

U.S. History: Our Worst Subject?

Bill Number:

Hearing Date: June 30, 2005, 3:00 pm

Location: SD430

Witness:

James Parisi

Rhode Island Federation of Teachers & Health Professionals

Field Representative

Testimony

Good afternoon Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Dodd and members of the subcommittee. Thank you for this opportunity to speak on how the American History Achievement Act (S. 860) can help to strengthen the teaching of American history and civics.

My name is Jim Parisi. As a staff member of the Rhode Island affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), one of my assignments has been to serve on the state delegation to both congressional conferences on Civics Education. As a result of these conferences, Rhode Island has begun working to ensure that all of its students are educated in state history and the principles of democratic government.

Unfortunately, my state has a long way to go in this regard. As you know, the most recent NAEP assessments suggest that American students are less proficient in American history than in any other core subject. Given the essential civic mission of our schools, how can this be?

One reason is suggested by a 2003 study from the Albert Shanker Institute, a nonprofit institute dedicated to promoting inquiry and discussion of educational policy issues and named in honor of the late president of the AFT. This report, *Educating Democracy: State Standards To Ensure a Civic Core*, evaluates all state history, civics, and social studies standards for the secondary grades to determine their worth for educating democratic citizens. That is, viewed as a whole, do the standards embody a common core of learning that equips citizens to make informed decisions – and are the required topics clear, concise, and teachable in the fewer than 180 days a year that are typically available for classroom instruction?

The results were mixed. The report found that only 24 states met or partially met the criteria for specifying a “civic core” within their standards. But not one of the 48 states in the study had written a document that had both a clear focus on democracy education and was teachable in the limited time schools have available. I say 48 states because two states, Iowa and my own state of Rhode Island, do not even have standards in these essential subject areas.

As the report suggests, the work of setting standards –deciding what is most important and what is less important or not important for students to learn – is crucial. So what should be in a civic core curriculum? The late Paul Gagnon, the noted historian and education scholar who authored the study, put forward some concrete suggestions.

According to Gagnon, “Political education requires mastery of the fundamentals of civics – the principles and workings of federal, state, and local government, of the law and court systems, the rights and duties of citizens, and how the United States Constitution and its resulting institutions and practices are like and unlike those of other societies. But to sustain the principles, institutions, and practices of democracy, citizens need to understand why and how they came into being, the conditions that allowed them to be established, as well as the ideas and forces that have been supportive or destructive of them over time.” In other words, they need to have a working knowledge of U.S. history and a basic knowledge of world history.

We are doing what we can to rectify the lack of standards in Rhode Island. Bipartisan legislation has been introduced in our state Legislature that would require our State Board of Regents to adopt standards in civics and Rhode Island history. The Senate version of this bill was amended to give the regents until Aug. 31, 2007, to accomplish this important task. This bill has widespread support in the state, and we are hoping to see it passed this year.

Mr. Chairman, by introducing S. 860, both you and Senator Kennedy sent a clear message that good standards are vital because they are the foundation for teaching and learning in every school. But having them and using them are different things. Among its other findings, the Gagnon report noted that only 12 states actually say that schools are required to teach, and students are required to study, the content defined by state standards. In 18 states, the existence of statewide tests for history or social studies at least implies that most students are required to learn this content. So, good standards matter. But good assessment matters, too.

I believe that S. 860 could be of great benefit in the creation of high quality civics and history tests. The more frequent administration of the NAEP assessment in U.S. history would provide a more accurate picture of student achievement and help to draw public attention to the progress – or lack of progress – in this area. It might help, as well, in bringing some focus and clarity to the question of what constitutes an essential civic core of learning. The funding of state-level pilot assessments is also vital.

State departments of education have a limited capacity to develop and implement any more assessment programs. Although state and federal accountability requirements have placed increasing demands on state education agencies, these agencies around the country are losing staff as a result of state budget constraints. The May 11, 2005 edition of Education Week had a front-page article on this phenomenon. For example, over the past two and a half years, California has lost 200 employees. Michigan has had a three-quarter reduction in staff over the past decade. Indiana’s staff has been reduced from 400 to 260. In my own state of Rhode Island, the professional staff of the state education department has dropped from 95 to 50 in recent years.

Clearly, if states are to develop high-quality assessments, federal assistance will be needed. By funding these pilot programs, quality models could be developed for all other

states to emulate. And the existence of such testing programs also would help mitigate the tendency of No Child Left Behind and other accountability measures to narrow the curriculum toward reading and math and away from the humanities, arts and social sciences. In education, getting the basics right is important. But neither can we forget that, since our nation's birth, the prime reason for free public education in a common school has been to nurture politically perceptive, committed citizens.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for the chance to talk about this important issue from the perspective of teachers. I welcome any questions that members of the committee may have about my statement.