

**History Rewritten:
The Damaging Effects of Changing Texas' Textbooks**

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Throughout the history of Texas education, there has been much debate regarding what content children should learn from kindergarten through senior year of high school. Due to the political and religious disagreements within board meetings, many possible changes have been suggested, agreed upon, and then undone. However, Texas school boards are still looking in to some major changes. These major changes include redefining the way textbooks address slavery and removing some historic figures from the text. These modifications have only gotten worse within the past few years. One reason parents and educators have taken a stand against these textbook tweaks is that changing the context of history is an attempt to rewrite the past, which hinders the cognitive development of children as they come of age.

So, what are the exact problems that these students are facing? Major changes are happening within the text that kids are required to interpret and understand throughout their academic careers. Historian Daina Ramey Berry says that one of the

textbooks “described the transatlantic slave trade as a ‘pattern of immigration’ that brought ‘millions of workers from Africa to the southern United States to work on agricultural plantations’”.¹ In other words, workers get paid, while people who are enslaved get no money. There is a very clear line between being a worker and working against one’s will. Berry further states that “many saw it [the changing of the text] as serious — and dangerous — misinformation” (ibid). She continues with her argument, commenting these “school-aged children have long been miseducated about the history of slavery in our textbooks. [T]hose who accept a version of American history that largely ignores the impact and significance of slavery are at fault”. Luckily, the text has changed. It now reads “Africans were both forced into migration and to labor against their will as slaves”, but Berry states that even though parents and educators won this battle, “we still have a long way to go”.

Historians, or people who dedicate their lives to learning about the worlds past, understand how significant slavery was in the United States, not only for the economic impact it had, but also for the lack of decency shown to people because of their appearances. Berry compares treatment of slavery in the textbooks to other history that children are required to learn in school, as she argues:

¹ Daina Berry, Kanye West’s teachable moment – for everyone (Washington DC: The Washington Post, 2018).

“Yes, it was a long time ago. But so were the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution, yet students study every detail of these events. Today, our sixth-graders learn more about ancient Greece and Rome than the history of slavery. Even though core curriculum in public schools requires students to examine political, economic and social events that shaped the United States, slavery is rarely included. The institution of slavery was a large part of all three areas of development and at the center of American history from the time Europeans stepped foot on native soil” (ibid).

As a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, Berry can tell from firsthand experience that “at the college level, students enter U.S. history courses with little understanding of slavery” (ibid). It is difficult to understand other people’s points of view on these difficult topics if textbooks change the facts as in the case of slavery. These transformative attempts begin with the school boards.

Understanding how exactly Texas is able to get away with changing these historical facts is key to combating the textbook problem. In National Public Radio’s (NPR) *All Things Considered*, Laura Isensee, a Houston native who covers education throughout Texas, breaks down how Texas compares with other states when it comes to textbook content. A handful of states have common core standard. If a state chooses to opt into these standards, it is given content in which educators legally must teach students the information that the common core calls for. Unfortunately, “so many states have adopted the common core state standards, though Texas has not... They have

actually outlawed the common core in Texas.”² Texas school boards, which are largely run by conservative members, get the final vote on what is included in the textbooks they adopt. *New York Times* journalist James C. McKinley, Jr. writes that:

“The Texas Board of Education approved a social studies curriculum that will put a conservative stamp on history and economics textbooks, stressing the superiority of American capitalism, questioning the Founding Fathers’ commitment to a purely secular government and presenting Republican political philosophies in a more positive light... The vote was 10 to 5 along party lines, with all the Republicans on the board voting for it.”³

It is clear that when it comes to academics, people who differ in ideologies have varying beliefs regarding what children should be taught. McKinley elaborates on the heavily one-sided vote that occurs inside school boards. McKinley states that “battles over what to put in science and history books have taken place for years in the 20 states where state boards must adopt textbooks, most notably in California and Texas. But rarely in recent history has a group of conservative board members left such a mark on a social studies curriculum” (ibid). The overly-conservative approach is what parents fear most when it comes to their children understanding some of the country’s darker

² Laura Isensee. “Texas Hits the Books”, *All Things Considered*, podcast audio, Nov. 21, 2014. <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2014/11/21/365686593/texas-hits-the-books>

³ James C. McKinley Jr., *Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change*. (New York: New York Times, 2010).

history. It seems that people are trying to sugarcoat unpleasant aspects of history instead of telling the good, the bad and the ugly that has molded the country into what it is today.

McKinley's article also mentions Latino board member Mary Helen Berlanga, who pushes for more Hispanic figures to be represented in the textbooks to acknowledge the state's growing Latin population. Berlanga criticizes that board members "are going overboard, they are not experts, they are not historians. They are rewriting history, not only of Texas but of the United States and the world" (ibid). This attempt at rewriting, or worse, erasing history is becoming more evident to the public eye. Parents of all communities are becoming outraged and demanding a change.

In a 2018 episode of NPR's *All Things Considered*, journalist Camille Phillips reported on a board meeting during which board member Marisa Perez-Diaz of San Antonio tells the other board member that "the state's previous social studies standards listed three causes for the Civil War: sectionalism, states' rights and slavery, in that order... skirting, the real foundational issue, which is slavery."⁴

When it came to vote on textbook content, the conservative board compromised: students will be taught about "the central role of the expansion of slavery in causing sectionalism, disagreements over states' rights and the Civil War" (ibid). This may

⁴ Camille Phillips. "Texas Students will soon Learn Slavery Played a Central Role in The Civil War" *All Things Considered*. Podcast audio, Nov. 16, 2018.

sound like a victory, but it is more of a mutual agreement. To satisfy critics, the school board was willing to add factual information about slavery into the books in order to acknowledge that slavery was a part of United States history. But this agreement doesn't break down the harsh treatments in which slaves endured nor the ways in which slaves were brought into the country.

Not understanding or even knowing of the past can have some serious effects on children as they grow to understand the world. Phillips also brings in discussion of Lawrence Paska, the executive director of the National Council for the Social Studies, who says, "what those students learn in school has a big impact on how they understand history and current events" (ibid). Paska reiterates the importance of truth being taught to children and he continues with, "students need opportunities to have reflective discussion... they need to be exposed to sources of information that may include conflicting perspectives on controversial issues." Without true information being passed on, we create a new era of ignorance.

One of the primary problems that people run into while attempting to challenge schools and their status quo is the understanding and history of state's rights. To get a better grasp of what state's rights are, CNBC reporter Abigail Hess looks into the history that is state's rights. Hess writes that:

“States' rights' is a fundamental aspect of the 'Lost Cause' myth that was promoted in the late-19th and early-20th century to erase the African-American experience and historical memory of slavery and the Civil War,” Hess cites Dr. Shirley Thompson, a historian at the University of Texas, who wrote, “This pro-Confederate interpretation of history also went hand-in-hand with and helped to authorize Jim Crow segregation, the disenfranchisement, lynching and terroristic violence and the relegation of African Americans to second-class citizenship. This relic of early 20th-century thought has long been discredited by the historical profession.”⁵

Since this “Lost Cause” myth has been used for the last two centuries to justify “this pro-Confederate interpretation of history”, it has been tough for people to be able to battle heavy conservative school boards. However, groups are forming to contest these schoolboards, Texas Freedom Network, for example, calls for everyone to be cautious of what these school boards are doing and how they dominate other groups in order to keep their ideas supreme and free from challenge:

“The Texas State Board of Education decides what every student in Texas public schools will learn from kindergarten through high school. The board does so by adopting curriculum standards and textbooks for public schools in the state. For decades, politicians on the State Board of Education and their activist allies have

⁵ Abigail Hess, The Texas Board of Education voted to remove Hillary Clinton and Helen Keller from school curriculum, (New Jersey: CNBC, 2018).

taken advantage of this flawed system to dismiss the advice of experts and scholars. They have instead worked to inject their personal views into textbooks on everything from evolution and climate change to the history of slavery, civil rights and separation of church and state.”⁶

Included on the website is a challenge to look into the possible critical damage that could be made behind these crucial curriculum decisions, “We can’t begin to heal all the divisions in our state and country if we continue to lie about our history” (ibid).

This point backs up the argument about which scholars, educators, parents and other citizens have been concerned. Newspapers and other forms of perpetuated made slaves look as if they enjoyed being enslaved. Of course, this was not the case. It is essential to understand other’s history in order to be willing to work with one another in the pursuit of a better, safer country, and children need to learn this lesson.

So what can be done to fight these harmful “tweaks” to history? Voting for a more balanced school board representation is crucial. Being able to have a solid mixture of republican, democrat, independent, liberal and conservative mindsets not only helps keep these votes from being one sided, but it also helps create a dialogue between various people, something that can lead to a more progressive and accepting culture within the United States.

⁶ *Textbook Censorship*, (Austin, TX: Texas Freedom Network, 2018).

At the end of the day, it comes down to a simple, yet complex argument. The various groups live within the United States (African Americans Latin Americans, etc.) want their history to expand within textbooks. Instead of discussing the typical one or two popular historical figures to represent entire groups scholars and parents want more people of all races within textbooks to show a variety of ways these many people, famous and not famous, have influenced society. Not only this, but stakeholders also do not want their representation limited. Lack of varied representation leads to stereotypes and unsupported assumptions. Without being able to interpret the significance of history and struggle of various groups creates a non-binary way of thinking. Inability to understand the history of others leads to one-sided thinking when trying to tackle serious societal issues, and if textbooks are not changed to reflect the truth, then history is doomed to repeat itself in some shape or another.

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