

Social studies teachers denounce anti-democratic changes to Michigan education curriculum

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26 June 2018

More than 200 social studies teachers, high school students, parents and others packed a meeting at the Oakland Intermediate School District building in Waterford, Michigan, north of Detroit on Wednesday. There were furious denunciations of several changes to the state's social studies curriculum, centered on the charge that the changes would undermine teaching about civil rights, global warming, and LGBT issues.

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) is sponsoring a series of "Listen and Learn" town hall-style meeting statewide to discuss changes in the social studies curriculum that will have a wide-ranging effect on what is taught and on what children are required to learn.

The meeting began with a collective groan and loud boos when representatives from the State Board of Education claimed the reason for changing language about teaching "core democratic values" to "core values" was in the interest of being "balanced" and "politically neutral," by avoiding use of the word that appears in the name of the Democratic Party.

It quickly emerged this was only one of numerous proposed changes in the curriculum motivated by far-right Republican State Senator Patrick Colbeck, one of four candidates for the Republican nomination for governor this year, who was invited to join the MDE standards panel after pressure from a cabal of right-wing Michigan state senators.

Over and over, teachers asked how Colbeck even got on the panel in the first place and why no Democrats were invited to be participants. Teachers were particularly angered by the fact that the panel had apparently extended invitations to other notorious right-wing legislators in addition to Colbeck.

Colbeck elsewhere has claimed that the United States was founded as a republic, not a democracy, an argument that is current in ultra-right-wing circles in the United States, particularly since the stolen election of 2000. It is associated with the rejection of the right to vote as a basic right, made

notorious by the late Justice Antonin Scalia, when he declared, supporting the *Bush v. Gore* ruling, that Americans had no fundamental right to vote for president (in his view, state legislatures could simply appoint electors to the Electoral College without bothering with a popular vote).

When teachers were finally able to make contributions from the floor at the end of the Waterford meeting, the really sordid role of Colbeck's influence on politics in the state and on the MDE was documented.

As one teacher declared, "In this age of 'alternative facts' why do we want to change American from a democracy to some sort of republic thing?"

Hussein Bedoun, who teaches history and social studies at Dearborn's Edsel Ford High school, which has a substantial Muslim and Arab-American population, joined other speakers in denouncing the dropping of any mention of religions besides Christianity from sections of the text. He spoke directly of Colbeck's influence on the curriculum proposed.

He asked the MDE representatives: "How can you entrust our children's future to an imbecile like that?" He then reviewed some of Colbeck's racist and anti-Muslim statements in the past. He noted that Colbeck is known for claiming Muslims are trying to take over the country.

Colbeck is not really running to win the Republican nomination. He has used his campaign to whip up anti-Muslim hysteria, centered on denunciations of one of the Democratic candidates for governor, Dr. Abdul El-Sayed, former Health Director in Detroit, claiming that he represents the Muslim Brotherhood and would impose sharia law in Michigan if elected.

Teachers denounced the removal of a mention of the KKK from one part of the standards, as well as the elimination of the word "genocide" from a section about the Holocaust. MDE panelists defended the deletion, saying that they were trying not to be repetitious.

There were several attempts by the representative from the

private company hired by the state board to “facilitate” the meeting to dampen down the loud and frequent outbursts that punctuated the rest of the meeting. There was a great deal of concern from teachers who felt their questions were not being answered.

There were questions about how the panel was selected. One speaker pointed out that there was no representation from Detroit, Saginaw or Flint. Few would not know that these are major urban areas where questions of democracy, civil rights, poverty, and inequality are everyday issues.

Marsha Lewis, a teacher from the Detroit Public Schools, said that racism, civil rights and social issues had to be included at the center of the standards. “I say this not just because I am a teacher. I don’t want my child to live in a world where she thinks she will be forgotten.”

One teacher questioned why the world history standards for high school were changed to begin with the 1500s. She said this was aimed at presenting a Euro-centric view of the world.

This was the third of six such meetings planned for various locations around the state this summer. The two already held, in Flint and Saginaw, were smaller in size but just as contentious. The Waterford meeting is the only one in the Detroit area. The three remaining will be next week in the Upper Peninsula, in Lansing, the state capital, and in Grand Rapids, in the western part of the state, the home town of US Department of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and her ultra-right billionaire family.

When asked at the end of the meeting why the right-wing partisan Colbeck was invited to be part of the process, panelist Linda Forward from MDE admitted, “I cannot give you any rationale that would hold any water here.”

Sadye Belcher, a college student in Flint, Michigan, spoke passionately during the public comments at the end of the meeting. She began by saying that the United States was founded on dissent, but that in this curriculum, “That knowledge of dissent is being taken away.”

“Students need to learn that history,” she told the assembled teachers, “including the history of the civil rights struggle and other struggles, to have the tools to take up the serious issues they face today.”

She expanded on her remarks later, speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*: “I have a little theory of my own. I think this is how fascism comes. When I was reading the standards, I saw all these red lines striking out such important history and topics. It was jarring. You can go online and actually see this. They show the old, 2007 standards side by side, and you can see the important sections removed.

“We will be teaching kids who will not be able to do anything because they do not have the foundation in history.

Our foundation was dissent, and they are taking away that foundation.”

Rita Chester is a retired teacher who lives in Waterford, Michigan, where the meeting was held. She told WSWS reporters after the meeting: “My granddaughter in Seattle called me and said ‘Grandma, you have to go down there! They are trying to change the education standards!’ She read about it online out in Seattle and called me. One thing she was concerned about was that references to LGBTQ were being removed, other things were being removed. So here I am!”

Emily Halls is studying music education at Michigan State University. She told the WSWS that she and her “peers” are much more aware of politics now than ever before. This is because so much is going on in the world today that affects us.

“When I saw online that in the new standards sections were removed that relate to climate change and to civil rights, I knew I had to come here tonight. Even though I teach music, my students are going to be affected by politics.

“The effects of climate change are happening now, and they are happening rapidly. By removing key parts of the topic from the main text, bringing these problems to students’ attention will not be a priority in every classroom.

“We had the luxury for a long time of not paying attention. This is especially true in the case of climate change. But now every student and young adult is starting to pay attention. Everyone needs to know what the withdrawal from the Paris Climate Change Treaty means. No one can afford to be uninformed.

“Even as a music educator, I feel I should be well-versed in these things. We talk about music for music’s sake. The way the changes were made here is explained as consolidation. But it is troubling that things like the NAACP, *Roe V. Wade*, are removed.

“We say about a piece of music that there is not one way to understand it, one way that is right and one way that is wrong. This is an important lesson that applies to how students should think about things. They should have all the information.”



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