

Virginia governor Glenn Youngkin proposes right-wing revision of public school curriculum

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On November 11, the right-wing administration of Virginia's Republican governor Glenn Youngkin announced a package of proposed changes to the history and social science curricula taught in the state's public schools.

The standards of learning (SOLs) provide the framework for the curriculum in each subject taught in Virginia public schools. They determine what students from kindergarten through 12th grade will be required to learn in order to pass their classes.

By law, the SOLs must be reviewed by the state Board of Education at least once every seven years. Under the previous administration of Democrat Ralph Northam, a draft version of the SOLs had been worked up over the course of several months in consultation with historians, academics, economists, geographers and political scientists, as well as the input of teachers, parents and students. In all, it numbered more than 400 pages.

Youngkin, who assumed office at the start of 2022, has appointed five people to the nine-member Board of Education. In August, as one of its first major acts under Youngkin, the board rejected the draft version of the SOLs, delaying the scheduled voting on the draft from late 2022 to early 2023, with Youngkin's appointees citing concerns over its contents.

The new version totals just 52 pages. Under the section headlined "Expectations for Virginia students," is a passage stating that the new standards will recognize the "optimism, ideals and imagery captured by Ronald Reagan's 'shining city upon a hill'" speech. The reference to Reagan, whose presidency (1981-1989) marked a sharp turn to the right in American politics, sets the tone for the rest of the document.

Among other things, students will be expected to learn about "the inhumanity and deprivations of communist

regimes" while also gaining "an appreciation of the attributes and actions that have made America the world's exemplar of freedom, opportunity and democratic ideals."

Under the section listing the "foundational principles" for history and social science, the document baldly asserts that "Free enterprise, property rights and the rule of law enable an economic system that allocates assets through free markets and competition and fosters innovation, opportunity and efficiency" while, on the other hand, "Centralized government planning in the form of socialism or communist political systems is incompatible with democracy and individual freedoms."

What is most noteworthy is not what the proposed standards explicitly say, but what they leave out. As noted above, the original draft was substantially downsized, from over 400 pages to just 52.

The new version removes references to the Native Americans in the Kindergarten curriculum, replaced with "America's first immigrants from Asia." The teaching of ancient China and Mali, along with the history of Russia and the Ottoman Empire, were scrapped.

The new third grade guidelines remove the teaching of world geography in favor of focusing exclusively on Europe. References to teaching about how "climate affects the needs and wants" of people as well as an analysis of the sustainable use of resources was removed from the eighth grade curriculum.

Teaching about Martin Luther King, Jr., Helen Keller and Cesar Chavez was removed from the curriculum. The original proposed standards made a point of teaching about racism. The new standards remove this, as well as references to the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Americans With Disabilities Act, and the women's rights movement. References to teaching about "respect for diversity" and

learning how to work with “people of diverse backgrounds, viewpoints and experiences” were erased.

The teaching of concepts such as colonialism, imperialism and nationalism were also removed.

On the other hand, the new seventh grade curriculum states that courses on economics should “evaluate the unique qualities of free enterprise and how democracy cannot survive without it.” Teaching about “poll watchers” was also added.

The new standards remove the original SOL’s language about the US Constitution as having built “a system designed to evolve overtime. [sic]” This cut reflects the Republican judicial position that claims to know the “original intent” of the framers of the Constitution, who supposedly imagined that the founding document was akin to sacred Scripture. This removal also neatly sums up the aims of the Republican attack on public education: The youth must not get it into their heads that society has evolved at all over the last two centuries. Anything but that!

Upon taking office earlier this year, Youngkin enacted a fascistic measure establishing a “tip line” for parents and students to report teachers who discuss “divisive” concepts. The tip line has reportedly been quietly scrapped due to lack of input.

Youngkin’s right-wing revision of the Virginia curriculum is part of a broader attack on public education being carried out by the Republican Party. Beginning last year with the outgoing Trump administration’s “1776 Report”—which was aimed at “restoring patriotic education,” in other words, promoting a right-wing, chauvinist view of US history—Republican legislators in dozens of states have moved to ban the teaching of “divisive concepts.” This has included a ban on critical race theory and the teaching of the *New York Times’ 1619 Project*, which promotes a racialist view of American history.

The new Virginia guidelines are not an explicit ban on the teaching of certain topics. Yet their removal from the graded curriculum amounts to the same thing. Teachers will still be “free” to teach these topics on their own time. But in practice, educators with limited resources and time will not have the means to teach about topics that fall outside the SOLs. This represents the first step towards outright censorship in Virginia public schools.

The *World Socialist Web Site* condemns the censorship drive of the Republicans. But this implies no support for the theoretical and political outlook of critical race theory, intersectionality and other reactionary ideologies that

attempt to obscure the centrality of class conflict as the main driver of history, or for the 1619 Project, which characterizes the American Revolution as a counterrevolution, and downplays the significance of the Civil War to abolish slavery. We recognize these as representing the outlook of a section of the affluent middle class grouped around the Democratic Party and bitterly hostile to socialism and the working class.

Indeed, despite their professed opposition to each other, there is a certain symmetry in the historical outlook of the fascistic Republicans and the racialist, identity-focused Democrats. On the one hand, the far right promotes an idyllic, mythologized view of American history. The racialists, on the other hand, say that American history is the history of “endemic” racial and gender oppression that has been “stamped from the beginning” and persists to this day.

What do these seemingly hostile outlooks have in common? It is this: They remove all real conflict from history, thereby making it incomprehensible. That one sings patriotic hymns to America while the other laments ineradicable oppression based on present conceptions of identity, expresses a fundamental unity of historical method. Both remove class conflict, the central driver of American and world history. Both preclude even the idea of progress in human society. Both serve, therefore, as an ideological defense of the capitalist order.

In fact, the main target of the right-wing assault on the teaching of “divisive concepts” is not racial and gender difference, but class struggle and revolution in history. In this sense, the drive by the Republicans to censor schools is part of a broader assault by the ruling class on democratic rights, taking place amidst the intensification of class struggle, as demonstrated in the growing movement of the railroaders, mass strikes among graduate students on both coasts of the US, and growing anger and militancy among autoworkers and teachers.



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