

Teaching American History with the Common Core State Standards

By Dave Inman



December 2013

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Teaching American History with the Common Core State Standards

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Executive Summary

Students across the United States demonstrate an alarmingly poor grasp of the fundamentals of our nation's history. Now as 45 states are preparing to implement the Common Core State Standards, a major shift which has dominated most serious discussions about classroom content in recent years, it is unclear what the implications will be for teaching history.

The Common Core State Standards, a new set of content standards designed to clearly articulate what students at each grade level should master in English language arts and mathematics, so that they can expect to be ready for college and careers upon earning their diplomas, are mostly silent on American history and civics.

How can schools achieve better outcomes teaching history under the new standards? This will require educators and decisionmakers being proactive and not relying on the Common Core to provide these opportunities. Recommendations discussed in this report include:

- State-level education policymakers must continue to develop and improve content standards for teaching history, especially when history is grouped within social studies or social science curricula.
- History teacher preparation and licensing practices should be strengthened to emphasize content knowledge in history.
- Opportunities to continue to assess students' knowledge of history, especially at the state level where different policies and approaches can be comparatively evaluated, will be critical, especially in light of the current, budget-driven freeze on future administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress for American History.

This report also includes a section describing selected classroom tools for teaching history with the Common Core, along with links and descriptions.

Introduction

Younger Americans' knowledge of critical facts and concepts from their nation's history and civics persist at alarmingly low levels, and trends in our public schools do not appear to be moving toward improving the situation. On recent National Assessments of Educational Progress, three-fourths of U.S. high school students scored at less than Proficient levels in U.S. history, and more than one-third scored at even lower "Below Basic" levels in civics.¹ In their authoritative 2011 analysis, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute's Jeremy Stern and Sheldon Stern lambast the nation as a whole for lacking quality standards in U.S. history, giving an average grade of "D" across all states.²

This troubling state of affairs begs the question: how will America's public schools adequately educate an informed electorate without high quality curricula and instruction in fundamental areas of American history and civics? Making matters worse, a Lexington Institute report published earlier this year raised doubts whether middle- and secondary-school teachers in most states have received sufficient content knowledge preparation to deliver that instruction consistently.³

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Most of the nation's discussions over curriculum and standards for K-12 public schools have been dominated in recent years by the Common Core State Standards. Having been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia, the Common Core State Standards will have an enormous impact on teaching and learning in America's public schools as it is fully implemented over the next few years.

The Common Core State Standards focus exclusively on English language arts and mathematics. The shift to Common Core, in those states electing to undertake it, does however have the potential for significant effects on what, and how, students learn about crucial facts, principles and documents in American history. The adoption of Common Core has disappointed many who favor emphasizing American history in public schools, who fear it will become further de-emphasized in instruction if it is not included in the tested core content areas. While there are no plans from the Common Core State Standards Initiative for the development of additional standards in other content areas, the new Common Core standards do represent an opportunity for rethinking and reinvigorating American history and civics instruction to improve upon what many students have gotten under existing standards.

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- 1 National Assessment of Educational Progress. Summary of Major Findings. *The Nation's Report Card*. Retrieved from http://nationreportcard.gov/ushistory_2010/summary.asp.
 - 2 Stern, Sheldon M. & Stern, Jeremy A. (February 2011). *The State of State U.S. History Standards 2011*. Retrieved from http://www.edexcellence.net/sites/default/files/publication/pdfs/SOSS_History_FINAL_7.pdf.
 - 3 Holland, Robert, Inman, David, Larson, Kristen Nye & Soifer, Don (April 2013). *Teaching History in Public Schools: An Analysis of State Requirements*. Lexington Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.lexingtoninstitute.org/library/resources/documents/Education/TeachingHistory.pdf>.

Teaching Beyond the Test – What it Will Take

While a cursory exploration of the Standards would suggest that American history and civics have already taken a back seat to other core curricula, history teachers can justify more robust instruction focused on the principles on which the United States was founded, using historical facts as a contextual means to a higher instructional end incorporating critical and higher-order thinking skills. Ball State University professor Sarah Drake Brown points out that Common Core’s concentration on English language arts, especially reading and writing, “enables history teachers to devote extensive class time to the historical habits of mind that a study of the past fosters.” Applying Common Core’s general emphasis on critical reading and writing skills, Professor Brown suggests that “history teachers can use the [Common Core State Standards] to launch discussions about corroborating sources, evaluating authors’ claims and use of evidence, and determining instances of ambiguity in texts.”⁴

Adoption of the Common Core standards certainly does not prevent teaching American history and civics, but states and schools that want to make this content a priority will need to be purposeful and deliberate to make it so. The new standards, even though they are not focused on social studies or history, do require a focus on reading nonfiction texts, including certain foundational American history documents that can be taught as part of language arts lessons.

Common Core “establishes a need to continue robust history teacher education.”

– Sarah Drake Brown,
Ball State University

But the specific decisions individual states’ education leaders make about including this content in their curricula will have a major bearing on the overall extent and effectiveness of the Common Core State Standards in classrooms where responsibility for history and civics instruction lies.

This challenge is further complicated in the majority of states that currently combine history teaching into a broader, interdisciplinary social studies or social sciences curriculum. The National Council for the Social Studies notes that “the primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.”⁵ While it stands to reason that American history and civics would serve a critical role in achieving that purpose, the Council lumps history into an extremely broad content category, including “appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences.”

4 Brown, Sarah Drake. An Opportunity for Enhanced History Teaching and Learning. *TeachingHistory.org*. Retrieved from <http://teachinghistory.org/issues-and-research/roundtable-response/25351>.

5 National Council for the Social Studies (2010). Executive Summary. *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning and Assessment*. Retrieved from <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/execsummary>.

It is possible that social studies standards that include American history may become the focus of their own revision effort in the style of the Common Core. Such a process is likely to become subject to contentious ideological pressures, as seen in state policy battles over history standards. Illinois is one of the lead partners in the creation of the Next Generation Science Standards, released in April of 2013.⁶ While not officially affiliated with the Common Core State Standards, the Next Generation Science Standards were developed with similar ideals – “internationally benchmarked, rigorous, research-based [standards]...aligned with expectations for college and careers.”⁷ It is certainly feasible that similar efforts to update American history and civics standards could be in the offing.

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subject matter.*

Earlier this year a new framework, the College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards was published by a consortium of states and professional organizations. Its authors described a “drastic and harmful reduction of social studies instruction,” and sought to complement the movement toward Common Core with a plan that would help “provide students the tools and methods of clear, disciplined thinking.”⁸

The C3 Framework was developed over a three-year process during which the project was organized across four dimensions (developing questions and planning inquiries, applying disciplinary tools and concepts, evaluating sources and using evidence, and communicating conclusions and taking informed action).

Rather than specific content standards, the Framework is structured around “suggested pathways” for curriculum and instruction. For instance, by the end of eighth grade, it is suggested that students, “use questions generated about multiple historical sources to identify further areas of inquiry and additional sources.” By the end of twelfth grade, for example, students should “critique the usefulness of historical sources for a specific historical inquiry based on their maker, date, place of origin, intended audience and purpose,” according to the standards. To whatever extent standards such as these provide opportunities to advance teaching history, teachers must be prepared to take advantage.

The developers of the Standards, as well as the states that have adopted them, tout the Common Core State Standards as emphasizing critical thinking skills and depth of knowledge over breadth. Even without the codifying of content-specific standards for U.S.

6 Illinois State Board of Education (August 2013). *Fact Sheet: Common Core State Standards*. Retrieved from

7 Next Generation Science Standards. Frequently Asked Questions. *NextGenScience.org*. Retrieved from <http://www.nextgenscience.org/frequently-asked-questions#4.1>.

8 Fact Sheet, College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework For Social Studies State Standards. *Asanet.org*. Retrieved from <http://www.asanet.org/documents/students/docs/FINAL%20C3%20Fact%20Sheet%209-13-13-1.pdf>.

history and civics, educators with the appropriate background that includes the study of these content areas can utilize the Common Core State Standards to inform their curricular and instructional choices.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative, the coalition of organizations that developed the standards, explicitly states that they are intended to “establish what students need to learn, but they do not dictate how teachers should teach.”⁹ By developing history and social studies curricula that emphasizes the overlap of critical reading and writing skills in the English language arts standards with the understanding of fundamental documents in our nation’s history, even states with lower standards for licensing history teachers can promote curriculum and instructional methods that improve history education. Some states have already taken steps in this direction.

Massachusetts, for instance, explicitly requires teaching primary documents including the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, Bill of Rights, Federalist Papers, and the Gettysburg Address. Although this is a seemingly small (and perhaps obvious) curricular decision, Massachusetts’ mandate on the inclusion of these documents stands as a clear signal of intent to treat American history as an important piece of the core curriculum. Even without any changes to instructional techniques, this alone is more than has been required in some other states.

However, for the 19 states that received federal funding under the Race to the Top Fund, for which the adoption of the Common Core standards was effectively a qualification, the expansion of history and social studies standards may prove to be complicated. Serious critics have raised concerns over recent federal strategies intended to encourage adoption of the Common Core.

The federal Department of Education’s regulations for state applications to the Race to the Top Fund under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 explicitly directed that not only were states to adopt a common set of content standards, but that, “a state may supplement the common standards with additional standards, provided that the additional standards do not exceed 15 percent of the state’s total standards for that content area.”¹⁰ It remains unclear whether the language restricts only the English and mathematics content areas on which the Common Core State Standards focus.

Federal officials have not made it clear that state history standards either do or do not pose a conflict for states hoping to apply for these grants. This stipulation was a major point of contention for critics of the Common Core State Standards. In states with clearly-articulated history standards like Virginia and Texas that have not adopted the Common Core standards, policymakers have expressed an unwillingness to allow their existing standards to become compromised.

9 Common Core State Standards Initiative. Frequently Asked Questions. Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/resources/frequently-asked-questions>.

10 The Federal Register (July 29, 2009). Part III; Department of Education. Vol. 74, No. 144. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/legislation/FedRegister/proprule/2009-3/072909d.pdf>.

Preparing Teachers to Teach History

Ultimately, broad success improving students' knowledge and understanding of American history and civics will depend on strengthening teacher preparation and licensure practices. After all, it is classroom history teachers who are responsible for the engaging instruction that will both excite students and prepare them to be well-informed, highly functioning members of a democratic society.

In an April 2013 paper on teaching American history in public schools, analysts at the Lexington Institute noted that, "more than half of states do not clearly define the academics required to become a certified U.S. history teacher."¹¹ For proponents of teaching American history in public schools, this represents a dereliction of duty that is pervasive in schools around the country.

Illinois, one such state, will transition to new state tests based on the Common Core State Standards by the 2014-15 school year. Although weak licensure practices may continue to cripple the teaching of American history in states like Illinois, the Common Core standards could provide an important push into more robust history instruction in elementary and secondary schools.

Massachusetts has taken an important step to include foundational historical texts in its new Common Core-ready curriculum, but this is only half the battle. Many serious critics express deep concern that the new standards relegate American history to the box of content literacy. Professor Sarah Drake Brown of Ball State University, however, argues that the Common Core "establishes a need to continue robust history teacher education," including requiring that future teachers of history have to complete a history major, and that continuing professional development and content methods courses "make student thinking in history visible and provide candidates with opportunities to observe and assess such thinking."¹²

Brown's suggestion that future history teachers have a history major seems a fundamental one, but teacher licensure requirements – including coursework in the content areas and in pedagogy, and passing standardized tests to demonstrate proficiency in both – vary widely from state to state.

Although some have criticized Texas history standards for allowing politics to drive content standards, this is one area in which the state stands out. From an instructional perspective, Texas is among the few states that require history teachers to have a history major. In a content area dominated by social studies – from anthropology, to economics, to sociology – requiring history teachers to have at least some significant training in the subject area demonstrates a serious commitment to the content, one which states across the nation could emulate in order to elevate history and civics in the curriculum.

11 Holland, Robert, Inman, David, Larson, Kristen Nye & Soifer, Don. *op cit.*

12 Brown, Sarah Drake. *op cit.*

Shifting these requirements will take a concerted, collaborative effort among policymakers, colleges and universities, alternative certification providers, and school divisions. This won't happen quickly, nor will it address the potential knowledge gaps that existing teachers may carry into the classroom with them. Any comprehensive approach to properly preparing history and civics teachers to thrive in a Common Core era must include ongoing professional development for new and veteran practitioners. We now have a crucial opportunity to make this happen effectively.

Another important policy tool that can support more knowledgeable history teachers in public schools is the potential for alternative tracks to standard schools of education, which generally de-emphasize and even discourage extensive formal study of history in favor of other aspects of pedagogy. Undergraduates and even students pursuing postgraduate study of history often find teacher certification rules to be a daunting disincentive from pursuing careers teaching in secondary schools, and alternative education pathways in many states prove valuable in this regard.

The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History's "Teaching Literacy Through History" professional development program is designed to enhance Common Core instruction.

Combined with state requirements that encourage candidates to major in relevant content areas, such policies can effectively reverse these disincentives. A recommendation made by the National Council on Teacher Quality could have a strong bearing on history education. "We recommend that the state require a major in at least one of the sciences or social sciences to be taught (or a related social science), and a passing score on a stand-alone test that measures knowledge of each subject intended to be taught."¹³

13 National Council on Teacher Quality, Illinois Education School Report Card, 2011. Retrieved from http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/Ed_School_Essentials_IL_Teacher_Prep_NCTQ_Report

Conclusion

Efforts to elevate American history and civics in public schools will only come in coordination with the sort of policy shifts that require robust teacher preparation programs and ongoing training in the subject matter. For any of the good work of advocates of American history and civics education to endure, policymakers must also devote some energy to these issues.

The federal Department of Education has discontinued the testing of American history as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) because of budget cuts. As this assessment is the only regularly-administered national test of history and civics knowledge, its findings are our most crucial resource to understanding the nation's needs in these critical areas. If the American history and civics NAEP were to be lost, so too would be our most effective method of measuring specific needs to begin to correct deficiencies through policy changes. Restoring NAEP American history and civics testing and expanding them to include state-level results would provide a valuable resource to help assess state policies, standards and needs.

Alternative pathways to certification that can attract history majors to teaching

Nowhere will this be more important than in our poorest and lowest performing schools. According to a report from the National Center for Education Information, the proportion of teachers under the age of 30 nearly doubled between 2005 and 2011. Demographic composition, including race, remained mostly constant, moving from 85 percent to 84 percent white in the same time period.¹⁴ Particularly in urban areas, these factors contribute to specific challenges for young teachers in traditionally underperforming urban schools. When teachers lack much formal study of American history themselves, their ability to address challenging, but important, historical lessons will be more limited.

Whether these new young teachers hail from traditional schools of education or alternative certification programs like Teach For America, if current trends hold they will be majority white, majority female, and presumably relatively high on the socioeconomic ladder. Many will very likely take a mission-driven approach to their profession, motivated by a commitment to social justice. In the urban schools where they work, most of their students will be from nonwhite households living in poverty. Given the reality of racial history – and persisting current inequalities – in the United States, teachers without sufficient training in history can understandably find themselves beyond their comfort zone as educators teaching about the founders and founding principles of the United States of America.

¹⁴ Feistritzer, C. Emily (2011). Profile of Teachers in the U.S. 2011. National Center for Education Information. Retrieved from http://www.ncei.com/Profile_Teachers_US_2011.pdf.

Especially in the climate encountered in many urban schools, where teachers feel pressure to make up lost ground in reading and math for high-stakes standardized tests, there is a real danger that important content in U.S. history and civics will lose out in prioritizing instructional time.

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The debate about the merits of the Common Core State Standards is bound to continue over the next several years as the standards are fully implemented in some states, and debated in others, and for years thereafter as student performance data is analyzed after the switch.

The study of American history and civics, however, cannot afford to be shelved for those years. With Americans' understanding of their nation's history at desperately low levels – indeed, with 12th grade students (at or near voting age) scoring at lower rates of proficiency than fourth or eighth graders – urgent strides are required to give American history its due position in the core curriculum.

Recommended measures include:

- State-level education decision-makers must continue to develop and improve content standards for teaching American history, especially when within the broader frameworks of social studies or social sciences.
- While the Common Core State Standards form an essential foundation for teaching, future gains improving students' knowledge and understanding of American history and civics will be largely dependent on the preparation and quality of those educators responsible for teaching history. Strengthening teacher preparation and licensure practices to emphasize content knowledge will be critical. So, too, will be the availability of ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers to deepen their content knowledge and develop their instructional toolkit in this area.
- Given the depth of the crisis in American history knowledge, data to guide decision-makers responsible for assigning priorities, allocating resources and setting standards will be essential. Ending coverage of American history and civics from the federal Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress would eliminate our most useful tool for understanding these challenges and their urgency. Restoring these assessments, and expanding them to provide understanding of instructional effectiveness on a state-by-state basis would be an incomparable resource in establishing a baseline and strategy to address these challenges.

Appendix – Classroom Tools for Teaching History

Whatever their background in formally studying history, classroom teachers in all states can benefit from useful work being done by several nonprofit educational and advocacy organizations who are committed to providing resources that ensure high quality instruction in American history and civics.

Based in Arlington, Virginia, the **Bill of Rights Institute** focuses its efforts on providing educational resources for students and teachers. They offer a library of free resources, including lesson plans and other instructional materials, games, and printed and online teachers' guides.

Careful to provide culturally relevant tools, the Institute offers resources on teaching with current events, as well as tools that leverage classroom technology, such as materials designed specifically for use with SMART Boards and their wikipedia-esque "Americapedia" built to help teachers and students "understand the history and ideas essential to American citizenship."¹⁵

Restoring NAEP American History testing and expanding it to include state-level results would provide a valuable resource to help assess state policies, standards and needs.

As more and more content is delivered online, the Institute has also recently released the first unit of *Documents of Freedom*, an online civics and economics textbook – aligned, of course, with the Common Core State Standards – which is interactive, free to use, and accessible on a variety of platforms.

Even more compelling for proponents of giving history teachers adequate formal training in their content, the Bill of Rights Institute offers specially designed Constitutional Seminars for teachers. These one-day courses are offered several times a year in locations around the country, and cover both content knowledge and pedagogical strategies for teaching constitutional principles, historical events, and Supreme Court rulings.

Combining these specially designed professional development workshops with interactive and customizable materials, the Bill of Rights Institute has the potential to be a veritable trailblazer in bringing American history and civics to the forefront of the Common Core-aligned social studies classroom.

All seven of their Constitutional Seminars scheduled for 2014 will be held in states that have adopted the Common Core State Standards, and the Bill of Rights Institute has announced that all of their curricula and workshops will align with at least one of the Common Core State Standards.

Other organizations are doing excellent work to elevate history as the Common Core State Standards are ushered into American classrooms.

15 Bill of Rights Institute. *Americapedia*. Retrieved from <http://billofrightsinstitute.org/resources/educator-resources/americapedia/>.

Founded in 2007, the Washington, DC-based nonprofit **Common Core** (not related to the Common Core State Standards Initiative) works with teachers and scholars “to create instructional materials, conduct research, and promote policies that support a comprehensive and high-quality education in America’s public schools,” in the liberal arts and sciences.¹⁶ Common Core offers curriculum tools in mathematics, English, history, and art, all aligned with the Common Core State Standards.

Specific to U.S. history, Common Core offers The Alexandria Plan, which provides teachers with “a strategic framework for identifying and using high quality works of non-fiction and historical fiction as resources for meeting the expectations of the [Common Core State Standards].”¹⁷ The Alexandria Plan offers significant resources in world and U.S. history, broken into summaries, objectives, anchor texts, suggested text-dependent questions, assessments, and additional resources for further study. As with most materials developed in relation to the Common Core State Standards, The Alexandria Plan does not prescribe specific methods of teaching; however, Common Core does offer a variety of in-person, online, real-time, and on-demand professional development programs to help teachers make the most effective use of their materials.

Additional online resources for history teachers abound, although some merit special consideration for high-quality materials well organized for teachers’ convenience.

The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History website offers a wealth of history resources for teachers, including programs for schools, teachers, and students used in all 50 states. “Teaching Literacy Through History,” a professional development program, is designed to enhance Common Core instruction by training teachers in strategies for the use of primary documents and texts from American history to develop students’ core literacy skills.

The institute’s online resources include essays, videos, primary documents, instructional tools and recommended resources. Much of their content is structured around timelines and grouped by historical era. A strong series of annual summer seminars designed for teachers, held around the country by an impressive roster of accomplished lecturers is also well worth considering.

A project of the Ashbrook Center at Ashland University in Ohio, **TeachingAmericanHistory.org** provides extensive content for teachers, including key historical documents, online and in-person professional development courses, lesson plans, and special exhibits.

A resource of the Organization of American Historians, **The Journal of American History** offers content that could be particularly useful for high-school history teachers in lesson planning. Most of this, however, is available only by subscription through a membership with the OAH. Membership fees are based on income level and range from \$45 to \$200 per year.

16 Common Core. Our Mission. Retrieved from <http://commoncore.org/mission>.

17 Common Core. The Alexandria Plan: FAQ. Retrieved from [http://commoncore.org/maps/history/faqs#what is the relationship bewteen common core and the common core state](http://commoncore.org/maps/history/faqs#what_is_the_relationship_bewteen_common_core_and_the_common_core_state).

Selected Sources for Classroom Resources for American History

	Description	Login Required	Cost
The Bill of Rights Institute www.billofrightsinstitute.org	Professional development seminars and online resources for teachers of American history	No	Free
Common Core www.commoncore.org	Curricular resources across several content areas, including The Alexandria Plan for history, mapped to CCSS	No	Free
TeachingAmericanHistory.org blog.teachingamericanhistory.org	Blog with lots of useful content for teachers	No	Free
The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History www.gilderlehrman.org	Professional development, resources for teachers, structured around timelines & grouped by era	Yes	Free
The Journal of American History www.journalofamericanhistory.org	Content useful for lesson planning, particularly for high school	Yes	\$45-\$200/year

Also by the Lexington Institute:

Teaching History in Public Schools: An Analysis of State Requirements,
by Robert Holland, David Inman, Kristen Nye Larson and Don Soifer,
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