

## **Zachary M. Schrag**

### **Comments on January 2023 Draft History and Social Science Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools, March 15, 2023.**

To the Virginia Board of Education:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the January 2023 Draft History and Social Science Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools.

I submitted a paper copy of these comments at the Mount Vernon hearing on March 14, and delivered a much-abbreviated, two-minute version orally. Please use this version as the version of record.

I am a Virginian and the father of a student in a Virginia public school. I am the author of three books on the history of the United States—including Virginia history—and of a fourth on historical research methods. I am a life member of the American Historical Association, and I applaud the association's work on this issue. And I am a professor of history at George Mason University, though my comments here reflect my own views and not those of my institution.

In all of these roles, I take pride in studying and teaching the history of this great nation.

I appreciate the goals of the draft standards, as articulated in their introduction: “to restore excellence, curiosity and excitement around teaching and learning history,” to “illuminate insights from the past and inspire current and future generations to lead lives that are informed and inspired by those who walked this journey before them,” and to teach “skills of historical analysis.” Students should understand history not as a list of facts to be memorized, but rather as the study of people and the choices they made. They need the encouragement to ask questions about the past, and tools and time to explore those questions.

I hope that my comments will help the board better achieve its goals.

### **General approaches**

Three general elements of the draft standards threaten the “curiosity and excitement” that the board seeks to instill, and the skill of “looking at events and issues from various perspectives” that the standards seek to teach.

#### *Unsupported claims of exceptionalism*

The introduction proclaims that “America is exceptional and not perfect.” The latter is true, as it is of all countries. But the standards' claim that America possesses “exceptional strengths, including individual innovation, moral character, ingenuity and adventure” is unsupported by anything that follows. How are students to measure Americans' moral character or ingenuity against those of other nations? This section of the introduction clashes with the skills of historical analysis the standards purport to advance.

#### *Focus on “great individuals”*

The “Expectations For Virginia's Students” states that “The Virginia standards are grounded in the foundational principles and actions of great individuals who preceded us so that we may learn from them as we strive to maintain our political liberties and personal freedoms and thrive as a nation.”

Here again, the claims of the introduction are unsupported—and indeed contradicted—by the body of the text. Throughout the standards, we find lists of people, some of whom have long been prominent in history textbooks, others of whom are sufficiently obscure that I—a relatively senior history professor—had to look them up. The presence of these less well-known names reminds us that history is made not only by great individuals, but by ordinary ones as well. Knowing that, we can all gain inspiration.

#### *Excessive detail*

Section-by-section comparison to the 2015 standards show that the proposed new standards are in many cases twice as long as those currently in use. This micromanagement will burden teachers, students, and publishers and threaten to crowd out the curiosity and excitement that the board hopes to instill. Too many facts to learn means fewer opportunities for teachers to devise lesson plans linking local

history to the state and national stories, to plan field trips that would illustrate major themes, and to develop open-ended assignments giving students the chance to pursue questions not answered by their textbooks. While many of the topics listed in the draft are important, they belong more in an accompanying resource guide than in a list of mandates.

### **Specific content**

The standards ask students to “[look] at events and issues from various perspectives” and to “wrestle with complex texts and ideas.” Yet some of the standards’ choices about historical content work against these goals. The content of the January 2023 standards suggest that they were designed for ideological—rather than scholarly—ends.

#### *Denigration of socialism*

The principles section claims that “Centralized government planning in the form of socialism or communist political systems is incompatible with democracy and individual freedoms.”

This assertion is unsupported by any components of the standards, and it ignores the history of democratic socialism in Europe, the United States, and other democratic nations. It also ignores notable successes of centralized planning, such as Japan’s resurgence after World War II. The standards mention, but do not identify as socialists, such champions of freedom as Vaclav Havel and Helen Keller. The standards mention food safety, but not the contributions of socialist Upton Sinclair. They highlight the 1963 March on Washington, but not its chair, socialist A. Philip Randolph.

The draft asks that students take on faith the incompatibility of socialism and democracy. This goes against the stated goals of the standards as a whole. Instead, students should learn the history of socialism, using the tools of historical analysis described on page 9.

#### *New Deal exceptionalism*

Sixth graders are asked to describe “the major features, including pros and cons of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal,” while eleventh-graders should explain “how Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal measures addressed the Great Depression and expanded the government’s role in the economy, creating opportunities for some and losses for others.”

Pros and cons is strange language for history standards, since those terms depend on one’s interests and values. “Opportunities for some and losses for others” is much better, but these are common to all historical movements, from westward expansion to the spread of the internet. Why is such language applied only to the New Deal?

Even as they challenge students to consider how the New Deal benefited some people at the expense of others, the standards here offer less detail than most other sections. While I would like to see the standards shortened, if they are to retain the current level of detail, more is needed here. Fourth graders could study the creation of the Shenandoah National Park, while eleventh-graders could study specific New Deal programs, such as deposit insurance, Social Security, and the Wagner Act.

#### *Erasure of labor and labor activism*

For all their length, the standards neglect stories of labor conditions and labor relations. Cesar Chavez gets a mention in the second-grade history curriculum, and sixth-graders are to learn about the “creation of public sector labor unions,” but apparently students will not be taught the multi-century history of American unions, from the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association through the Knights of Labor, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and the AFL-CIO. They are to learn about the philanthropy of Carnegie, Mellon, and Rockefeller (58), but not about the employees who toiled to build their wealth, or the strikes that eventually led to better conditions, shorter hours, higher pay, and greater equality. They are to learn about the regulation of child labor, but not of the role of union leaders, such as Mother Jones, in pushing for those reforms. To understand the history of American capitalism, students need also the history of American labor.

### *Inattention to Northern Virginia, especially its recent history*

According to the Northern Virginia Regional Commission, nearly three out of ten of Virginians live in Northern Virginia, yet this dynamic region barely appears in the Virginia history sections. Both the fourth-grade and eleventh-grade versions could benefit from stories of Northern Virginia's past eighty years: stories of national defense, suburbanization, highway and transit development, technological innovation, and immigration from all over the world.

### **Minor errors**

Along with these major concerns, I wish to draw your attention to some minor errors.

Page 20. "John F. Kennedy, Jr." Presumably you mean John F. Kennedy, Sr., the 35th president, not John F. Kennedy, Jr., the co-founder of *George Magazine*.

Page 32. "Calvary." Presumably you mean cavalry.

Page 33. "Battle of Berlin." The Soviet contribution to victory in World War II absolutely deserves attention, but this Soviet victory seems out of place in a list of American battles.

Page 34. "Environmental Protection Act." Do you mean the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency by executive order? Or the National Environmental Policy Act?

Page 52. "Vaclev Havel." Correct spelling is Václav Havel or Vaclav Havel.

Page 58. I suggest that the acquisition of the Philippines and the resulting war is at least as important as the Pancho Villa expedition.

Page 63. "Five values." As Michael Soto noted in 2010, these five values were compiled not by Tocqueville in the 1830s, but rather by Seymour Martin Lipset in the 1990s. [Michael Soto, "Plagiarized Work," History News Network (blog), 2010, <http://hnn.us/articles/126367.html>.] Let us accurately cite all sources, but especially those by George Mason University faculty.

### **Final thoughts**

Teachers required to adhere to the proposed 2023 standards would have difficulty preparing their students for universities like mine. Unlike the current draft, the August 2022 standards reflect the process and values of my profession. Please adopt those.

Thank you for your attention and for your continued work educating Virginia's youth.

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