

# The Virginia NEWS LETTER

## The Development of Virginia's History and Social Studies Standards of Learning (SOLs), 1995–2010\*

by Stephanie van Hover, David Hicks, and Jeremy Stoddard

What do schoolchildren need to learn, how do they learn best, and who should decide? This is a long-running debate, with a new movement underway led by the National Governors Association to set rigorous national standards for learning math and English. Virginia's struggle to set history and social studies standards over the last fifteen years offers an informative lesson in the complicated process of constructing standards at the state level—and how teachers and students have learned to adapt to them.

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published a provocative report, *A Nation at Risk*<sup>1</sup>, which excoriated the educational system in the United States by arguing that a “rising tide of mediocrity” and plummeting student achievement threatened the foundations of the nation. This report, which captured the attention of the public and policymakers, sparked a chain of events that have ultimately led to today's current emphasis on curriculum standards, high-stakes testing, and accountability.

Virginia was at the forefront of this movement through the efforts of Republican Governor George Allen, who took office in 1993 and initiated a controversial standards-based reform effort that included three key components:



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(1) creating rigorous standards and measuring those standards through aligned high-stakes assessments;

(2) rating schools and reporting school and district performances, and

(3) revising the standards of accreditation for schools and creating consequences for schools that failed to perform adequately.<sup>2</sup> As part of this reform effort, the state revised its social studies standards in a contentious, divisive and politically charged process that ultimately resulted in the development of standards of learning for history and social science.

The struggle to craft these standards offers an informative case study about the ideologies, arguments, negotiations and compromises that ultimately influence what is being taught and learned in social studies classrooms in Virginia. This article builds upon and is informed by other works that have examined both state and national standards and curriculum movements.<sup>3</sup> This piece focuses explicitly on the initial drafting (1995) and subsequent revisions (2001, 2008). It is a story that reveals the difficult process of determining what knowledge is of most worth and resolving competing beliefs about how children best learn.

### The 1995 History Standards

In May 1994 Governor Allen established the Champion Schools Commission, a 49-member committee comprised of political appointees.<sup>4</sup> He charged this group with a number of educational reform efforts, among them the development of

\*This analysis is based on a recent journal article by the authors, “From a Roar to a Murmur: Virginia's History and Social Science Standards, 1995–2009,” *Theory and Research in Social Education*, (2010) 38(1), pp. 80–113.



*“[Lillian Tuttle, chairperson of the Commission’s Academic Standards and Testing Subcommittee] ...rejected the 1980s version of the Virginia social studies standards that followed the popular ‘Expanding Horizons’ model at the elementary level that taught about self/home, families, neighborhoods, communities, states, country and world.”*

rigorous and measurable academic standards.<sup>5</sup> Lillian Tuttle, chairperson of the Commission’s Academic Standards and Testing Subcommittee, took a special interest in the drafting of the social studies standards. Influenced by the work of educators Diane Ravitch and E.D. Hirsch, Tuttle called for rigorous, academic, discipline-specific standards.<sup>6</sup> She rejected the 1980s version of the Virginia social studies standards that followed the popular “Expanding Horizons” model at the elementary level that taught about self/home, families, neighborhoods, communities, states, country and world. This curriculum model had been adopted by most states, was used in elementary textbooks, and was viewed as something of a *de facto* national elementary social studies curriculum.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, at this point, the Virginia Department of Education had already selected four school divisions (Fairfax County, Virginia Beach City, Prince William County, and Newport News City) to revise and develop rigorous, concise and jargon-free standards. Newport News had led the revision of the social studies standards and decided to maintain the Expanding Horizons framework. At a meeting between the Newport News group and the commission, it became evident that the two groups held opposing beliefs regarding the scope, sequence and nature of the standards.<sup>8</sup> The commission rejected any mention of or reference to Expanding Horizons, reaffirmed its commitment to discipline-specific content-based standards, and made fundamental changes to the standards. In an effort to overcome the apparent ideological divide between the two groups, State Superintendent of Public Instruction William Boshier, who was vice chairman of the commission, reportedly had writing teams try to “meld the school districts’ revisions with the commission’s.”<sup>9</sup>

### The “January Draft”

A draft of the standards reflecting the commission’s viewpoint was produced. In a newspaper article, a person on the Newport News standards team was quoted as commenting “the product the [Newport News] social studies writing team submitted and what was later issued for public review were like apples and oranges.”<sup>10</sup> This draft, the “January draft,” organized the K-3 elementary standards by discipline (history, geography, civics/government, and economics), followed by content-specific stand-alone courses in grades 4-12—Virginia studies, U.S. history to 1877, U.S. history after 1877, civics and economics, world history to 1500, world history 1500 to the present, Virginia and U.S. history, and Virginia and U.S. government. The Virginia Board of Education released

them for public comment in March 1995 without officially endorsing the standards.

The public turned out in force at a series of hearings for all of the content standards, but the most vociferous debate revolved around the language arts and social studies standards.<sup>11</sup> Opponents argued that the social studies standards were politically-driven, ill-founded academically,<sup>12</sup> and “bowed to conservatives and ignored the views of professional educators.”<sup>13</sup> In terms of content, critics argued that the standards presented a narrowed /myopic view of history that omitted “references to multiculturalism and promoted rote memorization that might produce stellar ‘Jeopardy’ players but fell short of preparing students for skills needed in the 21st century work force.”<sup>14</sup> The standards, it was argued, also contained factual inaccuracies and a complete absence of historical thinking skills.<sup>15</sup> Although generally outnumbered in most meetings, supporters of the standards did attend the hearings, lauding the decision to go “back to the basics” and accusing opponents of being scared of “rigorous, measurable standards.”<sup>16</sup>

In April 1995, the Virginia Board of Education acknowledged that the debate over the social studies standards “had become too ideologically polarized” and withdrew the proposal for consideration.<sup>17</sup> The board subsequently called for the formation of a task force to fashion new standards in social studies.<sup>18</sup> The task force was comprised of members of the Board of Education (including Lillian Tuttle), public school teachers, college faculty, curriculum specialists, representatives of professional organizations, business leaders, parents and interested citizens.<sup>19</sup> In a series of heated and contentious meetings, the standards were swiftly revised and a draft submitted to the Virginia Board of Education for consideration in time to meet the June deadline.

### Standards Are Approved

The Virginia Board of Education, on June 29, 1995 unanimously passed a motion that approved the Standards of Learning for History and the Social Sciences, in principle, subject to further revision.<sup>20</sup> A four-person editing committee comprised of board members (two Democratic and two Republican) was charged with “combing the document for historical accuracy and clarity and to polish it.”<sup>21</sup> The final document reflected the commission’s vision of discipline-specific standards for grades K-12. The controversial K-3 standards were divided by discipline (history, geography, civics and economics). The standards required kindergarten students to study famous Americans and major holidays. In grade 2, the contributions of

ancient Egypt and China as well as various tribes of American Indians were covered. Greece and Rome, the discovery of the Americas, exploration, and the settlement of Jamestown were introduced in Grade 3. The standards for grades 4-11 were organized chronologically and provide specific lists of ideas, events and people.

### Many Different Reactions

Reaction to the final version of the 1995 standards was uneven. In a series of editorials, Dan Fleming, a professor emeritus in social studies education at Virginia Tech, unpacked and critiqued the revised standards, describing them as weak, ethnocentric and suffering from content overload/inappropriate content at the elementary grade levels.<sup>22</sup> Lamenting the heavy emphasis on the ancient world and early U.S. history at the expense of the modern world, Fleming suggested this was largely the result of “slipshod curriculum design and editing,” and “not surprising, considering that many of the SOLs were written by members of the State Board of Education working in haste.”<sup>23</sup> While contending that there was little evidence to support the rhetoric of widespread teacher participation in the standards revision process, he summarily challenged the abilities of those responsible for writing them, noting that “politically-appointed board members writing detailed objectives is comparable to members of a hospital board performing brain surgery.”<sup>24</sup>

Discussions regarding the standards were not confined to the state itself. An article in *Education Week* quoted education scholar Diane Ravitch as saying that “the Virginia standards, especially in history, have gained favor among parents because of their clarity and rigor... parents really want their kids to learn history [and] are fed up with the social studies approach.”<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the author observed that “the history portion has been mocked by critics as nothing more than a game of ‘trivial pursuit’ in which students are crammed with names, dates, and other facts with no real understanding of the relationships among them.”<sup>26</sup> The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) recognized Virginia as the only state with “exemplary standards” in the core subjects.<sup>27</sup> And, in an assessment of 37 state history standards for the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, David Warren Saxe gave Virginia’s SOLs a grade of “A” describing them as “exemplary. . . clearly written, measurable, and descriptive of what is to be taught and learned...based on chronology, reflect solid and warranted history, keep history in context, avoid presentism...avoid the promotion of dogma and refrain from manipulation of student attitudes.”<sup>28</sup>

The Virginia Board of Education, following the adoption and implementation of the Standards of Learning subsequently developed an assessment program (the SOL tests) and revised the Standards of Accreditation (SOAs). The SOAs, approved in September 1997, created high stakes of Allen’s reform program by stipulating that 70 percent of a school’s students must pass the SOLs for a school to become (and remain) accredited.<sup>29</sup> Schools had a three-year grace period—that is, the first three years of implementation, schools below the 70 percent pass rate would be accredited with warning, but starting in 2006-2007, those schools would lose accreditation. The 31-page document also outlined graduation requirements; under the new guidelines, students were required to earn 22 credits and pass six SOL examinations for a “standard” diploma and to earn 24 credits and pass nine SOL examinations for an “advanced” diploma. School performance report cards were also part of the revised SOAs.<sup>30</sup>

### Implementation—and Dismal Results

The *History and Social Science Standards* were implemented in schools in the Fall of 1995. By 1996, despite in-service training offered by the Virginia Department of Education, school divisions were overwhelmed with the cost of new textbooks, training for teachers teaching new content, preparing new curricula, developing practice tests, and constructing pacing guides.<sup>31</sup> Despite this situation, field tests took place in the spring of 1997, and the first official testing took place in spring of 1998. In history, tests at the end of the course were un-timed and solely made up of four-item, multiple-choice items that emphasized fact recall of content included on the standards.

The initial test results were dismal, particularly in history. Across the board, social studies scores fell well below the established cut scores—for example, 70 percent of students failed the high school U.S. history test and 67 percent failed the fifth grade history exam.<sup>32</sup> School officials protested that these low scores were to be expected, given the huge content change in elementary school and the fact that, at this time, the high school tests didn’t count for anything. In response to the weak performance on the history SOLs, the Department of Education announced production of “grade-level implementation resource documents,” published in July 1999 designed to explicitly identify the essential understandings, questions, knowledge and skills for the teaching of history.<sup>33</sup> This document, in conjunction with the nature of the assessment, helped to narrow the teaching and learning of history as teachers began to teach *only* the content listed on the

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amplification document since that content would appear on the end-of-course tests. The test scores rose slowly but steadily over the next few years.

### The 2001 Revisions

The Virginia Board of Education, in September 2000, established a review and revision timetable—a seven-year cycle for each content area. *The History and Social Science Standards of Learning* would be up first, due in part to the low SOL scores and continued dissatisfaction with the content of the standards.<sup>34</sup> While less controversial than the 1995 process, the 2001 revisions did generate considerable discussion and debate about what to include, what to exclude, and how to address controversial issues in history. The revision committee cut the number of standards, simplified the language, and made the standards more specific. Additionally, the task force made some content changes. For example, in grade 3, the West African Empire of Mali was added to the standards, while Jamestown was deleted. Civil War personages were moved from early elementary grades into the U.S. history to 1877 course. And, the committee edited the names of historical figures listed in the standards.

The revised standards were released in November 2000 for public comment. The public hearings were not as well attended nor as heated as in 1995. Yet debate swirled around the revisions, particularly regarding the issues of historical “names.” One parent, for example, criticized the review committee for “trading historical figures like baseball cards.”<sup>35</sup> Other critiques included accusations of too much or too little attention to diversity; too little or too much content; avoidance of controversial issues; and not enough attention to the Civil War.<sup>36</sup> The media jumped on the “name” issue, gleefully publishing lists of “who is in” and “who is out.”<sup>37</sup> And, the revised standards also attracted criticism at the national level. David Warren Saxe, who had rated the 1995 standards as exemplary, described the revised standards as a serious setback to the teaching of history in Virginia, in part due to the elimination of 62 percent of historical figures in the standards.<sup>38</sup> The revised standards, following additional changes and debate, were ultimately approved by the Virginia Board of Education on March 23, 2001.<sup>39</sup>

The Virginia Department of Education published a revised “grade level enhancement” document, now entitled *History and Social Science Curriculum Framework*.<sup>40</sup> It also provided a number of additional resources for teachers: enhanced teaching charts, test blueprints, instructional materials and web sites. As a result of the revised standards, revised tests, and lower cut scores (in

conjunction with a teaching force more adept at test preparation), the traditionally low social studies pass rates rose sharply in spring 2004.

### The 2008 Revisions

In January 2007, the Virginia Board of Education initiated a review of the 2001 *History and Social Science Standards of Learning*. The process, compared to the events of 1995 and 2001, proceeded smoothly, under the radar, with very little controversy. The recommendations shifted the division of the two U.S. history courses from 1877 to 1865; replaced all references to B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini) with B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and C.E. (Common Era); and added and deleted some “names.” This time, the “name game” attracted no media attention. The Virginia Department of Education solicited feedback through its web site and a series of public hearings. This time, the public hearings did not garner any newspaper coverage. At a board meeting, the feedback from public comment was summarized by a Virginia Department of Education social studies coordinator. Main areas of concern included the repositioning of the Civil War and Reconstruction into U.S. history part II; the amount of content in the standards; the lack of attention to women, Latin America, contemporary leaders and events; and inclusion/exclusion of certain historical events and people.<sup>41</sup> The Virginia Board of Education approved the 2008 standards on January 10.

### Reflection: The Standards, 1995-2010

Over the last 15 years Virginia social studies educators and the families of children in Virginia’s schools have experienced first-hand the impact of the standards and accountability movement that has continued to grow and gain momentum across the nation. The case of the history and social studies standards in Virginia clearly reveals the impact of policy implementation in a number of ways.

First, the initial furor and criticism highlights the fundamental difficulty in codifying and representing historical knowledge because the decision-making process about what knowledge is of most worth—what our children need to learn—is a value-laden, complex, political process that rarely pleases everybody.

Second, the development of standards recounted in this article reveals how the rhetoric of standards-based instruction, high-stakes testing and accountability surrounding policy implementation has now seeped into the very fabric of schools within Virginia, one of the first states to jump on the standards bandwagon.

Subsequent responses to changes and adjustments to the history and social studies of learning have paled in significance compared to the anger of 1995. What appears to have happened is that within Virginia we are now seeing a new landscape emerge, where success as a history and social science teacher is aligned with how well students do on multiple-choice tests. State accreditation of schools rests with how well students do on such tests and teachers know that the content of these tests is clearly laid out in scope and sequence documents. Test scores in history and social science have increased and most schools are accredited by the state.<sup>42</sup>

Why would history and social science teachers continue to question the standards and subsequent revision if they and their students have figured out how to pass these tests? Subsequent revisions mean little and an acceptance of the standards—and the knowledge that is worth knowing and worth testing by basic multiple choice tests—makes sense in an era where in many other states the discipline of social studies is actually losing its foothold in the curriculum because of the impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) which tend to crowd out other subjects. In fact, organizations like the National Council for the Social Studies are currently lobbying for social studies to be included in NCLB.

Early this year, the influential Diane Ravitch added a new twist to the ongoing story.<sup>43</sup> An advocate for accountability, standards, and testing whose work formed part of the foundation for the standards movement in Virginia and across the nation, Ravitch once gave her approval of Virginia's history and social science standards. However, while many of the critics in Virginia of the initial standards and tests have gone quiet, Ravitch is now raising concerns and questions about the impact of national and state standards and the burgeoning testing movement. In a recent interview with the radio commentator Diane Rehm, Ravitch suggested that the high stakes environment at the national and state level may well be “dumbing down kids and lowering standards.” She argued:

What I have found, and I think most people have, is that the state scores are going up because first of all because the states are engaging in what I call the fraudulent lowering of their standards—so we are dumbing down the standards and at the same time children are getting higher scores because they are being taught to take tests... We've turned schools into places of drudgery

where all the kids are doing is learning the rubric and all this very technical stuff about if you get this kind of a question you eliminate this question and these two bubbles and you are left to choose between those two bubbles.”<sup>44</sup>

It is ironic that a person who is so often connected with the standards and accountability movement may well become the touchstone for re-igniting important questions and debates at the state and national level about the nature and direction of state and federal educational policies with regard to what it means to educate children, not just in history and social science, but across the curriculum. It will be interesting to see what happens next, in Virginia and the nation, as the conversation and debate over national standards heats up and President Obama moves forward with his educational agenda.

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