From Crisis to Civic Engagement:
The Struggle Over Social Studies Standards in Minnesota

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Before Minnesota became a hotly contested battleground state in this year’s presidential election, our state recently concluded a highly controversial public debate regarding the creation of new social studies standards. This battle over required social studies knowledge in Minnesota was part of the larger “culture war” in the state and nation.

In early September of 2003, the Minnesota Department of Education made public the 56-page first draft document detailing 233 K-12 standards that were specified by 848 corresponding benchmarks dealing with U.S. history, world history, geography, economics, civics and government. Immediately, many teachers, parents, professors, community leaders, and students raised serious concerns at public hearings, in the newspaper, and elsewhere.

Ultimately, the struggle centered on two questions: What knowledge is of most worth? and Whose knowledge is of most worth? These questions were new for the state because Minnesota has a long tradition of local control in matters of curriculum—before the mid-1990s, when the legislature adopted state-wide performance standards for graduation in various subject-areas, independent school districts, schools, and teachers determined what was taught and when. The system had served the state well by consistently producing top-rated scores on national assessments and strong showings in performance-based efforts like National History Day competitions. However, in this new era of accountability and No Child Left Behind, Minnesota was labeled as “failing” to have highly specific and testable content standards.

The struggle over social studies standards in Minnesota is a story about social studies in action and the intense struggle for democracy and diversity in our curriculum. It is a hopeful story about the power of teachers, parents, professors, and others uniting and engaging in authentic civic participation that actualized the best aspects of our democratic society.

Yet, our story is also sobering because we have learned that the battle over social studies and public education in our democracy is a constant struggle. We realize that the compromise standards finally adopted in law by the state are overwhelming in volume and still need improvement. Furthermore, we learned that our state cannot rest on its good reputation, and we learned that powerful, well-organized, ideological forces are persistent in seeking opportunities to control, diminish, and ultimately privatize public education.

What was Wrong with the Proposed Draft Standards?
Many critics found the first draft standards to be inaccurate, politically-biased, ethnocentric, racist, and sexist as well as age inappropriate, incoherent, too numerous, too costly and too focused on memorizing factoids.

Page after page of the draft proposed K-12 standards had basic factual errors that immediately undermined the credibility of the document. For example, the document stated that the Declaration of Independence described the specific structure and form of government eventually codified in the Constitution. Hitler was included in a list of American leaders during World War II. And, the proposed standards suggested Reagan was solely responsible for the fall of communism.

The proposed standards were also problematic for their omissions, distortions, and biased emphases. Missing were items such as due process, equal protection, how a bill becomes a law, separation of powers, federalism, unions, and all Democratic presidents since Franklin D. Roosevelt. The standards suggested the role of government was limited to protecting individual rights (no mention of...
the common good) and that America was founded as a Christian government.

In the U.S. history, world history, and civics strands, the proposed standards perpetuated an inaccurate and outdated presumption of a single line of development from the ancient Mediterranean through Western Europe to “Us,” where the “Us”—Americans—are all presumed to be of shared descent. The standards portrayed America only in a positive light—a country that seldom makes mistakes and that has had a minor history of dissent and conflict. There was no mention of Latin American history after Hernán Cortés conquered the Aztecs and no mention of Latinos in U.S. history. Furthermore, independence movements in Africa received no attention, nor did apartheid in South Africa or Nelson Mandela.

Other omissions or distortions included the minimization of the Constitution, and a fixation on the Declaration of Independence as the founding document for the United States (including, in seventh grade, the requirement that students “know the significance of” the four references to God in the Declaration); the depiction of Columbus as only a famous person to be celebrated; enslaved people brought to the U.S. from West Africa during the period of 1800 to 1877 being characterized as “immigrants” in fifth grade geography; “racism” only being mentioned once in more than 22,000 words, and the post-Reconstruction Jim Crow era with the rise of the KKK and frequent lynchings being characterized generically as “other challenges” faced by African Americans; and no mention of Japanese internment camps in the U.S. during World War II.

The United States’ economic relationships with other countries and the application of economic theories and concepts to public policy issues were largely ignored along with controversial economic issues and the role of unions.

Throughout the proposed standards, the levels of specificity were hardly comparable for different world regions. For instance, fifth graders in one benchmark would be required to simply “identify major contributions of the Mayan, Aztec, and Incan civilizations,” but in another they were to “identify the significance of the Gutenberg printing press, Bible translations into common languages, the Protestant Reformation, Copernicus, and Galileo.”

The length of the United States and world history standards alone would have been ambitious for college level courses. Because of this, the proposed standards were age-inappropriate. They were also critiqued as developmentally inappropriate because they rejected the widely used “expanding horizons” curriculum approach for the K-5 U.S. and World history standards, mandating instead more of an E.D. Hirsch “Core Knowledge” approach. While the expanding horizons approach starts with understanding family and community and builds relevancy from students’ experiences, the Core Knowledge approach assumes that all young children need to know certain isolated pieces of abstract information about very distant places, people and times deemed important by Hirsch and his followers.

In addition to being too numerous and developmentally inappropriate, the proposed standards included much historical trivia combined with lower-order thinking verbs such as “know” and “identify.” Rather than being high standards, we and many others critiqued the standards for having extremely limited expectations for students to consider multiple perspectives, think critically, and evaluate information.

As University of Minnesota historian Lisa Norling testified, “What bothered us most—and inspired us to action—was the comprehensive denial in the proposed standards of several generations of professional scholarship, the knowledge it has produced, and the instruction it offers.”

Why Were the Proposed First and Final Draft Standards so Bad?

Stacked Committee

The foundation for problematic standards was formed in the summer of 2003 when our state’s new ultra-conservative and now ex-Commissioner of Education Cheri Pierson Yecce handpicked forty-four people to draft the standards. Although some 300 Minnesotans, including dozens of educators with outstanding credentials in teaching and curriculum development, answered a call for volunteers to help draft new social studies standards for K-12 schools, they were overlooked and excluded.

Yecce claimed the citizen writing team and process was inclusive. However, her committee was not culturally, geographically, or politically representative of Minnesotans. People of color were not even proportionally represented; more than half of the committee was from suburban communities, although only about 35 percent of Minnesota’s population lives in these communities; and none of her chosen committee members had given reportable campaign contributions to Democrats, but many members of her committee had close ties to the Republican party operatives, campaign volunteers and contributors. The commissioner’s team was also disproportionately comprised of persons who either opted out of, or opposed, public education, and many also sought to end the separation of church and state (especially in schools).

During the public outcry in response to the first draft, Yecce dismissed the critics as reacting from a “hate America agenda.” Rather than considering the substance of the complaints, in November she concentrated power for revising the first draft standards in a smaller, fourteen-member subcommittee chosen from the larger group ostensibly for their “leadership and consensus building.” Yet, the subcommittee was even more dominated by conservative ideologues and advocates of E.D. Hirsch’s Core Knowledge curriculum.

Although the fourteen-member writing committee worked hard under the watch of public observers from both sides of the debate, the group’s effectiveness was severely constrained by a lack of representation from politically and culturally diverse public school teachers and professors with expertise in key social studies disciplines. While the least problematic standards strands in geography and economics were guided by professors in those disciplines, no university historians, no political scientists, no civics teachers, no leaders of
the Minnesota Council for the Social Studies, no middle school teachers, no teacher educators, no district curriculum directors were chosen to participate on the writing committee.

Rushed Timeline with Unused Resources and Limited Public Accountability

Compounding the problems of the stacked committees was the rushed timeline the commissioner set for them to complete their tasks. Unlike our social studies colleagues in Georgia, who are currently seeking to develop new standards over the course of two or three years, the process in Minnesota was unnecessarily condensed into part-time meetings over four weeks to develop the first draft and intermittent meetings over six weeks to develop the final draft. These rushed timelines resulted in the most controversial subject strands of civics and U.S. history receiving the least amount of attention and debate in these writing committee meetings.

Lack of time as well as inadequate guidance resulted in committee members avoiding the use of scholarly materials or textbooks to assist them in writing their detailed listing of what Minnesota students should be required to learn. In fact, the first draft committee was not even given copies of either NCSS-authored standards or the standards developed by the national professional organizations representing each of the specific disciplines of economics, history, geography, and civics. However, the commissioner did encourage the use of standards from five states highly rated by the conservative Fordham Foundation and did provide committee members with copies of the Fordham Foundation's publication Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?

Finally, the rushed timeline, along with the personal and political agendas of committee members and the commissioner, resulted in the committee virtually ignoring 170 pages of mostly critical public input solicited at public hearings and on the Department of Education’s website. At each of fourteen public hearings as well as on the Department of Education’s website, the commissioner requested specific comments on specific standards rather than often-heard general comments about the standards document as a whole. Even though many social studies educators, departments, school districts along with parents, professors and others provided such specific feedback, the commissioner did not provide her committee with paper copies of all the public feedback prior to or at their November 1 meeting to consider feedback and start working on a revised draft. In fact, most of the committee members were unable to download and print the 223-page document. When the writing committee members made specific reference to any specific public feedback, they noted no more than ten instances of feedback over the course of more than forty hours of meetings over several weeks.

The most glaring example of lack of responsiveness occurred in November
after a protest by Native American community leaders over a denial by the commissioner on Minnesota Public Radio of the role of Columbus in the genocide of indigenous peoples. Despite widespread print and TV coverage of the protest and despite one copy of resources on American Indians from the Department of Education's own Office of Indian Education being made available to committee members, the committee never once discussed the fact that Columbus was only framed as a famous person to be celebrated, and none of the committee members ever examined or used the stacks of resources during their work to revise the standards.

Since there were no public hearings scheduled by the commissioner on the final draft and there was no mechanism to provide feedback on this draft at the Department of Education’s website, critics of the final draft had to make their case known at the state capitol. The ultimate lack of responsiveness and accountability by the commissioner and her committee to the majority of public opinion in what the commissioner framed as an “unprecedented open process” only motivated us the more to see the proposed standards rejected by the state legislature and the commissioner lose her position.

What Did We Do About It?
How we and many others coalesced into a grassroots movement to resist the severely flawed proposed standards from the commissioner of education is a story that has surprised many. We did not represent a single organization, we had no financial backing, and we had no formal or hierarchical decision-making structure. We were just a diverse collection of individuals and groups who shared a deep concern about the standards and a determination to do whatever we could to make sure they were not passed by the legislature.

The resistance movement only had three strategic planning meetings over the course of eight months, and many of us had not met each other in person until this past summer at a victory celebration. (Three of us met for the first time when we shared our story at the NCSS Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C.) Much of our struggle was waged in a virtual electronic network that relied on regular email, website, and telephone communications to discuss updates, talking points, and strategies.

Creating Public Awareness of the Crisis
Focusing attention on the draft standards was essential, and this was accomplished by individuals taking the initiative to create websites and online petitions, speak out at public hearings, email friends and colleagues, mobilize teachers, professors and parents, write to newspapers, hold press conferences, and meet with key legislative and community leaders.

One day before the first and only public hearing on proposed social studies and science standards scheduled in the Twin Cities, social studies teacher educator Paul Spies and five family members expressed their concern for their young children and grandchildren by creating a group called MAPSSS—Minnesotans Against Proposed Social Studies Standards. Within hours after their Sunday dinner conversation, they created a flyer listing major problems with the standards, a website, and an online petition to reject the standards.

The next evening at the hearing, Paul distributed the flyer to some 300 people packed in a St. Paul high school auditorium to raise objections about the standards. Of the dozens who spoke out, Michael Boucher testified passionately about the problems with the standards from his perspective as a teacher in Minneapolis. The next morning headlines in both major metropolitan newspapers read, “Proposed Standards Draw Fire” and “Proposed School Standards Face Critical Reception.”

Because of media attention, and because the objections identified by MAPSSS resonated with so many in attendance at this and other public hearings, the online petition gathered more than 1400 signatures from 180 different communities throughout the state in a matter of six weeks.

Getting teachers from around the state to increase their level of attention to the draft standards became a critical goal of Jennifer Bloom at the Minnesota Center for Community Legal Education. To accomplish this, forty-one experienced civics and government educators came together on September 25, 2003 to carefully read the first draft of the civics and government standards. The bipartisan group came from all corners of Minnesota and represented rural, urban, and suburban schools equally.

They compared the proposed document with other states’ standards, available curriculum materials, and existing courses. They evaluated it for bias and accuracy, and they made recommendations for corrections and improvements. A seventy-three-page analysis with specific recommendations resulted and was shared with the commissioner. The “September 25th teachers” did not limit their participation in the commissioner’s process to printed recommendations. Many of them testified at the public hearings, held informational meetings in their schools and communities, and volunteered to help draft alternative standards.

A group of history professors at the University of Minnesota joined the opposition to the proposed standards in early October only after the standards were brought to their attention by a school administrator who had worked with several of them in the past. A number of the faculty, including Lisa Norling, examined the standards and were startled and even offended by the sheer sloppiness and obviously deliberate rejection of established and mainstream scholarship.

Lisa and a few colleagues circulated the proposed standards to the rest of the department and called an open meeting to discuss if and how they should contribute to the growing debate. As a result, a few colleagues undertook a detailed analysis of the proposed standards, which was then summarized in a thirteen-page letter addressed to the commissioner of education. The letter, co-signed by thirty-two faculty members of the university’s Department of History, expressed grave concerns about the standards; it received front-page coverage in the Star Tribune newspaper as the public comment period

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An important source of dissent about the proposed standards and the flawed process used to develop them also came from social studies teachers who served on the commissioner’s committee. At the end of October, Jack Brady, Mary Tacheny, Paul Seeba and Marc Doepner-Hove broke ranks, joined together and wrote a “minority report” that was given to the press, MAPSSS, and state legislators.

From mid-October through November, at least thirty-seven news reports and commentaries appeared in the major papers, TV stations, and radio. This media blitz was not orchestrated, but numerous voices from multiple sources seized on and created opportunities to bring attention to the issue, and put pressure on the commissioner to see that changes were made. In addition to raising awareness, there were also many important actions we and others took behind the scenes.

Forming Networks
In early November, Jennifer, Dana, and Paul decided to invite thirty people who had taken a public stance on the standards and had demonstrated leadership to a Saturday morning strategic planning meeting. This meeting provided an important opportunity for educators, parents, and elected officials to unite and update each other on efforts, brainstorm next steps, and claim responsibility for further action. One concrete result of the meeting was the creation of an email listserv on Yahoo that kept everyone constantly connected in a virtual electronic community.

Monitoring the Process
The meetings of the fourteen-member writing committee charged with revising the first draft standards were, fortuitously, open to the public. Jennifer, Lisa, Paul, and Rick, along with a few parents, attended every one of these weekly meetings through November and December, took careful notes, and shared the information with others in our network. Their first-hand observation provided crucial insights into the process by which the flawed standards were produced: the personal and political dynamics at work within the committee; the narrow qualifications, limited experience, and skewed perspectives of each committee member, and the role of the commissioner and other staff at the Department of Education. All of this information was absolutely invaluable for our strategizing, our testimony at the Senate and House hearings, and our lobbying at the capitol starting in late January. Being present at the meetings was also crucial because activists from the ultra-conservative group EdWatch attended every meeting too, and we witnessed—and took note of—their ties to several committee members.

Lobbying
The larger political context of the standards framed our lobbying efforts.
Standards in America's Classrooms

Washington, was appointed by our conserva
tive Republican Governor Tim Pawlenty. Given his (and her) support by the Republican majority in the state House of Representatives, it was paramount that key leaders in the Democrat-led Senate were on the alert that the commissioner’s standards had serious problems. The chair of the Education Committee, Senator Steve Kelley, shared most of the concerns expressed about the standards and the process used to develop them. He pleaded not to support the flawed standards and invited social studies teachers and professors to work on alternative versions.

MCSS: Taking A Stand

It wasn’t until March that the Minnesota Council for Social Studies agreed to take an organizational stance against the proposed standards. Many active in the opposition movement had expected MCSS to intervene earlier, given the opinions of so many members and the fact that the commissioner had deliberately excluded MCSS representation on her writing committee. However, the council’s delay proved to lend credibility and objectivity to its official position, announced at the capitol immediately following the MCSS annual conference on March 5th.

At the two-day conference, members of the resistance movement made presentations. Lynda Symcox, the author of Whose History? The Struggle for National Standards in America’s Classrooms1, was the keynote speaker, and there was a separate standards review and comment room available for participants. During their board meeting, MCSS President Nance Purcell, President-elect Michael Boucher, and others along with NCSS past-President Rick Theisen, crafted a resolution expressing concern about the commissioner’s standards that had, by then, been passed by the House. The resolution also offered the collective expertise of MCSS to assist in revising and improving the standards.

Drafting Alternative Standards

In fact, an effort to offer an alternative set of standards had already begun in December. The group who volunteered to craft the alternative included accomplished (and award-winning) public school social studies teachers who were much more broadly representative of the entire state than the commissioner’s “citizens committee.” To provide content expertise, several University of Minnesota professors from the departments of history and political science also joined the effort.

In late March, the alternative standards were endorsed by the Minnesota Council for the Social Studies and were passed by the Senate. In May, a behind-the-scenes legislative conference committee, selected by negotiation between the Senate and the House education committees and composed of teachers, curriculum directors, content experts, and staff from the Department of Education (minus the commissioner), worked around the clock during the last week of the legislative session to meld the two competing versions of the standards—the set passed by the House and the set passed by the Senate—into one compromise document. In most cases where the most controversial content had been proposed in history, civics, and government standards, the compromise document included Senate-approved versions of the standards.

Blocking Confirmation of the Commissioner

While the struggle over social studies standards was the dominant education news story in the state during the fall, the confirmation of Commissioner Yecke overshadowed the standards issue during the spring. Yecke had become a polarizing figure on many other education issues as well, including her unwavering support of No Child Left Behind, her harsh (and illogical) condemnation of middle school education in her book War Against Excellence2, and her creation of flawed state report cards of schools. Ultimately, however, Yecke’s divisive rhetoric, persistent mistruths, and disrespectful behavior to marginalize and discredit her critics resulted in her losing her job.

Seeing Things Through to the End

We and others worked too hard on the standards and confirmation issues over the course of eight months to leave anything to chance in the final days and hours of the unusually divisive and bitter 2004 legislative session. While Rick, Michael, Paul, and others were at the capitol seeking opportunities to observe and lobby legislators in the final late night and early morning hours of the session, Carrie was at home busily communicating via e-mail and phone with senators on the Senate floor who were against confirmation and those who were identified as holding the swing votes.

In a dramatic turn of events at 3:30 a.m. on May 16, the Senate voted along party lines against confirming Cheri Pierson Yecke—less than ten minutes after a House-Senate conference committee voted to approve a compromise set of social studies standards.

Lessons for Other States

Ultimately, the struggle over social studies standards in Minnesota became a hopeful story of coalition building, resistance, and authentic civic engagement for teachers, students, parents, professors, and others. Our standards are not perfect, but they
are an extraordinary improvement over the ideologically driven and deeply flawed efforts of our now ex-commissioner of education. If the multipartisan coalition of parents, social studies teachers, professors, communities of color, as well as the Senate education committee chair and his staff had not become involved in the process, Minnesota would have the most right-wing, out-of-the-mainstream social studies standards in the country. We learned that anyone has the power to lead an effort to influence public policy, even if they do not have experience, money, or a formal well-established organization. We had practiced what we teach about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

But it is also important to note that even in Minnesota, where we take great pride in our tradition of excellent education, efforts to impose standards driven more by right-wing extremism than educational excellence were almost successful. Other states cannot afford to be caught off guard. The struggle over social studies curricula has been and will continue to be an issue across the nation. Social studies teachers need to be particularly prepared and ready to use the civic education skills they commonly teach in their classrooms. Our opposition was well organized and energized, and it has analogues (and even direct connections to allies) in virtually every state. Complacency is not an option.

Notes
1. E.D. Hirsch has published a series of seven books for K-6 parents and teachers titled What Your (#) Grader Needs to Know.