

Opinion: Education standards failing students

By Rachel Burstein

Why can't history classes show students why history matters?

That's what I thought as I read through a new framework for teaching K-12 history in the U.S.—California's History-Social Science Framework.

This is supposed to be the new, 21st century approach. It spans hundreds of pages of minute detail. But this document doesn't seem to recognize the value of history.

Consider the framework for fifth grade. In 164 pages, it defines the theme for the year ("making a new nation") and provides a jumble of guiding questions (e.g., how proximity to water affected the lives of North American Indians) teaching resources, and classroom activities (e.g., team analysis of paintings depicting the American Revolutionary War).

Absent, though, is any concise statement of why all this content, and the skills needed to thoroughly analyze that content, are important. In other words, why should anyone care?

There are good answers to that question. I have a doctorate in history and used to teach college history courses; now I'm a social studies curriculum designer at an education technology company. I know that history can be more than engrossing. It teaches students about the messiness of the world and invites them to argue and speak truth to power. It shows them that they, too, are historical actors. In a word, it is empowering.

But it's hard to sense that when reading through the various state frameworks for social studies. Unlike math and language

arts, social studies has no set of standards approved by multiple states, so the documents are idiosyncratic and sometimes conflicting. California's is far from the worst: It doesn't have the whiff of politicization in Texas' elementary school standards, which ask teachers to communicate the "benefits of the free enterprise system," or the local bias of Tennessee's—which asks second-graders to identify 11 "major" American cities, four of which are in Tennessee.

In many ways, California's framework is a model. It trusts teachers to find different ways to communicate ideas. And it draws on new research about teaching effectiveness, inclusion of underserved groups of students, and fostering 21st-century skills.

But nowhere does it say why history matters.

I can guess why the standards don't answer this question. In most schools across the country, it's math and language arts, and the testing tied to them, that drive instruction. So educators are forced to present social studies as serving the other subjects. Students use their graph-reading skills in history class to reinforce math lessons. Reading primary sources lets students exercise critical thinking skills learned in language arts classes.

The problem is that learning history isn't merely useful for learning other things. History is illuminating and transformative on its own.

When I taught survey courses on global and American history, I asked students to become teachers. Each student was to draft a short lecture that identified and explained themes we had covered over the course of the semester. The lecture assignment was an opportunity for students to think not just about facts and figures—the Chinese dynastic periods, the transatlantic slave trade—but to make connections between them.

Students had different reactions to the assignment. For some, the assignment seemed like a betrayal of the unspoken rules for most survey classes; it required more than simply doing the reading and memorizing names and dates. On the other hand, students who naturally thought beyond the limits of the textbook were energized. These were the ones who forgot to do the reading on the Cold War and Soviet politics because they were so excited to get a head start on Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. These were the students who could identify the big ideas of social discord and globalization, the students who wanted to debate with me even though I was the authority figure. These students might not earn A's, but they were using history to make sense of the world around them.

These are the students state officials should be thinking about when they design history standards.

Any guide to teaching history should open with a few clear paragraphs laying out the vision. Forget about the usefulness of history for a moment and concentrate on what history education can do for students. It teaches them how to make sense of the world around them—so that they might make history of their own.

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