

## POLICY NOTE

# Forming engaged citizens: How to strengthen civic knowledge, open-mindedness and democracy in Washington public schools

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education

November 2022

### Key Findings

1. Public schools are failing to teach basic civics and U.S. History.
2. Washington's Social Studies standards lack subject matter content, inhibiting student learning.
3. These weak standards have allowed radical left-leaning activists to promote false academic content from radical Critical Race Theory (CRT) ideology.
4. The CRT approach promotes distrust and division within communities, which in turn leads many students to hate their own country.
5. Producing ill-informed, isolated and disaffected citizens is not the goal of a healthy public education system, and dangerous to our democracy.
6. Students need access to a non-partisan civics curriculum that is true, high-quality and essential to living in a democracy.
7. A national model, The American Birthright, provides a curriculum with the full and accurate history of America.
8. Students deserve to know their country was founded upon the humanitarian ideals of individual rights and liberty for all, not to promote the institution of slavery.

### Introduction

National research finds that public schools are failing to teach students basic civics and U.S. history, leaving young people ignorant about their own country and ill-equipped to participate as free citizens in the practice of self-government and modern democracy. This harmful trend is particularly strong in Washington state, where public officials have in the past and continue to weaken learning standards for children assigned to the public schools.

In 2019, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation conducted a 50-state survey of 41,000 Americans and found that only 27 percent of those under age 45 could demonstrate a basic understanding of American history.<sup>1</sup> Washington ranked 30th in this survey, revealing it as one of the worst states in the nation in teaching basic civics to children.

Foundation president Arthur Levine says the study:

“...validates what studies have shown for a century: Americans don’t possess the [historical] knowledge they need to be informed and engaged citizens.”<sup>2</sup>

A major reason Washington ranked so low in this national survey is the state’s weak Social Studies learning standards.

Washington’s Social Studies learning standards do not provide teachers the facts, names and events students are expected to know from U.S. and Washington state history, economics, civics and geography. The content vacuum created by these weak learning standards inhibits student learning.

Worse, the weak standard allows radical left-leaning activists to promote false academic content from radical Critical Race Theory (CRT) ideology. Political activism inserted into what is supposed to be a non-partisan curriculum blocks students from accessing civics knowledge that is true, high-quality and essential to living in a democracy.

1 “Woodrow Wilson Foundation finds only one state can pass U.S. Citizenship test,” by Woodrow Wilson Foundation, press release, February 15, 2019, at <https://woodrow.org/news/one-state-pass-us-citizenship-exam.../>.

2 Ibid.

## Creating a meaningful civics standard in schools

A meaningful civics standard is needed to provide Washington's students with a full understanding of the founding of America, and of the historic story of the American people to "create a more perfect union." A national model, "The American Birthright, the Civics Alliance's Model K-12 Social Studies Standards," provides such a model.

The American Birthright standards were written for governors, lawmakers, school boards, grassroots activists, and for every American citizen. It is a model, not a set structure, which provides facts and content which teachers can use to ensure that children:

"...continue the work bequeathed to us by the Founders, to establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity."<sup>3</sup>

The standards were developed by the Civics Alliance, a national coalition of organizations and citizens convened by the National Association of Scholars. The Civics Alliance includes established historians like Victor Davis Hanson, state associations of scholars, professors of history, non-profit educational organizations, foundations and activist education groups from around the country.

## Washington's Social Studies lack subject matter content

State learning standards are important and influential. They are used to guide school districts and teachers in the creation of their courses. These standards also influence the curriculum, what textbook authors write, and the content which testing companies include in the exams that students must take.

Over time the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has significantly lowered the quality of social studies and civics learning in public schools. The policy change started in 2011, when OSPI imposed the weak Common Core standards in English and math.

In 2019, OSPI ordered low-quality social studies standards following the Common Core model, which stress "student skills" over teaching actual facts and content.

For example, the social study policy tells teachers to achieve "Enduring Understandings," a vague concept drawn from Common Core. This standard is intended to help teachers "target content for more effective instruction" by defining "the big ideas that provide focus for both students and educators."<sup>4</sup>

3 "American Birthright; The Civics Alliance's Model K-12 Social Studies Standards," The Civics Alliance, page 33, at <https://civicsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/AmericanBirthright.pdf>.

4 "Washington State K-12 Learning Standards for Social Studies," by Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, September 2019, page iv, at [https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/standards/OSPI\\_SocStudiesStandards\\_2019.pdf](https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/standards/OSPI_SocStudiesStandards_2019.pdf).

Instead of gaining knowledge, public schools have children spend time on process:

“In our rapidly-changing world, where ideas, information and opinions are but mouse-clicks away, students more than ever need to learn how to keep learning in order to cultivate sound understandings.”<sup>5</sup>

According to this approach, the proper role of the teacher is not to provide students with truth and information, but to tell them how to organize “big ideas” to “keep learning in order.” Such an approach leaves students in ignorance about the subjects they study, and deprives them of the ability to think clearly about any given real-world topic, such as math, English, geography, science or literature.

In another example, for U.S. History OSPI’s Social Studies guidance says students are supposed to learn the “Key ideals and principles of the United States, including the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and other foundational documents.” Yet very little is provided in the form of specific content in teaching these ideals, with no reference to major concepts and moral principles that inform democratic government. Students do not learn that the U.S. was founded by Christians fleeing religious persecution in Europe; instead the current guidance mentions “tribe” or “tribal” 75 times.

In World History, teachers are told that students should, “Analyze and interpret historical materials from a variety of perspectives in world history (1450-present),” and “to develop an understanding of the roots of current world issues.”<sup>6</sup> There is no content detail to help teachers design courses in World History, and no defined facts that students should know to understand the world around them.

### **The harm imposed by Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

In May 2021 Governor Inslee signed SB 5044, to require Critical Race Theory in teacher training in order to introduce this divisive race concept in public schools. In October of 2021, OSPI published the Ethnic Studies Framework, in the spirit of the race-based program called for by the new law.

OSPI guidance provides that its focus is the “dismantling of white supremacy” and that teachers and students are required to “...critique racial oppression at the institutional, interpersonal, and internalized levels while also showing how each level influences the other.”<sup>7</sup> The focus of CRT is not to convey truth and knowledge to students, but to promote ideas of race identity and powers, as illustrated by the program’s official graphic.”<sup>8</sup>

5 “Washington State K-12 Learning Standards for Social Studies,” by Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, September 2019, page 49, at [https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/standards/OSPI\\_SocStudies\\_Standards\\_2019.pdf](https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/standards/OSPI_SocStudies_Standards_2019.pdf).

6 History standard H3.9-10.1., “Washington State K-12 Learning Standards for Social Studies,” by Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, September 2019, page 95, at [https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/standards/OSPI\\_SocStudies\\_Standards\\_2019.pdf](https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/standards/OSPI_SocStudies_Standards_2019.pdf).

7 “Ethnic Studies; Ethnic Studies History and Pedagogy,” Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, page 6, at: <https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/EthnicStudies/EthnicStudiesHistoryandPedagogy.pdf>.

8 “Washington State Ethnic Studies Framework: Supporting the Teaching of Ethnic Studies in K-12,” by Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, page 7, at <https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/EthnicStudies/WashingtonEthnicStudiesFramework.pdf>.

## The Framework

### The Framework



The Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee created the Washington State Ethnic Studies Framework to provide districts and educators a clear entry point for engaging in Ethnic Studies. The Framework is intended for use across grade levels and disciplines. It is not intended to be a lesson or unit plan; rather it draws on the best practices for placing student wellbeing at the center of classroom instruction. The Framework contains four domains: Power, History, Identity, and Civic Action through which students and educators incorporate Ethnic Studies. It should be noted that

Ethnic Studies Framework also introduces Critical Race Theory ideas in the areas of English, History, Social Studies, Math, Science, The Arts, Health, Physical Education and Technology.<sup>9</sup>

Seattle Public Schools uses the state Ethnic Studies Framework to tell students CRT concepts such as:

“Power and oppression, as defined by ethnic studies, are the ways in which the United States government was founded on racist intellectual premises and economic practices that institutionalized oppression of people of color that continues to the present day.”<sup>10</sup>

The CRT approach to civics used in Washington public schools not only induces students to despise their own country and discourage participation in democracy, it directs student time away from knowledge content in order to focus on issues of contemporary politics.

National education experts point out that many of the pedagogical theories used in Washington state public schools are actually harmful to student learning. These detrimental theories encourage students to pose aggressive political questions when they cannot answer simple factual questions:

“Furthermore, we judge that a great many pedagogies actively inhibit student learning, including action civics, so called ‘anti-racism,’ civic engagement, critical race theory, current events learning, inquiry-based learning, media literacy, project-based learning, social-emotional learning, and virtually any

9 “OSPI Standards Alignment with Ethnic Studies,” at <https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/EthnicStudies/EthnicStudiesStandardsConnections.pdf>

10 “Seattle Public Schools, U.S. History Ethnic Studies Framework,” at <https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/pubdocs/US%20History%20SDS%20ES%20Framework.pdf>

pedagogy that claims to promote ‘diversity, equity and inclusion’ or ‘social justice.’<sup>11</sup>

These teaching ideologies block student access to content knowledge and instead promote distrust and division within communities, which in turn leads many students to hate their own country. Producing ill-informed, isolated and disaffected citizens is not the goal of a healthy public education system.

## **The American Birthright civics standard**

In contrast to the harmful ideas conveyed by the Ethnic Studies Framework and CRT, an alternative learning standard, The American Birthright provides students with a more constructive, knowledge-based learning. The standard provides that:

“...American students should comprehend aspects of American government such as the rule of law, The Bill of Rights, elections, elected office, checks and balances, equality under the law, trial by jury, grand juries, civil rights and military service.<sup>12</sup>

It further provides that students should learn about the founding principles of the United States, the structure of our self-governing republic, the functions of government at all levels, and how key institutions work.<sup>13</sup>

The American Birthright standards cover the four core disciplines of History, Geography, Civics, and Economics. Under these topics, the standards cover seven primary themes: Liberty, Faith and Nations, Science and Technology, Economics, State and Society, Culture, and Achievement.

The standard ensures students learn in-depth content knowledge they can carry with them for a lifetime. Learning content is matched to appropriate student age level, as follows:

- Pre-kindergarten—Kindergarten Learning to be an American
- Grade 1—Tales of Liberty
- Grade 2—Our Country and its People
- Grade 3—American and State Geography and History
- Grade 4—North American Geography and Introductory Civics
- Grade 5—Colonial and Early National American History
- Grade 6—World Geography

11 “American Birthright: The Civics Alliance’s Model K-12 Social Studies Standards,” by The Civics Alliance, July 2022, page 25, at <https://civicsalliance.org/american-birthright/#:~:text=The%20Civics%20Alliance%2C%20a%20coalition,K%2D12%20Social%20Studies%20Standards.&text=State%20standards%20are%20the%20single%20most%20influential%20documents%20in%20America’s%20education%20system>.

12 Ibid, page 4. at <https://civicsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/AmericanBirthright.pdf>.

13 Ibid.

- Grade 7—Economics
- Grade 8—Ancient and Classical Mediterranean Civilizations
- Grade 9—The Development of Western Civilization
- Grade 10—World History
- Grade 11—United States History
- Grade 12 –Civics

Each chapter provides students with age-level facts, names, events and concepts that contribute to being an educated person. For example, second-graders learn about the U.S. Capitol, the White House, the U.S. Supreme Court, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Booker T. Washington, Rosa Parks, the Declaration of Independence, and the U.S. Constitution.<sup>14</sup>

Critics say rigorous civics standards seek to “whitewash” the evils of history. This is not true. The American Birthright civics program introduces students to content knowledge of:

- European overseas colonialism and the global growth of empires;
- European debates about the morality of slavery;
- Comparison of historical forced-labor regimes, including Muslim slavery, European serfdom, African slavery, American Indian slavery;
- The abuses of monarchies and the fight for individual liberty and the growth of democratic systems;
- The moral ideals contained in the Declaration of Independence and the writings of key founders like Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Roger Sherman.

To promote independent thinking the civics standards introduce students to primary source documents like Thomas Paine’s influential pamphlet “Common Sense,” Martin Luther King’s moving “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” and Abraham Lincoln’s insightful “Second Inaugural Address.”

Students are urged to read from the actual materials of history, and not just textbook interpretations, so students can broaden their minds by forming their own opinions.

## Conclusion

In Washington state parents and the general public expect local elected school boards to exercise responsibility in selecting civics curriculum materials to educate children living in their districts. Most “anti-racist” and “inquiry-based learning” social studies programs in use today fail to provide the knowledge content students need.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



**Liv Finne** is the Director of the Center for Education at Washington Policy Center. She is the author of *An Option for Learning: An Assessment of Student Achievement in Charter Public Schools*, which in 2011 reignited the charter school debate in Washington state. She wrote “*Why parents will love charter schools,*” “*Why teachers will love charter schools,*” and many other publications during the 2012 public debate on Initiative 1240, the nation’s first charter school initiative. When charter schools came under attack from the state teachers union, she wrote “*Analysis: Why the state supreme court ruling against charter schools is wrong.*” She is also the author of Washington Policy Center’s widely-read education blog, and of Washington Policy Center’s Education Reform Plan: *Eight Practical Ways to Improve Public Schools*. Liv holds a law degree from Boston University School of Law and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Wellesley College. She retired from civil litigation practice to raise two children and work as business partner for a small business she owns with her husband.

*Washington Policy Center is an independent research organization in Washington state. Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body.*

*Published by*  
Washington Policy Center  
© 2022

**washingtonpolicy.org**  
**206-937-9691**

High-quality models like the American Birthright standard provide the knowledge content that parents, teachers and school board members can use to prepare students to participate successfully in our modern democracy. The American Birthright standards are clear, understandable, rigorous and lead students to original source documents.

These standards show how our system of government is designed to preserve democratic self-government and protect equal citizenship rights. They teach students to admire the humane ideals on which the country was founded, despite the times when Americans failed to live up to these ideals. Most importantly, a strong-content civics program shows students that the national goal and core birthright of Americans is freedom.<sup>15</sup>

Policymakers at the state and local level should act to improve student knowledge of social studies and civics. Replacing Washington’s current weak Social Studies standards with the American Birthright standards would significantly increase student knowledge of history, economics, civics and geography across our state.

---

<sup>15</sup> “American Birthright: The Civics Alliance’s Model K-12 Social Studies Standards,” by The Civics Alliance, July 2022, page 18, at <https://civicsalliance.org/american-birthright/#:~:text=The%20Civics%20Alliance%2C%20a%20coalition,K%2D12%20Social%20Studies%20Standards.&text=State%20standards%20are%20the%20single%20most%20influential%20documents%20in%20America's%20education%20system.>