

## *Original Paper*

# Current Issues within the U.S. History Curricula

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### ***Abstract***

*North Carolina recently implemented new social studies standards for each content area. However, there has been some controversy over whether the standards truly represent U.S. History and racial equity. However, opponents argue that this makes the U.S. History too political and includes topics that are too sensitive for students. As the population of the United States increases in diversity, it is essential that students are exposed to diverse perspective within their history lessons.*

### ***Keywords***

*North Carolina, U.S. history, critical race theory, the 1619 project*

## **1. Current Issues within the U.S. History Curricula**

Within North Carolina, students are exposed to some form of U.S. history in each year of their K-8 schooling, except for the first, sixth, and seventh grades. At the high school level, curricula are not consistently confined to grade levels among the districts but require students to take the same four history classes: world history, economics and personal finance, U.S. history, and civic literacy. Thus, not every high school in North Carolina requires their students to take world history their freshman year.

During high school, students taking world history learn about countries outside of the U.S. All other years require students to learn about the local community, the American identity, the state of North Carolina, the U.S. government, or the history of the United States as a whole. Thus, since students are learning about U.S. history, in some capacity, for much of their K-12 education, one may assume that this allows students to learn about its diverse history in-depth. In reality, however, this topic is consistently left out of history curricula while many others are consistently taught.

## **2. Literature Review**

In 2021, North Carolina implemented a new set of standards for each history curriculum. This was done to ensure that each curriculum includes more diverse perspectives, in order to honestly represent the history of the U.S. (Walkenhorst, 2021). In general, those who did not vote in favor of the new standards

believed they did not accurately represent the United States' "progress toward racial equity" (Walkenhorst, 2021, para. 2). One of the major differences between the previous standards and the recently adopted ones is that specific groups are directly within the new standards and students are "asked to compare narratives of different perspectives, critique systems and practices or explain how inequities continue today" (Walkenhorst, 2021, para. 5). For example, the author states that students now compare perspectives on topics considered to be sensitive, such as the trail of tears or the Wilmington race riots (Walkenhorst, 2021).

Teaching U.S. history "in public schools has always been political" (Waxman, 2020, para. 4). This means that, despite changes in the standards, true changes may not be made as to how and what history is taught. Currently, there are at least two policies to help improve the diversity of the U.S. history curriculum: the 1619 project and critical race theory. Both are being heavily debated by politicians, school districts, and members of society, as both have been labeled by many as anti-American (Walkenhorst, 2021; Strauss, 2020; Waxman, 2020). Regardless, a curriculum that centers the varying perspectives of U.S. history may be useful to students of today's diverse population.

### **3. Data**

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2021) collected data in 2018 on the U.S. history assessment, testing 16,400 students in the eighth grade across the United States. Students were tested on this assessment within the scope of U.S. history related to themes, time periods, and ways of knowing and thinking (National Assessment Governing Board, 2018). According to Strauss (2010), the NAEP is the most consistent and "representative measure of U.S. student achievement since the 1990s" (para. 2).

Between 2014 and 2018, the scores for the U.S. history exam have decreased within each percentile by at least three points. In addition, scores decreased among the reported White, Black, Hispanic, male, and female subgroups. It is important to note that no data is reported for the 2018-2019 or 2019-2020 school years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which canceled many state exams and limited many students' access to education. Additionally, this data set does not report scores year-to-year, rendering it near impossible to discern how social movements have affected the scores. This means, based on this specific data set and the years it reports, it cannot be concluded how events, such the national uprising after the death of Eric Garner in 2014, truly affected U. S. history lessons that were subsequently taught or how students responded to them.

### **4. Discussion/Recommendations**

Students are part of an increasingly diverse population within the United States, yet they are not seeing that diversity reflected within their curriculum, despite the new standards (Walkenhorst, 2021). This may be because teachers are reluctant to change their style of teaching and what they are teaching in order to address all the new standards within their curriculum. It could also be because some teachers may not

have enough experience or resources to effectively implement the curriculum changes. Therefore, in order for the new social studies standards to be effective, the following recommendations should be considered:

- The curriculum should be consistently revised to support the new history standards.
- Districts should create a team to establish and distribute curriculum materials so that the standards are effectively taught.
- Teachers need to receive adequate training on the new curriculum and resources to ensure they implement them effectively.
- There should be constant check-ins to ensure teachers are successfully implementing the lessons and receiving feedback on how the lessons may be improved.

These suggestions will ensure that students are exposed to a U.S. history curriculum that adequately addresses the cultural society issues. In addition, with the added teacher supports, such as trainings/workshops, teachers will be able to effectively implement a curriculum that is positively inclusive for all of their students. This recognition could lead to more positive student-teacher relationships, an increase in student engagement within the classroom, and more growth in student scores.

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