

March 11, 2024

Dear Senators Green, Quirnbach, Rozenboom:

HF 2544 would severely undermine the integrity of history and social studies education in Iowa's public schools. This legislation directly encroaches on the authority and expertise of the members of the Iowa State Board of Education, sidestepping statutory minimum requirements for the educational program and bypassing the state's mandated process for developing social studies standards. The American Historical Association urges you to reject this attempt to replace this thoughtful process with politically inspired standards that will weaken Iowa's public K–12 education to the detriment of Iowa's students.

Iowa's protocols for creating social studies standards draw on insights from both professionals and relevant public stakeholders. In his Executive Order 83 (2013), Governor Terry Branstad initiated a multistage process for the revision of academic standards to allow ample opportunity for public scrutiny and input. In 2017, the State Board of Education adopted revised K–12 Iowa Core Standards in Social Studies. Owing to pandemic-related delays, implementation is still ongoing. Throughout this process, Iowa Department of Education staff have incorporated input from committees of educators, academic historians, parents, and a variety of community stakeholders. This democratic process, which emphasized contributions from a wide range of Iowans, accords with guidelines from the American Historical Association, the National Council for the Social Studies, and other leading professional organizations.

The education system in Iowa is built around respect for local and district-level priorities. HF 2544 proposes to sidestep this well-established process for curriculum development to impose dramatic changes in mandated content, adding so many new requirements as to leave little room for substantive focus on state and local concerns. If enacted, this measure would disrupt the implementation of Iowa's current academic standards. The result is likely to disorient Iowa teachers and do a disservice to Iowa students, all while elbowing Iowans out of their own educational policymaking.

To what end? The text of the bill cobbles together clauses copied from five separate pieces of politically oriented model legislation, all originated by a coalition of education policy activists headquartered on Madison Avenue in New York City. HF 2544, for instance, insists that fourteen historic sources—some of them quite lengthy—must *all* be included in the program of study for fifth and sixth grade. Seems fair enough. But this list is copied verbatim from a bill designed for *undergraduate college* students in other states. The lengthy list of American role models is lifted entirely from model legislation as are most of the other clauses in this hodgepodge of a bill. A few added references to Iowa are insufficient to tailor these generic templates to the precise needs of the state's students. HF 2544 leaves no room for input from teachers, administrators, historians, or parents.

By not following its own mandated (and appropriate) processes, Iowa does a disservice to its students. As the AHA has documented through our extensive work on career preparedness in history classrooms, the aspect of history education employers value most is students' ability to communicate with and understand people from different backgrounds. The elision of world history from this extensive list of social studies requirements—insisting instead upon a much narrower emphasis on Western civilization—would greatly diminish the career preparedness of Iowa's students. This, too, contradicts the Iowa Code's requirement that "global perspectives shall be incorporated into all levels of the educational program" (Iowa Code Section 256.11). At a time when Iowa should be offering its students the best and broadest educational opportunities to stay competitive in the world economy, these standards instead have the potential to hobble students with a parochial worldview and deprive them of the chance to become tomorrow's global leaders.

Content aside, the curriculum presented in this legislation is simply impractical. Although Iowa's Educational Standards legislation (Iowa Code Section 256.11) specifically requires attention to age-appropriate intellectual development of children (as well it should; a teacher's job is hard enough), this legislation sets requirements that bear little resemblance to cognitive development among children. Even the brightest fifth graders will struggle to comprehend *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville or Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. The overwhelming quantity of material enumerated in this new curricular mandate will leave little time and space to contextualize these documents or explore their origins and implications. Good history education helps students learn to explore issues from multiple perspectives.

These flaws and shortcomings are the results of politically motivated efforts to reject established legislative and education policy procedures. This bill is a Frankenstein's monster constructed out of disembodied portions of five out-of-state model bills sharing little more than the support of a small group of lobbyists with an overt political agenda. Iowa has plenty of historians at its first-class public universities to provide the kinds of expertise that this legislation ignores. Instead of turning to language sourced from New York's Madison Avenue, Iowa should consider adopting its own home-grown standards.

With 11,000 members, the AHA is the largest membership association of professional historians in the world, representing every historical era and geographical area. Founded in 1884 and incorporated by Congress in 1889 for the promotion of historical studies, the Association provides leadership for the discipline, helps to sustain and enhance the work of historians, and promotes the critical role of historical thinking in public life. Everything has a history.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James R. Grossman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

James R. Grossman
Executive Director