

Introduction to the Forum: Standards in World History

World historians largely reject Eurocentric approaches to history by embracing a global approach to course content focusing on connections and exchanges across time and space. But this can lead to a multitude of organizational frameworks and an even greater diversity of content selection. There is no consensus vision amongst world historians for what content, organization, scope, sequence, or interpretive framework is optimal for a world history education. The vibrancy of the field of world history is therefore in tension with the bureaucratic process of K-12 education in the United States, in which every state produces mandated guidelines known as standards that legally enforce a particular vision for world history education. This forum explores the conceptual, political, and practical questions that arise from the production of state standards.

Despite the headline-grabbing attention that controversies over standards can easily generate, we should perhaps start by exploring the extent to which these documents directly affect the teaching of world history. At a recent panel in the Midwest History Association conference on the subject of Difficult Histories, I asked veteran world history teachers Tom Barker and Eileen Orzoff-Baranyk about the effect state standards had on their day-to-day teaching styles.¹ They both replied that, though they of course drew upon state standards, their teaching was much more informed by their own expertise and background on the subject. Indeed, they suggested that unless there was a statewide standardized test or a district common assessment on the subject, standards documents are difficult to enforce. This accords well with research from educators, which indicate that teachers can be resistant to sweeping changes in how they do their work.²

These perspectives suggest that we should not overestimate the extent to which state standards dictate actual teaching practice. Nevertheless, I argue that despite their limited enforceability, standards matter a great deal in American K-12 education. Veteran teachers with a wealth of experience and content knowledge in world history may know and be able to incorporate best practices in the discipline, but novice teachers

often do not have such advantages. Research suggests that teacher education programs only rarely require the study of world history, so teachers may have no formal training beyond their own secondary education on the subject.³ They may therefore rely more on standards documents as a guide to course design. The selection of instructional materials is also often based on their adherence to state standards. Standards documents are also important as they formally endorse a particular way of looking at the past. This is especially meaningful in the subject of social studies, which is often seen as a key site for citizenship formation.

While states had recommended curricula and guidelines throughout the twentieth century, moral panic surrounding the supposed failures of American education during the 1980s spurred on a move to aggressively assert control over K-12 curricula, leading to standards documents that were more rigid and proscriptive than in the past.⁴ Production of state guidelines often privileged political actors with little or no content expertise. Though scholars and educators usually play a significant role in the process, social studies standards creation and revision processes offer regular opportunities for political actors to wage battles in the American culture wars. World history scholars may be familiar with the imbroglio over the National History Standards in the mid-1990s, during which the work of scholars was widely condemned, including by the United States Senate.⁵

Unfortunately for the burgeoning field of world history, the movement towards more proscriptive standards emerged simultaneously with the creation of the World History Association (1983) and the formal organization of world history as an academic discipline. World historians championed their vision for a more inclusive and accurate global history with an organizational structure that was very inclusive of K-12 teachers from the outset. But though they successfully lobbied for this vision within the National History Standards project, the political firestorm that emerged significantly blunted their impact.⁶

Susan Douglass begins the forum with a panoramic view of the state of world history standards since the controversy over the National History Standards project. Importantly, Douglass focuses on the overall interpretive frameworks for standards documents rather than on the minutiae of content selection, which dominate headlines but matters much less in practice. Douglass identifies the primary interpretive frameworks that have been used over the past quarter century. Disappointingly, though the traditional and Eurocentric model is no longer dominant across the United States, the eras model, which most accurately represents world history scholarship, is the basis for only about a third of U.S. states in 2022. Douglass' results demonstrate that, despite the stunning success of the *Advanced Placement World History* curriculum over the last two decades, world historians have still only had a limited impact on curricula across the country.

While Douglass focuses on national trends and the lack of attention to interpretive frameworks, Lauren McArthur Harris and Brian Girard provide suggestions for how these documents might be improved to provide helpful guidance to teachers. A common criticism of standards documents is that they contain disconnected lists of names, dates, and events. These lists obscure historical significance and meaning by providing little sense of how content information should be organized. Harris and Girard argue that the inclusion of educative features could make standards documents significantly more useful for teachers. These elements could include rationales for content inclusion, suggestions for teachers, or other textual information that provides a background on what is included and why. Educative features may increase the size of standards documents, but they could also increase their usability.

The next two articles analyze what standards documents leave out. Tamara Shreiner's article explores how historians from prominent world history journals used data visualizations, including graphs, charts, or other visuals. She found that professional historians often utilize these types of visualizations to provide context, supplement textual evidence, and more easily illustrate meta-concepts. As historians increasingly engage with the digital humanities and with big data projects, the ability to make sense of data visualizations may in fact become even more significant. But though some state standards documents include the use of data visualizations as evidence, they only rarely encourage the ability to engage with and critically interpret these types of sources. A key takeaway for historians and educators is a need to include training in data visualizations in future standards revision processes.

Kathleen Ferrero set out to study the teaching of current events in contemporary world history classrooms. She feared that the lack of emphasis on the social studies, evident in both the No Child Left Behind and Common Core movements, would result in the loss of meaningful instruction on current events. Ferrero's survey of veteran world history teachers demonstrated, however, that current events are being taught, largely because teachers believed it imperative to connect the past to the present in their classrooms. But the inclusion of current events is happening because teachers utilize sources other than state standards as they develop their world history courses. Perhaps the National Council of the Social Studies' *C3 Framework*, with an emphasis on active citizenship, might encourage even more engagement with current events in the future.

The Forum next provides three case studies of scholars who actively participated in recent standards revisions processes. Ross Dunn discusses changes to world history education in California in 2017. He distinguishes between the California History-Social Science Framework, which provides an overall governing rationale for the standards, and grade-by-grade standards based on that framework, which provide more specific content guidance. The California Framework was originally created in the 1980s, when world history was still in its infancy as an organized academic discipline. It organized world history education around a multicultural approach still rooted in a Eurocentric

vision of history. For the revision process concluding in 2017, the California legislature approved and funded an overhaul of the specific grade-level Framework without simultaneously funding a wider revision of the overall standards. So, although educators were able to utilize numerous insights from the cutting edge of world history, they were unable to alter the organizational paradigm of the 1980s Framework, which continues to shape what California students learn about the world.

David Fisher next provides an analysis of the ‘streamlining’ process for the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) in 2018. Fisher focuses on the process by which revisions were made, concluding that politically motivated interference from Texas’ State Board of Education (SBOE) diminished the overall quality of the Texas standards. While educators made a number of suggestions rooted in a clear understanding of best practices in the discipline, members of the SBOE were able to arbitrarily make changes that increased the gap between the TEKS and historical scholarship. Nevertheless, Fisher argues that the work of educators was still vital in this process. Decisions of the SBOE to alter state standards were centered on a few particularly controversial issues, but other changes that improved the standards were left intact by the SBOE.

The last of the case studies is my own contribution to this volume, which explores South Dakota’s controversial 2021 standards revision process. This revision process took place within a politically charged context where Governor Kristi Noem stridently opposed the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and ‘divisive concepts’ in schools. After a Standards Revision Work Group made their recommendations, the South Dakota Department of Education unilaterally re-wrote significant portions of the state standards. Most controversially, they removed numerous references to South Dakota’s Indigenous peoples, the Oceti Sakowin Oyate. This unprecedented action by the state government led to a furious controversy. Governor Noem ultimately threw out the 2021 standards altogether, largely because of pressure from conservatives who argued that ‘woke leftists’ had taken over the process. Instead, the Governor created a new process for 2022, one in which South Dakota educators were marginalized and political appointees were overrepresented.

Three broad conclusions emerge from these case studies. First, state politics very often move standards farther out of alignment with the best practices of scholarship. Secondly, in various ways each of these case studies reveal that standards creation processes are resistant to broad or sweeping changes, even when most educators and content knowledge specialists consider such changes to be necessary. In other words, there is an inertia to past standards decisions that limit what can be done in the present. As scholars and educators, we should expect sweeping conceptual and content changes to be rare occurrences. Instead, it is more reasonable to expect incremental improvements. Finally, each of the case studies indicate that the inclusion of teachers is absolutely vital if any improvements in the organization, content selection, and quality

of standards can be expected. Indeed, the South Dakota case indicates that marginalizing teachers can have disastrous effects on the standards creation process.

When taken together, the articles in this Forum present numerous avenues for further research and provide suggestions for world historians and educators to get involved moving forward. Hopefully, the Forum will inform the world history community about current developments in the creation and revision of state standards in the United States. To that end the last contribution to the Forum is a database by John Maunu offering a wealth of freely available sources. These sources are divided into several easily searchable categories, providing numerous options for diving deeper into the topic.

While educators and historians are limited by the political environment in which standards are made, the articles in this Forum suggest that there is still much to be done to improve the state of world history standards in the United States. I'll therefore conclude this Forum introduction with suggestions from David Fisher on the many ways in which world historians can be active and influential participants in standards revision processes. They can become knowledgeable about local standards policies and procedures, speak at public hearings, provide state departments of education with concrete proposals, and participate formally in standards revision processes. Let's get to work.

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Notes

¹ Tom Barker and Eileen Orzoff-Baranyk, “Panel 5.3: Techniques for Teaching Difficult Histories,” Midwest History Association Conference, Grand Rapids, Michigan, September 24, 2022.

² Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890-1980* (New York: Longman, 1984).

³ See Deborah Smith Johnston, “World History Education,” in Marnie Hughes-Warrington, ed., *Palgrave Advances in World History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2005) 256-278.

⁴ For more on this, see Linda Symcox, *Whose History? The Struggle for National Standards in American Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).

⁵ See Symcox, *Whose History?*; Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

⁶ See Susan Douglass’s contribution to this Forum for more on the state of world history in standards since the National History Standards controversy.