "2023 Conference Resources," National Social Studies Leaders Association, https://www.socialstudiesleaders.org/.

[27]C3 Teachers Inquiry, "What Does It Mean to Be Equal?," https://c3teachers.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/NewYork_7_Womens_Rights.pdf; "Is Republican Democracy the Best Form of Government?," district document, Texas, City: Midsize. In our full report, all references to unpublished instructional materials (as with our survey and interview informants) were anonymized. Our mission was to describe the common strong suits and weak spots that characterized coverage of our six topics—not to celebrate or denigrate any particular teacher, district, or state education agency.

trips (offered by organizations like the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National WWII Museum, Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, and George Washington's Mount Vernon, to name those cited by teachers) spoke glowingly of the sense of enrichment and community they had gained. But experience with these opportunities was uneven, with descriptions of access, approval, and funding for history-focused PD varying widely across district settings—except for the common refrain that district-organized PD rarely focused on history content.

Our assessment of specific historical content resists easy summary here, but suffice it to say that teachers do their best when they know their stuff. Materials covering Native American history stood out as particularly prone to vagaries, erasures, and platitudes, though not for want of interest in the topic. 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."[28] The founding era was richer on specifics and strong on causation and contingency, but it suffered whenever a preference for providing civics lessons bent the plot toward a Constitution-centered exposition. On westward expansion, some instructional materials persist in assigning Manifest Destiny an inflated role as prime mover, but other units have incorporated dynamic local stories and diverse characters in support of a more contingent picture of technological innovation, environmental change, military conflict, and immigration. Political conflict over slavery is uncontroversially described in instructional materials as the chief cause of the Civil War. More controversial is the question of how to teach about slavery itself, which a segment of teachers reported having difficulty doing without fear of offending someone. As for the Civil War, some teachers focus excessively on military conduct, cramping treatment of the social and political dimension. Coverage of Reconstruction benefits from newer, focused materials that spotlight transformations in the lives of freedpeople but suffers from being squeezed in and rushed through at the end of a semester or school year. Industry, capital, and labor at the close of the nineteenth century is a "slog" or a "soup" for some teachers, who struggle to corral the overlapping themes and topics that span the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Teachers deploy various framings to clarify the mess—with varying success. A "making modern America" emphasis is common, as are profiles of industrial titans like Carnegie and Rockefeller. Agency among the masses is far scarcer, and labor unionism is often shortchanged of its unique historical trajectory, lumped in and drowned out in the soup of Progressive reform. The civil rights movement was ranked as the clear standout for priority coverage among surveyed teachers; for many, the era contained important lessons about national character, sacrifice, and the need for active citizenship. While the northern front of the movement was notably absent in curricula, treatment of the civil rights era appears more reflective of recent historiographic developments than many of the other subjects we appraised; materials made space for a longer civil rights movement, and a chorus of teachers stressed the grassroots nature of a movement that was "more than MLK and Rosa."[29]

[28]Iowa Teacher, "Survey of US History Teachers," AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 22.

[29]When teachers took time to make mention of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. in their free responses, the most common purpose was to explain why they were not the movement's *only* important figures. AHA/NORC questionnaire, 2023, question 19.

The missteps that we found in classroom materials rarely expressed a partisan slant or ideological agenda. Weak points stemmed from the need to simplify, reflecting the pressure to rush through a topic or indicating a lack of strong content knowledge in particular areas. Teachers do not express uniform confidence in their subject matter, citing areas of weakness on both ends of the American history timeline. The expiration of the federal Teaching American History grant program in 2011 has left professional development among K-12 history teachers underfunded for over a decade. Any new initiative will doubtless face difficulty navigating the hot spots and third rails of ongoing culture wars. Ideally, however, a program of targeted PD for US history teachers should focus on reinforcing teachers' confidence as authentic experts in their subject matter, moving fluently between inquiry and narrative—developing and conjoining their inner Sam Wineburgs and John Greens.

What We Can't See and Can't Solve

HEQ readers will undoubtedly note that our study never got a peek into Larry Cuban's "black box" of classroom practice, nor got past Jon Zimmerman's "recipe" of curriculum to taste the "meal" of instruction, and we stopped short of sampling David Labaree's "received curriculum." We can only hope that scholars who carry out ethnographic excursions into the classroom will test our hunches and conclusions.

In the end, our report makes a strong case that we—historians, teacher educators, history teachers, historians of education—need to help education reporters and pundits change the subject. In place of partisan hyperbole about who is or isn't indoctrinating America's children, our research suggests the need to provoke new debates: about how to preserve the distinctive tricks of history's trade amid the interdisciplinary mission creep of inquiry and literacy; about how teachers, administrators, and school boards ought to negotiate the boundaries of authority with regard to instruction; about the proper relationship between civics and history; and about how history-rich professional development for teachers can be funded and sustained over the long haul. None of these new debate topics map comfortably onto the red and blue boundaries set by partisan media; all the better. One insight that we've gotten from speaking to teachers is that feeding the culture war beast is seldom good for history teaching.

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