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National History Standards:

Genuine Concern or Political ideology?

The controversy over National History Standards first erupted in 1994, when a new national strategy for improving the quality of public schools and raising the expectations for academic excellence was proposed by NCHS, the National Center for History in the Schools at the University of California Los Angeles. While many other countries have been known for their strict national curriculums, the U.S. has always placed education at the state level, and the proposed change to 31 national standards organized into 10 eras proved to be a change that many were unwilling to accept[[1]](#footnote-1). The standards were written and reviewed by members of the public, classroom teachers, academics, and various historians over a period of two to three years.

The original standards were part of a “national movement to invigorate schools with new academic guidelines and goals;” suggestions for what all students should know about history based on their grade level[[2]](#footnote-2). Critics, during the time when the standards were still being written, argued that these standards wouldn’t help the real problems of education, such as the lack of funding and overcrowding in public schools. And others like Chris Pipho, spokesman for the Education Commission of the States, asked “Will national standards matter? They probably won’t change much because they’ll have to reflect what states are already doing. It could be more of a political gesture that won’t make much difference down at the schoolhouse level.”[[3]](#footnote-3) While this was a legitimate question at the time, the arguments would indeed shortly become highly politicized, and what was meant to be a small change became a public controversy.

Supporters of the National History Standards defended their position, saying that the intentions of the standards had been largely misrepresented by the media and that they were in actuality meant to be voluntary suggestions. The original standards, later to be revised, contained over 2000 example lessons of what should be taught that were meant to be helpful guidelines for teachers. Gary Nash, a history professor at UCLA who was extremely influential in the writing of the standards, said “This was never supposed to be a bible for teaching history, just an important guide. We know schools have to do a better job in this subject. It’s clear that kids aren’t learning much right now.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Many hoped that the implementation of the standards would help teachers create lesson plans that would not only help students succeed academically, but also encourage them to think critically and creatively, wanting to know more about history.

When the first publication of the standards was released in 1994, conservatives accused the standards of having a liberal bias, as well as a “[marginalization] of Western civilization.”[[5]](#footnote-5) But it wasn’t just the content of the standards that had conservatives speaking out against the proposal; people like Lynn Cheney were very vocal about keeping the control over education at the state level where it had always been. Cheney also argued that it would be harmful for students if these changes were enforced when there was no evidence that the standards would be effective, while other more localized strategies like “whole language” programs have already been proven successful.[[6]](#footnote-6) The genuine concern for education that had prompted the standards had now become an “ideological war between conservatives and liberals over whose vision of the nation will reign in the classroom.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

The NCHS took all the criticisms into consideration and spent the year of 1995 revising the standards. The sample lessons, which had made up over half of the original proposal, were removed as they were the main cause of most of the criticism and had been labeled as too biased. It was the examples more than anything that had led people to believe that the plan called for a national curriculum, rather than suggestions meant to help teachers. Diane Ravitch, a research professor at New York University stated in an article published in 1998 that, “the overall effort to develop national standards became hopelessly hobbled by partisan politics in Washington,” and “This is more or less where matters stand today: a standoff, an uneasy silence, a controversy that has left the headlines but not the hearts and minds of those who were in the trenches on both sides.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Though the controversy has died down considerably since the revision of the National History Standards proposal, there are still aspects of the standards that spark debates not only among politicians but among teachers and parents as well, namely the idea of standardized testing. Diane Ravitch said in a 1996 interview that, “The problem now may be one strictly of perception. This became such a political fiasco the first time, it may be hard now to get people to really pay attention.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Meanwhile, while politicians argue over whose view of history should be taught in schools, the old and largely ineffective ways of teaching history are being continued. Some schools throughout the country have even reached the point where the lack of academic success in social studies has led them to stop teaching real history at all.

One opinion on what really caused the criticisms of the standards in the first place stems from the rise of social history. This idea has been made public by Gary Nash, in an article from the *Journal of Social History*:

The attention to social history over recent decades has no doubt raised new questions, not the least of which is the problem of developing master narratives to take the place of the narrowly constructed and distorted mega-stories of the past…The rise of social history has ended forever any single interpretation or completely unified picture of American history – or, for that matter, of any national history.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The standards would change not only how history is taught but also content, and what perspectives of history should be taught. In many ways the controversy over standards is just another example of the tensions that exist between continuity and change, and how the fear of change can cause people to resist something that could be beneficial in the long run. Though National History Standards may not be the answer to education reform, the problem of students not receiving a good education in history is still prevalent in much of the country.

The National History standards first proposed in 1994 have unsuccessfully attempted to unite the country in improving its educational standards, but that doesn’t mean that standards-based reform cannot work. Politicizing the education system instead of being genuinely concerned on a personal level has merely wasted everyone’s time, and the problem of how to successfully encourage learning and academic achievement among students still remains. An interesting suggestion concerning how to satisfy both the state and federal levels came from Robert Schwartz and Marian Robinson in an article published in the year 2000: “A national education strategy has to be driven by the states, working in conjunction with a wide variety of nongovernmental national organizations. It may be awkward, inefficient, messy, and from an international perspective, irrational, but it seems to be the way Americans do education.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

The solution to educational reform, if in fact there can be one existing solution, will have to come from a place of real concern for the impact that education has on our society as a whole. There may yet be potential to keep education at the state level while simultaneously being able to increase academic expectations and success. However, change is inevitable, and fortunately or unfortunately we have not seen the last of proposals for national standards. History is not black and white and should not be taught that way, and so arguably the solution for how to teach history in the future will not be an issue of right versus wrong, but rather of finding a way to deal with the interpretative nature of the past.

1. Editorial, “Maligning the History Standards,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 13, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rene Sanchez, “History Curriculum Guides that Conservatives Criticized May Be Revised,” *The Washington Post*, Jan. 14, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sandy Banks, “National School Standards are Goal for ‘90s [Home Edition],” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 24, 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rene Sanchez, “Revised Teaching Standards Shift Historical Emphasis,” *The Washington Post*, April 3, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rene Sanchez, “History Curriculum Guides that Conservatives Criticized May Be Revised,” *The Washington Post*, Jan. 14, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lynn Cheney, “Whose National Standards?” *Wall Street Journal*, April 2, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hugh Dellios, “Conservatives Won’t Give National History Standards Passing Grade Final Document Called ‘Editorializing,’ More State Control Sought,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 3, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Diane Ravitch, “The Controversy over National History Standards,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences 51*, no.3 (Jan/Feb. 1998): 19-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rene Sanchez, “Revised Teaching Standards Shift Historical Emphasis,” *The Washington Post*, April 3, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gary B. Nash, “The History Standards Controversy and Social History,” *Journal of Social History29*, Special Issue (1995): 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Robert B. Schwartz and Marian A. Robinson, “Goals 2000 and the Standards Movement,” *Brookings Papers on Education Policy* (2000): 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)