

# Improving History in the Schools

Schools must support the teaching of an articulated history curriculum with increased instructional time, better textbooks and materials, and improved training for teachers.

[We Americans are not] bound together by a common religion or a common ethnicity. Instead, our binding heritage is a democratic vision of liberty, equality, and justice. If Americans are to preserve that vision and bring it to daily practice, it is imperative that all citizens understand how it was shaped in the past, what events and forces either helped or obstructed it, and how it has evolved down to the circumstances and political discourse of our time.

—Kenneth Jackson, Chair, Bradley Commission (Bradley Commission 1988, p. 2)

After years of neglect, history in the schools is the focus of growing national attention. Every major reform proposal of this decade has called for renewed focus on this vital field of study, and educators are responding:

- California has produced a dramatic new social studies curriculum (1988) that returns history to the early years of schooling (K-3) and emphasizes history in seven of the remaining nine years of social studies education (grades 4 through 12).

- The Bradley Commission on History in the Schools (1988) has released guidelines for teaching history that identify essential topics and themes for the history curriculum.

- In 1988, Lynne Cheney, Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, announced the establishment of a National Center for History in the Schools to assist the nation's

schools in the teaching of history at all levels of precollegiate education.

To fulfill expectations for curriculum reform, however, schools must:

- clarify essential goals and objectives for history instruction;
- provide increased instructional time for history;
- introduce history in appropriate ways in elementary schools and then build systematically on early learnings in middle and senior high schools;
- obtain improved history textbooks and supplementary resources; and
- provide appropriate teacher preparation and staff development to help teachers develop substantially changed instructional programs.

**To improve history  
in the schools, we  
must first determine  
what history is  
essential for all  
students to learn.**

## Establishing Clear Goals

To improve history in the schools, we must first determine *what* history is essential for all students to learn. Given the enormous scope and detail of the field, this is no easy task. Fortunately, educators can turn to several authoritative sources for help:

- The Bradley Commission's guidelines document, *Building a History Curriculum* (1988), recommends themes, topics, and "habits of the mind" that should be the focus of United States and world history in the schools.

- *The History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools* (California State Department of Education 1988) illustrates one state's goals, essential learnings, and grade-by-grade course descriptions for a history-centered curriculum that has received national acclaim.

- The National Center for History in the Schools is presently developing a major volume that defines and justifies the goals of the history curriculum, specifies essential understandings in American and world history, and recommends how these learnings might be sequenced for a balanced and developmentally appropriate K-12 curriculum.

Common to all these documents is the belief that a collective memory of our democratic heritage is particularly important for Americans today. Our stu-

dents must understand that the nation's democratic ideas of liberty, equality, and justice, of civil, political, and economic rights and obligations are *moral values*—values that impel citizens today, as throughout our past, to make choices between right and wrong and, also, between one right and another when two values conflict. Students must understand that in a democratic system political conflict is inevitable and to be expected when cherished values—of liberty and equality, of personal freedom and social justice—clash. Students must also understand the reform impulse throughout American history as a continuing struggle to extend to all citizens the protections and opportunities guaranteed by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

In addition, students need to understand that history is the study of continuity and change and that every problem of the present or the future can only be understood in terms of some version of the past. These versions of the past matter, whether they are right or wrong, substantiated or invented, because they determine how we understand and behave toward events occurring in our world (Rogers 1984). Inadequate frames of historical reference will lead to false assessments of a problem, and the consequences—whether at the level of national policy or of local or personal decision making—can be disastrous. The continuing tragedies of Northern Ireland and Lebanon, the horror of the Holocaust, and the long denial of equal opportunities to black Americans are all effects of policies supported by large numbers of people influenced by particular versions of the past.

History provides a casebook of dramatic events that can help students build these essential understandings, as well as understandings they must

## Students need to understand that every problem of the present or future can only be understood in terms of some version of the past.

acquire to cope with an increasingly interdependent world. By examining the causes, alternatives, and consequences inherent in the critical issues of history, teachers can help students develop deeper insights into the complexity of human affairs. Such studies also help students hone their analytic and decision-making skills and begin to develop political wisdom regarding issues they will inevitably confront in their public and private lives.

### Building on Early Learnings

These higher-order goals for history cannot be achieved in the sparse hours devoted to history in many schools today. But besides more time, these goals require a thoughtfully articulated curriculum that allows high school students to build on a strong grounding in history, pleausurably acquired during their elementary and middle school years.

Returning history to the elementary school has been the subject of lively debate among social studies educators in recent years. The preponderance of evidence (see Crabtree in press), however, supports those who

endorse introducing children to the whole universe of space and time and not limiting them to the "near to far" or "expanding environments" model. The monolithic progression of that model (studies of self in kindergarten, one's family in grade 1, one's neighborhood in grade 2, one's community in grade 3, and so on) is without any foundation in developmental or cognitive psychology and unduly limits the development of thought and feeling.

Parents, children's librarians, and teachers of the young have long known the power of superbly written biographies, myths, legends, folktales, and historical narratives to capture the imagination of children and to hold their interest. By engaging children vicariously in the experiences of others, these tales expand their universe into times long ago, help them see the world through others' eyes, and provide the foundations on which later historical analyses will be built.

In planning history programs for high schools, curriculum leaders must consider how offerings in American and world history can be sequenced to provide adequate time for each, as well as to develop understanding of their interrelationships. To understand American history, for example, requires a strong foundation in Western civilization. Students also need grounding in the histories of the Middle East, China, Africa, and the Americas to understand the evolution and distinctive characteristics of those societies, the consequences of their interactions with the West, and the strong forces for continuity and change sweeping the modern world. The momentous events unfolding today in China, the Soviet Union, and Poland illustrate not only historic movements toward the democratization of those societies; they also illustrate for students the consequences of strong forces for continuity with the past and resistance to change.

The California History-Social Science Framework presents one model for how these various histories, in all their interactions, can be sequenced across the elementary, middle, and senior high school years. The Bradley Commission's guidelines suggest four alternative patterns. The draft proposal

Watch for Charles Haynes' book, *Religion in American History: What to Teach and How*, to be published by ASCD in early 1990. Haynes focuses his book on 13 historical documents pertaining to religious liberty that have influenced attitudes and events throughout American history. Each chapter includes a reproduction and transcription of the original document; a concise explanation of the significance of the document; a set of suggested discussion questions, activities, and research topics for students; and a list of additional resources. With this book, Haynes provides classroom teachers with an instructional tool for bringing the past to life for students and covering a long-neglected aspect of American history.

of the Curriculum Task Force of the National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools (1989) suggests yet another approach.

### Obtaining Better Texts

In study after study (for example, Beck and McKeown 1988, Davis et al. 1986, Gagnon 1987, Larkins et al. 1987, Sewall 1987, and Vitz 1986), reviewers have found textbooks for elementary and junior high school social studies wanting. They have deplored their sameness and mediocrity and their violations of basic features of organization and writing that cognitive psychologists demonstrate are essential for learning. High school texts are more varied, but many are also marred by superficial and trivialized content, bland writing, lack of vivid and stirring historical narratives that would grip students' attention and bring history alive, avoidance of controversial issues, and lack of balanced and sound historiography.

A number of resources can help teachers in their review and selection of texts. *Social Studies Review*, a new journal of the American Textbook Council, provides a continuing program of textbook reviews by authorities qualified to judge both the content and the teaching merit of texts. The National Center for History in the Schools is presently compiling authoritative reviews from recent years and will undertake a review of widely used texts over the next two years.

**Textbooks can and will improve, but only if schools withhold their purchase of inadequate texts presently on the market.**

## Resources for Teaching about Religion

Charles C. Haynes

Silence about religion is being broken in classrooms throughout the United States. As more and more states mandate study about religions, particularly in the social studies, supervisors and teachers now have support for including religion in the curriculum.

Accompanying this new opportunity, however, is an urgent need for resources and for teacher education. Though much more needs to be done to meet the growing demand, a number of good resources are already available for teaching about religion in ways that are constitutionally permissible and educationally sound. For example, although most social studies textbooks have seriously neglected the role of religion in history and culture, three new publications will help teachers fill this gap:

1. *Living With Our Deepest Differences: Religious Liberty in a Pluralistic Society* is a new curriculum from the Williamsburg Charter Foundation, a non-partisan, nonsectarian, nonprofit project concerned with the place of religion in public life. The material is being written for three separate school levels—upper elementary, junior high, and senior high. The lessons address the history and significance of the First Amendment Religious Liberty clauses and their decisive contribution to individual and communal liberty and to American democracy. The curriculum seeks to deepen each student's appreciation of the principles of religious liberty for peoples of all faiths or none, and to establish a strong civic commitment to the ground rules by which all citizens can contend robustly but civilly over religious differences in public life. The curriculum, now being tested, will be ready for distribution in 1990. For more information, write:

Williamsburg Charter Foundation  
1250 24th St., N.W., Suite 270  
Washington, DC 20037.

2. *Religion in American History: What to Teach and How* by Charles Haynes (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development 1990) contains facsimiles of original source documents pertaining to religious influences in American history, with background information and teaching suggestions. Part one describes the major religious influences in U.S. history, based on the scholarship of Professor Timothy Smith of the Johns Hopkins University and an ASCD panel of teachers and historians. Part two offers guidelines and methods for teaching about religion and religious liberty, using historical documents.

3. *Pathways to Pluralism: Religious Issues in American Culture* by Robert Spivey, Edwin Gaustad, and Rodney Allen (Addison-Wesley 1989), which comes with a teacher's guide, is designed as a supplement for high school courses in social studies, humanities, or religion. In discussing the role of religion in American history and culture, the text makes extensive use of primary sources.

For more information about other excellent resources for teaching about religion in the public schools, write: National Council on Religion and Public Education (NCRPE)  
Attention: Charles Kniker  
N155 Lagomarcino Hall  
Iowa State University  
Ames, IA 50011.

In addition to teachers' resources, NCRPE also publishes *Religion and Public Education*, a journal reporting the latest information about curriculum materials, teacher education, and public policy on religion and public education.

Americans United Research Foundation publishes an instructional guide for teaching about religious freedom in U.S. history and offers a summer institute and regional workshops for teachers and supervisors on the history and significance of religious liberty and on teaching about religions in public schools. Free copies of "Religion in the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers," a brochure sponsored by 16 major educational and religious organizations, are available from the foundation. For information, write:

Religious Freedom Education Project  
Americans United Research Foundation (AURF)  
900 Silver Spring Ave.  
Silver Spring, MD 20910.

World Religions Curriculum Development Center offers workshops for teaching about religions in secondary schools and has developed "Religion in Human Culture," a comprehensive curriculum on the major world religions. For information, write:

World Religions Curriculum Development Center  
Wes Bodin and Lee Smith, Co-Directors  
St. Louis Park Public Schools  
Minneapolis, MN 55426.

Charles C. Haynes is Project Director, Americans United Research Foundation, 900 Silver Spring Ave., Silver Spring, MD 20910-4781.

Textbooks can and will improve, but only if schools insist on a better product and withhold their purchase of inadequate texts presently on the market. California is leading the way with 1990 adoption criteria that send a clear message to publishers that textbooks must be excellent to be adopted for its new history-centered curriculum.

Besides improved texts, teachers of history need the freedom to select from a wide range of supplementary resources, including historical documents, biographies, history books other than texts, and literature, art, and music produced in the historical periods under study.

### Improving Teacher Preparation

The most important influence on the quality of history instruction is, of course, the classroom teachers. So long as states certify teachers for social studies teaching without requiring substantial study in history, we will face an enormous need for inservice education to provide teachers the necessary historical and pedagogical knowledge to create exciting classroom programs.

The Bradley Commission has recommended that prospective teachers of history, to be certified, must complete a substantial program in history (preferably a major, minimally a minor) at the college level. The 45 Teacher Associates of the National Center for History in the Schools<sup>1</sup> concur, observing that the most important factor in improving history instruction in their schools has been improving teachers' background knowledge in history.

Meanwhile, we have large numbers of teachers minimally educated in history who will be called upon to venture into new realms of history instruction under present reform proposals. California's State Department of Education is tackling this problem on a massive scale, simultaneously supporting the development of new teaching guides and resources for classroom use statewide, the efforts of administrator training centers, and inservice programs for implementing

## The most important influence on the quality of history instruction is, of course, the classroom teachers.

the new history curriculum within local districts.

The National Center for History in the Schools assists teachers by collecting, for national dissemination, reports of exemplary programs for teaching history in elementary and secondary schools. Besides acquiring existing programs, the Center is working with outstanding classroom teachers and historians to create tested teaching units that are exciting to students, inspire gripping classroom discussions, and engage students in thinking deeply about how people in other times and places have grappled with fundamental issues.

### Broad Popular Support

Signs abound that broad popular support for history in the schools is rising. There is already great interest and leadership potential in the schools for the revitalized teaching of history in the years ahead. If schools can define the goals of history instruction, develop an articulated curriculum to achieve those goals, and support their efforts with increased instructional time, better textbooks and materials, and improved training for teachers, they should fulfill the high expectations of the reform proposals and the public. □

<sup>1</sup> The Teacher Associates of the National Center for History in the Schools are 45 outstanding classroom teachers appointed to work collaboratively with the Center's

scholars, institute leaders, and consultants in the program development and evaluation activities of the Center.

### References

- Beck, I.L., and M.G. McKeown. (August/September 1988). "Toward Meaningful Accounts in History Texts for Young Learners." *Educational Researcher*: 31-39.
- Bradley Commission on History in Schools. (1988). *Building a History Curriculum: Guidelines for Teaching History in the Schools*. Washington, D.C.: Educational Excellence Network.
- California State Department of Education. (1988). *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools, Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve*. Sacramento, Calif.: California State Department of Education.
- Crabtree, C. (In press). "Returning History to the Elementary School." In *Historical Literacy, The Case for History in American Education*, edited by Paul Gagnon. New York: Macmillan.
- Davis, O.L., et al. (1986). *Looking at History: A Review of Major U.S. History Textbooks*. Washington, D.C.: People for the American Way.
- Gagnon, P. (1987). *Democracy's Untold Story: What History Textbooks Neglect*. Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers.
- Larkins, A.G., M.L. Hawkins, and A. Gilmore. (Fall 1987). "Trivial and Noninformative Content of Elementary Social Studies: A Review of Primary Texts in Four Series." *Theory and Research in Social Education* 15, 4: 299-311.
- National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools. (1989). Draft proposal of the Curriculum Task Force. Washington, D.C.: unpublished document.
- Rogers, P.J. (1984). "Why Teach History?" In *Learning History*, edited by A.K. Dickinson, P.J. Lee, and P.J. Rogers. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Sewall, G.T. (1987). *American History Textbooks, An Assessment of Quality*. New York: Educational Excellence Network.
- Vitz, P.C. (Summer 1986). "Religion and Traditional Values in Public School Textbooks." *The Public Interest*.

**Charlotte Crabtree** is Professor of Education and Director of the National Center for History in the Schools, University of California-Los Angeles, Moore Hall 231, 405 Hilgard Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90024-1521.

Copyright © 1989 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.