

September 10, 2020

Honorable Chairs:

Sen. Max Wise, Co-Chair, IJCE

Rep. Regina Huff, Co-Chair, IJCE

Sen. Stephen West, Co-Chair, Administrative Regulation Review Sub-Committee

Rep. David Hale, Co-Chair, Administrative Regulation Review Sub-Committee

Kentucky General Assembly

Frankfort, KY

Dear Honorable Chairs of the Interim Joint Committee on Education and the Administrative Regulations Review Sub-Committee:

We write to you as former members of the Kentucky Board of Education, bringing to your attention our deep concerns about Kentucky's approved education standards for social studies and especially the associated training materials developed by the Kentucky Department of Education. While we voted unanimously to approve these standards in February 2019, subsequent events have caused us to reconsider the quality of these standards and the way KDE is attempting to implement them in schools. We ask that you would call hearings to investigate the standards and training materials and consider reopening the regulation adopting these standards, 704 KAR 8:060 Required Academic Standards for Social Studies, for further review and what we believe should be a finding of deficiency.

The social studies standards approved in 2019 are a marked improvement over the standards that preceded them. They are more comprehensive and detailed. The new standards provide guidance for teachers at every grade kindergarten through eighth grade. Nevertheless, during our deliberations over the standards we heard concerns from teachers and citizens about their relative lack of content specificity, but KDE was developing "Disciplinary Clarifications" for each grade that promised to provide additional content guidance to teachers. The draft clarifications for K-8 were available for our review and approved in February 2019, but the high school clarifications - which now exist in a completely separate document from the standards themselves - did not emerge until December 2019 and were not vetted by our board or, to our knowledge, by the new board members appointed by Governor Beshear that same month.

Now, upon further review of the standards, Disciplinary Clarifications, and the training materials developed by KDE to implement the standards, we are deeply concerned that the standards package is inadequate to meet the goal of developing knowledge and skills essential for virtuous and engaged citizens of the Commonwealth. Furthermore, the training materials issued by KDE reflect a deep left-wing ideological bias that does not reflect the values of most Kentuckians.

Regarding the standards, there is a nearly endless list of vitally important figures, concepts, and historical events that are left out, including the following examples:

- Despite the surging interest in socialism on the part of many young Americans, Karl Marx, socialism, and communism are never mentioned,
- No war after World War II is listed,

- All presidents other than Washington and Jefferson are unmentioned (Yes, even Kentucky's own son, Abraham Lincoln, is never mentioned!),
- MANY other important figures in history like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Edison, Andrew Carnegie, Benjamin Franklin – in fact ALL other historical figures except, strangely, Sam Adams, Henry Clay, and Daniel Boone – are omitted,
- The atomic bomb and its important implications are never discussed,
- Important, peaceful events like the Louisiana and the Alaska purchases are not mentioned.

The Kindergarten to Grade 8 Disciplinary Clarifications that accompany the standards are inadequate to address these deficiencies, and include the caveat they are “possible suggestions; they are not the only pathways and are not comprehensive to obtain mastery of the standards.” Even more inadequate, the high school Disciplinary Clarifications are not even included in the approved standards document, rendering the coverage of high school topics even more incomplete than the coverage for lower grades. Actually, this inconsistent omission, by itself, renders the current standards incomplete and deficient.

We concur that there might be other content concepts that could describe mastery of the standards. But since the language accompanying them renders the Disciplinary Clarifications with no authority at all, do we really have anything more substantial than the very limited standards themselves to outline what students must learn and what is fair game on state tests?

How can state assessments validly seek to measure anything specific with such vague guidance? For example, can a Kentucky state assessment ask questions about the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln and his early formation as largely a self-made man? Most likely, such questions would be illegal as the law stipulates that anything not included in the approved standards cannot be tested and topics related to Lincoln as a noteworthy American most specifically are not listed.

The lack of content specificity in the standards becomes more problematic when you consider the training materials that were developed under KDE's authority for implementing them. These “Inquiry Ready Modules” are not available for parents or the general public to review and are based explicitly on concepts closely associated with neo-Marxist critical theory.

At least 750 teachers across the Commonwealth have already been trained in these methods which encourage students to focus their study of history through the lens of “unequal distributions of power.” An instructional model held up as an exemplar guides students through an inquiry about income inequality through the use of extraordinarily biased questions and limited sources designed explicitly to convince students that income inequality destroys democracy.

Dr. Gary Houchens, one of our signatories and former chairman of the KBE Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment committee, has documented these concerns about the standards and their training materials at length. We encourage you to read his blog posts at the links below:

<https://schoolleader.typepad.com/school-leader/2020/08/kentuckys-social-studies-standards-need-more-work.html>

<https://schoolleader.typepad.com/school-leader/2020/08/kentucky-teachers-are-being-encouraged-to-use-inquiry-methods-to-indoctrinate-students-in-anti-ameri.html>

We believe that the inquiry design approach itself might be a valuable teaching tool – but only if the compelling and supporting questions and sources used are crafted by a highly talented, well-informed and *unbiased* teacher and truly allow students to arrive at *multiple* conclusions. Otherwise, these are extremely dangerous tools in the hands of a weak teacher, or worse, a teacher who wants to impose a political agenda (whether right or left-wing) on their students.

Considering these serious issues, we respectfully request that your committees call for hearings to further investigate and ask KDE officials to explain the development and use of these Inquiry Ready Modules in their training of teachers. We urge you to explore the biased ideological content and question why the modules are not publicly announced and readily available to the general public. We urge you to inquire how many teachers have participated in these modules and the extent to which, and how, they are being used in their schools.

Due to the apparent secrecy that currently surrounds the Inquiry Ready Modules, we hope your committees also explore ways that local communities could become highly engaged in promoting a more thorough and rigorous presentation of social studies materials in our classrooms.

In closing, we again urge you to reexamine the administrative regulation governing the social studies standards. We encourage you to find 704 KAR 8:060 deficient so that more work can be done to ensure Kentucky's social studies standards are comprehensive and appropriate guides for both classroom activities and state assessments -- work that should be collaboratively conducted in ways that involve teachers, parents, civics advocates, and lawmakers.

We look forward to discussing this matter with you further and are open to testifying on this matter before your committees.

Sincerely,

Former Members of the Kentucky Board of Education:

Laura Timberlake
Joe Papalia

Milton Seymore
Alesa Johnson

Gary Houchens
Hal Heiner
Kathy Gornik

Rich Gimmel
Tracy Cusick
Ben Cundiff