Teacher hostility grows to Michigan Department of Education's curriculum changes

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Anger over proposed changes in the social studies curriculum by the Michigan Department of Education's (MDE) curriculum standards panel continues to spread among teachers in the state. On August 9, about a hundred teachers and parents attended one of a dozen "Listen and Learn" town hall-style meetings called by the MDE to discuss these changes.

As a result of backlash against the proposed standards, six more meetings will take place statewide through September. A final draft of the curriculum will voted on by the State Board of Education.

As in the previous gatherings, those attending the Ann Arbor meeting added their voices to the sense of anger and dismay over the character of the curriculum changes, as well as the intervention of a cabal of Republican state legislators, led by the extreme right-wing state Senator Patrick Colbeck (Seventh District), who insinuated themselves into the process of determining what teachers teach and what will be tested on statewide mandatory exams.

Colbeck and his team were actually invited to attend the standards panel deliberations, and quickly proceeded to push through a far-reaching proposed standard that essentially rewrites history, expunges the crimes of U.S imperialism, minimizes the struggle for democratic rights, and places in jeopardy the ability of teachers and students to inquire about the nature of historical truth.

The proposed omissions eviscerate teaching about the revolutionary character of the democratic rights proclaimed in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, the founding documents of the American Revolution. Under the proposed standards, examples of the Constitution's core values no longer include equality, rule of law, unalienable rights, social compact theory and the right of revolution.

Likewise, examples of rights guaranteed by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights no longer include the freedom of religion, freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Everywhere they previously appeared, the words "separation of church and state" are removed. These references or "examples" are literally struck out of the text, which means that educators will no longer be required to mention them.

Perhaps, the most telling item among the curriculum changes, and the one that has galvanized the most opposition to this new and reactionary attempt at sanitizing American history, has been the removal of the word "democratic" from the phrase "core democratic values" traditionally at the center of the study of civics and US history in Michigan public schools.

Colbeck, a major recipient of campaign contributions from the billionaire family of federal Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, fraudulently claims that the removal of the word "democratic" is in the interests of "balance" and "political neutrality," and that it should be emphasized that the United States was established as a republic rather than as a democracy.

This is in keeping with the ultra-right revision of history, in which the American Revolution is presented, not as a struggle for democracy and popular sovereignty against aristocracy and privilege, but as the establishment of a republic in which the guarantee of property rights—including property in slaves—was the principal goal.

The new standards downplay references to crimes committed by U.S. imperialism. References to its seizure of colonial possessions are removed, as is any reference to one of the monstrous war crimes of the twentieth century, the nuclear annihilation of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War Two.

The powers-that-be also want no mention of "US military missions in Lebanon, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo and the Gulf War." While it is permissible to discuss "the attacks on 9/11 and the response to terrorism" the curriculum removes "wars in Afghanistan and Iraq." In other words, young people whose entire lives have been dominated by US wars of aggression should not be taught this history!

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The proposed standards came under withering criticism for their proposal to severely reduce the study of the US civil rights movement. The new proposal eliminated mention of freedom riders, the Montgomery bus boycott and the Black Panthers, for example. An entire appendix, page 136 of the proposed curriculum, which references the growth of industrial America and the mass migration of southern blacks to the North to seek jobs in the burgeoning industries and escape Jim Crow segregation, is eliminated. The deleted appendix also includes a section on women's suffrage. Ironically, Michigan was one of the first states to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution giving women the right to vote.

Other deletions remove any mention of LGBTQ rights, climate change and *Roe v Wade*, the Supreme Court decision which legalized abortion.

The utter bankruptcy of the process by which the curriculum is being altered to appease these arch reactionaries in the state legislature was not lost on those attending the Ann Arbor meeting, despite assurances from the panel that their "voices would be heard." During the course of the hour-long discussion that followed the submission of questions, many spoke eloquently and angrily over the attack on democratic values, and their utter distrust of the MDE panel.

In fact, the question and answer period that preceded the open discussion was constantly being interrupted by comments of disapproval from those in attendance. One teacher commented, "The concern of many in this room is that the focus group was hijacked."

Another admonished the panel. "We feel that the whole process is flawed. We don't understand why we are sitting here. Your group was involved with the process, but then a second group comes in that is politically motivated. Why was that allowed?"

"Process here matters a lot … it seems like a hyper-partisan way to decide what we teach our children."

When the open discussion commenced a retired Detroit teacher and supporter of the Socialist Equality Party told the audience. "The problem here is that the word 'democratic' has already been removed from the phrase. It is now "core values." The word is not in parentheses. It is not in quotes. It is gone. How is this not being presented by the panel as a *fait accompli* ?" He called for a fight to overturn the curriculum changes, explaining that these democratic rights were not simply given, they had to be fought for.

Susan, a parent, commented, "I'm white. This is not a whitewash of history. It is a lie. These standards are a lie. My ancestors settled at Plymouth, and were involved in the Pequot massacre … One was a slave trader, while others fought on the side of the North in the Civil War … But when you put in these changes, you are erasing their history, and my history. The fact that I am white does not mean I want this history erased."

Rachel, a political science teacher and lawyer, described the intervention of Colbeck and his ilk as "the 2018 version of book burning. One set of beliefs from an isolated group that wants to bring back racism. Because of how this went down, no one has confidence in your process."

And elderly Catholic nun explained, "I have a very strong affinity for democratic ideals. Our government is a republic, but what about those democratic ideals. We have had to fight for them. I worked in Detroit for many years, and I feel that we still have to fight for these ideals. Someone else is not supposed to make up our core values."

The contributions of many of the speakers at this meeting in defense of historical truth along with deeply held egalitarian notions regarding democratic rights were in sharp contrast to the general indifference of local and state Democratic politicians. While some local Democrats have attacked the proposed curriculum, and the Democratic members of Michigan Board of Education have vowed to vote against it, it is notable that this right-wing attack on teachers, parents and students has not elicited a response from Michigan's principal Democratic Party elected officials in Washington, Senators Debbie Stabenow and Gary Peters, or the Party's candidate for Governor Gretchen Whitmer.

In opposition to both capitalist parties, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party candidate for the US House of Representatives in the 12th District, Niles Niemuth, distributed campaign material outside the meeting and received a warm response. Thus far, Niemuth's Democratic opponent, the incumbent Representative Debbie Dingell, has also been silent on the proposed curriculum changes.

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