



Education and Housing Equity Project Records.

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EDUCATION & HOUSING EQUITY PROJECT

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February 20, 1998

George A. Beck, Administrative Law Judge
Office of Administrative Hearings
100 Washington Square, Suite 1700
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2138

COPY TO: Mary Lynne McAlonie, Rulemaking Coordinator
Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning

Dear Mr. Beck:

**RE: COMMENTS OF THE EDUCATION & HOUSING EQUITY PROJECT
ON THE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION RULES RELATING TO
GRADUATION STANDARDS PROFILE OF LEARNING**

Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments for the public record concerning the proposed state graduation requirements (Proposed Permanent Rules Relating to Graduation Standards, Profile of Learning, Minn. Rule Parts 3501.0300 to 3501.0469).

I am Dick Little, the executive director of the Education and Housing Equity Project, a nonprofit organization focusing on the issues of education and housing segregation and racial/economic disparities in educational achievement and life opportunities in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Our mission is to build broad-based collaborations that engage Twin Cities area citizens in public discussions and action to promote racially and economically inclusive communities that give families and children of all races, incomes and ethnic backgrounds access to quality schools and housing throughout the metropolitan area. The comments offered here represent the official position of the EHEP board.

We are limiting our comments on the draft standards to **Learning Area Seven (3501.0447), Subpart 2. Themes of United States History and Subparts 3 – 7 as they might relate to Subpart 2.** Subpart 2 spells out the areas of historical knowledge that high school students must demonstrate familiarity with and understanding of before being granted a diploma. The requirement broadly includes the major events, periods, documents, doctrines and institutions that are deemed most important in shaping American history and the kind of America we have today.

We affirm the approach taken in this subsection and the categories that are included; however, we believe that several very critical elements of American history are missing from this list and should be explicitly added to the requirement. These include:

- **The institution of slavery and its aftermath**, which so pervasively define the dilemmas and paradoxes of this country.
- **The civil rights movement of this century**, which is a defining moment in the struggle for the soul of this country and its democratic ideals.
- **The immigrant experience**, which also defines the American experience. America is the sum of its Native American and immigrant parts. This evolving phenomenon, unique to America, must be understood.

Slavery and the policies and practices of segregation and discrimination have enormous economic and moral consequences for the American character.

Race is America's greatest dilemma. As a nation, we don't know how to think or talk about race.

If we are to make sense of our country, we must understand the peculiar institution of white hierarchy that has spread its veil over all our lives, whether we are conscious of it or not.

The Minnesota State Constitution (Article XIII, Section 1, "Uniform System of Public Schools") states "*The stability of a republican form of government depending mainly upon the intelligence of the people*, it is the duty of the legislature to establish a general and uniform system of public schools [emphasis added]." It is apparent, therefore, that the public schools have a duty to prepare students for public life. If we expect today's students to make sound decisions tomorrow, their basis for judgement must be built upon honest information and comprehensive knowledge. It is time to give teachers and students what they need for the task ahead.

In addition to our comments on the standards, we join the chorus of voices that suggest a delay in implementing the proposed rules. Enclosed is a copy of the report by Conflict Management, Inc. recommending mediation of the NAACP v. State of Minnesota educational adequacy lawsuit. One of the findings of this report is that parents in general and parents of students of color in particular are extremely alienated from the public school system (see pages 10 – 13). The imposition of the new language and revision of the curriculum in the proposed rules will only exacerbate this situation. What also comes through in the report is that what parents see as the solution has more to do with ending present segregation and inequality of resources than further tinkering with school standards. The lawsuit and mediation process should be allowed to proceed before adoption and implementation of new graduation standards. Mediation of the lawsuit may raise issues that need to be revisited before the graduation standards could be implemented with the full support of the community.

Sincerely,

Dick Little,
Executive Director

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February 13, 1998

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I am limiting my comments on the curriculum standards to specifically address **Learning Area Seven (3501.0447), Subpart 2. Themes of United States History** and **Subparts 3 - 7 as they might relate to Subpart 2.** Subpart 2 spells out the areas of historical knowledge that high school students must demonstrate familiarity with and understanding of before being granted a diploma. The requirement broadly includes the major events, periods,

documents, doctrines and institutions that are deemed most important in shaping American history and the kind of America we have today.

I support the approach taken in this subsection and the categories that are included; however, I believe that several very critical elements of American history are missing from this list that should be explicitly added to the requirement. These include:

- *The institution of slavery and its aftermath, the ‘Jim Crow’ era of deep seated segregation, that have so pervasively defined the dilemmas and paradoxes this country has had to face and still must confront today.*
- *The civil rights movement of this century, which is central to an understanding of how our traditions of democracy and ‘fair play’ can come to terms with the “shadows” of racism, segregation, prejudice and discrimination that have been part of our history and that have so persistently dogged our steps toward realizing our democratic ideals.*

I am pleased to see that Indian Sovereignty and the Reconstruction Era are included in the requirement, as are the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution – I would especially emphasize the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments – and the Civil War. *The history of our country as a nation of both indigenous peoples and immigrants from all parts of the globe, people of many different races, ethnicities, languages and religions, becoming part of our country at different times in our history, and under different circumstances – including sale into forced bondage – should also be added to the requirement.* The issues of how we have, and have not, come together as a country with a “place at the table” for all citizens is central to our understanding of ourselves and the tasks before our citizenry today.

The essential lesson is that the past matters: who we were in the past has much to do with who we are today. Our next generation of citizens cannot understand this country without understanding its heritage of slavery, segregation and white supremacy, the long shadow that heritage has cast on present-day realities, and the long struggle for social justice to rectify this part of our legacy. I believe it is essential that today’s students know much more about the legacy of slavery and its aftermath of segregation and inequality than has traditionally been taught in high school curriculums in the past. To paraphrase one of our board associates, Dr. John Powell of the University of Minnesota’s Institute on Race and Poverty, if we are to make sense of our country, we must understand this peculiar institution and its profound aftereffects that reach into our lives to this day. The acceptance of slavery was an essential compromise, embodied in the Three-Fifths Clause of the Constitution, that allowed this country to be born, thus setting the terms for what became an abhorrent but commonly accepted American practice: the enslavement of blacks creating freedom and prosperity for a white elite. Slavery and the policies of segregation, discrimination and inequality that developed in its wake have had immense moral and economic consequences for Americans and continue to define a large part of America today – not only in terms of attitudes and resources but also of life opportunities. Until we come to terms with this, there can be no

serious process of healing the breach that threatens to keep us from becoming the country our history books tell us we are.

The role of public education is essential to healing this breach and to fulfilling the American Ideal. A better understanding of this part of American history will also affect how today's students – tomorrow's leaders – will see and implement social policy in the future. If they are able to make the connection between slavery and some of today's serious problems, such as inner city poverty and metropolitan 'apartheid,' they will be more willing and better prepared to combat them. As the experience of the Holocaust reveals, knowledge does not necessarily lead to good public policy, but ignorance of the 'underside' of our history will surely perpetuate bad public policy, and lead us to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Aside from my comments on the language of the proposed standards, I feel obliged to observe that the solutions to our education problems, at least in the Twin Cities metropolitan region, have much more to do with ending present-day segregation and inequality of resources than with tinkering with the graduation standards. In closing, I hope that the State Board of Education will join the growing chorus of community voices calling for a much needed and long overdue public conversation about the costly price we are paying for segregation in our communities and the public leadership that is needed to eliminate this scourge.

Sincerely,

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