
MEMORANDUM

TO: The Honorable Mary Cathryn Ricker, Commissioner
Doug Paulson, Director of Academic Standards and Instructional Effectiveness
Filliz Yargici, Social Studies Specialist
Stephanie Graff, Director of Equity and Opportunity

FROM: Danyika Leonard, Policy Director, Education Evolving

DATE: December 21, 2020

RE: Minnesota social studies standards revision process

I'd like to commend the Minnesota social studies standards committee and express gratitude for the significant strides made in their incredible work on the first draft of the Minnesota social studies academic standards. As a fellow committee member, I am humbled to be among some of the state's most passionate student and education advocates.

That said, I am perplexed and disconcerted with MDE's revision process, structure, and framework used to engage the social studies committee, given MDE's own Ten Commitments to Equity.

The first four commitments (in order) are to:

- Prioritize equity, set and communicate a vision and targets for high outcomes for all students.
- Start from within: Focus on leadership, diversity and inclusiveness
- Measure what matters: use relevant and meaningful data. Hold each other accountable for equity.
- Go local: Engage and develop leaders at all levels. Empower community partners in the continuous improvement work.

This is high stakes work. If we expect to move away from the status quo and see forward progress in our racial, social, political, and economic climates—and create a more racially just and culturally responsive society—what is taught in social studies matters. The process used to accomplish this matters too.

Equity Concern #1

Given these commitments, there is an expectation that committee's work would be rooted in equity from the start. The revision process thus far and the first draft has not only failed to reflect MDE's own equity commitments, it also muddled the committee's strong sentiments around equity. For example, MDE's statement citing the committee's decision to "delay the full consideration for contributions of Minnesota American Indian tribes and communities, as well as issues of diversity and equity" does not prioritize equity. Neither does their decision to not acknowledge the committee's vote to add Ethnic Studies as a fifth strand, as well as embed Ethnic Studies in the other standards. In fact, there is no indication that MDE plans to honor the committee's request and no substantive information has been shared with committee members around MDE's plan to begin the process of developing an additional set of standards. This is not prioritizing equity.

Equity Concern #2

The committee was asked to conduct a gap analysis comparing our standards with a number of other states. A clear and extensive gap analysis would have served as a great tool. It would have provided the committee with meaningful data by allowing them to deepen their conversations and spend more time articulating their desired improvements. Instead, the committee was tasked with a magnitude of work to produce something that should have been provided by MDE. As a result of the time and process constraints, the gap analyses ultimately lacked the necessary consistency, practicality, and fidelity to be a useful tool for the committee as a whole. It was not an effective or efficient use of time.

Equity Concern #3

The time is now for social studies standards to make a transformational shift away from the default Eurocentric lens—toward real equity—by teaching about the history and current role of race, racism, and anti-racist work, and by including the lenses, narratives, histories, and intersectionalities of historically marginalized groups. We are not revising these standards to solve a technical problem. We seek to create a better blueprint for all students to have meaningful learning experiences.

Equity Concern #4

MDE must acknowledge that this is just as much an adaptive challenge as it is a technical one. This cannot be ignored. The adaptive work must happen so that the technical work is undergirded by equity. Like many committee members, I seek to do more than reword things; my hope is that the new standards spark systems change and transformation. To do that, we must start the work in the adaptive realm, so that we believe in the technical/structural work that follows. MDE selected a dynamic, esteemed, and racially diverse group of committee members who have demonstrated their commitment to creating meaningful and equitable learning experiences for all Minnesota learners. Their voices and progress must not be stifled by the very systems and processes there to set them up for success. In order for MDE to create the necessary holding environments for the adaptive work to happen, they must take inventory of the necessary skill sets and examine the areas of resistance in their own strategies and systems.

MDE cannot remain in this technical space, nor justify their work as well-intentioned, especially under the assumption they hold a neutral position. This is about disrupting and dismantling white supremacy and structural racism. Anything else is work avoidance.

If a committee voted to uphold harmful and oppressive policy, would MDE say their hands are tied and move the plan forward? The answer should be no. There is no neutral. There is no equity-lite. MDE needs to live up to their own equity commitments because this is their work to own, too. Minnesota learners cannot afford to experience more of the same.

Definitions: Technical Problem vs Adaptive Challenges & Holding Environment <http://www.kwli.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Heifetz-Laurie-2001.pdf>

Results Based Facilitation: Work Avoidance: <http://rbfnetwork.com/new/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/FinalWorkAvoidance2PageApp.pdf>

Minnesota Department of Education's Ten Commitments to Equity: https://education.mn.gov/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&dDocName=MDE073769&RevisionSelectionMethod=latestReleased&Rendition=primary