



January 5, 2022

Dear Social Studies Standards Review and Revisions Committee:

Independence Institute is a free market think tank located in Denver, Colorado. We appreciate the opportunity to provide our feedback to the committee about the recommended revisions to Colorado's Social Studies Academic Standards.

Independence Institute has concerns with many recommendations within the draft document. Our analysis found the following:

- Some terms, such as “religious minorities,” lack definition or clarity. It is unclear if religious denominations of Christianity such as Catholics, Evangelical Protestants, or even Colorado’s small Amish communities or Jehovah’s Witnesses would fall under the banner of religious minorities or if “religious minorities” only applies to non-Christian faiths such as Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, etc.
- Numerous recommendations are clearly age inappropriate and introduce sexual concepts into the classroom at the earliest grade levels.
- Many standards do not coincide with grade-level instruction and sequences, which means students may lack the needed background knowledge and context to engage meaningfully with the topics.
- The Committee has infused critical race theory, or aspects of critical race theory, into the standards.
- Some committee recommendations are framed in such a way as to lead students to certain conclusions or perspectives rather than encouraging them to evaluate historical situations and dynamics on a factual basis and reach their own conclusions.
- Students are encouraged to become participants in political activism, including insinuations of utilizing violence.

**PRESCHOOL AND KINDERGARTEN:**

Preschool and kindergarten recommendations inject inappropriate concepts and topics into the standards. Preschool History Standard P.1.1 states that students should be provided opportunities to “discuss past and future changes affecting families such as immigration, naturalization, marriage, adopting, and cultural and religious rites of passage.” Concepts of immigration or naturalization, as well as religious rites of passage (typically based on age and sexual maturity) are not age-appropriate for preschoolers (typically aged 3-4).

Kindergarten Civics evidence outcomes also indicate age-inappropriate additions. For instance, the committee included in K.4.1 that students can: “Listen and consider the ideas of others while verifying the reliability of the author/speaker identifying the likelihood of the statements” and “Identify credible sources (teachers, books, etc.) to check for accuracy when gathering information.” Civics Standard K.4.2

indicates that a kindergarten student will have the ability to differentiate between “fair, equal, and equitable.”

### **FIRST GRADE:**

In first grade, sexuality and gender identity join race as inclusions in the committee recommendations. It is assumed a child at the age of six has the cognitive ability to fully understand race, sexuality, and religious denominations at the level required to engage meaningfully with these topics. Question 4 of the “Inquiry Questions” under History Standard 1.1.2 for First Grade specifically asks, “How are African American, Latino, Asian American, Indigenous Peoples, LGBTQ, and religious minority cultures different from and similar to one another?”

The first-grade standards (History Standard 1.1.2) also place heavy emphasis on subjects like understanding “people’s lived experiences” including “multiple perspectives on the First Thanksgiving, Fourth of July, Juneteenth, and Cinco de Mayo” In addition to being charged political terms and topics in the modern era, which alone may make them unsuitable for full consideration by six-year-olds, these items go too far into specifics without first laying the correct groundwork. A better approach might be to encourage students to engage generally with the concept of similarities and differences between people and groups rather than forcing that engagement through highly specific and politically challenging lenses like those outlined in the current draft.

### **SECOND GRADE:**

Critical race theorists hold that racism is inherent in the law and legal institutions of the United States, which function to create and maintain social, economic, and political inequalities between whites and people of color, especially African Americans. The theory separates groups into oppressors vs. the oppressed, with a focus on highlighting the abuse of the poor and marginalized at the hands of the wealthy and privileged.

Elements of this theory are evident in the second-grade standards, where Civics Standard 2.4.1 tasks seven-year-olds with recognizing that “voting, representation, lobbying and organizing” are “important to privileged and marginalized individuals, families, and communities.” Those groups referenced as fitting the marginalized criteria are again “African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Indigenous Peoples, LGBTQ, and religious minorities families.”

We take no issue with the idea of second graders receiving basic information about American government and the importance of engaging with our system of representative democracy. In fact, we view the introduction to these topics as a positive approach to early civics education. However, it is important that the standards convey that engagement with government is important to *all* Americans and that *all* Americans have a right and responsibility to be civically involved, not only those fitting the definition of marginalized. Students should be encouraged to contemplate the ways in which American government can provide an equal voice to various groups and act as a fair, structured system through which various individuals, groups, and organizations can pursue their interests. In other words, American government should be treated not as a weapon used against oppressors, but as a way to provide access to the public forum for all citizens, regardless of background.

Second graders must also meet the Civics Standard 2.4.2 “evidence outcome” that they will be able to “analyze ways that diverse individuals, groups, and communities including those of Indigenous, African, Latino, and Asian descent work through conflict and promote social change.” This is concerning given that students of this age would not be able to grasp the concepts of “social change” without a background in American government and governmental processes. The same standard further indicates that second graders should be able to “Identify and give examples of appropriate uses of power and . . .

abuse of power.” No definition is provided as to what constitutes “abuse of power,” leaving open the door to a wide variety of potentially problematic interpretations based on political leanings rather than evidence-based history.

### **THIRD GRADE:**

Third graders are tasked in History Standard 3.1.2 with the “evidence outcome” of being able to “Describe the history, interaction, and contribution of the various peoples and cultures, including, but not limited to, African Americans, Asian Americans, Indigenous Peoples, Latinos, LGBTQ, and religious minorities, that have lived in or migrated to a community or region and how that migration has influenced change and development.” While these elements certainly could be included in historical conversations and studies, third-grade students, who are typically eight years old, likely lack the foundational knowledge to adequately understand and analyze the complex political and social interactions between various groups, particularly across the shifting American historical landscape.

Civics Standard 3.4.1 also contains the concerning addition to “Nature of Skills of Civics” stating “Civic-minded individuals understand that some of the most impactful and necessary changes to institutions have required the breaking of rules and demanding justice, even if these demands are not mainstream and are met with resistance.” This topic is highly complex morally, ethically, and legally. While there are certainly many instances of civil disobedience being positive and producing good outcomes, teaching students that the “most impactful and necessary changes” have required such tactics seems to endorse them generally rather than asking students to evaluate right and wrong when it comes to justice and change in a civilized nation founded upon the rule of law.

For instance, would students feel the same way if those who disagreed with the policies they support simply refused to follow the law? How does one weigh right and wrong in the context of civil disobedience? To what extent do citizens have a responsibility to pursue change through established systems before resorting to extra-legal tactics? Once again, eight-year-olds are likely not equipped to meaningfully have these conversations.

### **FOURTH GRADE:**

Committee additions and revisions to the fourth-grade history standards insinuate that early Colorado settlers were “colonists.” An addition, History Standard 4.1.1 asks students to “Identify and describe the processes [by which] settler colonialism/Westward Expansion . . . altered” the political and cultural landscape of the region presently known as Colorado.” This term should be distinct from the pre-Revolutionary “colonial” period and suggests that westward settlers were attached to colonies rather than to states and territories of the American West.

Additionally, the term “colonial” has taken on a pejorative meaning in the modern political zeitgeist. For fourth graders, who often think in terms of “good guys” and “bad guys,” this term and the surrounding language seem to imply that settlers were, as a rule, on the wrong side of the moral spectrum. Yet, many of those who risked their lives to settle and build the American West as we currently know it came from terribly unprivileged backgrounds, including a wide variety of immigrant and minority communities. The topic of Westward expansion is one full of cultural, social, economic, and political motivations that students ought not miss in favor of a narrower view of how it impacted only certain groups. Certainly, students ought to be taught the negative aspects of westward expansion—of which there were plenty. But they should also engage with the motivations and reasons for that expansion, as well as with how it played into shaping their world today.

This same standard also notes “social and economic decisions” that “caused African American, Latino, Asian American, Indigenous Peoples, LGBTQ, and religious minorities to be relocated in various regions

of Colorado” and the relationship of cause and effect, “such as the confrontation of Indigenous Peoples defending their homelands/way of life from settler colonialism/Westward Expansion . . .” This phraseology infuses critical race theory concepts of the oppressed vs. the oppressor into the standard without mention that many indigenous groups pushed others out of geographic regions.

The standard similarly does not mention the fact that at least some settlers were themselves seeking refuge from discrimination or oppression in various forms in the settled United States—fascinating situations in which the competing interests of various marginalized groups collided. This topic would benefit from a wider, more inclusive lens.

#### **FIFTH GRADE:**

Fifth graders are asked to explain in History Standard 5.1.2 the “interactions among various groups such as Indigenous Peoples, enslaved individuals (both Indigenous and African) and European colonists,” including “the genocide of Indigenous Peoples, chattel slavery of Africans, the League of the Iroquois, Spanish missions, and trade networks.” The use of the word “genocide,” which has a very specific meaning that may or may not match the events in any given location at any given point in American history, is troubling without additional context, as is the exclusion of other forms of slavery or involuntary labor in common practice at the time.

#### **MIDDLE SCHOOL:**

Committee recommendations through middle and high school grow increasingly transparent in promoting critical race theory, particularly in the revisions of the history and civics standards. Under the History Standard 8.1.2 inquiry questions, eighth graders are asked numerous questions that, taken together, could be construed as leading students to the conclusion that the United States was founded on the premise of oppressing marginalized groups rather than on the idea of individuals seeking freedom and opportunity. Furthermore, the questions ignore the discussion of any existing conflict or power dynamics within or between Indigenous Peoples. The inquiry questions include the following:

- How was North American colonial settlement perceived by settlers, governments, enslaved individuals, and Indigenous Peoples, and how did this affect cultural change, oppression, and survival throughout the continent?
- What role did economics play in the establishments and perpetuation of the enslavement of peoples from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onward?
- Who did the Declaration of Independence apply to?
- How did America define itself as a “new” nation in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century?
- How did different groups of people participate in, respond to, and resist Westward Expansion?
- What would the United States look like if the institution of slavery had never been an integral part of the North American economy?
- What role did women, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Indigenous Peoples play in the Civil War?
- To what extent did the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment truly end slavery?
- Which primary documents have had the greatest impact on the people of the United States including but not limited to those from Indigenous Peoples, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans?

Additionally, in Civics Standard 8.4.1 the inquiry questions include the following two questions: How has the development of the American government had an impact on the rights of underrepresented, vulnerable, and targeted groups of people, and how has civic participation for underrepresented, vulnerable, and targeted groups changed over time? While not necessarily bad questions on their own, they are posed only after students have been led to a certain conclusion—in this case, that

representative American government serves as a tyrannical force rather than a place where various groups can find equal footing.

### **HIGH SCHOOL:**

High school students in History Standard 1.2 are tasked with demonstrating they can evaluate “institutional racism” and “legislated racism,” both of which are loaded terms indicative of critical race theory’s postulations that racism permeates in all U.S. government institutions and that both federal and state legislation have historically pitted the powerful U.S. and state governments against weaker, marginalized minorities. While there are certainly instances of such behavior, students of this age would benefit from a well-rounded discussion of the topic that goes beyond political buzzwords and dogma.

From sixth grade on, students are repeatedly tasked to “look for and find value in different perspectives expressed by others.” High school History Standards 1.2 and 1.3 both reference that high schoolers will be versed in “inviting and respecting diverse points of view.” These are laudable goals if applied correctly. However, there is some danger in encouraging students to place “value” on diverse points of view simply because those points of view differ from their own. This approach does not encourage critical thinking and the informed formation of opinions, nor does it take into account that some opinions that differ from the mainstream—for instance, the idea that discrimination is right or acceptable in certain circumstances—require careful consideration morally, ethically, and politically before being endorsed or accepted.

Students in high school are old enough to listen, evaluate, and draw their own conclusions regarding various opinions without a requirement that they find value in them. It has been said that it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it, and that is particularly true for older students who must weigh and evaluate differing perspectives on complex topics for which no obvious “right” answer may exist.

Economics Standard 3.2 also raises concerns, noting that students will “Explore the role of government in dealing with economic crises.” Examples include “rationing, scapegoating, including the incremental dehumanization of minority groups, and mitigating conflict over resources.” These are worthwhile explorations, but they should go further to ensure a more robust discussion about the role of government in upholding or repressing certain populations or interests. For instance, students could, as part of this requirement, evaluate whether and how certain *types* of government can be more or less likely to produce these outcomes—nationalistic socialism as adopted by the Nazis in Germany, the Soviets under Communist rule, the Chinese under Chairman Mao, etc.

The High School Civics Standard 4.1 raises questions about intent, asking “Under what circumstances, if any, is it necessary to act outside of established methods of civic participation?” Misapplied, this standard could be considered a call to violence or a suggestion that, when a court decision or legislation does not produce a group’s desired results, that group is justified in conducting “extralegal” activities. This topic must be approached carefully—especially for students who are experimenting with independence for the first time.

Students are called in Civics Standard 4.1 to “Engage in advocacy at the appropriate level of government for both individual and group rights. For example: African American, Latino, Asian American, Indigenous Peoples, LGBTQ, and religious minorities.” We agree that students can and should engage thoughtfully with government at the appropriate level on the issues they care about. However, it’s important for the standards to adequately reflect that this engagement is necessary and important to *all* Americans, not just those who fall within the narrowly defined groups listed above.

## **CONCLUSION:**

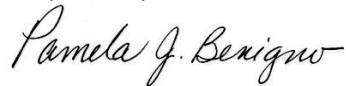
Independence Institute believes that United States history should be taught in full and that well-taught students should be able to synthesize strong, evidence-based conclusions from factual teaching. The proposed standards, however, seem to lean against such an approach to education in favor of one that presupposes certain perspectives, eludes or avoids important historical or social nuances, and fosters discussions based more upon predetermined political beliefs than true understanding of or engagement with history.

Furthermore, the committee's recommendations tend to place the most emphasis on identity-based considerations and politics rather than foundational American documents and principles. For instance, the standards reference the Declaration of Independence only six times and the Bill of Rights only three times within the entire 145-page document. By comparison, the term "LGBTQ" is mentioned 32 times and "Indigenous" appears 66 times throughout the document.

We are concerned that the recommendations on how to revise Colorado's Social Studies Academic Standards are too politically motivated and biased to provide a solid academic foundation for Colorado's future leaders. The additions attempt to infuse modern themes of critical race theory, social justice, and gender identity into what are very complex cultural exchanges, interacting and overlapping geographies, and rich histories that naturally evolve for student investigation in the social studies classrooms of Colorado.

Colorado students deserve a more full and well-rounded approach to social studies. We hope the committee will do its utmost to provide that approach in the next draft revisions.

Respectfully,

Handwritten signature of Pamela J. Benigno in cursive script.

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Independence Institute