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Guest Editorial

Historical change

Everyone knows that this year is a "change" election, and everyone also knows that our education system could benefit from some real change, too. I vote for reinserting history and related subjects back into the curriculum.

Every week, it seems, another study highlights how little knowledge our young people possess about history, civics and geography. Earlier this year, [Common Core found](#) that half of the 17 year olds polled didn't know whom Senator McCarthy investigated or what the Renaissance was, while the [Bradley Foundation told us](#) that most eighth graders couldn't explain the purpose of the Declaration of Independence. The list goes on. In 2006, [National Geographic revealed](#) that nearly two-thirds of 18-24 year olds could not identify Iraq on a map of Asia, and fully 88 percent could not find Afghanistan--apparently refuting Ambrose Bierce's suggestion that "War is God's way of teaching Americans geography."

As an organization that believes in the power of standards and school accountability to boost student achievement, StandardsWork naturally looks first to see if faulty state standards are the culprit. Not surprisingly, we find that social studies standards are both more out-of-date (fully 20 percent are more than 10 years old) and of poorer quality than the standards for any other subject. Generally, older state standards documents haven't benefited from rising expectations for clarity, specificity and rigor. [Fordham's most recent reviews](#) of social studies standards gave states an average grade of D, with half receiving F's in US History and almost as many F's in World History--far worse than in English, math or science.

The American Federation of Teachers' recent report, [Sizing Up State Standards 2008](#), similarly gave states their lowest marks in social studies. Only three were found to have adequate social studies standards at the elementary level. The reason? Social studies standards typically lacked substance, with 39 percent of failing marks due to "missing or vague content."

What about testing? Is it possible that assessments more than standards are driving good instruction by at least providing us with important information about what students know and don't know?

Unfortunately, the picture here is, if anything, worse. In a recent analysis conducted by StandardsWork, fewer than half the states were found to test at all in social studies or in any of its constituent disciplines. Just eight states have tests specifically targeting history (whether U.S. or World) in any given grade. Only 16 test social studies at the elementary level--and far fewer state assessments in this field carry any "stakes" or consequences.

While many are ambivalent about championing high-stakes social studies testing, there is clear evidence from the (now defunct) Council for Basic Education and from [Martin West's analyses](#) that social studies testing, where it occurs, has increased the amount of instructional time devoted to the subject. Perhaps this is reason enough to push for it?

Before embracing that solution, however, we ought to take a hard look at what's on these tests. Consider some of the items we found (in states that will remain nameless):

From an 8th grade test:

Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men--the balance-wheel of the social machinery.

--*Horace Mann, Twelfth Annual Report of the Massachusetts State Board of Education, 1848*

In the excerpt above, Mann shows his support for--

- A. women's suffrage
- B. prison reform
- C. public schools
- D. improved sanitation

From a 4th-6th grade test:

The following question appears under an illustration of a boy at the beach, sitting behind a hot chocolate stand that he's set up featuring a hand-written sign saying, "Sam's hot chocolate--50 cents." Sam is under a beach umbrella, as is a woman across from him in a bathing suit on a chaise lounge. Steam is rising from one of the cups already poured on Sam's table.

Why is Sam having difficulty selling his hot chocolate? How might he solve his problem?

From a 5th grade test:

Place these events on the time line in the correct order:

- 1803--Ohio becomes the 17th state
- 1763--Treaty of Paris is signed
- 1787--Northwest Territory is formed
- 1795--Treaty of Greenville is signed

If read to him, a 2nd grader could probably get the first one right; with a scribe, a kindergartener could surely answer the second; and assuming he was proficient in math, a 3rd grader should be able to nail the last one (since most state standards expect one to compare and order numbers to 10,000 by 3rd grade).

The bottom line is this: No matter how we measure our commitment to a subject--whether it's the quality of state standards; the frequency, quality or consequences of testing; the amount of instructional time; or the availability of curriculum tools (clearly a problem in many school districts where we've worked)--history and its kin, by whatever indicator, are the stepchildren of K-12 education today.

And while I worry a lot about the consequences of low levels of civic literacy, a lack of knowledge about the country's past, and the ability to make connections in a global way, I am *most* concerned by the squandering of an opportunity to fire the minds of students by learning about stuff in which they're interested!

During [Congressional testimony in 2006](#), historian David McCullough described how human beings have a natural interest in history and find it to be a source of pleasure. He went on to say that "to deny our children that pleasure is to deny them a means of extending and enlarging the experience of being alive."

Worse, the squeezing out of social studies is felt hardest in elementary schools, particularly high-poverty schools that are under the gun to make AYP. Those are precisely the places where we're wringing our hands trying to figure out how to increase student engagement.

That's why my vote is for doing whatever it takes to put social studies back into our schools. Let's not diminish our children's experiences by denying them the passion of history, the pleasure of social studies. Let's let them live big.

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