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To the Members, Current and Elected, of the Texas State Board of Education:

The State of Texas has a proud record in recognizing the importance and value of historical knowledge and in acting on that recognition. The State Board of Education, the Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the State Legislature have concurred on the designation of U.S. History and Government as crucial components, not only in primary and secondary education, but also as part of the core requirements for an undergraduate degree; both subjects carry a two semester requirement. Thanks to these arrangements, thousands of young people have gained an informed sense of the past and of their heritage as citizens of Texas, the United States, and the world. As elected officials of the American Historical Association, we are also grateful for the teaching and research opportunities that these wise requirements have offered to many members of our profession. Texans have, by many measures, led the nation in the project of taking history very seriously. The many individuals who figure in the governance and support of K-16 education in Texas and the members of the American Historical Association share an unwavering recognition of the value that historical knowledge offers to young people as they find their bearings in place and in time.

As we have followed recent press coverage of the proposed revisions of the U.S. History standards, it is our conviction that the actual issues raised by the revision of the Texas U.S. History Curriculum are considerably more complex than most newspapers stories have conveyed. Both the State's Middle School Texas History Curriculum and the High School World History Curriculum are characterized by an exemplary attention to the diversity of the human population, and the ways in which an accurate understanding of the past requires a reckoning with that diversity. We write now to suggest that the U.S. History Curriculum, currently under consideration, would better serve the children of Texas if it were brought into consistency with the standards set forward in the Texas History Curriculum and the World History Curriculum. It is important to note that the inconsistency is much less evident in the standards for U.S. History since 1877, so this letter primarily addresses the standards related to U.S. History before 1877. Nonetheless, we are concerned that, unless the three curricula (Texas History, World History, and U.S. History) are restored to consistency, the U.S. History Curriculum may reduce or render invisible certain individuals and events, considered central to the story for the last fifteen years.

In light of these considerations, we ask the Texas State Board of Education to extend its period of deliberation and decision making and to take up a further review of the proposed U.S. History standards, incorporating the wisdom already at the center of the Texas History Curriculum and World History Curriculum, reinstating the

consistency in these matters that an older generation owes to a younger generation. If there is anything that the American Historical Association could do to be helpful in this process of reconsideration, we will welcome the opportunity.

The Texas History standards require teachers to guide students, working with primary and secondary sources, in the examination of “the rich cultural background of Texas” as they identify the different racial and ethnic groups that settled in Texas to build a republic and then a state. Emphasizing the study of “the full scope of Texas History,” the standards call for an opening comparative survey of Native American cultures. Moving on to the “Age of Contact,” students track the European explorations of Texas. In their study of the Spanish Colonial period, students learn about “the establishment of Catholic missions, towns and ranches.”

The proposed U.S. History standards for the period before 1877 make a radical shift from the Texas History standards, almost entirely discounting the importance of human activity in North America before the British colonization of the Atlantic Coast. This reverses the major premises that guide the students’ learning in middle school, and such a shift is sure to be disorienting and perplexing to them. Just as important, the U.S. history standards drop the Texas history standards’ careful attention to the context of European settlement, and the thorough reckoning with the presence of Indian people and representatives of the various empires. While this omission raises considerations of fairness, there is a larger problem of historical accuracy. The complicated process that led to the creation of the United States involved a great range of people, ideas, and interests. To draw a comparison with science education, no curriculum in chemistry would be of much value to students if it made arbitrary selections and deletions among the elements to be studied; if the focus were to be on oxygen with hydrogen omitted, then students would be at a considerable disadvantage when it came to understanding water. The analogy applies directly to U.S. history: omit the key elements of Indian, Spanish, African, and Mexican people’s presence and actions, and the resulting history will not qualify for the adjective accurate. Thus, bringing the proposed U.S. History standards into a direct relationship with the current Texas History standards would not only bring clarity and consistency to hundreds of classrooms, it would also provide a firmer foundation for a more accurate knowledge of American history.

We make the same case for the reinstating of consistency between the U.S. History Curriculum and the High School World History Curriculum. Like the Texas History standards, the World History standards reckon with the importance and diversity of Indian civilizations, the long and complex history of European exploration and expansion, and the complicated history of the Atlantic slave trade. Thus, we repeat our earlier request: that the U.S. History Curriculum be brought into consistency with the standards laid out in the World History Curriculum.

We add one additional proposal. Much of the recent public discussion of the proposed U.S. History standards has hinged on the meaning of two important terms: “constitutional republic” and “representative democracy.” A consideration of these phrases can lead very directly to an important and illuminating discussion of the origins of the American nation. Such a consideration can lead to an equally important and illuminating discussion of the nation’s current practices of governance and to widely

varying appraisals, by citizens today, of those practices. The American Historical Association welcomes this opportunity to bring historical perspective to bear on debates and disputes that, in recent months, have generated more heat than light. Among our membership are many scholars who specialize in the history of the meanings assigned to both “democracy” and “republic,” and a number of these scholars are committed to and skilled at engaging public audiences. The reflections of historians, who are often keen observers of public decision-making if rarely holders of office themselves, would be deepened and aided by conversations with public officials who are direct participants in these matters of responsible governance and public service. Therefore, we ask the Texas State Board of Education to join us in making the most of the extraordinary opportunity, presented by the recent controversy over the state’s History Curriculum, to explore these important concepts and the power they have demonstrated to move Americans to action and reflection over the course of the nation’s dynamic history. We all agree that public engagement with history is crucial and that public indifference to or boredom with history is the worst case scenario. The one clear advantage of controversy is that it lessens the grip of that indifference and boredom, presenting an opportunity that we should not pass up.

For decades, members of our profession have been hard at work, researching the history of this nation. This dedicated labor has produced riches of knowledge for teachers and students. And yet this harvest delivers the disadvantage of abundance: history teachers at every level are overwhelmed by a supply of worthwhile material that simply exceeds the capacity of a semester or school year. We recognize and appreciate that the Texas State Board of Education struggles with this happy dilemma, as, indeed, all teachers and professors do in every course. As we try to make the best choices in designating the individuals, events, and trends that are most important to young people’s understanding of history, we would be well-advised to work in collaboration and not in opposition.

Yours,

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