

Critics Would Teach About an Oppressive America

By Katherine Kersten
Published November 9, 2003
Star Tribune

Minnesota is adopting new social studies standards, which will replace those of the discredited Profile of Learning. These standards will specify, for the first time, what Minnesota students must know about American and world history. Is it any surprise, then, that they are the subject of controversy?

The new standards' most vocal critics hail (predictably) from the educational establishment. Recently, 32 history professors from the University of Minnesota grabbed the media spotlight with a blistering 13-page letter to Education Commissioner Cheri Pierson Yecke. The letter -- which sums up many critics' complaints -- expresses "grave concerns" about the standards, and demands sweeping changes.

The professors' first gripe is a familiar one. (Indeed, it's been a hallmark of "progressive" educators since 1920.) The new K-8 standards, they say, stress "lower level skills" like knowing and understanding, at the expense of higher level skills like debating and analyzing. How can students debate or analyze something that they don't yet know or understand? The professors fail to explain.

But the professors' central objection is ideological. They insist that the new standards paint too rosy a picture of America, and fail to focus sufficiently on the "tragedies and injustices" of our nation's history.

What would our children's history classrooms look like if the "U" professors, and like-minded critics, got their way? One thing's sure: Every day, our kids would walk out of class hanging their heads for shame at being Americans. The professors' letter makes clear that they see America -- first and foremost -- as a nation that has oppressed women, enslaved blacks and exploited the poor. They want our children to see it that way, too. That's why their letter is full of recommendations like this: When Minnesota 8- and 9-year-olds study colonial America, they should focus on "the genocidal impact of European incursions," the extinction of numerous species and the destruction of whole environments." When third-graders study the Pledge of Allegiance, they should learn that its author was "forced by the political climate of Jim Crow and xenophobia" to omit the mention of equality, along with liberty and justice.

The professors reject the new standards' Government and Citizenship benchmarks along with its history benchmarks. They object, for example, to a first-grade standard that encourages "good citizen traits" like "honesty, courage, patriotism and individual responsibility." Why? Portraying such traits as important components of citizenship is tantamount to teaching patriotism as a "reflex action of blind obedience or conformity."

Why is the standards battle in Minnesota so contentious? It's an important front in our nation's culture wars. At stake, as the new standards' critics well know, are the hearts and minds of the next generation.

Fortunately, most Americans don't want the sort of social studies standards that the "U" professors propose. That's because most Americans view the United States as a noble experiment which, despite its flaws, is eminently worthy of their love and loyalty. In a 1998 Public Agenda poll, 84 percent of parents agreed that the United States is "a unique country that stands for something special in the world." Eighty-three percent of parents overall and 81 percent of African-American parents reported that they would be "upset or somewhat concerned" if their children were "taught that America is a fundamentally racist country."

According to **Public Agenda**, parents of all demographic groups "embrace with pride a common agenda they expect the public schools to teach about what it means to be an American," and endorse "the use of traditional ideals and stories" in this effort.

Many prominent educators and liberal politicians agree. Recently, the Albert Shanker Institute of the American Federation of Teachers issued a consensus document called Education for Democracy. "As citizens of a

democratic republic," the document proclaimed, "we are part of the noblest effort in history." Our nation's schools, it went on, must encourage "a deep loyalty" to American political institutions and prepare students to "protect and extend this precious inheritance." The document's signers spanned the ideological spectrum, and included former President Bill Clinton, Sen. Edward Kennedy and Reg Weaver, president of the National Education Association.

The new Minnesota standards are not perfect. They are too lengthy, and in some cases too repetitive. These flaws are being corrected.

The important point is this. At the heart of the standards debate are two contending visions of public education. The "U" professors' letter is revealing in this respect. Minnesota's new standards, the professors charge, "feed into the ignorance, prejudice, and misperceptions of many Americans [that's us, folks!] about much of the world rather than offering a basis for changing these assumptions." Most Americans see the public school as an institution dedicated to the transmission of knowledge. Critics like the professors view it as something quite different: an agent of radical social change.

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