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May 19, 2010

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Re: Proposed Social Studies TEKS

Dear Members of the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE):

I write on behalf of the ACLU of Texas to advise you that our organization, representing over 12,000 members across the state, has grave concerns about the proposed Social Studies TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) this board is considering in the May 19-21 meeting. The proposed standards have been shaped by personal bias instead of academic objectivity and neutrality, and if adopted will degrade the caliber of education provided to children in Texas public schools. As a result of the Board's choices, the future well being of our children, our economy, and our state as a whole may be at risk.

I write also in my personal capacity as a parent and grandparent, to express my concern that weak curriculum standards will undermine the education my granddaughter Ella and her friends will receive. I worry that Ella will be taught a version of history stripped of cultures, like Islam, and events, like the Vietnam War, that I as an American and a proud fourth generation Texan believe are crucial to an understanding of the world today. Worse, I fear she will be discouraged from thinking critically, asking questions, and challenging assumptions. I am saddened to think of my granddaughter and all Texas children growing up without the opportunity to form their own opinions and thoughts about historical events.

The TEKS are flawed for three specific reasons. First, they push a specific interpretation of history. For example, for someone my age, the Vietnam War

was a crucial turning point in history and President Nixon was better known for his undermining of democracy than for his leadership – yet the proposed TEKS downplay the importance of the Vietnam War and emphasize the leadership of President Nixon. This confounding curriculum decision is not the result of expert academic input, but rather reflects the ideological interests of the SBOE.

The social studies TEKS present conclusions rather than information in two other important instances. First, the TEKS single out Islam as the only religion connected to terrorism. Second, the TEKS require young Texans use crime and arrest data to analyze “deviance,” a superficial approach to issues related to crime and punishment that serves to reduce student understanding of these issues rather than enlighten. Without any explanation during the TEKS creation process as to why these curriculum goals were appropriate, Texans are left to wonder why the SBOE chose to include such seemingly biased learning standards in the TEKS.

Finally, the proposed TEKS focus on unintended consequences of government action such as affirmative action without placing the policies in the appropriate context. Students and teachers are encouraged to explore the problems with government programs such as the Great Society and Title IX. Once again a seemingly ideologically motivated standard that, absent expert educational input, appears to encourage students to take a specific perspective toward government programs and assistance.

I am not alone in expressing concerns about the proposed curriculum standards. Eight hundred collegiate professors and the Houston Independent School District School Board have officially questioned the academic integrity of the proposed TEKS. As of a week ago, 20,000 comments have reportedly been submitted to the SBOE, requesting aspects of the standards be modified in a number of ways. Given this degree of widespread, cross-political concern, the only way the SBOE can regain the public’s trust is to start a new review process of the Social Studies TEKS and ensure appropriate input from true education experts.

The great state of Texas deserves schools we can be proud of. By delaying the approval of current Social Studies TEKS and fully reviewing the curriculum standards with the input of qualified education experts, the SBOE can take a step toward this goal. By passing these standards, you, the SBOE, will have chosen your ideological priorities over quality education in Texas and the future strength of the Texas economy. For all Texans, for all Texas children, and for my granddaughter Ella, please make the right decision.

Sincerely,

Terri Burke
Executive Director
ACLU of Texas