

Comments on HSB714—It is extremely disappointing, but unfortunately not unexpected, that I am again having to comment on extremely flawed piece of educational legislation. Having read the almost identical legislation two years ago, the curriculum on the CivicsAlliance.org website from which it was taken, and this new iteration of the legislation, I am saddened and frightened for our children. This legislation is not about educating the children of Iowa. It is about denying them access to the learning and knowledge that will best prepare them for a world that is increasingly more dangerous in almost every way. This legislation is like the blinders put on the bridles of draft horses. The blinders may have let the horses feel safe, but only because they couldn't see any of the dangers that might harm them.

The irony of the CivicsAlliance.org website and this legislation is that it purports to be nonpartisan or nonpolitical, as if it speaks of some divine truth about Western Civilization, the United States, and Iowa. I don't use this word lightly, but this legislation is about indoctrinating our students to mindlessly and blindly adhere to some sense of national pride based on a cherry-picking of the history of Western Civilization, the United States, and Iowa. The statement on page 3 lines 12-13—"The study of and devotion to the United States' exceptional and praiseworthy history."—makes it plain that the legislation is not about educating students but about indoctrinating them. I have to wonder how students are supposed to show their "devotion." The documents identified and which are to be taught over and over and over again touch on a small portion of the debate over what our has been, is, and will be. Note that the latest document specifically identified is the Emancipation Proclamation from 1863. The important documents of our national canon did suddenly stop being produced 162 years ago.

The new requirement for units of instruction at the high school will completely eliminate the teaching of World History, Economics, Sociology, Psychology, and Geography in Iowa's high schools. Students wanting to pursue careers in criminal justice will not have access to course work that could get them started on that path. Students in the 8th grade will get a dose of economics, but the focus at that level seems more concerned with contrasting market systems to communist systems, as if communism as an economic system survived the 20th century. This fixation on bashing communist systems is beating a horse that has been dead for over 30 years. It would be more reassuring if our legislators did not seem so firmly fixed on fighting the battles of the last century and were more attentive on the battles that are ahead of us.

The denial that our students need to know any of the world's history beyond the Western traditions is most disturbing. It implies a return to 19th histories that claimed only the "Aryans" had accomplished anything of any merit, with a small shout out to the Semitic peoples for monotheism. This blindness to the merits and accomplishments of civilizations from around the world and which have contributed in innumerable ways to our present achievements is extremely concerning. Should we abandon all contributions of non-Western civilization as well

as all knowledge of their histories? If so, we could start with the base 10 number system and the Arabic numerals that originated in India. We can give up paper, a technological innovation from China, and printing, an innovation that originated in Korea. How do we separate the achievements of the European Scientific Revolution from the preceding centuries' work by the scholars in the Islamic world or South Asia? Which words should we eliminate from our language? What instruments? What foods?

But the denial of the history of the rest of the world is also a denial of the histories of the students in our classrooms. Family stories that originate anywhere but the West are voided by this legislation. Read the list of what is valued in this curriculum, and the message is clear. Overwhelming white and overwhelming male are the historical actors and the history that matters, but of course teachers won't be able to say that because HF802 muzzled them on the issues of racism and sexism. But whether identified explicitly or not, the void will be noticed by the students who do not see themselves represented at any point in this curriculum.

In a world that is more interconnected and interdependent than at any other time in human history, lacking knowledge of the world and the histories of the countries in it will put Iowa students at an enormous disadvantage. Imagine trade delegations to China or Japan or South Korea to sell our agricultural products. Knowledge of one's trading partners would seem essential for successful trade negotiations, but I don't think the Lincoln-Douglas debates will be helpful in negotiating with a Chinese delegation intent on maintaining and building their nation's status and wealth. As an employer, who would want to hire an individual who had no facility with global politics or economics, much less the history of the world.

Maybe the most ironic part is the inclusion of requirements to teach about the Holocaust and antisemitism because both were a product of the Western Civilization that students are supposed to honor and revere. Antisemitism grew out of the Christian church's need to separate itself from the Jewish belief system, and European history from the time of the Roman empire to the present is punctuated with violence and discrimination against Jews, from the Crusaders destroying Jewish communities on their way to the Holy Land to mob violence during the Black Death to the pogroms that arose out of the 19th century nationalism to the present day attacks on synagogues like the one in Jackson, Mississippi last month. I wonder how to maintain students' "devotion to the exceptional and praiseworthy history of the United States" while explaining that the Nazis studied the U.S.'s Jim Crow system and segregation laws to develop their own system of segregation and legalized discrimination against Germany's Jews.

From a pragmatic position, the documents and content required by this legislation will be challenging to teach. On the one hand, current teachers may not have the knowledge and skills necessary to make some of these documents comprehensible to their students. And on the other, the students will likely find the language of these documents extremely challenging, and

they are likely to question the relevance of this material to their lives today. If you haven't picked up Thomas Paine recently, here is just a taste of "Common Sense:"

Society in every state is a blessing, but government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one: for when we suffer, or are exposed to the same miseries by a government, which we might expect in a country without government, our calamity is heightened by reflecting that we furnish the means by which we suffer. Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built upon the ruins of the bowers of paradise. For were the impulses of conscience clear, uniform and irresistibly obeyed, man would need no other lawgiver; but that not being the case, he finds it necessary to surrender up a part of his property to furnish means for the protection of the rest; and this he is induced to do by the same prudence which in every other case advises him, out of two evils, to choose the least. Wherefore, security being the true design and end of government, it unanswerably follows that whatever form thereof appears most likely to ensure it to us, with the least expense and greatest benefit, is preferable to all others.

<https://americainclass.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Common-Sense-Full-Text.pdf> (Accessed 11 February 2026)

Paine's "Common Sense" is first required in 5th and 6th grades and then repeated in middle school and in high school. George Washington's Farewell Address is 10 pages single-spaced, with equally dense language. Only excerpts of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* have to be used, but which excerpts from his two-volume work should be used?

In the Western Civilization requirements, I admit to being baffled by some of the requirements. With an undergraduate degree in history, 40+ graduate credits in history, and 25 years of teaching World History, I have no idea what "the Christian synthesis of those Greek, Hebrew, and Roman sources that emphasized the equal dignity of all individual humans in the eyes of God" might refer to. I do, however, think it sounds like proselytizing and not teaching history when it requires students to accept there is a God and that the Christian belief system is the basis for this idea. This statement is not about the historical development of the Christian belief system. This statement implies belief in Christianity and its God.

From an educational perspective, what strikes me about this legislation is that it is a list of topics, like a checklist for students to know. What does "knowing" this content mean? The unwritten standard for most of the 20th century for most students in history courses was knowing the material long enough to take a test. What research in social studies education and the science of learning has shown is that students learn best when content is organized around questions and inquiries. This is the same reason that the Next Generation Science Standards, on

which Iowa's science standards are based, center on scientific inquiry. Students learn better when they are answering important and challenging questions. What important and challenging questions does this legislation ask of students? To show their devotion? To give their blind allegiance to a tradition, a country, and a state?

I most sincerely hope that enough legislators will do what is right for our students and the future of our state to vote this legislation down.