

# Education or Indoctrination?

## The Development of Social Studies Standards in Texas

Sue Blanchette

**O**n May 19, 2010, I drove to Austin, Texas, on what would prove to be a futile mission. It was the last opportunity to speak at a public hearing concerning the rewriting of the social studies standards. I left Dallas in the wee hours of the morning for the 3.5-hour drive, knowing full well that nothing I would say could make any immediate difference. The fundamentalist conservative block on the State Board of Education (SBOE) had the votes and there was little question about how things would turn out.

So why did I go? First, I wanted my opposition on record. I had sent a written commentary earlier, but I was stunned and appalled at some of the changes being made to the standards, changes not based in scholarship but in partisan politics and religious fervor. Secondly, our own National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) had received some concerned messages, asking why we had not made a statement about the standards. It wasn't that the NCSS Board hadn't had strong feelings about the standards; rather, it was the poisonous atmosphere that had developed in Austin aimed at both the Texas Council for the Social Studies (CSS) and NCSS. Any effort at presenting a rational statement about the standards would have resulted in even more stiffening of backbones in response to the interference of that "liberal East Coast organization." Here was an opportunity, however, to put NCSS directly on the record.

The procedure for testifying before the SBOE is fairly straightforward. Individuals had a two-day window in which to call in and sign up. By 9:30AM on the first day, I had called and was on the list. I was told by the young man who answered the phone that the list of those testifying would be posted on the

Texas Education Agency website sometime after noon on Tuesday, May 18. All I had to do was check, and I would have a pretty good idea of when I needed to be at the public hearing. At midnight, no list had been posted, forcing me to leave at the crack of dawn to ensure that I would

**"Only one in five Texas voters actually voted for the nine Board members who enacted the new standards...."**

be in Austin whenever I was scheduled. An accident 30 miles north of Austin slowed my momentum for about half an hour, but I made it to the meeting at 9AM, ready to say my piece. The list was available then—207 people signed up to speak, and I was Number 116! At three minutes per speaker, it would be mid-afternoon before it was my turn.

It was at this point that the meeting became a travesty. By 10:00AM, only the first two speakers had been heard by the

SBOE. By noon, only 20 speakers had gone. The problem was not the speakers, who dutifully limited their remarks to three minutes. The problem was that the members of the SBOE turned a public hearing designed to allow residents of the state to speak their minds into political grandstanding. Once a speaker was finished, the questions began—questions, it became quickly clear, not intended to illicit information, but rather to enable the members to reiterate *one more time*, their previously stated opinions, opinions which had, in many cases, now been institutionalized into the standards. The first speaker of the day, Rev. Stephen Brodin, was asked questions by nine board members, each using their questions as a platform to expound upon their own beliefs. Consequently, Rev. Brodin's three minutes lasted another 15 minutes. Former Secretary of Education Ron Paige gave a concise and erudite statement pleading for standards that were not driven by ideology or mired in details. He stated that the purpose of the standards was not to be fair, but to teach what actually happened and to avoid "stealth omissions." When he finished his three minutes, nine board members extended his stay at the microphone another 20 minutes. Perhaps the most insulting question asked was, "Have you read the standards?" Board member Terri Leo then pointed out that the SBOE had added "lots of minorities, just not progressive ones."

The next bit of grandstanding came from two members of the Texas State Legislature, Dan Flynn and Wayne Christian, who used the practice of politi-



State Board of Education member Mary Helen Berlanga listens to debate during an SBOE meeting in Austin on March 12, 2010. Earlier in the day, the board voted to preliminarily adopt the new, more conservative, social studies standards. Berlanga, who voted against the changes, decorated her desk with signage of past minority discrimination.

cal courtesy to spend 40 minutes or so of the time allocated to public testimony, even as one said that they were not there to “impose their views on the State Board of Education.” At this point a letter from the Texas Conservative Coalition in the Texas legislature was read into the record supporting the standards. Thirteen SBOE members felt compelled to comment. Don McElroy, one member of the conservative bloc on the SBOE, repeatedly reminded the others that more than 200 people remained to speak, but to no avail. As long as the state and national media remained in the boardroom, the grandstanding continued and the public waited.

The public hearings finally finished at 11:58PM. Many had gotten fed up

and left; many stuck it out. When the audience became justifiably restless, the SBOE chair threatened people with expulsion and called for security to be present. At one point, she publicly identified a young student—probably no older than 12—and told him to leave the room because he had applauded. Thanks to the generosity of a colleague who switched places with me on the list, I was able to speak at 6:15PM, the last speaker before the supper break. I made my plea for cooler heads, professional oversight, and a delay in the vote until emotions cooled and a compromise could be reached. Unfortunately, most members of the SBOE were not listening. During the proceedings, SBOE members often left their chairs to wander over to a

colleague’s desk or were obviously inattentive to the proceedings. Kudos go to Mavis Knight, an SBOE member from Dallas, who gave considered attention to virtually every speaker, in stark contrast to many of her board colleagues. Two days later, after the addition of many amendments to which the public was not privy very much in advance, the standards were adopted on a 9–5 vote, with one member (who was defeated in her primary and thus will no longer be on the SBOE after January 1, 2011) not voting.

How did things get to this point? In Texas, the members of the State Board of Education are elected in a partisan election. This is a down ballot election to which, unfortunately, many voters have

paid little attention. Only one in five Texas voters actually voted for the nine Board members who enacted the new standards, and fewer than one in six Texans of voting age cast ballots for them in the elections that were held.<sup>1</sup> The relative obscurity of the State Board of Education enabled a very conservative group within the state to target the SBOE as a platform for their ideology. Of the 15 people currently serving on the board, only 6 have had significant professional experience in education; most have had none. This has led to an atmosphere where it was considered acceptable for an SBOE member to state publicly that he was glad the board had not listened to the “experts” (social studies educators?) and where teachers who took their own time to travel to Austin to express their concerns were castigated and told that they should be “back in the classroom where they belonged.” This atmosphere allowed another member of the board to extend an invitation in a conservative newspaper to all “patriots” to attend the hearings in Austin and voice support, implying that those who opposed the standards were not patriotic. She obviously was not aware of Jefferson’s views—that dissent is the highest form of patriotism.

One of the duties of the State Board of Education is overseeing the writing of curriculum standards for the various content areas. Every 10 years, these Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) are revisited to ensure that they conform to current scholarship. From these TEKS will come the state exams (TAKS and, shortly, end-of-course exams in various high school subjects) upon which students and teachers alike are judged. A call went out to educators across the state, asking for volunteers to write the standards. Committees were formed for each elementary grade level and each secondary course with instructions to take the current standards and modify them as deemed necessary. The Texas Council for the Social Studies submitted a blueprint based on a statewide survey of social studies educators and prepared by its members as a guide to the writing teams. Although the science teachers had

followed a similar procedure during their standards revision, the Texas CSS was branded as a subversive organization trying to undermine the authority of the board, and a public furor arose after parts of the original draft taken out of context were leaked to the press by Don McElroy. The initial draft was rejected unilaterally, and the writing teams were sent back to the drawing board. Additionally, based on recommendations from the SBOE members, six so-called experts were selected to examine the standards and offer commentary. Three of these experts were well-respected university educators from across the state. The other three formed a triumvirate of conservative ideologists dedicated to the ideas that separation of church and state was not intended, that the country was formed as a Christian nation, and that U.S. “exceptionalism” is paramount. Only one of these experts actually lives in Texas. Similar experts were planted on each of the new writing teams in an effort to undermine scholarship and replace it with ideology. The new drafts were presented to the SBOE in the fall of 2009. A series of public hearings followed, culminating on May 21 with the 9-5 vote to adopt the standards as amended.

There is a fine line between education and indoctrination. Providing students with a variety of viewpoints, teaching them how to identify the bias in those viewpoints, and encouraging them to come to independent conclusions based on the information gleaned is the role of the teacher in the classroom. Social studies teachers walk that line daily, determined to open their students’ eyes to a myriad of ideas, while not allowing their own political or personal opinions to influence the intellectual development of their students. It is a formidable task. The writing teams for the standards knew this; they also knew that students had a finite amount of time in which to learn the information contained in the standards. When the standards were written, it was with the understanding that it was not fully possible to cover every detail. What was done to the standards by way of amendments added by the SBOE obliterated the reasonable and substituted

instead a laundry list of minutia, names, dates, and events. Since these items can be tested at any point, teachers are then forced into a “drill and kill” mentality that leaves precious little time to provide students with the discussion and independent thought that is so necessary to create thinking students. The code words of “including” (You *must* teach this!) and “such as” (This would make a good example) become meaningless as teachers struggle to find the time to cover everything. This is especially evident in the U.S. history standards, where the number of people included rose 50 percent. For elementary teachers already under fire to raise math and language arts scores because of No Child Left Behind, the task becomes almost insurmountable.

There has been some confusion in the national media as to just what was at issue, especially when it comes to textbooks. Textbooks are not the issue *now* and won’t be for two to three years. What is at issue now is what will ultimately be in those textbooks—the standards upon which they are based. People, politics, race and religion—and a very peculiar view of age appropriate activities—these are the factors that have caused the most controversy. By examining a few selected examples from the standards, the issues become clear.

These following two statements are part of the introduction to **every** grade level and course in the social studies standards:

- Students understand that a constitutional republic is a representative form of government whose representatives derive their authority from the consent of the governed, serve for an established tenure, and are sworn to uphold the constitution.
- Students identify and discuss how the actions of U.S. citizens and the local, state, and federal governments have either met or failed to meet the ideals espoused in the founding documents.

In and of themselves, they seem perfectly logical. However, is it logical or educationally sound to expect a kindergartener or early elementary-aged student to accomplish these tasks? First graders are required, in Standard 13 A, to **respectfully** hold public officials to their word. For a secondary student approaching voting age, this is a sensible statement, but elementary students are not developmentally ready, nor legally capable, of carrying out this directive.

The following selected key terms or phrases also indicate the politicization evident in the standards:

#### *Exceptionalism*

In the high school U.S. history standards the insertion of political ideology becomes more evident. The SBOE has created a new word for the English language called *exceptionalism*, designed to focus the student's attention on the positive attributes of American life, such as the concepts of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire espoused by Alexis de Tocqueville. Unfortunately, the term exceptionalism also brings to the table an image of superiority and nationalism, as the standard adds that the students should "describe how the American values identified by Alexis de Tocqueville are different and unique from those of other nations." Pride in one's heritage is one thing; nationalism that implies the inferiority of other nations does not make for good international relations and does not prepare students for the realities of the world they will live in.

#### *Expansionism versus Imperialism*

The term imperialism has been erased from the high school U.S. history standards, to be replaced by the milder and more positive term of expansionism. However, changing the term does not change the reality of what the United States did during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The United States was imperialistic. The actions of the nation were contrary to the basic beliefs that

underscored the American Revolution. We do our students a great disservice when we send them off to college or out into the world with a warped view of our history. The warts in our nation's past cannot and should not be glossed over with feel-good terms.

#### *Barack H. Obama*

According to a contemporary textbook, about one-third of our presidents used their middle name or include their middle initial. Barack Obama was not one of them, yet the SBOE spent much time debating whether to include his middle name in the standards. The use of President Obama's middle name during the election was a political ploy designed to inflame ethnocentric and nationalistic attitudes, and it is clear that certain members of the Texas SBOE wished to institutionalize those attitudes in the standards. Eventually, the compromise reached was to use Barack H. Obama in the standards.

#### *Trans Atlantic Trade*

This would be the slave trade—the Triangular Trade, the Middle Passage—one of the most reprehensible aspects of American history, yet members of the SBOE attempted to white wash it by using the gentler term Trans Atlantic Trade. This did not pass, but the fact that it was even introduced demonstrates what went on behind the scenes.

Perhaps the most controversial part of the new standards is the insertion of blatant political issues instead of creating standards that provide examples from all views that would stimulate discussion among students. U. S. History Standard #10 is a primary example of this, as it requires students to:

- (10E) describe the causes and key organizations and individuals of the conservative resurgence of the 1980s and 1990s, including Phyllis Schlafly, the Contract with America, the Heritage Foundation, the Moral

Majority, and the National Rifle Association; and

- (10F) describe significant societal issues of this time period.


Standard 10F provides the neutral, open-ended approach, while Standard 10E demonstrates a blatant political bias. Combining the two, with examples from all parts of the political spectrum, would have served the students far better.

NCSS has created a set of curriculum standards that demonstrate what a student should master for a thorough education in the field. Additionally, the NCSS Board set guidelines for the creation of social studies content standards. In both, the emphasis focuses on allowing the social studies professionals to set the standards. Diane Ravitch states unequivocally that

The curriculum of the schools [should not be] the subject of a political negotiation... Curriculum—that is, what to teach—should be determined by professional educators and scholars after due deliberation, acting with the authority vested in them by school, districts or states. (*The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, 226)

Perhaps the biggest tragedy of the social studies standards adoption in Texas is the lack of respect directed at those very professional educators by SBOE members intent on their own agenda. The students of Texas are the ones who will suffer the most.

The study of social studies isn't always pretty. There are dark spots in our nation's past that should not be glossed over. This country's greatness lies not only in its sprawling land and dynamic people, but in its recognition of the wrongs in the past and the nation's desire to right those wrongs. Social studies standards that allow our students to examine all sides of an issue and explore solutions will produce an educated populace with the

skills to lead our country in the future. Strangle those standards with political partisanship, and education becomes indoctrination. 

**Note**

1. The elections for the Board of Education were held in 2006 and 2008, with half of the positions being filled in each year. In 2008, five of the nine Board members mentioned were elected with 1,844,094 votes (Bradley—287,175; Cargill—401,363; Hardy—446,231; Leo—332,910; Lowe—376,415). In 2006, four of the nine mentioned were elected with 851,832 votes (Craig—202,999; Dunbar—221,808; McLeroy—192,218; Mercer—234,807). All votes for

them in both years totaled 2,695,926. The average number of all Texas voters in 2006 and 2008 was 13,324,670. All votes for the nine represented 20.23 percent of this number. The average number of Texans of voting age in 2006 and 2008 was 17,186,092. All votes for the nine represented 15.69 percent of this number. For voting statistics, see the official results at [www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/historical/index.shtml](http://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/historical/index.shtml).

**References**

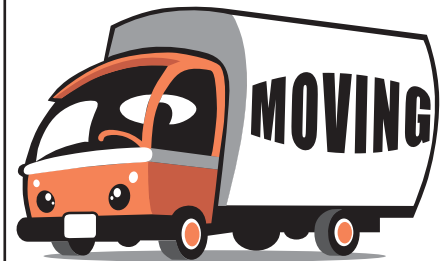
1. Texas Education Agency — webcasts and standards, June 11, 2010, [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us).
2. Ravitch, Diane. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.

**Are You Moving?  
Have A New E-Mail Address?**

Go to the members-only link at [socialstudies.org/membership](http://socialstudies.org/membership) to renew your membership, change your address, or update your member profile. That way, there'll be no gap in the delivery of your NCSS publications.

And include your e-mail address to receive updates and alerts that arrive only by e-mail several times a year.

You can also reach the Membership Department at [membership@ncss.org](mailto:membership@ncss.org).



**SUE BLANCHETTE** is president elect of the National Council for the Social Studies. She recently retired, after 32 years working in both middle school and high school with the Dallas Independent School District (ISD). She has written curriculum and provided staff development for Dallas ISD, and has served on both district and state textbook committees. She has received numerous awards in teaching, including the Teacher of the Year awards of both the Texas Council for the Social Studies and NCSS, the Texas Excellence Award given by the University of Texas, and the Teaching Excellence Award of American Councils for International Education, a State Department program. She has received two Coe Fellowships, several NEH Fellowships and a Fulbright-Hays to India.



**Center for Civic Education**

PROMOTING THE PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE OF DEMOCRACY



**CELEBRATE CONSTITUTION DAY ON SEPTEMBER 17TH WITH FREE DOWNLOADABLE LESSONS [WWW.CIVICED.ORG](http://WWW.CIVICED.ORG)**

The Center for Civic Education produces quality curricular materials that provide K–12 students with the skills needed to participate as effective and responsible citizens.

- ▶ We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution
- ▶ Project Citizen
- ▶ Foundations of Democracy

To learn more about the Center's programs and request a free catalog, call 800.350.4223  
5145 Douglas Fir Road, Calabasas, CA 91302 [www.civiced.org](http://www.civiced.org) [ncss@civiced.org](mailto:ncss@civiced.org)