

Textbooks in the Balance: An Insider's Review of the History-Social Science Textbook Adoption Process in California

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I SAT IN MY DINING ROOM surrounded by the textbook materials, highlighters, pens, and tally sheets that covered the table surface. I paged through the fifth-grade textbook again, trying to determine if the text met California Standard 5.6.4: “Understand the personal impact and economic hardship of the [revolutionary] war on families, problems of financing the war, wartime inflation, and laws against hoarding goods and materials and profiteering.”¹ The discussion of “personal impact” and “economic hardship” was clear and easy to find, as was text about “financing the war.” With a bit more scanning, I had found brief discussion of laws about hoarding goods. After extensive searching, I finally found an inset feature that explored how inflation affected families. I decided that this text adequately met the standard in an age-appropriate way. So after several minutes of review, I ticked the box on my tally sheet denoting that the publisher had met one standard for one criterion for one grade level. I had made hundreds of similar checkmarks so far over the last few weeks, and would have to complete a few hundred more before I had finished.

Educators often wonder, as I did before participating in this process, exactly how the textbooks that end up in students' hands were approved. In this article, I explore one significant stage in the process in California, the nation's largest textbook market. The Instructional Quality Commission (IQC), an advisory board to the California Department of Education's (CDE) State Board of Education (SBE), supervises the K-8 textbook review process on an eight-year cycle.² By statute, a majority of IQC members must be classroom teachers. Before 2012, the process was more consequential, as categorical funds allocated for textbooks required districts to use only adopted texts. While local school districts are no longer required to follow the SBE's final adoption recommendations, they do have to demonstrate that they have completed a similar process on their own. Since independent reviews are time-consuming and expensive, districts often rely on the SBE's final recommendations. The process I describe here is only advisory, not binding. After reviewing each panel's report, the IQC makes its own recommendation to the SBE, and the SBE, in turn, conducts its own final review. Still, the adoption process remains a key stage in the selection of suitable K-8 textbooks—one that reveals simmering debates about the role of history-social science instruction in the nation's largest state.

In this article, I share my own experiences as a reviewer for California's 2017 adoption. I begin by briefly placing history-social science textbooks in historical context to help explain why their adoption is so contentious. Next, I describe how the textbook adoption process works in California. Then I consider what makes the process complex, challenging, and combative. I conclude by evaluating the significant outcomes of the review, particularly the expectations that many stakeholders have for history-social science textbooks and the problems such expectations foster.

The Larger Context of History Standards and Textbooks

The textbook adoption process can only be properly understood in the context of history-social science's traditional role in the curriculum. For more than a century, history education has served, among other things, to inculcate a sense of citizenship among students—which includes an understanding of the U.S. Constitution, a celebration of basic rights and freedoms, a commitment to the

democratic process, and, especially with younger students, a sense of national pride that is thought of as necessary for students to actively identify with their country. Or, as the authors of *History on Trial* bluntly put it, “Utility-minded administrators wanted young Americans to finish high school prepared to work diligently, consume intelligently, and vote responsibly. Therefore, they favored social education that emphasized current affairs, civic life, and the wisdom of the social sciences.”³

Early in the Reagan era, *A Nation at Risk*, an alarmist document sponsored by Secretary of Education T. H. Bell lamenting the woeful state of American education, prompted states to increase the rigor of K-12 education, particularly secondary education.⁴ Largely in response to this call, Bill Honig, California’s superintendent of education, directed the creation of a draft set of standards in each content area.⁵ Because he was a former social studies teacher, Honig took particular interest in the history-social science standards.⁶ These standards would serve as guides for curricular frameworks in each subject area; the frameworks, in turn, would shape the selection of textbooks.⁷ The *History-Social Science Framework* was published in 1987.⁸

Then, very briefly, the standards movement went national. In a moment of optimism fueled by the end of the Cold War, President George H. W. Bush announced six National Education Goals in his 1990 State of the Union address, which included the creation of national standards in core subjects. The effort enjoyed bipartisan support, including the active involvement of several Democratic governors like Bill Clinton, and input from Diane Ravitch, by then Assistant Secretary of Education, and Charlotte Crabtree, who had helped shepherd the California Framework through the adoption process.⁹ The subsequent controversy and eventual collapse of the National History Standards has been told in great detail by some of its co-authors and need not be reviewed here. Fundamentally, the movement floundered on accusations that the standards were too critical of the American past and too dismissive of its heroes; to a lesser extent, some were also concerned that world history standards were too global and not sufficiently celebratory of Western civilization—from which the nation’s civic heritage derives. In other words, the standards looked too much like the kind of critical history pursued in college and not enough like the civic staple it was meant to be.

In the wake of the national movement's collapse, individual states took up the charge. California was among the first, and many others followed suit, often using California as an exemplar. In recent years, standards in conservative states—and the highly prescriptive interventions of state legislatures there—have made national news. As with the National Standards, controversy surrounds the inclusion or exclusion of particular individuals for coverage, as well as the interpretive nature of the historical discipline. In 2006, Florida mandated that “American history shall be viewed as factual, not [as] constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable, and shall be defined as the creation of a new nation based largely on the universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence.”¹⁰ This injunction against interpretation in history reflects a century-long misunderstanding by the public of the fundamental nature of the discipline.¹¹ In 2010, the Texas State Board of Education adopted requirements promoting patriotism, free enterprise, the Second Amendment, and America's divinely ordained mission, while downplaying slavery, the civil rights movement, and the scientific revolution.¹² More recently, in an effort to “streamline” history curriculum, the Texas Board voted to remove Helen Keller and Hillary Clinton—the first viable female presidential candidate in American history and winner of the popular vote in the 2016 election—from the curriculum.¹³

California has largely charted a different course. Its liberal ethos constrains the most exuberant expressions of nationalism that characterize textbook requirements in Texas and Florida. The first Framework in 1987 explicitly shifted the focus of instruction from the social sciences to history as the “umbrella under which all of the social science disciplines and the humanities [would] find shelter.”¹⁴ The emphasis on history opened the door to multiculturalism and diversity. The Framework authors carefully steered a middle course between the experiences of often oppressed minorities and more traditional celebrations of the nation's past.¹⁵ Still, the larger narrative weaves minorities into a teleological narrative of progress, while an emphasis on nationalism and civic engagement remains central throughout.

Every grade level from kindergarten through twelfth grade provides required content that addresses civic goals. Lower elementary students learn about American heroes and icons, fifth graders learn

about the American Revolution, and virtually every grade learns about the Constitution, whether it easily fits the curriculum or not. For example, in fourth grade, devoted to California history, students study the federal Constitution in comparison with the California Constitution. Thanks in large part to the influence of conservative historian of education Diane Ravitch, world history coverage in the Framework retained a strong focus on Western heritage, which reinforced the philosophical, religious, and ethical traditions thought essential to civic virtue.¹⁶ Even in tenth-grade world history, where little refuge for American civic values might be expected, the authors found a way to smuggle democracy into the story. The guidelines on totalitarianism include a discussion of Stalinist Russia, commenting explicitly on the importance of “the absence of a free press” as an implicit foil to the U.S. example.¹⁷ Indeed, the patriotic enterprise of history-social science education is embedded in the California Education Code, which requires not only that emphasis be “placed on civic values, democratic principles, and democratic institutions,” but that “significant attention” is also given to “the principles of morality, truth, justice, and patriotism and to a comprehension of the rights, duties, and dignity of American citizenship,” with the overarching goal of “inspiring an understanding of and a commitment to American ideals.”¹⁸

The civic and democratic content of history-social science invites the public as a whole to view themselves as experts in the construction of the past—especially the American past, but also the past of California and of the world inasmuch as their coverage often reflects this same civic purpose. Consequently, members of the public offer input on the content of textbooks to a degree not seen with more technical subjects like science and math. While instructors at the college level have the luxury of choosing whichever textbook they want, their K-12 counterparts must use a textbook that has survived the gauntlet of the California adoption process.

The Review Process

The Instructional Quality Commission (IQC) supervised the complicated adoption process with clarity, competence, and efficiency. The 2017 History-Social Science Adoption included ten panels, each consisting of six to ten members, that reviewed a

different set of publisher's materials. Two types of panelist were selected after review of their applications. One type, the Instructional Materials Reviewers (IMRs), are primarily practicing classroom teachers, but may also be administrators, curriculum specialists, or parents. The second type, Content Review Experts (CREs), must have a doctorate in the field of their review, and are typically university faculty. They use their subject matter expertise to assess materials for historical accuracy. As a historian with a Ph.D., I was appointed to be a Content Review Expert. Both IMRs and CREs participate in the same training, conduct the same review, and have the same voice in deliberations. For the 2017 adoption, a total of 120 reviewers were approved, with 99 IMRs and 21 CREs. Each panel was facilitated by a member of the IQC, and throughout the training and deliberations, other IQC members routinely checked in with our panel, providing guidance and clarification as questions emerged.

There were three elements to my work as a reviewer. First, I participated in three full days of training at the Doubletree Hotel in Sacramento in April 2017, which included simulated reviews of textbook materials that allowed panelists to practice applying the evaluation criteria. On the final day, each panel's publisher provided a presentation that oriented reviewers to their curriculum and explained how to find state-mandated elements within it.

The second step was when the hard work began. A few weeks after my return from Sacramento, I received a delivery of eight large boxes on my front porch, representing one publisher's texts and support materials for kindergarten through sixth grade. After I had unpackaged and inventoried the materials, I began the review. Over the next two months, I applied the extensive, detailed criteria to the materials, using the publisher's guidelines to determine whether requirements had been met, and documenting my answers for reference during deliberations.

In July, the third and most important step took place. All reviewers met with their respective panels at the Doubletree again, this time for up to four days of deliberation to compare findings and reach a single conclusion on whether to recommend adoption of the program in whole or in part. When my ride pulled up at the hotel, the first thing I saw was a small group of people holding signs to protest one textbook, a reminder of the stakes of the adoption process and a foreshadowing of tensions to come during deliberations. At the

appointed time, I reported to our panel's individual conference room. After tallying every member's vote on each criterion, our panel began deliberations, addressing our hundreds of points of disagreement one at a time.

Ideally, conclusions were to be reached by consensus, which our group defined as a vote of nine out of eleven reviewers. If a panel failed to reach consensus, however, the facilitator (not counted as one of the eleven) had the authority to invoke a ruling that all subsequent decisions would be made by majority vote. By the final day of deliberations, our panel's impasses on many subjects forced the facilitator to adopt this standard. This shift in voting procedure prompted outrage from a vocal minority of the panel, one of whom complained that the CDE had altered guidelines mid-process to force an outcome it secretly favored. Our voting patterns had often left us deadlocked, with tallies just short of the consensus standard. Votes began to go in a different direction once a majority standard was adopted. The CDE's Ken McDonald happened to be in the room when the panelist made this assertion about a hidden agenda. Though McDonald, like other IQC members, had offered clarifying input to our panel throughout the process, he had never commented on a non-procedural issue. He briefly intervened at this point, however, to defend the integrity of his colleagues and the process, prompting quick backpedaling from the panelist who had offered the baseless accusation.

Each day, there were two opportunities for public comment, which often included impassioned comments from concerned members of the public who thought their demographic group had been severely misrepresented by the publisher and urged us to reject the textbook series outright. Public comment also allowed representatives of our curriculum's publisher to answer questions that panelists had raised in our deliberations, but were forbidden to ask publishers about directly. The days were long, full, and punctuated by heated dialogue, broken occasionally by jokes or lighthearted comments.

Challenges of the Process

The IQC provided competent leadership that kept the review as smooth as possible, but a number of features make the process inherently challenging. Some difficulties reflect the convoluted

nature of the educational requirements, rather than the review process as such. A number of criteria are needlessly prescriptive. An individual statement, for example, mandates that the Great Potato Famine be taught explicitly in both Grade 5 (though many classes never move beyond ratification of the Constitution) and Grade 8 (where “Irish immigrants and the Great Irish Famine” are already explicitly discussed).¹⁹ Requirements like this seem tacked on for political reasons, rather than being integrated into course content in meaningful ways. They militate against the kind of coherent narrative that makes history instruction meaningful to students.

Other requirements accrete as a new policy or statute is passed, at times without adequate attention to existing policy. Three separate criteria, for example, require that textbook materials address the needs of English-language learners.²⁰ It is not clear why these statements remain separate, rather than being consolidated into a single, well-defined statement that excises redundancies. The recently adopted framework provides more than ten pages of guidance to teachers on how to support English-language learners.²¹ These guidelines, based on extensive educational research and incorporated into a recent, formally adopted state document, might simply supersede previous statutes.

Another criterion requires that textbooks address cause and effect. This undeniably worthy expectation is already mandated by the Analysis Skills in the California State Standards, which indicate that students will “identify and interpret the multiple causes and effects of historical events.”²² Causation is addressed in another criterion as well. Thus, there is no need for this issue to be called out separately. It might seem that redundant expectations can be easily resolved—if, for example, cause and effect has met one standard, it has likely met the others—and thus will not constitute a burden to reviewers. But the presence of overlapping, separately worded statements with nuanced differences caused some reviewers to expend time and energy carefully parsing the differences between them.

Some evaluation challenges resulted from the need to weigh competing directives. One criterion requires textbook materials to address the recently adopted Framework. Some of the Framework’s new historical content directly contradicts the California State Standards. To take one controversial example, the Framework describes the migrations of peoples speaking Indo-European

languages into South Asia beginning around 1500 BCE in a cautious way, indicating historiographic uncertainty:

[A]ccording to many scholars, people speaking Indic languages, which are part of the larger Indo-European family of languages, entered South Asia, probably by way of Iran. Gradually, Indic languages, including Sanskrit, spread across northern India. They included the ancestors of such modern languages as Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali. The early Indic speakers were most likely animal herders. They may have arrived in India in scattered bands, later intermarrying with populations perhaps ancestral to those who speak Dravidian languages, such as Tamil and Telugu, in southern India and Sri Lanka today. In the same era, nomads who spoke Indo-Iranian languages moved into Persia. Indic, Iranian, and most European languages are related. Another point of view suggests that the language was indigenous to India and spread northward, but it is a minority position.²³

This corrects a terse and outdated description in the standards that simply directs teachers to “[d]iscuss the significance of the Aryan invasions.”²⁴ Textbook publishers must reflect recent historiography on this subject, as the Framework does and as Hindu advocacy groups and others have demanded, because few scholars today accept the notion of an Aryan invasion.²⁵ But rather than allowing the recent Framework text to take precedence over the outdated—and flatly contradictory—explanation in the standards, current instructions require publishers to include this standard or risk failing to meet the criterion of addressing all standards.

As indicated in the introduction, the most notable challenge is the sheer scale and complexity of the requirements. Each individual grade level must be evaluated according to seventy-seven separate criteria. Since our panel’s materials included grades K-6, this amounted to 539 separate criteria. But this number is misleading, as it underestimates the detail entailed in many individual criteria. For example, the first criterion asks whether the curriculum meets the California State Standards. That means that reviewers must determine whether every content standard, every sub-statement of every content standard, and every analysis skill descriptor has been adequately addressed. For kindergarten, by far the shortest grade level, that amounts to nearly thirty elements.

A concrete example from the Analysis Skills illustrates how many elements may be embedded in just one criterion. Consider the

following Chronological and Spatial Thinking requirement from the Analysis Skills for K-5, with the connectors highlighted in italics:

Students use map *and* globe skills to determine the absolute locations of places *and* interpret information available through a map's or globe's legend, scale, *and* symbolic representations.²⁶

To determine if a publisher's textbook has met this one standard, reviewers need to find evidence of each of the following:

- using map skills to determine absolute locations
- using globe skills to determine absolute locations
- interpreting information through a legend
- interpreting information through a scale
- interpreting information through symbolic representations

The structure of the Analysis Skills created still more interpretive challenges for reviewers. The standards apply the same set of descriptors to the entire K-5 band of Analysis Skills. Skills, often described as forms of historical thinking, are clearly developmental, as education researchers have demonstrated both in broad terms and with respect to particular skills, such as causation and explanation.²⁷ It is unreasonable to expect the curriculum to address every feature of a skill in the early grades. In our deliberations, I had to lobby hard for this developmental interpretation of the skills, against the views of panelists who adopted a textual literalism in an effort to take seriously the charge they received from the IQC. Such rigidity led to indefensible positions, including the expectation that our publisher be required to provide instructions for teaching kindergarten students—five-year-olds—to “differentiate between primary and secondary sources.”²⁸ The deliberation process excluded consideration of evidence outside the publisher materials and the state-adopted guidelines, so I could not directly substantiate my claims regarding the vast body of research evidence that demonstrates the developmental nature of historical thinking.

Some detailed criteria raised issues with much higher-stakes issues than student skills. Consider the text of the most controversial criterion, one that our panel (and, as I understand, many other panels) spent extensive time on:

Instructional materials use biography to portray the experiences of men, women, children, and youths. Materials shall include the roles and contributions of people from different demographic groups:

Native Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, European Americans, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans, persons with disabilities, and members of other ethnic and cultural groups to the total development of California and the United States.²⁹

After SBE staff confirmed that the colon in the second sentence signaled that the list that followed was inclusive rather than illustrative, our panel understood that publisher materials needed to address the activities of fifteen different demographic groups. Note that the end of the statement requires publishers not simply to discuss the experiences of these groups, but to explain how members of the included demographic groups contributed to the development of both the state and the nation.

For various reasons, many grades cannot extensively support this criterion. While there is some historical content in the K-3 standards, the contributions of those grades are necessarily limited. First, standards in the early grades are quite brief, generally two pages or less. Second, the focus during these years falls heavily on skills acquisition and social studies content, which limits the relevance of historical examples. Third, the limited cognitive development of students at that age makes it difficult to provide the kind of detailed, analytical text required to meet this criterion. At the other end of the grade spectrum, these requirements are largely irrelevant to sixth grade because of the focus of its content: few events in ancient world history can plausibly be linked to the development of the state or the nation. Thus, the burden of this criterion was largely borne by just two grade levels: fourth and fifth.

Such criteria prompted long and agonized debate on our panel about what constituted adequacy of coverage. Qualitatively, how detailed did descriptions need to be to meet the standard? Quantitatively, how many examples needed to be included from a particular demographic group to meet the standard? This led to surreal discussions, particularly around issues of gender and sexual identity. Discussions were shaped by the directive that the publisher materials did not need to explicitly identify an individual's gender identity to meet the criterion. Was James Baldwin gay or bisexual, since the latter might represent the only example of a bisexual in the publisher materials? Did a panelist's *lack of awareness* that Jane Addams was a lesbian constitute proof that she was not a lesbian?

Should Sally Ride, whose twenty-seven-year relationship with a woman, Tam O'Shaughnessy, was only made public in her obituary, be viewed as a lesbian? Was Deborah Samson, who dressed as a man and fought in the Continental Army more than two centuries ago, transgender? Debate about Samson illustrated the hazards of such evaluations. In the absence of clear first-person explanation for her actions, later scholars must make inferences about her motives. Moreover, it is quite problematic to retroactively apply contemporary identity terms to individuals who lived long before these labels existed.³⁰ Ride's example is equally knotty. She ultimately left it to O'Shaughnessy to write her obituary, which she never herself read. O'Shaughnessy chose to reveal the nature of their relationship. But she acknowledged the fraught nature of the decision. "Sally didn't want to be defined by the lesbian/gay label just as she didn't want to be defined by a gender label," she said. "We both didn't like categories, didn't want to define ourselves by our sexuality."³¹ So it must at least be asked whether labeling Ride as a lesbian honors her wishes and her legacy.

While we discussed many issues—the readability of curriculum, the suitability of support for different student needs, and the rigor of assessments—the bulk of our deliberation addressed questions of historical fact. These discussions could be very problematic, as some panelists had limited content knowledge on particular subjects. In the training process, for example, one veteran instructor confidently explained to another panel member that the Three-Fifths Compromise meant that only three out of five slaves in a given Southern state were permitted to vote. As a Content Review Expert, I could easily correct egregious historical errors like this. But many questions of historical accuracy were not so amenable to simple determinations of fact. For example, one panelist challenged the veracity of the textbook's characterization of Spanish-Indian relations during the missions period. The text indicated that those operating missions had exploited Native Americans' labor and had used fear and intimidation to pressure them to remain at the mission. Still, the panelist objected to an elusive issue of a "tone" that seemed too lenient in evaluating Catholic misdeeds. Though the burden of proof ought to rest on the one raising this vague objection to substantiate a critique that hinged on the broad characterization of the missions system, the nature of the deliberative process required the opposite. So I attempted to show

that the collection of facts—none of which this panelist disputed individually—constituted an accurate portrayal of an exploitative system. In this case, the panel accepted my assessment as a historian with a concentration in California history. But I could not assume that, as a CRE, I would have decisive influence on these types of questions of historical accuracy. If someone at the table thought a particular narrative was in error and I disagreed, or vice versa, we each had to make our respective case and see what the rest of the panel decided.

Panelists sometimes appealed to information that in their view *ought* to have been included in the textbook, arguing that this content was implied in the standards if one read between the lines. Such challenges, resting on the *absence* of tangible evidence, were more difficult to refute without access to books, articles, etc. In some cases, panelists seemed swayed by their colleagues' emotional appeals, which were often accompanied by abundant tears. While I was deeply sympathetic to my fellow panelists' feelings and frustrations, I was equally concerned that our decisions be based on the established criteria, rather than personal anecdote or intuition. The role of emotion in our panel's deliberations was intensified by comments from a number of members of the public, who frequently used strong language to express concern about what they perceived—sometimes quite rightly—as inaccurate and demeaning features of the textbook materials. Comment from the public provided insight regarding the views of some members of a few demographic groups from the larger public. It nevertheless tended to have undue influence on our panel's views, as evidenced by panel members' references to such comments as authoritative without providing specific corroborating evidence from the publisher materials.

Consequences of the Process

The textbook adoption process undoubtedly produced several constructive outcomes. The most positive is that classroom teachers can be confident that any adopted textbook has been thoroughly vetted. Publishers must run a gauntlet of hundreds of requirements before they bring their materials to the table for review. Their materials are only adopted after careful scrutiny by panelists, who are typically able to reach majority agreement on most of

the hundreds of criteria. Publishers strive to provide appropriate presentations of fact and interpretation, include a variety of stories, address recent historiography, and maintain a compelling narrative. They often work closely with advocacy groups to ensure balanced coverage. Driven by criteria that are informed by a full storehouse of educational research on history-social science education, learning theory, and literacy development, publisher materials provide more robust inquiry-based instruction than ever before. Instructional support includes extensive discussion of literacy strategies, offering suggestions for teaching general academic vocabulary and discipline-specific vocabulary in thoughtfully contextualized ways. Instruction is enriched by a wide range of primary sources from the earliest grade levels, both imbedded within instructional materials and as ancillary materials.

Historical thinking fares well in this process as well. Inspired in part by the National Standards, California has had historical thinking standards since 1998, but these have often been ignored by teachers.³² The explicit teaching of historical thinking has advanced dramatically since then, in no small part due to the influence of Sam Wineburg.³³ Elementary instructors, the vast majority of whom did not complete an undergraduate degree in history, also receive extensive guidance for teaching cause and effect, change over time, and point of view. Suggestions for embedding historical thinking in classroom instruction are often rigorous, engaging, and abundant. In the materials I reviewed, the overwhelming majority of such supports were located in the Teacher's Edition rather than the student textbook. So any evaluation of pedagogical utility of the textbook program must include careful examination of the Teacher's Edition.

Given this evidence, the sweeping criticism still often found in social studies methods texts that elementary textbooks represent an "enormous collection of particular items, along with a few generalizations about trends over time or common patterns observed in parallel situations" and "overemphasize details rather than the big ideas; they are devoid of perspectives from underrepresented groups; [and] they neglect local history" does not accurately describe contemporary California history texts.³⁴

Despite the benefits of the process, there are problems as well, some of which are quite serious. First, the sheer number of criteria makes meaningful discussion during deliberations extremely

challenging. Because panels must consider a total of hundreds of possible elements (many of which have multiple features) in fewer than four days, they cannot give substantive attention to more than a few. A significant reduction in the number of required criteria would allow panels to devote more time to really problematic issues without feeling rushed. This could be done in part through consolidation of similar items and some reduction in the level of prescriptiveness. For example, three successive requirements all address overlapping issues of perspective, inquiry, and primary sources—the third of which runs to 126 words:

- Instructional materials present accurate, detailed content and a variety of perspectives and encourage student inquiry.
- ...Primary sources, such as letters, diaries, documents, and photographs, are incorporated into the narrative to present an accurate and vivid picture of the times in order to enrich student inquiry.
- Materials include sufficient use of primary sources...so that students understand from the words of the authors the way people saw themselves, their work, their ideas and values, their assumptions, their fears and dreams, and their interpretation of their own times...The materials present different perspectives of participants, both ordinary and extraordinary people...and further student inquiry.³⁵

But after consolidating redundant criteria, more difficult decisions would need to be made. New criteria have emerged over time to rectify perceived weaknesses or omissions in textbook coverage, so deciding on criteria to remove would be a daunting task. Still, the alternative is worse. Because requirements steadily accrete over time, an unwillingness to courageously pare criteria down will lead to a review process that becomes ever more unwieldy.

Second, because the review happens so late in the publication process, review panels have very few tools at their disposal. If they are concerned about content, they can (1) mandate corrections of fact that do not require extensive changes amounting to a rewrite; and (2) suggest removal of “social content” that is inappropriate. In general, the social content standards prohibit “adverse reflections”—that is, “Descriptions, depictions, labels, or rejoinders that tend to demean, stereotype, or patronize”—in regard to specified categories of “Male and Female Roles,” “Ethnic and Cultural Groups,” “Sexual

Orientation and Gender Identity,” “Older Persons and the Aging Process,” “People with Disabilities,” “Entrepreneur and Labor,” and “Religion.”³⁶ Apart from this, a panel’s only remaining tool is a very blunt one: they can completely reject one or more grade levels of curriculum, and, in the most extreme case, reject an entire set of curriculum. With a narrow majority, our panel voted to recommend our publisher’s materials, despite significant concerns, in the expectation that corrections and the removal of problematic “social content” would make the materials acceptable. In its final review of the publisher’s materials that our panel covered, the CDE accepted the IQC’s recommendation to overrule our panel’s decision, largely based on concerns about the adequacy of coverage of LGBTQ individuals required by the 2011 FAIR Act.³⁷ Consequently, these materials will remain unapproved during the entire eight-year textbook adoption cycle.

A two-step review might be much more productive. A preliminary review process would be helpful a year or so before the final review, allowing publishers the opportunity to make more substantive changes based on critiques. Texts might then only be adopted after a second review determined whether the publisher had adequately addressed the problems identified in the preliminary stage. Because such a review would be limited in scope, it would be shorter and less costly than the full process. Still, a two-step review would undoubtedly be more expensive. The additional cost of this process could be borne largely by the publishers, who might agree to provide funding to ensure a greater opportunity to revise materials based on feedback and reduce the possibility of rejection during the final adoption stage.

California’s 2017 raucous adoption process was no anomaly. Nationally, history textbooks aligned to various history curricula have stirred controversy for more than a century.³⁸ Unlike some states, California’s protests have not been dominated by conservative religious and civic organizations wanting more traditional coverage, but by minority groups seeking more inclusive treatment. During adoption of the original California History-Social Science Framework in 1987, organizations representing various groups complained about their lack of inclusion.³⁹ The first textbook adoption under the new Framework in 1990 elicited similar lobbying.⁴⁰ During the 2005 adoption, Hindu American groups sued the state to overturn findings regarding coverage of India and Hinduism in all of the adopted sixth

grade texts.⁴¹ And the adoption of the 2016 California History-Social Science Framework process included “a record 10,000 emails, 1,000 suggested revisions and hundreds of speakers” in multiple public comment forums.⁴² The public is rightly entitled to observe deliberations as part of an open process. So textbook adoption is an inescapably politicized process, and the creation of history textbooks will always represent a kind of consensus process of constituting a shared public past.

It is thus naïve to imagine that “experts” could work in an undisclosed room somewhere and magisterially render their professional judgments. Still, the process could be depoliticized and rendered more professional. Some checks could be placed on the nature and volume of public input and pressure. Panelists could also be routinely reminded that those offering public comment represent only a portion of the state constituency that will use the texts, that their opinions many not necessarily represent expert knowledge, and that the panel may consider any of this input—but is equally under no obligation whatsoever to accept any of the input of any of the groups.

The SBE could also revisit the adoption review panels, perhaps requiring more experience from the non-CRE panelists. Elementary teachers with at least a few courses in history would know, for example, that the Three-Fifths Compromise had nothing to do with slaves voting. The SBE should require a higher proportion of Content Review Experts on each panel and might also consider defining expertise more narrowly to require an advanced degree in history. Inasmuch as history is the “umbrella” covering these standards, degrees in religion or the social sciences may not provide the right kind of training. Recruiting more historians might be daunting, however. Few feel motivated to participate in a process that offers little professional reward. Historians and the K-12 educational system largely parted ways in the early twentieth century⁴³ and, despite efforts by professional historical organizations and the National Council for the Social Studies, this remains largely the case today.⁴⁴ Given this arrangement, it is little surprise that universities provide little incentive for such collaborations with K-12 teachers.⁴⁵ Individual universities would have to rethink this reward structure to encourage a large number of historians representing a real cross-section of the discipline to feel motivated to participate in the process.

Most importantly, panel discussion was often deeply problematic. During deliberations, our facilitator repeatedly had to remind a couple of panelists that our task was to apply the established statutory criteria to the textbook, and not to adjudicate the appropriateness of the criteria themselves. It is wholly understandable that discussion stirred deep emotions, as it raised fundamental personal questions of identity and equity. But discourse requires some boundaries. One panelist in particular repeatedly ignored established guidelines, asking the panel multiple times whether we were going to let a “piece of paper” (the established criteria) keep us from doing “what is right.” This panelist engaged in lengthy monologues that our panel chair chose not to interrupt, and stormed out of the room more than once. It is difficult to imagine how any panelist selection process would root out reviewers who would not abide by the established rules. And no one could fault the IQC’s guidance in preparing for deliberation. Leaders had explained the reviewer requirements in great detail during training, and every panelist had agreed to abide by them. The only recourse would be more strenuous intervention during deliberations. If a panelist explicitly indicates a refusal to follow the process, the IQC needs a formal mechanism to privately excuse them from further participation. Given the politicized nature of deliberations, safeguards would undoubtedly be necessary, as would documentation of the reasons for dismissal. Nevertheless, something needs to be in place to restrain disruptive behavior, so that the hard work of the panelists who followed the process in good faith can be honored.

Discussion

The 2017 History-Social Science Adoption was a complex affair involving ten panels, each composed of Instructional Materials Reviewers and Content Review Experts, that reviewed a different set of publisher’s materials. Work for participants included training, individual review of textbook materials at home, and deliberation to conclude whether to recommend adoption of the program in whole or in part. Several features made the review process inherently challenging. Educational requirements are quite elaborate and continue to grow as new policies are adopted, at times without adequate attention to existing policy. Some evaluation challenges

resulted from the need to weigh competing directives, for example, between the recently adopted Framework and the older Standards. The most daunting challenge was the sheer scale and complexity of the requirements. Specific criteria about the inclusion and representation of particular demographic groups prompted passionate debate. Questions of historical fact dominated deliberation, including difficult-to-address arguments about the absence of evidence.

The adoption process produced a range of outcomes. On a positive note, blanket critiques about the poor quality of textbooks prove unwarranted for California. Textbooks generally provide equity in coverage, while reflecting research on history-social science education, learning theory, and literacy development. But the process has serious problems as well. Dramatically reducing the required criteria would allow panels to give adequate time to truly significant issues. A preliminary review process a year or so before the final review would enable publishers to make substantive changes based on feedback. As mentioned, the SBE could also revise the makeup of review panels to require a higher proportion of Content Review Experts (who might be required to have an advanced degree in history) and more experience from the non-CRE panelists. Finally, panelists' discourse and comportment could be held to a higher standard, and a clear policy for the dismissal of panelists could be adopted.

As historian Todd Gitlin noted more than two decades ago, people fight over textbooks because they reflect our "shared collective identity."⁴⁶ It is clear that the textbook adoption process provides an opportunity to raise concerns about important questions of identity—about race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, and many others—and to ensure equitable coverage of all groups in publisher materials. A deliberative process that remains focused on established criteria and the evidence (or absence thereof) in the materials is valuable and significant. Still, some were not content with this significant responsibility as they sought to litigate the content of the Standards and the Framework. Not only was evaluation of the criteria themselves beyond our purview in the adoption, but many other established avenues exist to provide such input. In the case of the Framework, extensive public hearings had only recently concluded when our training began. The textbook adoption process is simply not the forum for pursuing such concerns. In several cases,

panel members made ad hominem attacks on other panelists, casting aspersions on the motives behind their conclusions, rather focusing on the evaluations behind them and the evidence proffered. Apart from fueling a tense, adversarial environment, such accusations also revealed an exaggerated perception of textbooks' influence. Clearly, a textbook is one element of effective social studies instruction, a significant one that needs to be held to high standards for evaluation. It is important that textbook publishers strive to get it right.

But a textbook is only one component of instruction. No textbook will ever be perfect, and the potential of even the best textbook will remain latent without an effective teacher. A skilled teacher can wisely make use of instructional materials, decide when to introduce new information and in what order, frame lessons with appropriate inquiry questions, and supplement primary sources where resources are lacking, based on a knowledge of their particular set of students. What matters most is the professional expectations we establish for our discipline, our preparation of teachers in schools of education, the quality of their induction programs as novice teachers, and the opportunities we provide for discipline-specific professional development. If we want to transform history-social science education so that students learn about all of our nation's people thoughtfully and equitably, this is where we should devote our greatest attention, resources, and passions.

Notes

Ken McDonald, Education Programs Consultant for the Curriculum Frameworks Unit of California Department of Education, provided feedback on the discussion of policies and procedures in an earlier draft of this article.

1. California Department of Education, *History-Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools, Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve* (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education, 2000), 19. Available at <<https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/histsocscistnd.pdf>>.

2. A caveat is in order. The full adoption process is more complicated and technical than the adoption review explained in this article. To describe that full process would require a tedious rehearsal of details already publicly available.

Anyone interested in the finer points of the process can consult the CDE's *Instructional Materials in California: An Overview of Standards, Curriculum Frameworks, Instructional Materials Adoptions, and Funding* (2014), available at <<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/documents/instrmatoverview2014.doc>>. All of the descriptions of qualifications for reviewers and the nature of the process can be verified through the document and the links it provides. This first-person article is limited to the portion of the process I participated in directly. In the interest of full disclosure, it should be noted, as discussed briefly at the end of the article, that the State Board of Education overturned our panel's recommendation.

3. Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 37.

4. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education, United States Department of Education, April 1983.

5. James Andrew LaSpina, *California in a Time of Excellence: School Reform at the Crossroads of the American Dream* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009), 29-34.

6. Linda Symcox, *Whose History? The Struggle for National Standards in American Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 70.

7. LaSpina, *California in a Time of Excellence*, 43-44.

8. California Department of Education, *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools: Kingergarten through Grade Twelve* (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education, 1987).

9. Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, *History on Trial*, 150-155.

10. Florida House of Representatives (H.B. 7087, Engrossed 3, 2006), as quoted in Bruce Craig, "History Defined in Florida Legislature," *Perspectives on History* 44, no. 6 (September 2006), <<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2006/history-defined-in-florida-legislature>>. Reflecting its conservative outlook, the legislature has recently not been so prescriptive regarding how other subjects are taught, allowing any parent or county resident—whether they have a student in area schools or not—to register a complaint about material that "is not suited to student needs and their ability to comprehend the material presented, or is inappropriate for the grade level and age group." Though the wording does not focus on science, critics of the legislation see that subject as the target of the law. See Sarah Kaplan, "New Florida Law Lets Any Resident Challenge What's Taught in Science Classes," *The Washington Post*, 1 July 2017, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2017/07/01/new-florida-law-lets-any-resident-challenge-whats-taught-in-science-classes/>>.

11. For examples from earlier in the century, see Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, *History on Trial*, 9-14, 32. The authors cogently explain why pitting "content" against "historical thinking" is a false dichotomy, since facts, "to be useful, must be embedded in some context or pattern of meaning" (p. 273).

12. Cris McGreal, "Texas Schools Board Rewrites US History with Lesson Promoting God and Guns," *The Guardian*, 16 May 2010, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/may/16/texas-schools-rewrites-us-history>>.

13. Lauren McGaughey, “Texas Board Votes to Eliminate Hillary Clinton, Helen Keller from History Curriculum,” *Dallas News*, 14 September 2018, <<https://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2018/09/14/history-curriculum-texas-remembers-alamo-forgets-hillary-clinton-helen-keller>>.

14. California Department of Education, as quoted in James Andrew LaSpina, *California in a Time of Excellence: School Reform at the Crossroads of the American Dream* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009), 50.

15. Symcox, *Whose History?*, 77.

16. LaSpina, *California in a Time of Excellence*, 118. A genuinely global approach to world history was only introduced in the 2016 Framework.

17. California Department of Education, *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools, Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve* (2016) (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education, 2017), 732. Available at <<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/hs/cf/documents/hssframeworkwhole.pdf>>.

18. The quotes are drawn from the Evaluation Criteria provided to reviewers, but cite the following California Education Code sections, respectively: 60043, 52720, and 60200.5. California Department of Education, “2017 History-Social Science Adoption Evaluation Criteria Map” (2017), 7-8. Available at <<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/hs/im/documents/hsevaluationcriteriamap.doc>>. See also, California Department of Education, *History-Social Science Framework* (2016), 626-627.

19. California Department of Education, “2017 History-Social Science Adoption Evaluation Criteria Map,” 7. California Department of Education, *History-Social Science Framework* (2016), 626, 721, 804.

20. California Department of Education, “2017 History-Social Science Adoption Evaluation Criteria Map,” 11, 16, 18.

21. California Department of Education, *History-Social Science Framework* (2016), 512-528.

22. California Department of Education, *History-Social Science Content Standards*, 2.

23. California Department of Education, *History-Social Science Framework* (2016), 162-163.

24. California Department of Education, *History-Social Science Content Standards*, 25.

25. See, for example, Thomas R. Trautmann, ed., *The Aryan Debate* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2005).

26. California Department of Education, *History-Social Science Content Standards*, 1.

27. Keith C. Barton, “Research on Students’ Ideas About History,” in *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education*, ed. Linda S. Levstik and Cynthia A. Tyson (New York: Routledge, 2008), 239-258. Barton’s chapter is a compendium of two decades of research conclusions organized around three topics: students’ knowledge of the past, their ideas about evidence and explanation (including historical accounts and the interpretation of evidence and explanations of the actions of people in the past), and the social contexts of students’ understanding. In addition to summarizing the major conclusions of

empirical research, it provides a bibliography of over 200 studies. Much work on developments in students' historical thinking has centered on explanation. For a brief example, see Rosalyn Ashby, Peter Lee, and Alaric Dickinson, "How Children Explain the 'Why' of History: The *Chata* Research Project on Teaching History," *Social Education* 61, no. 1 (January 1997): 17-21. The article explores the progression in students' thinking about the second-order, or procedural, concepts of "explanation" and "evidence." It offers a sequence of the development of student explanation that begins with simpler descriptions based on intentional actions, to more complex, multi-faceted conceptualizations. The sequence of evidentiary explanations begins with younger students' failure to distinguish between information. This sequence culminates in more complex descriptions. Another example is Ola Halldén, "Conceptual Change and the Learning of History," *International Journal of Educational Research* 27, no. 3 (1997) 201-210. This article investigates explanations of the past that students offer in the classroom, concluding that they tend to personalize—and even personify—historical explanations, even when teachers emphasize structural factors. The author argues that students' inability to understand and use structural explanations stems from their unfamiliarity with the larger theoretical context of the discipline of history.

28. California Department of Education, *History-Social Science Content Standards*, 1.

29. California Department of Education, "2017 History-Social Science Adoption Evaluation Criteria Map," 6.

30. In his extensively documented 400-page biography of Sampson, Alfred F. Young, *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 297-306, evaluates claims that Sampson was a person of color, a feminist, and/or a lesbian. He dismisses all of these claims, which "involve an uncertainty in definition and a carelessness in weighing evidence." They are based on wishful thinking, uncritical reading of sources, or "imposing a modern concept on another era" (p. 297). Thus, while he does not address the possibility of Sampson's transsexual identity, given the paucity of evidence, he would likely come to the same conclusion.

31. Lynn Sherr, "Sally Ride's Secret: Why the First American Woman in Space Stayed in the Closet," *Slate*, 30 May 2014, <https://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/05/30/sally_ride_lesbian_why_did_the_first_american_woman_in_space_stay_in_the.html>.

32. The 1987 Framework included critical thinking skills, but these were very generic and did not explicitly address issues like cause and effect or the careful reading of primary sources.

33. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001), introduced the history education world, for example, to the notion of "sourcing" primary sources, language that is now ubiquitous. For an autobiographical narrative of his influence in history education, see Sam Wineburg, *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 103-138.

34. Jere Brophy, Janet Alleman, and Anne-Lise Halvorsen, *Powerful Social Studies for Elementary Students*, fourth ed. (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2017), 117, 124.

35. California Department of Education, “2017 History-Social Science Adoption Evaluation Criteria Map,” 1-2.

36. These standards also require representation of the interdependence of people and the environment, discouragement of the use of dangerous substances, celebration of thrift, explanations of fire prevention methods, humane treatment of people and animals, and a ban on the use of identifiable commercial brands or corporate logos. See California Department of Education, “Social Content Sheet” (2013), available at <<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/abridgedsocialcontent.asp>>.

37. For coverage of the SBE vote, see Theresa Harrington, “After Hours of Testimony, California State Board Rejects Two History Textbooks, Approves 10 Others,” *EdSource*, 9 November 2017, <<https://www.edsource.org/2017/after-hours-of-testimony-state-board-rejects-two-history-textbooks-approves-10-others/590118>>.

38. Nash, Crabtree, Dunn, *History on Trial*, describes controversy regarding David Saville Muzzey in the 1910s (pp. 39-46), Harold Rugg in the 1930s (p. 42), and various textbooks in the 1980s (pp. 116-117).

39. LaSpina, *California in a Time of Excellence*, 61.

40. LaSpina, *California in a Time of Excellence*, 120-122.

41. LaSpina, *California in a Time of Excellence*, 124-126.

42. John Fensterwald, “After Hours of Testimony, State Board Adopts History Guidelines,” *EdSource*, 14 July 2016, available at <<https://www.edsource.org/2016/after-hours-of-testimony-state-board-adopts-history-guidelines-history-and-social-studies-framework/567055>>.

43. Nash, Crabtree, Dunn, *History on Trial*, 36-39.

44. Panels at the AHA or OAH devoted to K-12 topics—and often to teaching in general—are ghettoized from the more prestigious research panels, and the OAH *Magazine of History*, produced by historians and aimed at secondary teachers, closed up shop in 2013. See Organization of American Historians, *OAH Magazine of History*, <<https://www.oah.org/publications/oah-magazine-of-history/>>.

45. Sam Wineburg, *Why Learn History*, 138, recently lamented the way that his contributions to historical thinking and K-12 curriculum were not the typical accomplishments that would be rewarded with tenure, and called for “a serious reckoning of our priorities in the academy.”

46. Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995), 23.