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Less Lincoln, more religion in class?

Proposed revisions to social studies curriculum could ruffle feathers

By **GARY SCHARRER**
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AUSTIN — Biographies of Washington, Lincoln, Stephen F. Austin? Not fit reading material for children in the early grades.

Cesar Chavez? Not worthy of his role-model status.

Christianity? Emphasize its importance.

Such suggestions are part of efforts to rewrite history books for the state's schoolchildren, producing some expert recommendations that are sure to inflame Texans, no matter their political leanings.

The State Board of Education expects to start discussing new social studies curriculum standards this week, with members of the public getting their first opportunity to speak this fall and a final board vote next spring.

The process is a long one with lasting impact: reshaping the social studies curriculum, including history, for 4.7 million Texas public school children.

"This is something that every parent would want to be paying attention to. This will determine whether or not the kids get the education needed to succeed in college and jobs in the future," said Dan Quinn of the Austin-based Texas Freedom Network. "If we are going to politicize our kids' education, that will put our kids behind other kids when they're competing for college and good-paying jobs on down the road."

Curriculum standards are updated about every 10 years; the last social studies update came in 1997.

According to a preliminary draft of the new proposed standards, biographies of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Stephen F. Austin have been removed from the early grades, said Brooke Terry of the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

The early draft, which is likely to change multiple times in the coming months, also removes Independence Day, Veterans' Day, and anthems and mottos for both Texas and the United States in a section on holidays, customs and celebrations, she said.

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Six experts appointed

The State Board of Education has appointed six experts to review existing social studies standards, which will influence the new curriculum. Two of them have recommended that migrant farm labor union leader Cesar Chavez, who died in 1993, be removed as an example of a significant model for “active participation in the democratic process.”

“Chavez is hardly the kind of role model that ought to be held up to our children as someone worthy of emulation,” said Peter Marshall, head of Marshall Ministries.

Role of Christian faith

Another expert reviewer, David Barton, said: “Cesar Chavez may be a choice representing diversity, but he certainly lacks the stature, impact and overall contributions of so many others; and his open affiliation with Saul Alinsky’s movements certainly makes dubious that he is praiseworthy”

Alinsky influenced the Texas Industrial Areas

Foundation, a number of church-based groups that help give low-income Texans a voice and a role in democracy. Those groups include The Metropolitan Organization in Houston.

“Cesar Chavez was one of those great historical figures that struggled for better wages and working conditions of America’s farm workers so that they and their families could enjoy a better future,” said Irene Jimenez, a TMO executive board member.

Marshall, one of the expert reviewers, also recommends that school children get a better understanding of the motivational role the Bible and the Christian faith played in the settling of the original colonies. He provided multiple examples of early Americans parlaying their biblical views into the communities and governments they established — beginning with the Pilgrims who risked their lives in coming to America.

“In light of the overwhelming historical evidence of the influence of the Christian faith in the founding of America, it is simply not up to acceptable academic standards that throughout the social studies (curriculum standards) I could only find one reference to the role of religion in America’s past,” Marshall said in his review.

One of the reviewers also suggested that the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall be removed from history books on grounds that he is not an appropriate example as a historical figure of influence. Thurgood Marshall was the NAACP lawyer who won the landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme court school

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