

The Teaching of American History: Promise and Performance



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BY ROBERT HOLLAND DECEMBER 2009

Executive Summary

The appalling results of de-emphasizing the study of U.S. history in elementary and secondary schools have become painfully obvious in recent years.

In the most recent round of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, only one-fourth of American schoolchildren tested as proficient in their knowledge of U.S. history. A study in Arizona found that only 3.5 percent of high school students could pass the test of civic knowledge given to immigrants seeking to become U.S. citizens.

An analysis of adults' knowledge of the American Revolution and the Founding of the United States exposed the sad reality that while 60 percent of respondents knew how many children "Jon and Kate" of reality-TV fame have, only slightly more than one-half could correctly identify James Madison as the "Father of the Constitution."

Over the past 20 years, prominent voices, including the Bradley Commission and organizations of history scholars, have urged education policymakers to bolster American history instruction, particularly by increasing the level of content knowledge of those who teach K-12 history. A common recommendation is for teachers of history to be required to have majored in history in college. Yet, overwhelming evidence suggests that only a small minority of history teachers have majored in the subject, and some have taken little more than a few survey courses.

A key problem lies in the process of teacher certification, which is controlled by state departments of education in cooperation with colleges of education. A basic problem is that history is often tucked under the umbrella of social studies – a mishmash of everything from global studies to sociology, in which critical figures and lessons from American history are often overlooked. Indeed, in some cases, it is possible to gain certification as a social studies teacher without having studied any history. Researcher Sarah Drake Brown has observed that states "often bury their low requirements {for history} amidst claims of high standards."

Some bright spots do exist, such as the Teaching American History Grant Program, adopted by Congress in 2001. It has enabled local school districts to partner with colleges, libraries, museums, and nonprofit history and humanities organizations to enhance history teachers' knowledge and appreciation of American history. However, school reformers need to do much more to restore history as a vital subject in American education.



Introduction

A new study commissioned by The American Revolution Center (ARC) in the summer of 2009 shows that gaps in knowledge about America's formative years and founding principles extend into the adult years. Yet, there was one hopeful finding: Over 90 percent of respondents encompassing a broad demographic cross-section of America believe it is important for citizens of this country to know the history and principles of the American Revolution, and, furthermore, that it is vital for schools to teach this subject matter.¹

Unfortunately, the vast majority of participants thought they knew a lot more Revolutionary history than they actually do. When asked before taking the 27-item multiple-choice test what grade they would assign their knowledge of the American Revolution, only 3 percent gave themselves an "F." But in actuality, 83 percent flunked, which means that they could not correctly answer more than 16 of the 27 questions.

While some knowledge erosion is understandable with the passage of time since one's school years, the authors of the study noted that some of the questions were of a basic nature, such as might be found on a naturalization exam for immigrants. So even though Americans routinely pledge allegiance "to the republic for which it stands," about as many respondents thought the Constitution set up a direct democracy as correctly identified the U.S. form of government as a democratic republic.

The study's juxtaposition of pop-culture and historical knowledge was eye-opening. Consider that 60 percent of Americans knew reality-TV stars Jon and Kate Gosselin have eight children, but only 11 percent knew John Jay was the first Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, and only a little more than half could identify James Madison as the Father of the Constitution from a list that included Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill.

The consequences of such lapses are far more grave than doing poorly on the historical portion of a "Trivial Pursuit" game. The success of our democratic republic depends upon citizens who believe in a common set of ideals as originally expressed in the Founding documents. If large proportions of the population do not grasp the meaning of liberties protected in the Bill of Rights, how can core values be

Which of the following events came BEFORE the Declaration of Independence?

- A. Founding of Jamestown, VA
- B. The Civil War
- C. The Emancipation Proclamation
- D. The War of 1812

Correct Answer – A.
49 percent of all Americans answered correctly.
(ARC, 2009)

¹ *The American Revolution. Who Cares?*, The American Revolution Center, 2009. Available at: http://www.americanrevolutioncenter.org/sites/default/files/ARCV27_web.pdf

Who took detailed notes at the Constitutional Convention and is widely regarded as the “Father of the Constitution?”

- A. Abraham Lincoln
- B. James Madison
- C. Winston Churchill
- D. George Washington

Correct answer –B.
54 percent of all Americans
answered correctly.
(ARC, 2009)

preserved? As the report states, “The freedoms that we enjoy today must be defended and preserved – but first they must be understood.”

Given the lively dissent being expressed by thousands of citizens participating in modern-day “tea parties” around the country, a startling finding of the American Revolution Center survey was the lack of understanding of the repercussions of the original Boston Tea Party in 1773. Only 12 percent of respondents could identify as the Tea Party’s most important consequence the provoking of the British Parliament into enacting the Coercive Acts, which strengthened American resistance and led to the convening of the First Continental Congress. A majority incorrectly thought the Tea Party resulted in repeal of the tax on tea.

Another disturbing finding was that most Americans have a poor grasp of the chronology of seminal historic events. For instance, nearly one-third of respondents thought that the Emancipation Proclamation or the Civil War came *before* the Declaration of Independence. And what should one make of the finding that more than half attributed to George Washington, Thomas Paine, or President Barack Obama the following statement: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”? Those words of Karl Marx are a central tenet of Communist political philosophy.

Loss Of Historical Memory

The study of U.S. history obviously encompasses more than just the Revolutionary era, but an understanding of the republic’s origins forms a foundation for all other learning. Other surveys (as will be noted below) have shown glaring deficits in knowledge all along the timeline up to recent times. And although other institutions of society bear some responsibility, it all begins in the schools and colleges, which is where a majority of Americans say they learned most of what they know (or don’t know) about their country’s heritage. Every indication is that today’s students are learning even less history in their schools than their parents did. The focus has changed in recent years from teaching the basics of history to “global studies,” and the like.



It was in the late 1960s and 1970s that the study of traditional American history began to go into decline. As David Kaiser, a history professor at the Naval War College, recently explained. “The boomer generation made a decision in the 1960s that history was starting over. It was an overreaction to a terrible mistake that was the Vietnam War.” The result, he concluded, is that “history is no longer focused on government, politics, or institutions.”²

Instead the spotlight went to groups that had been largely overlooked by historians or mistreated in past times – i.e., women, racial/ethnic minorities, immigrants. Whatever might be said for or against a broadening of the study of history, there is no doubt that the sharp switch led to declines in knowledge of the founding of the American Republic, its enduring principles, and its accomplishments.

2 Patricia Cohen, “Great Caesar’s Ghost! Are Traditional History Courses Vanishing?” *The New York Times*, June 11, 2009. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/11/books/11hist.html>

By 1989, President Ronald Reagan was warning in his farewell address “of an eradication of the American memory that could result, ultimately, in an erosion of the American spirit. Let’s start with some basics: more attention to American history and a greater emphasis on civic ritual.”³

Early in the 21st Century, there can be little doubt that Reagan was right about Americans starting to lose their collective memory about the essential institutions of their society. For instance, the 2006 edition of *The Nation’s Report Card* for history and civics revealed a lack of basic knowledge among America’s students that was nothing short of alarming – and depressing.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that the country’s 4th, 8th, and 12th graders knew only slightly more about history and civics than students did during the 1990s. Furthermore, only one-fourth of them were proficient in knowledge of U.S. history.



Some specific examples show woeful deficiencies in historical knowledge: Only 1 percent of 8th graders could explain how the fall of the Berlin Wall affected foreign policy, and more than one-half of high-school seniors thought that Italy, Germany, or Japan was an ally of the United States in World War II.⁴

Nor do most colleges and universities close the gap in students’ historical knowledge. A study by the non-profit Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) discovered that less than one-half of college seniors could identify Yorktown as the decisive battle in the Revolutionary War or recognize the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as an alliance formed to deter Soviet expansionism in the Cold War era.⁵

The ISI study, conducted by the University of Connecticut’s Department of Public Policy, queried more than 14,000 randomly selected freshmen and seniors at 50 colleges and universities (including some of the nation’s most prestigious institutions). It found that if seniors had taken the 60 questions as an exam in a college course, they would have failed with an average score of 53.2 percent, an “F” on most grading scales.

Indeed, one of the most telling findings was that seniors learned little if anything about history during their college years. They scored just 1.5 percent higher, on average, than the freshmen. Moreover, at several elite institutions – among them, Brown, Georgetown, and Yale – seniors actually knew less than did freshmen about American history, government, foreign affairs, and the economy, a phenomenon the Institute’s report characterized as “negative learning.” (A 2004 study by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni found that only 7 of 50 of the nation’s most prestigious colleges and universities still required students to take so much as one course in United States history.)⁶

When did the American Revolution begin? Was it in the . . .

- A. 1770s
- B. 1640s
- C. 1490s
- D. 1800s

Correct answer – A.
65 percent of all Americans
answered correctly.
(ARC, 2009)

3 President Ronald Reagan, “Farewell Address to the Nation,” January 11, 1989. Available at: http://www.ronaldreagan.com/sp_21.html

4 “The Nation’s Report Card: U.S. History 2006,” May 2007. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubSearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007474>

5 Tracey Wong Briggs, “College students struggle on history test,” *USA Today*, September 17, 2007. Available at: http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2007-09-17-history-test_N.htm

6 *The Hollow Core*, American Council of Trustees and Alumni, Washington, D.C., 2004. Available at: <http://www.goacta.org/issues/academic-excellence.cfm>

After four years of college costing upwards of \$200,000, students were graduating without the knowledge needed for “informed engagement in a democratic republic and global economy.”⁷



“The results are far from encouraging,” the ISI report concluded. “In fact, they constitute nothing less than a coming crisis in American citizenship.”⁸

Speaking of citizenship, the Phoenix-based Goldwater Institute commissioned a private survey firm in mid-2009 to administer to high school students questions drawn from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services item bank, which consists of 100 questions prepared for candidates for U.S. citizenship. The USCIS practice has been to administer the candidates 10 of these questions, at least 6 of which they must answer correctly to pass. Recent passing rates have exceeded 90 percent.

The survey gave the Arizona high school students very basic questions from the exam. (Examples: “Who was the first President of the United States?” “Who wrote the Declaration of Independence?”)

The outcome was stunning: Only 3.5 percent of Arizona high school students attending public schools passed the citizenship test. The passing rate for public charter school students was twice

as high, and private school students four times as high, as for regular public school students, but the results across the board were “dismal,” the report concluded.⁹

It is truly mind-boggling that only one-fourth of the public high school students knew that the first ten Amendments to the Constitution are known as the Bill of Rights, or that the person in charge of the Executive Branch of the federal government is the President.

There is no reason to believe that Arizona students are significantly less informed than students in other states. Therefore, the recommendation made for Arizona by the Goldwater Institute is worthy of consideration by other states: Lawmakers ought to require students seeking a diploma from high school to pass the USCIS citizenship exam administered by a third party. After all, shouldn’t students who have passed history and civics courses in 13 years of schooling be at least as knowledgeable as people who have come to this country from other lands and begun learning about U.S. heritage from scratch?

In 2008, Common Core, a non-profit organization advocating for a strong liberal arts education for every child, commissioned a national study of what 17-year-olds know about U.S. history and culture. Again, the questions were basic in nature, not stumpers. Author Frederick M. Hess characterized the questions as “far more similar, for instance, to the kinds of questions asked in a citizenship test than to those posed by an Advanced Placement history exam.”

The answers on the 22-question survey (which was conducted by telephone and multiple choice) exhibited “stunning knowledge gaps.” Only one question got a correct response from more than 90 percent of the students: The “I have a dream” speech was given by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. (97 percent correct). One half did not know that the objective of the Federalist Papers was to gain

7 *The Coming Crisis in Citizenship*, a report of the National Civic Literacy Board, The Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2006. Available at: <http://www.americancivilliteracy.org/2006/summary.html>

8 *Ibid.*

9 Matthew Ladner, *Freedom From Responsibility: A Survey of Civic Knowledge Among Arizona High School Students*, Policy Brief, Goldwater Institute, June 30, 2009 Available at: <http://www.goldwaterinstitute.org/article/3211>

ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Only 43 percent could place the Civil War in the correct half-century. Barely 50 percent knew that the controversy swirling around the late Senator Joseph McCarthy had to do with investigations of individuals suspected of being involved in Communist activities. And nearly a quarter thought Adolf Hitler was a “German munitions manufacturer between the two World Wars.”¹⁰

If the vast majority of America’s young people have not been taught the story of this country’s Declaration of Independence, then one would have to wonder what history they are being taught, if any. Close to 100 percent of students should be able to “ace” basic history questions, but the record to date indicates that a depressingly small number will be able to do so when the next NAEP-history is administered next year.

There is a sliver of good news in the fact that many of the nation’s most prominent scholars and policymakers have been advocating in recent years for greater emphasis on the teaching of American history, particularly including state requirements that K-12 history teachers have solid knowledge of the history they are teaching.

The bad news is that the advocates have had very limited success so far.

A key to improving the substance of history teaching lies in how states certify teachers as qualified to teach specific subjects. Research shows that no state requires teachers of history to have majored in history in college. Instead, amassing school-of-education credits in pedagogical theory and social studies education typically can suffice for a teacher to be licensed to teach history.



The U.S. Constitution establishes which of the following forms of government in the United States?

- A. A Direct Democracy
- B. A Republic
- C. A Confederacy
- D. An Oligarchy

Correct answer – B.
42 percent of all Americans
answered correctly.
(ARC, 2009)

The landmark 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, helped spark interest in the condition of the study of history by stressing the need for a strong core curriculum in subjects including history. State and federal initiatives to set academic standards added further fuel.

The Bradley Commission on History in Schools, which was composed of 16 of the greatest minds in the history profession, in 1988 issued recommendations for states and localities to bolster history instruction. It also advocated ways of “historical thinking” after grasping factual background. “What of it?” is

a “worthy question and it requires an answer,” declared the Commission, which became the National Council for History Education a few years later.¹¹

10 Frederick M. Hess, “Still at Risk: What Students Don’t Know, Even Now,” Common Core, Washington, S.C., 2008. Available at: http://www.commoncore.org/_docs/CCreport_stillatrisk.pdf

11 Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 1988. Available through the National Council for History Education, Westlake, OH, at: www.nche.net

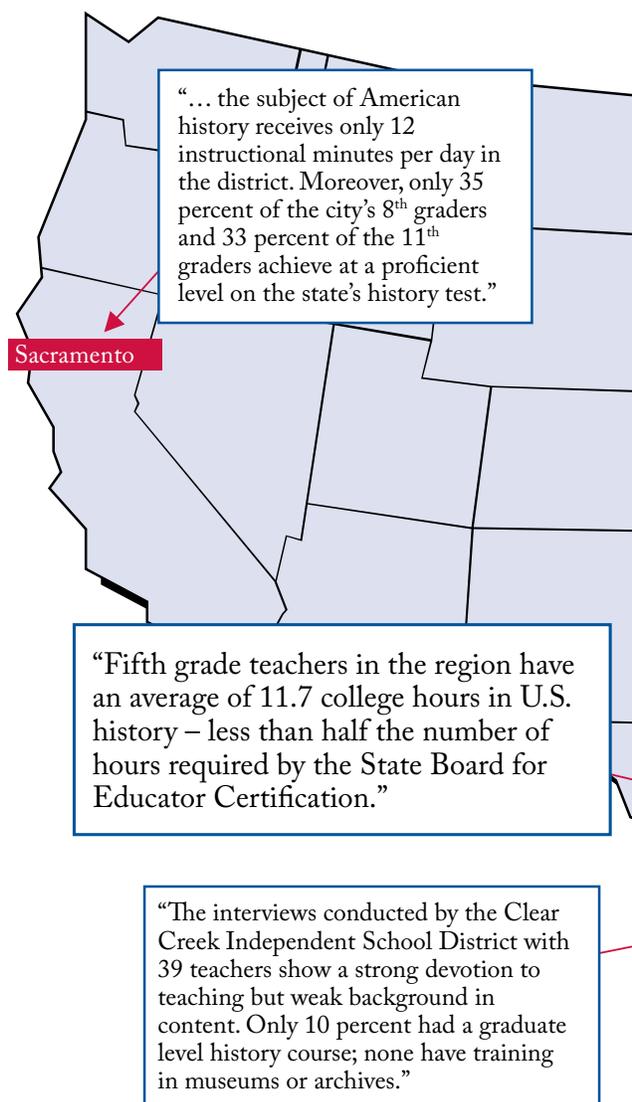
Then, tragically, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, drove home with even more urgency the need for young Americans to learn about their common heritage and what makes their country so exceptional. The Shanker Institute's report, *Education for Democracy*, argued that mastery of "a common core of history binds us together, creates a common civic identity based on a patriotism of principles, and unites us in the shared undertaking that is both our past and our future."

The report reiterated what others have said in regard to 9/11: "We were attacked for being American. We should at least know what being American means."¹²

Writing for the American Historical Association, Peter N. Stearns observes that "two fundamental facts" define the usefulness of history as part of one's education:

- (1) *History helps us understand people and societies:*
". . . How can we evaluate war if the nation is at peace – unless we use historical materials? How can we understand genius, the influence of technological innovation, or the role that beliefs play in shaping family life, if we don't use what we know about experiences in the past? . . ."
- (2) *History helps us understand change and how the society we live in came to be:* ". . . the past causes the present, and so the future. Any time we try to know why something happened – whether a shift in political party dominance in the American Congress, a major change in the teen-age suicide rate, or a war in the Balkans or the Middle East – we have to look for factors that took shape earlier. Sometimes fairly recent history will suffice to explain a major development, but often we need to look further back to identify the causes of change. Only through studying history can we grasp how things change; only through history can we begin to comprehend the factors that cause change; and only through history can we understand what elements of an institution or a society persist despite change."¹³

The Bradley Commission report of 1988 put the case succinctly: "History belongs in the school programs of all students, regardless of the academic standing and preparation, . . . because it provides the only avenue we have to reach an understanding of ourselves and our society."¹⁴



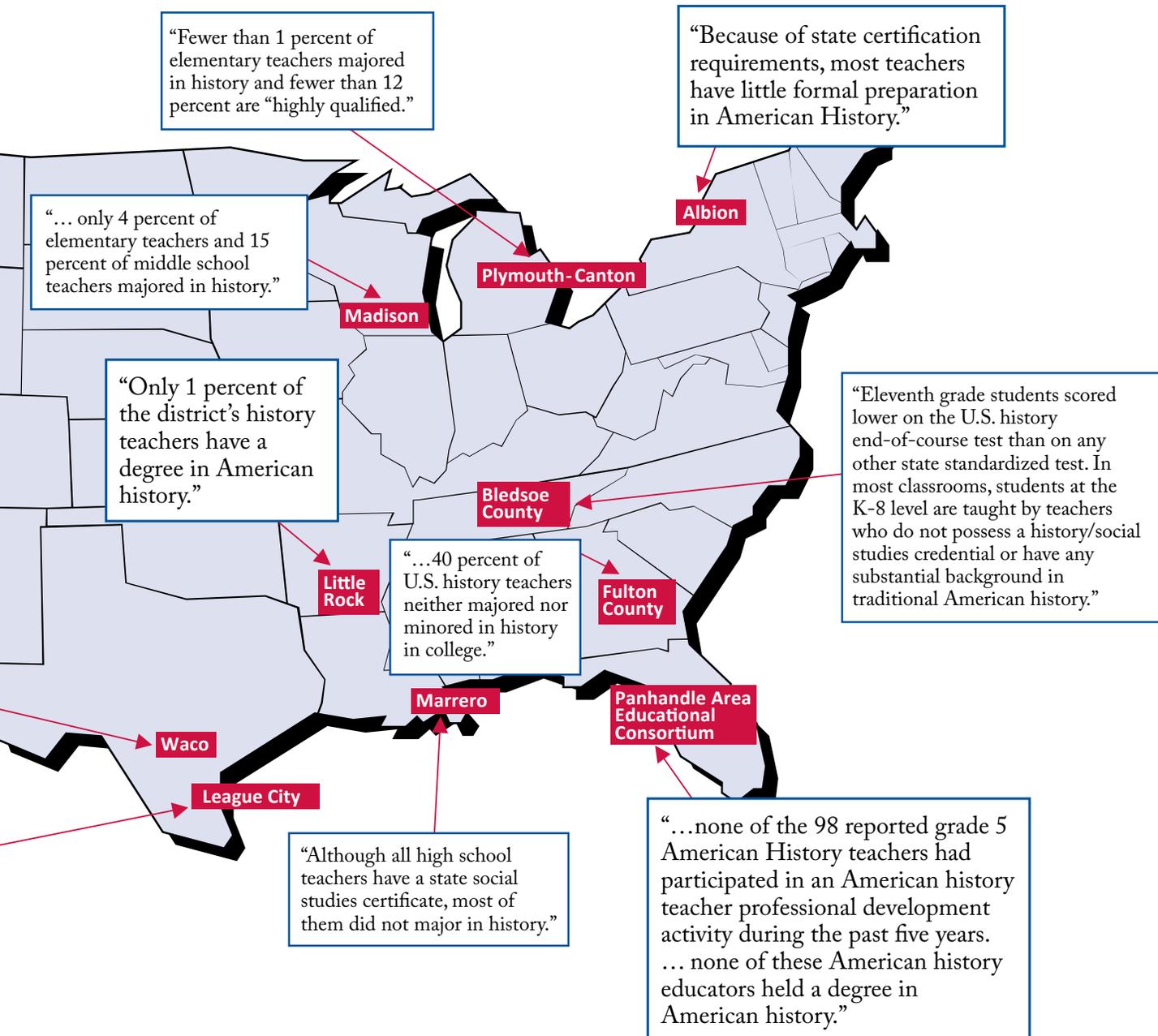
12 "Education for Democracy," The Albert Shanker Institute, September 11, 2002. Available at: <http://www.ashankerinst.org/education.html>

13 Peter N. Stearns, *Why Study History?* American Historical Association, 1998 (updated July 11, 2008). Available at: <http://www.historians.org/pubs/free/WhyStudyHistory.htm>

14 Bradley Commission, op cit.

Who's Teaching American History?

(Noted in Federal Grant Applications)



In 2008, the Bradley Project on America’s National Identity issued a follow-up report that struck an even more urgent tone about what is happening to America as a result of its loss of historical memory and sense of cohesiveness.

“The next generations of Americans,” noted the Commission, “will know less than their parents about our history and founding ideals. And many Americans are more aware of what divides us than of what unites us. We are in danger of becoming not ‘from many, one’ – *E Pluribus Unum* – but its opposite, ‘from one, many.’”

Noting the abysmal results on NAEP history and civics (such as only 5 percent of high school seniors being able to describe accurately how presidential power can be checked by Congress and the Supreme Court), the Commission blamed the failings on such factors as boring textbooks, neglect of America’s accomplishments and heroes, shoddy curriculum standards, and “teachers inadequately prepared in American history.”

The Commission added: “Too often, students are taught more about America’s failings than its successes. Absent are those ‘mystic chords of memory’ that Abraham Lincoln believed held our country together. A rich and balanced history best prepares young people for informed democratic participation.”¹⁵

Must History Teachers Know History?

While widespread agreement exists on the desirability of teaching history more thoroughly, questions of how to teach it evoke passionate debate. A fundamental question is who is teaching U.S. history in elementary and secondary schools: What educational preparation have history teachers had? Do state certification requirements offer any assurance that they will know history and be able to teach it well? What support do the teachers receive in developing sound lesson plans?

The best available evidence suggests that preparation of precollegiate history teachers is inexcusably lacking in rigor and substance. No doubt there are outstanding individual teachers of history who inform and inspire their students. However, state teacher licensing authorities have not shown much interest in ensuring that history instructors have proven knowledge of the content they teach.

Scholarly organizations such as the American Historical Association have repeatedly called for state authorities to require that history teachers have a major in history. However, according to researcher Sarah Drake Brown, now an assistant professor of history at Ball State University, no state’s teacher-certifying agency requires a history major. (Brown and John J. Patrick, a professor *emeritus* at Indiana University, surveyed state history certification standards during a 2002-2005 timeframe.) Furthermore, states “often bury their low

“A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided.” (Abraham Lincoln, 1858.)

What did Abraham Lincoln mean in this speech?

- A. The South should be allowed to separate from the United States.
- B. The government should support slavery in the South.
- C. Sometime in the future slavery would disappear from the United States.
- D. Americans would not be willing to fight a war over slavery.

Correct Answer – C.
67 percent of 8th grade students answered correctly.
(NAEP, 2006)

15 *E Pluribus Unum*, The Bradley Project on America’s National Identity, June 2008.

requirements amidst claims of high standards.” Indiana, for instance, required a junior high/middle school teacher to complete at least 18 hours in social studies; however, it failed to mention how much of that or other study should be devoted to history.¹⁶

The researchers used Indiana as an example but were quick to note that it is far from alone in its low requirements for history teachers. In Florida, they found applicants were certified as social science teachers if they have a bachelor’s degree with a major in social science, social studies, history, political science, geography, economics, psychology, or sociology. Alternatively, they could present a bachelor’s degree with 30 hours in social studies or social science (just 6 hours of which would be in U.S. history). In Nebraska, one route would entail completion of 60 hours in all social sciences fields, without the state specifying how many of those hours, if any, must be in history.



Social studies (or science), after all, is a big tent under which solid instruction in history may or may not fall. Therefore, in some cases it would be possible for a history teacher to be licensed without having completed any college coursework in history whatsoever.¹⁷

Each state exercises responsibility for teacher licensure, and follows disparate paths that are not always easy to untangle. Brown boils these down to four methods: (1) Requiring teacher candidates to show that they have taken a set number of hours in a field of study, even though the hours might not amount to an academic major, or minor; (2) Requiring would-be teachers to show their proficiency in the subject, typically by presenting portfolios or taking an exam; (3) Setting basic certification guidelines and then allowing universities to create their own approved programs, which may differ one from another; and (4) Insisting that teachers pass state content tests before being certified.¹⁸

Unfortunately, a state’s adopting a content test to show teacher candidates know at least a minimal amount of history is no guarantee of a new seriousness. A sad example was the Illinois State Board of Education lowering the passing score on its licensing test for social science/history teachers out of a concern that too many prospective teachers were flunking the test.

Instead of requiring that applicants answer 64 of 100 history questions correctly, the board dropped the cut-off to 57 correct answers. State education officials said the change meant more than 80 percent of test-takers would pass, as opposed to just 56 percent before the lowering of the standard.¹⁹

A fundamental question is **who** is teaching U.S. history in elementary and secondary schools.

In an editorial comment on this gambit, the *Chicago Tribune* noted acerbically:

This doesn’t bode well for the next generation of middle-school history students, but don’t worry. We can always lower the bar for them, too.

Too many parents have had the disturbing experience of receiving a note from a teacher that is riddled with spelling and grammar errors. ‘How did this person get to be a teacher?’ is the

16 Sarah Drake Brown, “History Teacher Certification Standards in the States,” *The History Teacher*, Vol. 39, No. 3, May 2006. Available at: <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ht/39.3/brown.html>

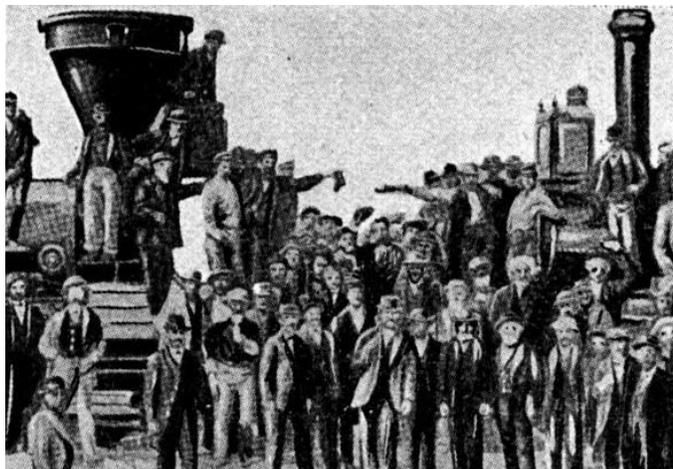
17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

19 Stephanie Banchemo, “Illinois lowers required score on a key exam for teachers/History/social studies exam was too tough, officials contend,” *Chicago Tribune*, p. 6 Metro section, August 11, 2006.

incredulous response. If we don't ask more of our teachers, we can't get more from our students. The board of education ought to be making it harder to become a teacher, not easier.²⁰

A little more than two years after Illinois lowered its passing score, data indicated plenty of room existed for raising standards for history teachers instead of lowering them. The state reported that its public schools were dealing with a glut of applications in most teaching fields (special education being a notable exception). For example in 2006, the state certified 5,033 new teachers for history/social science, but school districts hired only 373 for the 2007-08 school year.²¹



Given a surplus of teacher candidates, Illinois and other states ought to seize the opportunity to make entrance standards for history teachers tougher and thereby raise the quality of instruction for students.

Another relevant point made by Brown in her keen analysis was the discrepancy between some states' content standards in history for teachers and for students. The study used Illinois and Indiana as points of comparison. While Illinois has woefully weak history standards (lacking in specifics and chronology) for students, its content standards for teachers are stronger – laying out specific knowledge and performance indicators. Meanwhile, Indiana's situation is just the opposite: Its history standards for students are rich in content and promote historical thinking. However, its standards for teachers are "vague and do not specify content."

"A major in history and adequate preparation in pedagogy will prepare teachers to teach the subject, but simply passing a test or concentrating in broad-field social studies will yield only more of the same problems we face today," the report concluded.

"Standards for teachers should also be as specific and content-rich as the leading states' content standard for students. It makes little sense to establish strong standards for students and weak standards for teachers. The reverse is also nonsensical. Teachers and students work together in the learning process, and each group's respective standards must work in concert with those of the other group."²²

Who was the first Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court?

- A. Alexander Hamilton
- B. John Marshall
- C. Charles Evans Hughes
- D. John Jay

Correct Answer – D.
11 percent of all Americans
answered correctly.
(ARC, 2009)

Advocacy for Teacher Knowledge

Leading scholarly organizations long have been advocating more substantive requirements for history. In guidelines originally issued in 1991 and updated in 2007 for the education and certification of history teachers for grades 6-12, the American Historical Association (AHA) said that the prospective teacher, whether in history or social studies, "should have a major in history," with content based on the precepts of liberal learning. "Such a program will require about one-fourth of the total semester or quarter hours needed to complete a four-year degree."

20 "Don't know much about history," editorial, *Chicago Tribune*, p. 4, August 13, 2006.

21 Diane Rado, "Many are called, but few are chosen to teach," *Chicago Tribune*, February 4, 2009.

22 Sarah Drake Brown, op cit.

The AHA added:

A strong advising program which acknowledges the vocational goal of the prospective teacher should accompany the major. Such advising can ensure that students take courses appropriate to the breadth of requirements of precollegiate teaching and necessary to communicate with a diverse student body. These courses should enhance the prospective teacher's understanding of cultural, economic, environmental, ethnic, geographic, political, racial, and gender differences, commonalities, and influences.²³

In 2006, the National Council for History Education took a slightly less forceful stand in support of a history major for all secondary-school history teachers. All such teachers, said the Council's trustees, "should take a significant number of history courses, preferably the equivalent of a college major in History."

The Council added that elementary (grades K-5) teachers ought to have "in-depth exposure" to history courses, "preferably equivalent to a college minor in history."²⁴ Unfortunately, as Brown's research indicates, many states do not specify any particular number of hours in history that must be completed for elementary licensure.²⁵

The problem is longstanding: A School and Staffing Survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics indicated that in the year 2000 many teachers of history in secondary schools were teaching without solid academic preparation in history.²⁶ More than 7 of 10 middle school and 6 of 10 high school teachers of history lacked a college major in history or certification in history. An analysis noted an increase in out-of-field teaching since a School and Staffing Survey in 1987-88 – slight in high school, but up 3.5 percentage points at the middle-school level.

In this survey:

- Nine states required a minor in history for certification at the secondary level;
- Two required a minor in history for certification at the middle-school level;
- Sixteen left certification to the discretion of universities;
- Four required passing only a content test; and
- Certification in social sciences or social studies, rather than specifically in history, was "abundant."²⁷

Many proponents of the teaching of traditional U.S. history believe that the persistence of social studies as a discipline has seriously watered down the content of history instruction. Thomas Fordham Institute president Chester Finn, Jr. has observed that many history teachers have never seriously studied the subject, instead being certified as social studies teachers "after majoring in sociology, psychology, or



23 "Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of History," American Historical Association, May 1991 (last updated July 3, 2007). Available at: <http://www.historians.org/PUBS/Free/TeacherPrepGuidelines.htm>

24 Statement on Teacher Qualifications, National Council for History Education, adopted by NCHC Board of Trustees, Dec. 21, 2006.

25 Sarah Drake Brown, op cit.

26 Sarah Drake Brown, "State Certification Requirements for History Teachers," ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, December 2003. Available at: <http://www.ericdigests.org/2005-1/history.htm>

27 *Ibid.*

social-studies pedagogy.” Historian Sheldon Stern has argued that the surest step toward effecting strong history standards in every state would be “to emancipate this subject from the miasma of social studies,” which he condemns as a “nebulous, anti-historical, and a-historical invention.”²⁸

Questionable philosophies of teaching long dominant in the collegiate schools of education that turn out many of the nation’s prospective teachers also make it difficult for children to acquire basic historical knowledge in social studies classes. In elementary schools, an approach commonly known as “expanding environments” holds that young children are incapable of acquiring knowledge about the past and their nation’s role in it. Instead, they must be exposed to a slowly expanding circle of social environments personally familiar to them – starting with self, then family and home, neighborhoods, and communities, before finally graduating to the state in 5th grade and the country in the 6th.

As an example, two critics writing for the Fordham Foundation, Bruce Frazee and Samuel Ayers, noted that “students in grades K-3 are taught about ‘community helpers’ like mail carriers, milkmen, and firefighters. Such lessons are superfluous (what kindergartener does not know about firefighters?) but more damagingly do not even begin to lay the groundwork for later study of history, heroes, struggles, victories, and defeats. Instead, they limit children’s instruction to persons and institutions with which children are already familiar.”²⁹

The result of the plodding “expanding environments” approach is that both teachers and pupils become hopelessly bored, with the result that elementary teachers devote even less time to social studies and pupils fail to grasp historical basics that would serve as a foundation for later learning.

Another fuzzy theory that affects teacher preparation and pedagogy is that of “constructivism,” which, broadly defined, means that students should be encouraged to construct their own meaning (with teachers acting as mere facilitators), rather than being called upon to acquire a base of historical knowledge. Frazee and Ayers describe the devastating effect this anti-knowledge ideology has on children:

Statement on Teacher Qualifications

All secondary school teachers should take a significant number of history courses, preferably the equivalent of a college major in History. This course of study should include:

- “History of a broad range of geographical areas and chronological periods.
- “Courses that provide a broad synthetic understanding of history, including upper division courses that provide such a synthetic understanding.
- “Upper division courses that examine historical events and themes in significant depth.
- “Courses that develop history’s habits of mind by providing a thorough grounding in the skills required for historical thinking, including an in depth understanding of how to read and utilize primary sources, significant experience in historical writing, significant experience in historical research and an understanding of the principles of historiography.
- “Teaching methods courses taught by an historian and/or an experienced master teacher of history with at least an MA in history.
- “Courses that provide grounding in the fundamental concepts of Geography, Civics, and Economics.
- “Clinical experiences (student teaching) guided by experienced history teachers with at least a BA in History, three years of teaching experience and a license to teach history.”

National Council for History Education

28 *History, Democracy, and Citizenship: Teaching Citizenship and Patriotism*, Organization of American Historians, 2004. Available at: <http://www.oah.org/reports/tradhist.html>

29 Bruce Frazee and Samuel Ayers, “Garbage In, Garbage Out” in *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Aug. 1, 2003. Available at: http://www.edexcellence.net/detail/news.cfm?news_id=317

Elementary students have limited experiences and knowledge and few are mature enough to determine what they need to learn. Yet constructivism plays a dirty little trick on them by shifting responsibility for creating and acquiring knowledge from the teacher to the learner regardless of age, background, or experience. Does the child know little or nothing about history, civics, or geography? Well, the child must be developmentally late, or perhaps incapable of ‘self-direction.’ Off to special education with him. Since the teacher is merely a ‘cognitive coach’ and is not responsible for selecting and transmitting appropriate knowledge, you can’t pin on the teacher a student’s failure to construct meaning.³⁰

Constructivism has dovetailed with the ideology of social-justice multiculturalism to affect profoundly how history is taught in some schools. Academic groups such as the National Council for Social Studies and the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) have championed the perspective that America has been persistently abusive of its minority cultures, and needs to undergo radical social transformation. As opposed to promoting the healthy ideal of pluralism, they advocate a separatist brand of multiculturalism that is deeply critical of unifying values derived from American culture and heritage. As leading NAME theorist Paul Gorski has put it, “We {the multicultural educator} must explore and deconstruct structures of power and privilege that serve to maintain the status quo.”³¹

A recent plan unveiled at the College of Education and Human Development of the University of Minnesota/Twin Cities showed just how far this mindset has advanced in some teacher-training institutions. As part of ensuring that all would-be teachers have something called “cultural competence,” a Race, Culture, Class, and Gender Task Force called on the school of education to make sure that future teachers renounce the American Dream, the idea that all people of varying backgrounds can get ahead on their own merit. The task force said that future teachers must recognize that America excludes many and confers unearned privileges on some – that “many groups are typically not included within this celebrated cultural identity,” known as the American Dream.

Our future teachers will be able to discuss their own histories and current thinking drawing on notions of white privilege, hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity {sic}, and internalized oppression. . . . Future teachers will recognize that schools are socially constructed systems that are susceptible to racism. That schools and classrooms are also structured in ways that advantage and disadvantage some groups but are also critical sites for social and cultural transformation.³²

What this means, wrote columnist Katherine Kersten in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, is that in order to receive an endorsement for a Minnesota teaching license, teacher candidates must not only reject the American Dream but also “embrace – and be prepared to teach our state’s kids – the task force’s own vision of America as an oppressive hellhole: racist, sexist, and homophobic.”³³



On the map above, the shaded area shows:

- A. Free states
- B. Slave states
- C. Eastern states
- D. Northern states

Correct Answer – B.
72 percent of 8th graders answered correctly.
(NAEP, 2006)

30 *Ibid.*

31 Robert Holland, “A Primer on Multicultural Education: Unifying or Divisive Force?” Lexington Institute, March 2004. Available at: <http://www.lexingtoninstitute.org/a-primer-on-multicultural-education-unifying-or-divisive-force>

32 Adam Kissel, “Political Litmus Test for Future Teachers at University of Minnesota – Twin Cities,” Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, Nov. 26, 2009

33 Katherine Kersten, “At U, future teachers may be reeducated,” *Star Tribune*, Nov. 22, 2009. Available at: <http://www.startribune.com/opinion/commentary/70662162.html>

The spread of this brand of radical multiculturalism in teacher preparation has consequences for the teaching of U.S. history, because these propagandists condemn the United States as irredeemably oppressive from its creation to the present, and totally reject the idea that America is exceptional and exemplary among the nations of the world. The Twin Cities campus is not the only place where teacher trainers have been trying to apply a politically correct litmus test to aspiring K-12 teachers.

Nearly one-third of Americans thought that the Emancipation Proclamation or the Civil War came *before* the Declaration of Independence.

Part of the challenge of a conscientious history teacher may be to discard the nebulous theories of education schools and ideologues and to devise his or her own practical approaches to the subject.

Too Little Time, Too Little Depth

The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 required that states ensure that all teachers were “highly qualified” in core academic subjects by the 2005-06 school year. To be deemed to have attained that status, such teachers were to “have solid content knowledge of the subjects they teach.” However, while some states, such as Virginia and Massachusetts, adopted specific history standards for students, many others tucked history into social studies – an action that did not encourage local departments of education to emphasize historical knowledge in certifying “highly qualified” teachers.³⁴

A number of academic studies have identified weaknesses in history teaching. A 2006 analysis by Western Michigan University researchers, who administered a questionnaire to high school history teachers in a Midwest state, concluded that teachers were weakest in “reading and understanding subtext” and “understanding cultural assumption and moral ambiguity.” They concluded that teachers need to encourage their students to probe more deeply – i.e., to use primary sources as well as historians’ articles and book publications, as opposed to simply relying on textbooks.³⁵

In another survey done in a large urban district in Southern California, researchers found that elementary teachers were devoting less time to social studies/history in this decade than they had in the 1990s. Many of them expressed unhappiness with this change of priorities, which they tended to attribute to mandates (such as in NCLB) to teach reading and math and to test kids annually on those subjects.

Two-thirds of responding K-5 teachers believed that they are “well-prepared to teach social studies.” However, of that group, only 36 percent credited their school-of-education methods courses, while 37 percent said colleagues and mentors helped them, and 48 percent said they had learned what they needed to know on their own.³⁶

On a more positive note, a March 2008 study by the Wake County, North Carolina, public schools found that the system’s most effective U.S. history teachers:



34 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). Available at: <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>

35 Yuanlong Liu, Jianping Shen, Wilson J. Warren, and Lynne E. Cowart, “Assessing the factorial structure of high school history teachers’ perception on teaching American history,” *Teacher Development*, Vol. 10, No. 3, October 2006, pp. 379-391.

36 Lisa A. Hutton, Reagan Curtis, Joyce H. Burstein, “The State of Elementary Social Studies Teaching in One Urban District,” *Journal of Social Studies Research*, Spring 2006. Available at: <http://www.redorbit.com/news/display/?id=454055>

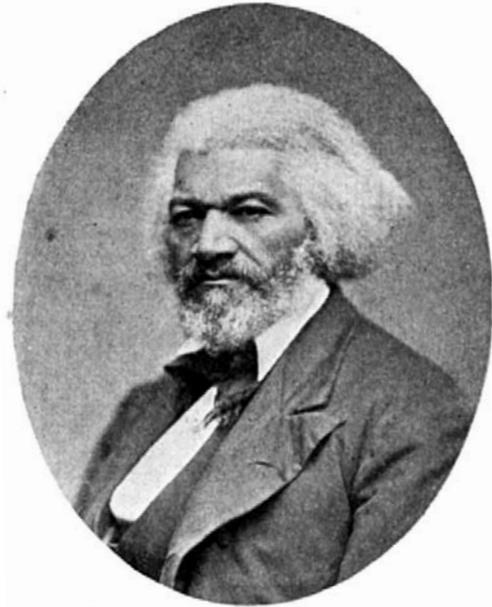
. . . had strong content knowledge, prepared their own materials, taught reading and note-taking skills, used time wisely, and connected history to themes across time. . . . Relationships with students were of utmost importance to effective teachers. They gave frequent positive feedback and believed that all students could succeed. Effective teachers created an atmosphere of mutual respect in which both teachers and students were enthusiastic . . .

A significant finding was that top-ranked teachers “tended to have more experience teaching U.S. history and were more likely to hold advanced degrees in their content area” than were the bottom-ranked instructors.

The study offered the following additional insight:

During all observations of top teachers, all teachers referred to their outside reading and study of U.S. history. The joy of telling what they had read made it clear that these teachers viewed this reading as pleasure reading. One teacher said, ‘I teach history because I love to study and read about history. I am a history nerd.’

The love of reading and studying history was also a characteristic of bottom{-rated} teachers. Yet the surveys showed that five of the 10 bottom{-rated} teachers taught history courses that were not American history courses (e.g. world history). All of the top teachers taught only American history courses (U.S. History or other American history electives such as African-American history). The planning and preparation time for all top teachers was focused on events of the United States.³⁷



National Efforts to Bolster History Instruction

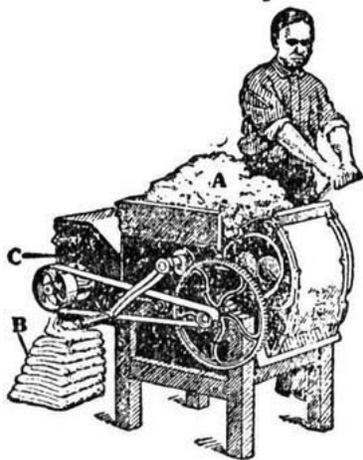
Nationally, there has been some discussion of adding history to the list of subjects for which localities must test student mastery each year under No Child Left Behind. With Congress and the Obama Administration set to consider NCLB reauthorization in 2010 (or, perhaps more likely, after the mid-term elections of 2010), the shape of future federal mandates remains a matter of speculation. However, Brown believes adding history to NCLB subjects could have a positive effect:

. . . While admittedly too much emphasis on testing has the potential to diminish creative teaching in the classroom, including history in the NCLB Act for assessments would improve its status in schools simply because in our current era of assessment and accountability, the disciplines that are tested are perceived as being important. The potential for excellent teaching remains if we simultaneously improve our certification standards, because teachers educated in pedagogical content knowledge will not have to resort to ‘teaching to the test.’ Finally, required assessment will yield useful research data. While tests can be problematic because they are, in essence, often designed to reveal what students do not know, they could if properly designed provide educators with information regarding students’ understanding of durable knowledge and their ability to ‘do history.’³⁸

State teacher licensing authorities have not shown much interest in ensuring that history instructors have proven knowledge of the content they teach.

37 Glenda Haynie and Melinda Stephani, “Effective Teaching Practices in U.S. History,” *Research Watch*, Wake County (NC) Public Schools, March 2008.

38 Sarah Drake Brown, “History Teacher Certification Standards in the States.”



Common Core agreed that “more systematically” assessing student learning beyond the NCLB-targeted reading and math would be a good idea, “particularly in the subjects of the traditional liberal arts.” While it is “probably not advisable” to do that within the framework of the reauthorized NCLB, said Common Core, “states, school districts, foundations, and the National Assessment Governing Boards should think hard about how we might more regularly and more profoundly measure learning in liberal arts and science subjects at a variety of grade levels.”³⁹

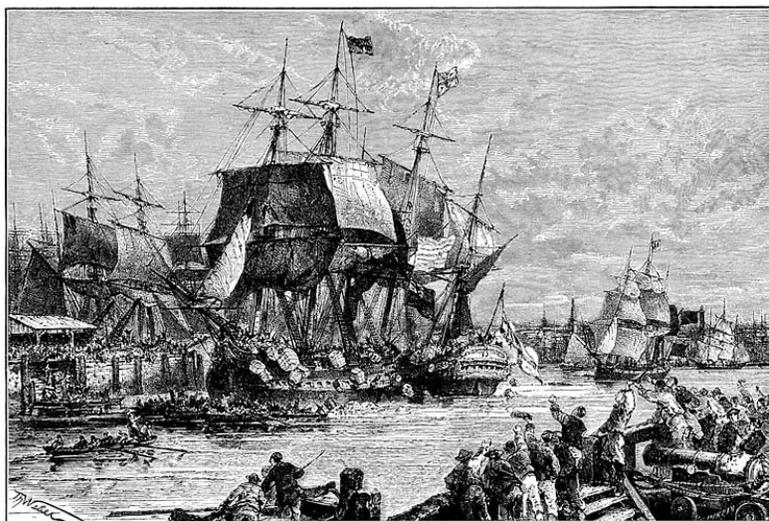
Alternatively, an example of what might be a more targeted approach to bolster history instruction (and more doable than expanded NCLB testing) is a bill introduced last summer by Senators Lamar Alexander (R-TN) and Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) that would seek to integrate English literacy, U.S. history, and civics education into educational programs intended to help English language learners become fully functional American citizens. The integrated approach would initiate (according to the bill’s language):

... a program of instruction designed to help an English language learner achieve competence in English through contextualized instruction on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, naturalization procedures, civic participation, and United States history and government to help such learner acquire the skills and knowledge to become an active and informed parent, worker, and community member.

Combining history/civics with reading instruction is a concept that might deserve broader application. For example, as schools concentrate on preparing children to be tested on their reading skills annually, they could make greater use of stories about heroes and heroines from the American past.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, despite the failure of state authorities to strengthen certification requirements for history teachers, and all the pressures that are crowding history from the prominent place it should occupy in the curriculum, there is some good news to report.

There are growing resources, many of them online, to help history teachers and their supervisors find materials and strategies to enrich the teaching of history (see Resources list on page 19). Throughout the past decade, the federal government has supported, via the Teaching American History Grant Program, efforts of local schools to raise student achievement in history by enhancing teachers’ knowledge and appreciation of traditional American history. U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd (D-WV) was the prime sponsor when Congress enacted the program in 2001.



39 Hess, op cit.

40 Strengthen and Unite Communities with Civic Education and English Skills Act of 2009, S1478. Available at: <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s111-1478>

To receive grants, local school districts must partner with institutions of higher education, libraries, museums, and/or nonprofit history or humanities organizations.

An example was a 2008 project in the Waynesboro, Virginia area called “Critical Connections in American History.” It entailed bringing teachers to five-day summer institutes taught by eminent historians. Each institute was reinforced during the school year by a program of readings, day-long discussion sessions, and visits to such key historic sites as Jamestown, Gettysburg, and Washington, D.C. The program examined a dozen key intersections in U.S. history that are featured in the Virginia history standards framework.⁴¹



In July 2009, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced another round of \$116 million in Teaching American History grants to 123 school districts in 38 states.

Many of the districts’ projects address specified weaknesses in history teachers’ preparation and certification, and gaps in student knowledge. For instance, the abstract of a program in Albion Central School District in New York state notes that “in these western New York state districts, teachers have few opportunities for history professional development and, because of state certification requirements, most have little formal preparation in American history.” Entitled “Setting Our Sites on History,” the project will help 125 teachers explore the ramifications of the American ideal of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Teachers will receive 90 hours of professional development, with school-day content workshops to design service-learning activities, and will attend a residential summer institute in Washington, D.C. to weave local themes into a national framework.

Near the end of the Second World War, the United States military dropped atomic bombs on cities in:

- A. China
- B. Germany
- C. Japan
- D. The Soviet Union

Correct Answer – C.
61 percent of 8th graders answered correctly.
(NAEP, 2006)

The director of a “Legacies of Liberty” project in the City of Sacramento, California, notes that the subject of American history receives an average of only 12 instructional minutes per day in the district. Moreover, only 35 percent of the city’s 8th graders and 33 percent of the 11th graders achieve at a proficient level on the state’s history test. Teachers will receive support from academic historians and master teachers who will “review state standards, present content on a topic included in the {state} standards, then distribute and discuss lesson plans focused on that topic.” In addition, sessions will demonstrate how historians use primary and secondary sources in teaching and research, and history labs will show teachers practical ways to bring history content into their classrooms.

Another national initiative that is helping encourage the study and teaching of American history is *We the People*, launched in September 2002 on Constitution Day under the aegis of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Among many other accomplishments, *We the People* has conducted enrichment workshops at historic sites for some 10,000 K-12 and community-college teachers, and has delivered free sets of classic works based on central themes of American history and culture, to more than 9,000 school and public libraries.⁴²

41 For a description of every project funded by the Teaching American History grants since 2001, including those mentioned in this article, go to <http://www.ed.gov/programs/teachinghistory/awards.html>

42 *We the People*, Initiative of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Available at: <http://www.wethepeople.gov/about/index.html>

Conclusion

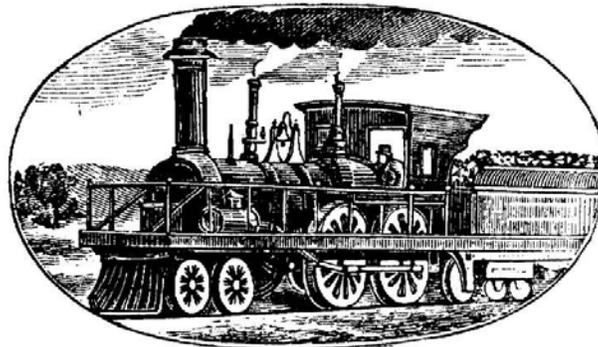
In summary, a great deal remains to be done to raise the level of history instruction in U.S. schools. While it is good news that the private and public sectors are devoting more and more resources to helping educators raise the profile and substance of U.S. history, policymakers need to tackle the problem at its source: The states' systems of certifying teachers as competent to teach history to America's children.

State legislators should demand that the state entities in charge of preparing and licensing the majority of public-school teachers require that teachers have mastery of the liberal-arts subjects they will be teaching, including history. Requiring that secondary-school history teachers have majored in history, as organizations such as the venerable American Historical Association have advocated, seems entirely reasonable. A solid background in history would be far more important for such teachers than accumulating many credits in redundant how-to-teach education courses.

If teacher candidates lack access to a history major in a particular region for whatever reason, the alternative of winning a history teaching job through an alternative route, such as passing a comprehensive examination of content knowledge might be an acceptable option. However, a state should not follow Illinois' poor example and deliberately water down such a test simply to qualify more candidates for jobs. High standards are necessary for both teachers and for students if the quality of education is to ever rise to an optimal level.

Finally, although there is a downside to testing if it is done too frequently, there is little doubt that school-day time spent on history has declined as testing requirements, such as under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, have focused on reading and mathematics in recent years. Simply adding history to required NCLB testing would be problematic. However, student knowledge of American history could be tested more often than is done now, by private foundations and public agencies. For instance, the National Assessment of Educational Progress now surveys history knowledge of U.S. students only once every five years or so, and state-level data are not produced. Testing every other year would give history more visibility. In addition, NAEP ought to release the results of its history testing state by state, so that citizens in each state could see how their students are doing and all America could gauge the relative effectiveness of teaching standards and practices in the 50 states.

Under our system of government, the federal government has no Constitutional authority to dictate policy for teaching history or any other subject. However, programs such as the Teaching American History Grants make opportunities available for history teachers to broaden their knowledge and deepen their appreciation of the subject. Such emphasis ought to continue.



Resources

What follows is a sampling of the kinds of materials that are available for enterprising teachers and others who, in the absence of systemic reform, want to advance the teaching of American history on their own initiative.

The Bill of Rights Institute (Free Classroom Resources)

<http://www.billofrightsinsstitute.org/Teach/FreeResources/>

The Bill of Rights Institute is a rich source of educational resources for teachers, all made available without charge. Weekly e-lessons provide 20-minute discussion guides for secondary-school teachers. The Institute also makes available complete lesson plans based on primary source documents.

The Organization of American Historians' "History Teachers Resource Center"

<http://www.oah.org/teaching/index.html>

This site provides a wonderful variety of links to publications, meetings, and activities useful for teachers of history.

"The Next Generation of History Teachers: A Challenge to Departments of History at American Colleges and Universities"

<http://www.historians.org/pubs/free/historyteaching/>

This is a seminal 2007 report from major scholarly organizations urging collegiate history departments to become more involved in the issues involved in enhancing K-12 history teaching.

The Teaching American History Grant Program

<http://www.ed.gov/programs/teachinghistory/index.html>

This U.S. Department of Education site provides information on how local school districts may apply for grants for projects lasting up to five years with the objective of improving teachers' knowledge of traditional American history.

The National Council for History Education

<http://www.nche.net/>

This is the organization that has as its foundation the seminal Bradley Commission on History in the Schools report of 1988. In the words of the Council, "we encourage and support regular communication between those who teach history in the schools and those who promote history in the community. We envision a communications network for all advocates of history education, whether in schools, colleges, museums, historical societies, humanities councils, or community organizations."

The NCHE website offers a valuable list of resources for history teachers. Among these are the insightful pamphlet, "Building a History Curriculum: Guidelines for Teaching History in Schools," which lays out the Habits of Mind for historical thinking. http://www.nche.net/resources/online_publications.html

The American Historical Association

<http://www.historians.org>

The AHA is the largest organization in the field. Its website offers much useful information about history teaching at all levels. Here is the organization's self-description.

"The American Historical Association (AHA) is a nonprofit membership organization founded in 1884 and incorporated by Congress in 1889 for the promotion of historical studies, the collection and preservation of historical documents and artifacts, and the dissemination of historical research. As the largest historical society in the United States, the AHA provides leadership and advocacy for the profession, fights to ensure academic freedom, monitors professional standards, spearheads essential research in the field, and provides resources and services to help its members succeed. The AHA serves more than 14,000 history professionals, representing every historical period and geographical area. AHA members include K–12 teachers, academics at two- and four-year colleges and universities, graduate students, historians in museums, historical organizations, libraries and archives, government and business, as well as independent historians."

The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

<http://www.gilderlehrman.org>

The Institute was founded in 1994 to "promote the study and love of history." It offers seminars and lesson plans for teachers in addition to fellowships and forums for U.S. history students and scholars.

"We the People," National Endowment for the Humanities

<http://www.wethepeople.gov>

This is an initiative, begun in 2002, that "is designed to encourage and enhance the teaching, study, and understanding of American history, culture, and democratic principles." Among other ventures, it helps K-12 history teachers attend informational workshops at historic sites, and provides supplemental history books to school libraries. It makes grants available to teachers, scholars, filmmakers, librarians, curators, and others to explore significant themes in America's history and culture.

Common Core

<http://www.commoncore.org>

Common Core is a non-profit research and advocacy organization that works for a broad liberal arts education for every child. It is a good source for information about education standards, programs, and curricula. It offers data and status reports on liberal arts in the modern school.

Also by the Lexington Institute:

<http://www.lexingtoninstitute.org>

Multiculturalism and "Social Justice" in American Public Education, November 2008.

A Primer on Multicultural Education: Unifying or Divisive Force, March 2004.

The Value of English Proficiency to the United States Economy, April 2009.



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