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Your Voice: Thinking pragmatically about curriculum issues in Jeffco

Posted by tc415 on September 25, 2014 in Arvada Education, Arvada Opinion, Conifer Education, Conifer Opinion, Edgewater Education, Edgewater Opinion, Golden Education, Golden Opinion, Jefferson County Education, Jefferson County Front, Jefferson County Opinion, Lakewood Education, Lakewood Opinion, Littleton Education, Littleton Opinion, Morrison Education, Morrison Opinion, South Jeffco Education, South Jeffco Opinion, Westminster Education, Westminster Opinion, Wheat Ridge Education, Wheat Ridge Opinion | 53 Views | [Leave a response](#)

Over the past few weeks, controversy over proposed changes in the national AP U.S. History curriculum have generated a great deal of heat in Jeffco, but precious little light. I hope to rectify that in this column.

To help you understand my perspective, let me first tell you a bit about myself. I chair the School Accountability Committee (SAC) at Wheat Ridge High School, where over half our students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. In January 2014, I also became a member of Jeffco's District Accountability Committee. I have spent my career in the private sector, where I focus on performance improvement. For most of my life I was a registered Democrat; however, as the party moved to the left in recent years while I stayed in the moderate, pragmatic center, I became an independent. I have been

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involved in K12 performance improvement for over a decade.

In approaching this controversy, one of my starting points is the two goals that Jeffco Boards of Education have repeatedly confirmed: Every student will meet state grade level subject matter standards, and will graduate college and career ready. My other starting point is Jeffco's poor track record in meeting these goals for the past nine years, even after adjusting for changing student demographics (see: http://k12accountability.org/resources/Data-Sets-and-Access/Colorado_Growth_Model_Explained.pdf). The urgent need to improve our achievement results – for all students – is the lens through which I view curriculum issues.

Disagreements over curriculum, usually accompanied by charges and countercharges of indoctrination versus censorship, have been a recurring theme in American educational politics for many years. Periods during which a narrative of American decline was perceived to be dominant have inevitably triggered demands for more balance, as have periods when a more triumphalist narrative was ascendant. This latest controversy is yet another manifestation of this cycle.

My first experience of this process came when I was fifteen, and testified in front of our local school board to protest a proposal that my high school stop using certain books in our course on "Alienation in Modern America" (a subject that did not go down particularly well with a generation of parents who grew up through the Great Depression and had fought in World War Two and Korea). Here in Jeffco in 2014, I can't help but admire the high school students who are protesting what they see as an attempt to censor the AP U.S. History curriculum, even though I disagree with their view. In the future, I hope to see them protest with equal vigor Jeffco's poor academic achievement results, which will undoubtedly have a strong impact on their future ability to replicate their parents' standard of living in our ever more intensely competitive global economy.

Let me start off with a point that I hope many people can agree with. Thus far, this issue has been framed as a black and white argument between those who believe the proposed APUSH revisions will teach U.S. history in too negative a light, versus those who believe it should be taught in a more positive light. While this framing is sadly predictable in our increasingly polarized political system (and makes for good media stories), it completely misses the common sense notion that our children will be better off if they learn about both America's great successes AND its great failures. Having spent many years living outside the United States, I have repeatedly found that people in other countries are not naive about America's history, yet still deeply admire our nation, as evidenced by annual polls that show how many of them would gladly move

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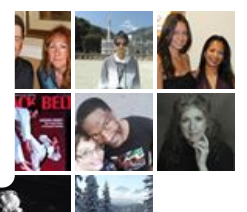
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here if they could. We have no reason to fear our children learning the unvarnished, balanced truth about our past.

Beyond this, there are other aspects of the controversy over AP U.S. History that have largely been overlooked thus far in Jeffco's heated discussions.

First, there is the non-trivial question of whether we should rely exclusively on educators to make curriculum judgments. The risk we have to guard against is the tendency of all professional organizations to become dominated by a prevailing set of views, and overly protective of their members' power. For this reason, a variety of governing and oversight structures have been established to give people from outside other professions a clear voice in the way critical decisions are made. Examples include civilian control over the military, police oversight boards (e.g., Denver's Civilian Oversight Board), and the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board, which oversees the activities of professional auditors. I do not see why the same logic should not apply to non-educators' participation in oversight of K-12 curriculum decisions.

Second, Jeffco's tempest over APUSH has once again seen the manifestation of what I consider to be a very dangerous trend in American society towards the de facto repression of free speech. On too many university campuses today, this takes the form of official speech codes and student judicial systems that often run roughshod over constitutional rights, and impose sanctions on students whose public utterances make someone else "feel uncomfortable", or are perceived to be "judgmental" or "intolerant." Outside of the academy, where such repressive speech codes thankfully don't exist, we too often turn today to crude and cruel ridicule and other forms of ad hominem argument in an attempt to repress views that differ from our own, rather than recognizing and respecting them as the legitimate exercise of free speech by our fellow citizens. Having fought across Europe in World War Two, my father frequently reminded us that one of the acid tests of being an American is the willingness to stand up and fight for the right of another person to publicly say something you personally find abhorrent. When that belief no longer resonates in our hearts, our democracy is in deeper peril than many Americans realize.

Third, there are methodological issues raised by the proposed revisions in the APUSH framework and test that we need to consider – that is, how we teach history as opposed to what we teach. Regarding the new APUSH teaching guide (i.e., the "framework"), reasonable people can disagree over the reduced requirement that students master a chronologically organized base of U.S. history facts, and the institution of a new requirement that focuses on key historical themes and conclusions about them that teachers should emphasize. Regarding the national APUSH test, the number of multiple choice questions is going to be reduced, and replaced by more

short answer questions that will require more writing, as well as (to quote the College Board) “historical thinking skills” and “the use of chronological reasoning or a rigorous use of evidence in making an argument.” As a parent and private sector employer I strongly support these goals. However, I struggle to understand how one can demonstrate “a rigorous use of evidence in making an argument” if one does not have a solid grounding in, and command of, a broad base of historical facts. Put differently, facts are the raw material of history, and dry though they sometimes may be, students of history still need to learn them. In sum, with respect to the proposed changes in APUSH, I think there are grounds for examining the underlying methodological issues in more depth. However, we also need to recognize that, since APUSH is a national test that determines whether a student receives college credits, Jeffco’s, and indeed Colorado’s room for maneuver is likely to be limited. Still, it is a discussion well worth having.

Even more worthwhile would be a more wide-ranging discussion about the relationship between state standards, district curriculum, and the different assessment tests our students take (e.g., TCAP in grades 3-10, and the national ACT in grade 11). Our Colorado Measures of Academic Success (i.e., our state grade level standards) are structured so that a student who reaches proficiency on them each year should also meet or exceed the college and career readiness standard on the national ACT test. TCAP tests are well-aligned to assess the extent to which students have mastered state standards in grades 3 through 10. For this reason, I have always had a strong negative reaction when I have heard the excuse that the reason the percentage of Jeffco students who are at least proficient on the state standards declines from year to year is that “TCAP doesn’t test what we’re teaching.” This gets it exactly wrong. The real issue is why Jeffco’s curriculum has not aligned with the state standards. As a parent and SAC member, this is an issue I have tried to understand for the past four years, since we moved to Golden from Calgary. In Alberta, the curriculum was tightly aligned with provincial academic standards and assessment tests, and made very transparent for students, teachers, and parents (see for yourself: <http://education.alberta.ca/teachers/program/socialstudies/programs.aspx>)

What I discovered after moving here is that rather than having a single transparent curriculum that could serve as a starting point and guide, Jeffco schools have often used very different curricula and effectively hidden them from parental view. Common sense suggests that all of these different curricula cannot have been equally well-aligned with Colorado’s state standards. This has always struck me as a glaring problem that has been swept under the rug using the battle cries of “local control” and “academic freedom”, without regard to its probable impact on Jeffco students’ academic achievement

results. Why hasn't the District Accountability delved into this critical issue? I don't know. Why hasn't the District Curriculum Committee explored it? I don't know that either. In fact, I can't even find a list of this committee's members on the Jeffco website (see:

<http://www.jeffcopublicschools.org/community/index.html>).

The obvious question for members of both committees is this: "where have you been on this issue?"

The good news is that Jeffco's new Superintendent Dan McMinimee and his leadership team have (finally) begun to address this issue, as evidenced by the fact that for the first time the district now has on its website a coherent description of our baseline district curriculum (see:

<http://www.jeffcopublicschools.org/academics/grades/index.html>). Full marks to them having taken this step. However, in

comparison to Alberta, Jeffco's most recent effort should be seen as a starting point, and not the end of a process to make the district's curricula more transparent for parents and consistent across schools. Moreover, given Jeffco's longstanding problem with implementing change (or what former Chief Academic Officer Heather Beck used to delicately call "fidelity of implementation issues"), we still need to "trust, but verify." And our District Accountability Committee also needs to much more rigorously examine the extent to which curriculum related issues have been an important root cause of Jeffco's poor district level achievement performance.

In sum, underneath all the heat that has been generated in Jeffco over AP U.S. History, there are many issues that merit our serious consideration.

Tom Coyne chairs the Wheat Ridge High School Accountability Committee, and in January 2014 joined Jeffco's Strategic Planning and Advisory Council. He has worked on corporate performance improvement issues for more than 30 years.

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