

Texas Social Studies *Simplified*

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The present reform of the K-12 social studies curriculum in Texas is complicated, politicized, and increasingly controversial. This guide aims to introduce Texans and Americans to the process, events, and issues being reported in the news.

What is Going On . . . and Why?

- The state of Texas is updating its social studies **standards**, a list of things that students in public schools are supposed to know by the time they graduate. The standards cover all thirteen grades from K-12 and are nearly 100 pages long.
- The standards are named the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS, for short).
- The social studies TEKS were first signed into law in 1998 with a provision that they be updated periodically; they are being updated now for the first time.

Why Does it Matter?

- **In Texas**, the TEKS serve as the blueprint for the entire social studies curriculum: first, textbooks will be selected that best teach the information outlined in the TEKS; then, the state will create standardized tests to measure how well students learned the information; finally, the state will revise the teacher training process so that future teachers are prepared to teach the materials. So this process impacts not only the more than 4.7 million *students* in Texas classrooms but also textbook *publishers* who seek a piece of a multi-million-dollar contract, school *teachers* who hope their students pass the state's standardized tests (so they can keep their jobs), *districts* who hope to secure greater funding on the basis of improved standardized test scores, *future teachers* who want to land a job to support their families, and *taxpayers* who pay for it all.
- **In the United States**, Texas textbooks influence a disproportionate share of the market because Texas adopts textbooks statewide (as opposed to letting districts or schools decide). Texas and California (another statewide adopter) purchase the most textbooks, but California's standards are so particular that their books typically do not serve other states. Texas, on the other hand, has in the past used books with rather generic and inoffensive content (some would say "dull," others "politically correct"). Texas further permits publishers to place Texas-specific content in sidebars, marginalia, and

appendices; then publishers simply remove the Texas features and resell the same bland text in other states. Exact figures are probably unknowable, but estimates for the use of the Texas core-text range from 45-85% of the American public school textbook market. In America's free enterprise system, the textbook market provides incentives to publishers who can create a textbook that meets the needs of the most buyers in the cheapest possible manner.

Who is Involved in this Process?

- The TEKS are prepared by the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE) and become law after three readings because the state legislature granted the SBOE statutory authority.
- The **SBOE** is an elected 15-member board that (with the commissioner of education) oversees public education in Texas. Board members represent roughly equally populous districts of the state and serve 4-year terms; one of them is appointed by the governor to serve as chair. *The SBOE has sole authority to expand, change, and edit the TEKS*; all other participants make recommendations at the request of the SBOE.
- Throughout 2009, the SBOE solicited the **advice** of over a dozen subject review committees (composed of school teachers, university professors, and citizens), six expert reviewers (4 university professors and 2 ministers), and the general public. Despite soliciting advice, the SBOE retains all power to edit and adopt the final version.
- Several **non-profit groups** have been lobbying the SBOE, including the Liberty Institute, the Texas Freedom Network, the Texas League of United Latin American Citizens, and the United Farm Workers of America.
- **Journalists** and **commentators** have analyzed and discussed the process in state, national, and international media outlets, including the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Dallas Morning News*, and the *Austin American-Statesman*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Huffington Post*, *Business Week*, *Fox News*, *MSNBC*, *Comedy Central*, and media outlets from the United Kingdom to New Zealand.
- **Public response** was solicited formally by the SBOE in fall 2009 and is once again being solicited through May 19, 2010. Additionally, many people have posted their reactions on *YouTube*, *Facebook*, and online comment sections accompanying media coverage.
- In the **state legislature**, the Mexican American Legislative Caucus and the Texas Conservative Coalition have made oral and written statements about the process.

Is the Process Over Yet?

- The SBOE posted its final draft on June 25, 2010.
- The Mexican American Legislative Caucus has threatened to challenge passage of inadequate standards and held their own hearing about the proposals.
- The new TEKS will be implemented in public schools in the fall of 2011.
- Textbooks based on the new TEKS were to be in public schools in the fall of 2013.

What Errors are Circulating in Coverage of the Process?

- *Texas is revising its textbooks.* Texas is revising the standards that will guide the selection of textbooks, but the debate over specific textbooks will not occur until 2011.
- *Texas will eliminate everything before 1877.* Education officials in North Carolina made that attempt earlier this year, but quickly backtracked after public outcry. Texas treats U.S. history to 1877 in 8th grade and U.S. history since 1877 in 11th grade.
- *Texas will remove Thomas Jefferson.* Jefferson has been removed from a list of figures influencing 18th-century revolutions (10th grade world history) but he remains in the treatment of the American Revolution (8th grade U.S. history).
- *Texas will remove César Chávez, Christmas, Veteran's Day.* All three remain in the latest draft of the TEKS. One of the expert reviewers criticized Chávez so the labor leader was moved from 3rd grade to 11th grade but he was never entirely removed; in the second draft of the TEKS, the world history review committee proposed studying one theologically significant holiday from major world religions and chose Easter for Christianity, but Christmas was quickly restored after public outcry; Veteran's Day was added to the first draft in three places and has not been removed.
- *Critical thinking skills are under attack.* Actually, they have been largely ignored. From 1998 through the fourth draft of revisions, the TEKS have been overwhelmingly occupied with identifying a laundry list stuff that students should know. Instead of considering skill acquisition or development, the TEKS feature a generic list of "skills" that is essentially copied and pasted from year to year.
- *The SBOE is chaired by a conservative activist named Don McLeroy.* McLeroy (R-College Station) is an openly-activist conservative and he did serve as chair until May 2009, but the current chair is Gail Lowe (R-Lampasas). McLeroy remains a member of the SBOE until his term expires in January 2011.
- *The SBOE has politicized the process.* Technically, the process is political. SBOE members are elected and the TEKS are passed into law by the state legislature. As in other levels of government in America, distribution of powers are politically contested. Over the past few years, the Texas state senate has stripped the SBOE of some of the powers it previously had; in the March 2010 primary elections, candidates ran against incumbent SBOE members because of the current social studies process (McLeroy lost his primary election); and the democratic candidate for governor in the fall 2010 election has already begun to blame incumbent Governor Rick Perry for the current social studies controversies. However, the 15 people currently serving on the SBOE will serve through the completion of the TEKS revision process; 10 of them are Republicans, 5 are Democrats.