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To: State Board of Education
From: Rep. Lawrence H. Curry LHC
RE: Proposed Academic Standards for History

I appreciate the difficulty in selecting standards for a field as complex and detailed as United States and Pennsylvania history. However, as a professional historian who has some forty years of teaching experience, I am dismayed with this work product.

Let's look first at 8.1

No where does the "Historical Analysis and Skill Development" section list multiple causation as a consideration for students. Worse, in 3 out of 4 of "C"'s, there is listed cause and result. No knowledgeable teacher or historian believes complex phenomena (result) can be explained by a single cause. Of course good teachers will explain multiple causation - but the standards are deficient in signaling that out as worthy of consideration.

No where in 8.1 is the student exposed to selectivity of facts or different alignment of facts unless it is "the multiple points of view." The very process which gives rise to varying interpretations of the past is overlooked in "C". "Explain the fundamentals of historical interpretation." Differences in interpretation do not arise as a result of facts v opinion; but rather from emphasis on some facts as opposed to other facts. I assume this concern is intended to be addressed by "C" "multiple points of view"; but I think the origins of "multiple points of view" should be stressed, i.e. different emphases on some series of facts.

The proposed standards for Pennsylvania and United States history are unrealistic , and do not conform to the age or grade levels when United States history is taught (which will be the course where Pennsylvania history is incorporated).

Some of the issues that are appropriately raised in the period "Beginning to 1824", are to complex or sophisticated to be "mastered" by the sixth grade students. Just as an appropriate appreciation of the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution cannot be mastered by the 3rd grade. These documents are too important to be left to a 3rd grade level of comprehension. Issues of religious freedom, which is not a topic included in the Standards, needs to be addressed by looking at the issue in several periods of time from the 17th Century to the 21st Century which, of course, transcends the three time periods in the standards.

The list of deficiencies in these standards, with these categories are too numerous to list. The entire history section must be re-though. I would be pleased to review additional concerns if anyone really cares.

Frankly, these standards look as though a committee filled in some interesting topics and projects - because there had to be a document called standards - but did it without regard to the years history is taught, the comprehension level of the students exposed to the material, and a true grasp of the meaning of history, or the usefulness of the historical process.

These standards need "Empowerment" attention.

Sincerely,

Lawrence H. Curry

Lawrence H. Curry
Member, House of Representatives
154th Legislative District

LH C/spc

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April 5, 2002

Honorable Lawrence Curry
250 Wyncote Road
Jenkintown, Pennsylvania

RE: Social Studies Standards

Dear Mr. Curry:

Thank you for allowing my input of concerns regarding the current proposed Social Studies Standards. Generally speaking, these standards are too content oriented with insufficient emphasis on process. While it is critical for our citizens to know some of the required information listed in the standards, it is simply too specific and numerous. When one reads these standards, it appears we are preparing our children to be contestants on "Jeopardy" or "Do You Want To Be A Millionaire" as opposed to preparing them to be productive members of our society. As such, listed below are some specific concerns:

- The four social studies standards documents (Geography, Economics, Civic & Government, History) need to be integrated and coordinated to be aligned chronologically or topically.
- There needs to be more flexibility as to the level that topics are taught, so that, for example, World History only to be taught once at the high school level.
- Innovative instructional techniques will be stifled because of the tremendous amount of material content "to be covered".
- Standards need to be organized conceptually rather than by specific content.
- Standards need to be reviewed to take into account child development, age appropriateness and time constraints.
- Bulleted, arrowed and diamonded items should be cited as "suggested activities only". By focusing on the numbers and letters only, educators will be allowed greater discretion to promote the teaching of skills to acquire the content.
- Some of the standards lack coherence. For example, by 6th grade under one bullet, students needed to know the Code of Hammurabi and Ann Frank (ancient historical concepts and modern concepts to be taught in the same time period) as well as other seemingly disconnected facts.
- There also seems to be some chronological confusion when 6th grade history goes through 1815 and the 9th grade reverts back to 1776. Considering the inordinate amount of content that needs to be covered, there is too much redundancy or "overlap".
- Many of these standards are too specific, prescriptive and numerous resulting in the restricting of teacher's use of instructional tools learned through their training and experience.

The purpose of any social studies curriculum is to focus on the acquisition of some very basic concepts with an increasing emphasis on the development of "life skills" of analytical thinking and research techniques. It is not necessary for our students to demonstrate their ability to analyze over and over again (to my count there are over 175 items in all four content areas that required students to analyze, interpret or evaluate). Analytical skills are critical for success in life and ultimately being able to make a contribution to our society. But students will not be able to develop these skills to their full potential with the inordinate number of items listed. The curriculum will be content driven instead of process or skill development driven. As is said, "give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach him how to fish and he will never be hungry".

Finally, I have some serous concerns regarding the implementation of these standards. First, these standards are geared towards high achieving, motivated students. Proficiency in these standards may not be possible for average, lower and life skills students. Also, implementation of these standards as they are currently written (overloaded, crammed with content and too broad), will ultimately remove Advanced Placement courses and other electives from school schedules.

I would greatly appreciate it if you could weigh these concerns during your discussion and deliberations. Enclosed also is a copy of my resume which provides documentation of authority to speak on this matter. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any additional information or clarification of my position. Thank you again.

Sincerely,

Marc Lieberson
Public School Teacher