

January 21, 2022

Ms. Sarah Hurd, Co-Chair
Ms. Jenny Pettit, Co-Chair
Social Studies Standards
Review and Revision Committee
Colorado State Board of Education
costandardsrevision@cde.state.co.us



Dear Ms. Hurd and Ms. Pettit:

The Foundation Against Intolerance & Racism is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing civil rights and liberties and promoting a common culture based on fairness, understanding, and humanity. We have more than 100 chapters and tens of thousands of members throughout the United States, including in Colorado. Our website, fairforall.org, can give you a fuller sense of our identity and activities.

We write in response to the Colorado Social Studies Standards Review and Revision Committee's November 2021 Draft Revision Recommendations. Please consider this letter FAIR's comment on the Recommendations for your review and consideration, timely filed by the February 1, 2022 deadline.

BACKGROUND

During the 2019 legislative session, Colorado lawmakers passed House Bill 1192, entitled *Concerning the Inclusion of Matters Relating to American Minorities in the Teaching of Social Contributions in Civil Government in Public Schools*. House Bill 1192 created the History, Culture, Social Contributions, and Civil Government in Education Commission, commonly referred to as the "1192 Commission." The 1192 Commission is charged with recommending revisions to Colorado's public school curriculum in order to ensure an accurate reflection of:

- history, culture, social contributions, and civil government of the United States and Colorado, including the contributions and influence of American Indians, Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) individuals within these minority groups;
- the intersectionality of significant social and cultural features within these communities; and
- the contributions and persecution of religious minorities.¹

Public comment on the Recommendations must be received by February 1, 2022. The Committee will consider public comments as it formulates its final recommendations, and the Colorado State Board of Education will ultimately decide which recommendations to accept.

¹ Report, *History, Culture, Social Contributions, and Civil Government in Education Commission* (June 2021), <https://www.cde.state.co.us/standardsandinstruction/hb191192commissionreport>.

COMMENTS

We support the legislature's efforts to include diverse perspectives and experiences that have been historically minimized or ignored. Additionally, we support the Recommendations to the extent they do so and provide students with robust, well-rounded, and accurate historical perspectives. However, we have several concerns about the Recommendations as a whole and the messages they deliver to the students.

First, the Recommendations have an overarching focus on immutable characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and ability, or external circumstances the children cannot control, such as socio-economic status and family conditions. For example, if the Recommendations are adopted, students in First Grade History will be required to "[i]dentify similarities and differences between themselves and others" with respect to "[r]ace, ethnicity, gender identity, religion, ability, and family makeup." As another example, students in Eighth Grade History will be expected to "[e]valuate the impact of gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, and class" during the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. Throughout the Recommendations, there is little reference to the numerous traits that make each human distinct and irreplaceable, such as values, beliefs, thoughts, opinions, talents, personality, interests, likes, dislikes, and so on. Instead, whenever human traits are referenced in the Recommendations, the traits listed are virtually always those that are immutable or otherwise beyond one's control. By centering immutable characteristics and placing such a high importance on them, the Recommendations not only instill a sense of helplessness in the children, but also limit them by teaching that *those* are the traits that define them.

Second, the Recommendations continually emphasize groups rather than the individuals within them. For example, if the Recommendations are adopted, Third Grade Civics students will be asked, "Why do some groups, such as African Americans, Asian Americans, Indigenous Peoples, Latinos, LGBTQ, and religious minorities, feel like their voices are not being heard?" Students in Seventh Grade History will be expected to understand "acts of violence towards groups of people," rather than how violence harms the affected individuals. Only individuals have the capacity to feel, think, and experience; only individuals are capable of having and taking responsibility. By anthropomorphizing groups and presenting them as entities with agency and responsibility, the Recommendations will inaccurately suggest to children that their feelings, thoughts, experiences, and responsibilities are tied to (or originate from) their membership in any particular group, rather than from their own individual being and actions.

Third, the Recommendations lump the same six groups together all throughout: African Americans, Asian Americans, Indigenous Peoples, Latinos, LGBTQ people, and religious minorities. We recognize that House Bill 1192 specifically mentions those groups. But repeatedly clumping all of them together as a collection trivializes each of them. Each of those groups is extremely large with countless cultures and subcultures and millions upon millions of unique human beings, and the individual members are exceptionally diverse and varied. To treat them as a mass collection represents them only in the crudest fashion. At the same time, the Recommendations assume that each of the six groups is neatly delineated and separated, when in fact Americans increasingly belong to multiple ancestral groups and the boundaries are blurred.

Fourth, the Recommendations treat those six groups as monoliths whose members inevitably think, feel, and experience in the same way. For example, if the Recommendations are adopted, students in First Grade History will be asked, “How are African American, Latino, Asian American, Indigenous Peoples, LGBTQ, and religious minority cultures different from and similar to one another?” And as stated above, the Third Grade students will study why “African Americans, Asian Americans, Indigenous Peoples, Latinos, LGBTQ [people], and religious minorities feel like their voices aren’t being heard.” Having no minds of their own and consisting of numerous different individuals, however, groups are not monolithic. Asking a student to imagine or describe the experience or culture of an “Asian American,” for example, teaches students little but broad and inaccurate generalizations, given that such person can be of Thai, Nepalese, Chinese, Indian, Laotian, Filipino, or any number of other diverse ethnicities and descents. Likewise, there is no “Asian American voice” or any other “voice” that is common to all members of a group that is based on racial categorization. Certainly, some Asian Americans may share opinions and feelings on any given issue. But the individuals who comprise that group have an enormous and varying range of opinions and goals, and so it is nothing short of limiting to claim that they speak with one “voice.” Furthermore, the Recommendations appear not to acknowledge that although members of groups may have *some* traits in common with each other, the vast majority of human characteristics are dependent upon the individual. By teaching children otherwise, the Recommendations will train the students to flatten others (and themselves) into generic members of groups, rather than to consider them unique individuals.

CONCLUSION

American social studies curriculum must include the histories and contributions of diverse and historically ignored ethnicities. But schools must strive to do so while emphasizing each person’s individuality as opposed to their group identity and immutable characteristics. That approach will value and respect each student while teaching the fullness and complexity of our history and humanity.

Respectfully submitted,

Foundation Against Intolerance & Racism