

March 12, 2010

# Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change

By JAMES C. MCKINLEY Jr.

AUSTIN, Tex. — After three days of turbulent meetings, the Texas Board of Education on Friday approved a social studies curriculum that will put a conservative stamp on history and economics textbooks, stressing the superiority of American capitalism, questioning the Founding Fathers' commitment to a purely secular government and presenting Republican political philosophies in a more positive light.

The vote was 10 to 5 along party lines, with all the Republicans on the board voting for it.

The board, whose members are elected, has influence beyond Texas because the state is one of the largest buyers of textbooks. In the digital age, however, that influence has diminished as technological advances have made it possible for publishers to tailor books to individual states.

In recent years, board members have been locked in an ideological battle between a bloc of conservatives who question Darwin's theory of evolution and believe the Founding Fathers were guided by Christian principles, and a handful of Democrats and moderate Republicans who have fought to preserve the teaching of Darwinism and the separation of church and state.

Since January, Republicans on the board have passed more than 100 amendments to the 120-page curriculum standards affecting history, sociology and economics courses from elementary to high school. The standards were proposed by a panel of teachers.

"We are adding balance," said Dr. Don McLeroy, the leader of the conservative faction on the board, after the vote. "History has already been skewed. Academia is skewed too far to the left."

Battles over what to put in science and history books have taken place for years in the 20 states where state boards must adopt textbooks, most notably in California and Texas. But rarely in recent history has a group of conservative board members left such a mark on a social studies curriculum.

Efforts by Hispanic board members to include more Latino figures as role models for the state's large Hispanic population were consistently defeated, prompting one member, Mary Helen Berlanga, to storm out of a meeting late Thursday night, saying, "They can just pretend this is a white America and Hispanics don't exist."

"They are going overboard, they are not experts, they are not historians," she said. "They are rewriting history, not only of Texas but of the United States and the world."

The curriculum standards will now be published in a state register, opening them up for 30 days of public comment. A final vote will be taken in May, but given the Republican dominance of the board, it is unlikely that many changes will be made.

The standards, reviewed every decade, serve as a template for textbook publishers, who must come before the board next year with drafts of their books. The board's makeup will have changed by then because Dr. McLeroy lost in a primary this month to a more moderate Republican, and two others — one Democrat and one conservative Republican — announced they were not seeking re-election.

There are seven members of the conservative bloc on the board, but they are often joined by one of the other three Republicans on crucial votes. There were no historians, sociologists or economists consulted at the meetings, though some members of the conservative bloc held themselves out as experts on certain topics.

The conservative members maintain that they are trying to correct what they see as a liberal bias among the teachers who proposed the curriculum. To that end, they made dozens of minor changes aimed at calling into question, among other things, concepts like the separation of church and state and the secular nature of the American Revolution.

"I reject the notion by the left of a constitutional separation of church and state," said David Bradley, a conservative from Beaumont who works in real estate. "I have \$1,000 for the charity of your choice if you can find it in the Constitution."

They also included a plank to ensure that students learn about "the conservative resurgence of the 1980s and 1990s, including Phyllis Schlafly, the Contract With America, the Heritage Foundation, the Moral Majority and the National Rifle Association."

Dr. McLeroy, a dentist by training, pushed through a change to the teaching of the civil rights movement to ensure that students study the violent philosophy of the Black Panthers in addition to the nonviolent approach of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He also made sure that textbooks would mention the votes in Congress on civil rights legislation, which Republicans supported.

"Republicans need a little credit for that," he said. "I think it's going to surprise some students."

Mr. Bradley won approval for an amendment saying students should study "the unintended consequences" of the Great Society legislation, affirmative action and Title IX legislation. He also won approval for an amendment stressing that Germans and Italians as well as Japanese were interned in the United States during World War II, to counter the idea that the internment of Japanese was motivated by racism.

Other changes seem aimed at tamping down criticism of the right. Conservatives passed one amendment, for instance, requiring that the history of McCarthyism include "how the later release of the Venona papers confirmed

suspicious of communist infiltration in U.S. government.” The Venona papers were transcripts of some 3,000 communications between the Soviet Union and its agents in the United States.

Mavis B. Knight, a Democrat from Dallas, introduced an amendment requiring that students study the reasons “the founding fathers protected religious freedom in America by barring the government from promoting or disfavoring any particular religion above all others.”

It was defeated on a party-line vote.

After the vote, Ms. Knight said, “The social conservatives have perverted accurate history to fulfill their own agenda.”

In economics, the revisions add Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek, two champions of free-market economic theory, among the usual list of economists to be studied, like Adam Smith, Karl Marx and John Maynard Keynes. They also replaced the word “capitalism” throughout their texts with the “free-enterprise system.”

“Let’s face it, capitalism does have a negative connotation,” said one conservative member, Terri Leo. “You know, ‘capitalist pig!’ ”

In the field of sociology, another conservative member, Barbara Cargill, won passage of an amendment requiring the teaching of “the importance of personal responsibility for life choices” in a section on teenage suicide, dating violence, sexuality, drug use and eating disorders.

“The topic of sociology tends to blame society for everything,” Ms. Cargill said.

Even the course on world history did not escape the board’s scalpel.

Cynthia Dunbar, a lawyer from Richmond who is a strict constitutionalist and thinks the nation was founded on Christian beliefs, managed to cut Thomas Jefferson from a list of figures whose writings inspired revolutions in the late 18th century and 19th century, replacing him with St. Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin and William Blackstone. (Jefferson is not well liked among conservatives on the board because he coined the term “separation between church and state.”)

“The Enlightenment was not the only philosophy on which these revolutions were based,” Ms. Dunbar said.

The New York Times reported last year in Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change: AUSTIN, Tex. "After three days of turbulent meetings, the Texas Board of Education on Friday approved a social studies curriculum that will put a conservative stamp on history and economics textbooks, stressing the superiority of American capitalism, questioning the Founding Fathers'™ commitment to a purely secular government and presenting Republican political philosophies in a more positive light." Thanks to ethnic studies programs and curricula, some students will learn that we had founding fathers and mothers who were not monochromatic, nor were they all conservatives. TAKE ACTION. There are a number of ways you can get involved and take action. McKinley, J. (2010). Texas conservatives win curriculum change. The New York Times, March 12. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/13/education/13texas.html>. Mohanty, C. (1997). Women workers and capitalist scripts: Ideologies of domination, common interests, and the politics of solidarity. High above the ice. Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change. AUSTIN, Tex. "After three days of turbulent meetings, the Texas Board of Education on Friday approved a social studies curriculum that will put a conservative stamp on history and economics textbooks, stressing the superiority of American capitalism, questioning the Founding Fathers'™ commitment to a purely secular government and presenting Republican political philosophies in a more positive light. The vote was 10 to 5 along party lines, with all the Republicans on the board voting for it." The curriculum standards will now be published in a state register, opening them up for 30 days of public comment.