

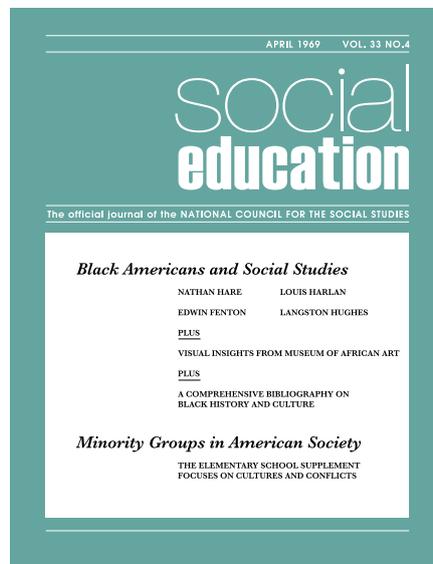
The Status of Black History in U.S. Schools and Society

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The year 2015 marked a century since Carter G. Woodson and his colleagues created the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (originally ASNLH, now ASALH), the first Black history organization that successfully “promoted, researched, preserved, interpreted, and disseminated information about Black life, history, and culture to the global community.”¹ Woodson, with help from ASALH, had a profound impact on efforts to institutionalize Black history in schools. Between 1915 and 1950, Woodson and his colleagues established a foundation for K-12 Black history education. They did so by authoring several K-12 Black history textbooks, designing Black history home study courses for school-aged children, establishing a K-12 Black history teacher journal, and promoting Negro History Week (now Black History Month) in schools.² Woodson envisioned these programs as temporary, and only the first steps at integrating K-12 Black history within the mainstream social studies curriculum.

The mainstream social studies curriculum, however, either largely ignored Black history or misrepresented the subject. Early renditions of history textbooks typically classified Black people as docile, uncivilized, and lazy. For example, a 1934 history textbook analysis by Lawrence Reddick observed that Black people were portrayed as being content as slaves; they liked to “sing, dance, crack jokes, and laugh; admired bright colors, never in a hurry, and [were] always ready to let things go until the morrow.”³ These examples illustrated a social studies curriculum mirroring a U.S. culture that elevated those considered to be White while simultaneously demeaning all of those considered to be Black. It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that mainstream social studies textbooks began to eliminate text that was explicitly racist.⁴

Inspired by the 1960s civil rights movement, systemic efforts to mainstream K-12 Black history began to build momentum. A 1969 survey conducted by *Education USA* indicated that, starting



with the 1961 California law, seven states “passed laws requiring or recommending that the contributions and achievements of minority groups be included in school curricula.”⁵ The study also chronicled the development of several school districts’ Black studies programs, complete with their own textbooks and resources. Additionally, *Social Education*, with its April 1969 issue, published a special edi-

tion highlighting the purpose and limitations of a Black history curriculum. In the issue, Nathan Hare and Louis Harlan exemplified the various arguments about the significance of Black history. Hare, for example, explained that a Black history curriculum and instruction should focus on social justice, militancy, and self-improvement, while Harlan believed that Black history instruction should be more subtle, apolitical, and integrated within traditional U.S. history classes.⁶

In school districts across the U.S., Black students, teachers, and parents began to demand that Black history courses become either part of the social studies curriculum or exist as stand-alone courses. Some schools/school districts—especially those with large Black populations—established Black history courses, and it was this type of experience which became the foundation of the multicultural education movement.⁷

A Contemporary Look at Black History

Today, the legitimacy of K-12 Black history as an academic subject for schoolchildren is largely unquestioned. Take for instance the report, *Research into the State of African American History and Culture in K-12 Public Schools*, conducted by the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). With the help of an evaluator, Oberg Research, this 2015 study sought to understand how social studies teachers conceptualized and implemented a K-12 Black history curriculum. The methodology included a nationwide survey of 525 elementary,

middle, and high school teachers, 72 in-depth personal interviews,⁸ and 5 focus groups,⁹ and a review of social studies standards from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Key findings indicate that teachers considered Black history as influential in understanding the complexity of U.S. history, with many teachers stating that they infuse elements of Black history in every historical era, sometimes going beyond state and local standards. Teachers noted that topics such as forced African migration, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the impact of the Civil Rights Acts of 1960s, and the Obama election were the most taught subjects by teachers. Teachers also enacted pedagogies such as inviting guest speakers from academia and the community, primary sources, movie clips, virtual fieldtrips, and web quest activities. Yet, despite teachers' enthusiasm about teaching Black history, the study surmised that generally only 1 to 2 lessons or 8–9 percent of total class time is devoted to Black history in U.S. history classrooms.

The study represents a conundrum for Black history in the classroom. For one, K-12 Black history can be seen as successful to the extent that students are now aware of famous Black leaders: Wineburg and Monte-Sano's *Famous American* study saw 2,000 high school students name Martin Luther King Jr, Rose Parks, and Harriet Tubman as the most famous historical figures in the United States other than presidents and their wives.¹⁰ Yet the Southern Poverty Law Center's report, *Teaching the Movement 2014: The State of Civil Rights Education in the United States*, noted that the majority of states received grades of Ds and Fs for their approach to teaching the civil rights movement, with five states neglecting the subject all together.¹¹ Additionally, other research has indicated that teachers ignore Black history and that what is taught is sometimes lethargic, too celebratory, and lacks complexity. The

NMAAHC's study also notes that teachers may not teach Black history as much as they should because they lack content knowledge, confidence, time, and resources, and are concerned with students' maturity levels for approaching difficult knowledge. The general consensus, however, is that Black history should be included in the curriculum, but (as the previously mentioned debate between Hare and Harlan showed), there is concern about how and what content should be delivered.

There is no doubt that Black history has become engrained in the nation's lexicon, probably making it one of the most popular subsets of U.S. history taught in K-12 education.¹² Several factors contribute to Black history's popularity. First, Black History Month in schools is now celebrated in many different countries. Teachers sometimes see Black History Month as a liberating time to offer different pedagogical approaches and disrupt an inequitable and limited curriculum.¹³ Second, Black history museums have become increasingly salient in providing educational opportunities for Black history learning. The newly created National Museum of African American History and Culture is an indication of the national importance of examining Black history. Even before NMAAHC, many state and local Black history museums contributed to K-12 Black history enrichment for students and teachers through activities such as Black history summer camps, lecture series, historical reenactments, and storytelling. A few other museums such as the Reginald Lewis Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, and DuSable Museum in Chicago, Illinois, have even collaborated with their respective state departments of education to create elementary and secondary K-12 Black history curriculum. Black history professional development opportunities for teachers are also common at Black history museums as well as throughout

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- b. A reference to *Hamlet*
- c. A new nation's hopes for independence
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various community-based organizations and education and history departments on U.S. university campuses.

Third, popular culture and visual media outlets have been influential in providing another space for Black historical study. Recent movies such as *The Help*, *12 Years a Slave*, *Selma*, and *The Birth of a Nation* have all been developed into K-12 curriculum and have been made available across the country.¹⁴ The Chicago-based television station, WGN America in a partnership with Sony pictures, has developed a successful TV series about the Underground Railroad. Harvard University's Henry Louis Gates' Black history series: *Finding Your Roots*, *Black in Latin America*, *Many Rivers to Cross*, and *Black America since MLK*, have enjoyed tremendous success on Public Broadcasting Service stations. Even streaming networks such as Netflix have produced some Black history content, as evident in the popular documentary *13th*.

Fourth, the Internet and social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest have expanded how Black history is accessed and interpreted. These social sites are used as a medium by users to help develop educational materials. Examples such as #Charlestonsyllabus, #Fergusonsyllabus and #Blackpanthersyllabus have been appropriated by people of all walks of life, providing them with spaces to contribute to Black historical knowledge through social media. The proliferation of and access to text and media sources have allowed people who might not otherwise learn about race, policing, and civil rights to do so through the lens of Black history.

Fifth, Black history has become a common elective course at many schools and school districts. Curriculum structures for these classes differ based on school policy and teacher experiences. These classes, however, have the option of using one of the four Black history textbooks published by Pearson [sub-division: Prentice Hall], McGraw Hill, and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt [sub-

division: Holt McDougal], and Globe.¹⁶ In addition, school districts in Chicago, Minneapolis, and Philadelphia have required that Black history classes be taught at all grade levels.¹⁷ The Philadelphia city school district has made a yearlong African American history course a requirement for high school graduation.¹⁸ Recently, Teachers College at Columbia University, the African Diaspora Consortium, and the College Board have collaborated to develop the first Black history advanced placement course. The course will focus on the African Diaspora and will be piloted in several school districts during the 2017–2018 school year.

Black History Mandates

The establishment of Black history mandates in a number of states is another sign of the popularity of Black history. States such as Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Mississippi, and Rhode Island have passed laws requiring Black history to be taught in public schools with special K-12 Black history oversight committees (See Table 1 for details about these states).¹⁹

Other states such as California, Colorado, Michigan, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington have passed educational laws regarding Black history with no special oversight committee.²⁰ The mandates are similar in many regards but vary in scope and implementation. State laws in Mississippi and Washington, for instance, only focus on the civil right movement. Both Mississippi and Washington favor a civil rights history that not only is studied within classrooms but applicable to contemporary human rights issues. The Black history mandates in Illinois, New Jersey, and New York are called Amistad commissions and emphasize curricula that explain how the African slave trade and enslavement in the U. S. connect to the contemporary realities of African Americans. In addition to learning about oppression, the commissions require that students also learn about the “triumphs of African Americans and their signifi-

cant contributions to the development of this country.”²¹ Curricular mandates in Florida, South Carolina, and Rhode Island suggest that Black history begins with Africa. Florida defines Black history as “the history of African Americans, including the history of African peoples before the political conflicts that led to the development of slavery, the passage of America, the enslavement experience, abolition, and the contribution of African Americans to society.”²²

Many of the Black history mandates are subject to criticism. Citizens in Illinois and New York have complained that the mandates are in name only and have no real and tangible purpose; this critique is based on the lack of curriculum enactment, enforcement, and financial assistance. Others just rehash the same old narratives of enslavement and the civil rights movement. While these topics need attention, Black history can become stagnant when the same topics are revisited with no re-interpretation throughout K-12 schooling. More research is needed on the history, structure, teacher training, resources, and influences of Black history mandates on states' history education.

The Purpose of this Special Issue

This special issue on teaching Black history serves several purposes. First, since teachers are extremely busy, finding teaching resources can be daunting. The lesson plans and recommended resources in this issue will benefit teachers. The second purpose is to combine theory with practice. The third purpose is to show how Black history can be used in teacher preparation, professional development, and nontraditional educational spaces. The fourth purpose is to reconceptualize how educators and other citizens understand what people consider to be Black history.

For over a century, K-12 Black history has matriculated from a discourse that questioned its legitimacy as an academic subject to a medium that can be accessed in multiple ways in schools and society. Yet, despite these achieve-

Table 1: **Black History Mandates with Oversight Committees**

States with Black History Mandates	Oversight Committee	State Curriculum/Resource Guide Website
Arkansas	Black History Commission of Arkansas	www.ark-ives.com/about-us/bhca.aspx
Florida	African American History Task Force	http://afroamfl.org/
Illinois	Amistad Commission (2005)	www.dusablemuseum.org/education/lesson-plans
Mississippi	Mississippi Civil Rights Education Commission	http://winterinstitute.org/academic-service/mississippi-civil-rights-education-commission/
New Jersey	Amistad Commission	www.njamistadcurriculum.net/
New York	Amistad Commission	www.dos.ny.gov/amistad/resources.html
Rhode Island	1696 Historical Commission	http://sos.ri.gov/boards/?page=board_detail&board_id=6311

ments, significant problems remain. Recently, a mother complained about a McGraw-Hill textbook distributed in Texas that described the Trans-Atlantic slave trade as the immigration of “millions of workers from Africa to the southern United States to work on agricultural plantations.”²³ Reportedly, social studies teachers at a Washington, D.C., middle school were fired for teaching Black history not associated with the standards.²⁴ Additionally, teachers have been criticized for questionable Black history class activities such as students participating in mock slave auctions, poorly constructed slavery math problems, slave games with some students acting as slaves and slave catchers, the dramatization of the middle passage with Black students tied under desks, and students writing fun slavery songs.²⁵

Therefore, the issue with Black history now is not simply the need to increase Black representation in the curriculum. Instead, we should ask how we can truly represent Black history in more humanizing ways. At the moment, Black history knowledge required by the curriculum is often additive and superficial. In many ways, we teach *about* Black history and not *through* it. The voices and experiences of Black people have often

been silenced in favor of the dominant Eurocentric history curriculum.

Some manifestations of this problem are a lack of context for the teaching of Black history and a shallow treatment of the great differences in the historical experiences of Black people compared to those of White Americans. For example, enslavement should not be the first contact school children have with Black history. Thousands of years of Black history existed before Western contact. In addition, for the majority of Black people who were enslaved, the date for U.S. independence meant little. A more suitable starting point for full emancipation for Black Americans might be June 19, 1865 (“Juneteenth”), when Major General Gordon Granger delivered the news at Galveston, Texas, that the Civil War ended two months before and that enslaved people were free. In addition, the concept of the United States as a country of immigrants is not applicable to most Black American history in the same way as it is to White American history.

The Black history curriculum needs to come from a Black perspective with topics specifically geared towards the Black experience, and many times these narratives are and need to be independent of

the way we typically frame U.S. history. The curriculum will need to balance narratives of victimhood, oppression, perseverance, and resistance, but unlike current renditions of the curriculum, it should contextualize issues that connect with the present.²⁶

The study of history requires learning about the identities of groups of people. History not only indicates where people have been, what they have been, where they are, and what they are; history also provides a blueprint for where they still must go and what they still must be.²⁷ K-12 Black history is as important as ever as we enter a new political era that might be contentious about those principles. As was the case in the early twentieth century and the 1960s, Black history is needed to allow society to comprehend Blackness through the record of Black agency and advancement in the context of systemic notions of White supremacy and racism. Our teaching should center on how Black history improves our understanding of contemporary circumstances, and how it can stimulate us to improve our democracy. 🌍

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