

OVERVIEW OF OUSD HISTORY STANDARDS

I. INTRODUCTION

Why Standards?

A committee of Oakland teachers, grade K-12, was charged with the responsibility of developing district-wide standards for history instruction. Underlying this charge was the belief that standards are an important cornerstone upon which to build a district-wide history curriculum and assure its instruction. The goal of the committee was to develop standards which would:

1. provide continuity for students as they move between grades;
2. provide a common point of reference so that student learning, district-wide, can be measured;
3. serve as concrete guides for teachers as they develop curriculum to help students meet the standards set out by the district
4. promote educational equity through a set of common goals and expectations for students in classrooms throughout the district.

This introduction provides an overview and discussion of the standards, as developed by the committee of teachers, for district-wide history instruction. The teachers represented schools throughout the district.

What Are Standards?

History instruction in Oakland, K-12, has been guided by the district's Core Curriculum. This curriculum's content is based upon the scope and sequence for history education outlined in the California "History-Social Studies Framework." This outline provides a detailed description of topics to be covered in grades K12. For example, the Framework's discussion of what students should study in the 5th grade (United States History and Geography: Making a New Nation) includes "The Land and People Before Columbus" and "The War for Independence." In the 10thgrade (World History, Culture and Geography: The Modern World), the Framework includes such topics as "Unresolved Problems of the Modern World" and "The Rise' of Imperialism and Colonialism: A Case Study of India."

The Core Curriculum and the State Framework outline what students should learn about history. But the study of history includes more than just learning what happened; it is also being able to critically examine historical evidence, to compare conflicting historical accounts, and to weigh the meaning of past events for the present. Fundamentally, history

is a learning process that involves more than just memorizing specific facts, dates, names, and Places. Yet students, and many adults, often think of history in exactly those terms. It is critical that Oakland's teachers of history help their students move beyond this narrow, sterile conception. With this goal in mind, and to help assure this broader conception, Oakland's History Standards stress the development of historical thinking as a means to historical understanding.

What is Historical Thinking?

A focus on historical thinking, in conjunction with the required topics of study, is important if students are to successfully inquire into the meaning and significance of historical events and individuals. Historical thinking requires students to go beyond their textbooks so that they may examine, for themselves, traces of history, artifacts, and other primary sources. It is a thoughtful process that requires students to think critically about the meaning and significance of historical evidence. Thus, historical thinking in conjunction with historical content can provide concrete goals for teaching and learning. These achievements have been identified as elements of historical thinking, or historical literacy.

In addition, a focus on historical thinking is essential to helping Oakland teachers work effectively with their diverse student populations. Historical thinking, by its very nature, invites students to cross cultural borders. Working with multiple perspectives, developing historical empathy, and making moral judgments are central to the study of history. For students, learning and thinking about people in the past in this way, rather than just memorizing names and dates, makes history a compelling topic. These practices require students not only to make use of their own personal and cultural knowledge, but also to move beyond their own specific perspectives to consider other points of view. The following two quotes both illustrate and represent this challenge.

The first is from the multicultural educator James Banks, who writes, "The challenge that teachers face is how to make effective instructional use of the personal and cultural knowledge of students while at the same time helping them reach beyond their own cultural boundaries." If we apply this idea to the study of history, it becomes clear that this is a challenge historians undertake as they research, narrate, and interpret the events and people they identify as historically significant.

The second quote, from the historian Lawrence Levine, supports this idea and connects it to the study of history. "We must prepare ourselves for the possibility that these people whose lives we are sharing for the moment are not necessarily earlier versions of ourselves ... To attempt to capture their [his emphasis] way of doing things, their consciousness, their world view, is the stuff of history, the quest that gives historians purpose."

II. AN OVERVIEW OF FIVE HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARDS

The committee has identified and defined five broad categories of historical thinking around which to focus our instruction and district standards. It is important to understand that as teachers, from kindergarten to 12th grade, begin to work with these standards, they will apply them in ways most appropriate to a particular grade level. In addition, more detailed descriptions will be developed as assessments of historical thinking and understanding are implemented. Below are brief outlines and summaries of the standards.'

Final Note References

1. Chronological/Spatial Thinking

- * distinguishing past from present
- * location
- * sequencing

At its most basic level, historical thinking requires students to be able distinguish the past, the present, and the future. Without a strong sense of chronology knowing what events occurred and in what sequence it is impossible for students to examine relationships among those events or to explain historical causality. (National Standards, p. 20).

In addition, knowing that historical events took place in a particular place is also essential to understanding what happened and why. Supporting these elements of historical thinking requires the construction of time lines, maps, and historical narratives that locate historical events and individuals in specific times and places. This is especially crucial in the primary grades, as students begin to develop a sense of the past as different from the present.

In addition, this standard requires that students are able to recognize that over time, as some things have changed, some things have stayed the same.

2. Examining Evidence

- * examining primary sources (such as photos, artifacts, & documents)
- understanding the relationship between primary sources & historical/geographical content
- * author's intention / perspective

If history is to be more than just the recording of names and dates, then students need to confront questions of historical methodology: How do we know about the past? What do

historians do? These questions focus on how students work with evidence from the past. Helping students understand how to respond to these questions is key to the development of their historical understanding.

With this in mind, it is important to help students begin to understand the relationship between evidence and historical understanding, as they learn more about the people, events, Place, and time period that produced the evidence. Learning about the society that produced a document is essential if a student is to use that document to make inferences and assertions about a particular time period. In addition, understanding a time period requires that both the background and the evidence students encounter reflect multiple perspectives on a particular event or issue. Connected to this encounter with multiple perspectives is the understanding that the authors of documents and historical accounts, existing in a specific place and time, brought specific intentions to their work. A student's ability to identify an author's intention is connected to his or her ability to understand that author's work and perspective.

3. Diversity : Multiple Perspectives

- * influences (such as location, race, gender, class, age, sexual orientation)
- * empathy

In Oakland we work with populations of students from communities whose history has, historically, not been included in the narratives presented in schools, textbooks, and the popular media.

Central to the study of history and the development of historical understanding is the need to seek out and consider multiple perspectives such as race, class, gender, and geographical location. For example, a unit on World War II should include primary sources that relate how the experiences of African - American soldiers differed from the experiences of Japanese- American soldiers and how both differed from the experiences of European - American soldiers. A unit on the - American Revolution should include primary sources which relate the experiences and viewpoints of women and African -- American s, as well as the experiences and viewpoints of the individuals included in the traditional narrative of our nation's origin. It is through the consideration of multiple perspectives that students begin to appreciate the challenge historians face as they attempt to understand and reconstruct the past.

Empathy, in terms of history, is both essential to the development of historical understanding and an achievement of that study. To say a student has empathized is to say that he or she, through a process of reconstructing the past, is in a position to consider a set of beliefs, values, and experiences not necessarily his or her own. It also is to say that a student has gained an understanding of a historical period by learning about people in the past who may have different beliefs, values, and experiences. In the California "History-Social Studies Framework," discussion of historical literacy, historical empathy was listed first among goals for students. The Framework described it as, "...the imaginative reconstruction of the past ... the student should have a sense of what it was

like to live there, to realize that events hung in the balance, that people in the past did not know how things ultimately would turn out."

Entertaining the beliefs, goals, and values of other people, in other places, and other societies can be a difficult intellectual task. It means considering ideas that are not one's own and may be disagreeable or disturbing. However, when students consider ideas in their historical context it will help them to better understand the beliefs and actions of people in the past.

Teachers face a dilemma in helping students achieve historical empathy. They want to help students understand that they shouldn't judge people in the past by our present day values and perspectives, but they also know that history cannot be value free and students can use their study of the past to help shape their own beliefs and values about the world today.

4. Historical Interpretation

- * constructing historical accounts
- * comparing historical accounts
- * moral judgment

Written historical accounts can never be the same thing as the past itself, they cannot include everything that happened from every perspective. Historians construct interpretations based on the questions they ask and the evidence they gather. For this reason, they are constantly challenging, revising and rewriting historical accounts. Some historians, for example, understand the events leading up to the Civil War as a moral conflict, while others stress the economic nature of the divisions between the North and South as the key to understanding what led to the conflict. In addition, interpretations of the past are also subject to influences that reflect the historian's own particular time and place. For example, many historians in the past have seen American westward expansion in the 19th century as a sign of progress. Today, environmental historians view this period less optimistically.

The goal of this particular standard is for students to be able to understand how historians construct history and to construct coherent historical narratives of their own as they work with evidence, accounts, and other historical narratives. It is also for students to understand the similarities and differences among historians' accounts of the past, and those of novelists, filmmakers, storytellers, and others.

Constructing and comparing historical accounts often involves making moral judgments. As Peter Seixas, a history educator, points out, "... our ability to make moral judgments in history requires that we entertain the notion of an historically transcendent human community, a recognition of our humanity in the person of historical actors, at the same

time that we open every door to the possibility that those actors differ from us in ways so profound that we perpetually risk misunderstanding them."

Grappling with the vital moral and ethical issues illuminated by the study of history provides an opportunity for students to better understand themselves and their present conditions. They get to see how people worked for, or against, change. They examine actions inspired by ideals of equality and social justice, as well as self-interest and greed. They see the constraints on people's decisions and the intended as well as the unintended consequences of their actions. All of this helps students to gain perspective and understanding, to help them make crucial decisions about their participation as citizens in their own community.

As students construct coherent narratives, the multiple viewpoints within a student population is also an important component of study-ing history. For example, because many of our students come from families that recently emigrated from Southeast Asia they may provide a different perspective on the Vietnam War than students whose families were in the United States during the war. If historical understanding requires the consideration of a variety of perspectives, then a classroom's diversity can be an important part of that process. Multiple perspectives on the meaning and significance of historical events and individuals can emerge through the diverse views and interpretations students develop as they discuss and write about the history they encounter.

5. Determining Historical/ Geographical Significance

What is Important in the Past and Why?

- connecting past, present, & place
- causation
- evaluation
- location

If history is the reconstruction of the past and a product of present interests and concerns, key questions for students become who were the significant people, what were the significant events, and how did their significance connect to their location? For historians, teachers, and students, these questions raise additional questions. How is this identification of significance made and on what basis? How do these events and individuals connect to larger themes and ideas? Rather than just reciting a list of important terms and individuals, students should be able to develop and express criteria for determining an individual or event as historically significant.

The ability to establish historical significance is dependent on being able to sort and sift through pieces of historical evidence and explain their connection to a certain theme, idea, event, or place. This means that students move beyond a recitation of events and people involved in a particular historical period towards an evaluation of which of these individuals and events were most important in determining what happened. This process

requires of students the act of evaluation. For example, students might be asked two very basic questions. First, "Which event during a particular time period had the most effect in determining what happened?" Second, "Did an individual make, in your judgment, positive or negative contributions to their society/ community at that time, or to the development of their society/ community over time?" A thoughtful response to these questions requires that students grapple with the problem of identifying and explaining an event's or individual's historical significance.

In addition, teachers are always trying to connect the past and the present. Throughout this process teachers are explaining and highlighting historical significance for their students. In other words, this event or person is important because of a connection to our present concerns and interests.

The Oakland History Standards highlight historical thinking because they provide students the opportunity to determine significance and evaluate, as part of the district history curriculum, the past for themselves.

III. FREQUENTLY USED TERMINOLOGY

2. *Examining Evidence* > **EVIDENCE** : When primary sources are used to support a historical argument or account, they become evidence. Without evidence, there are no grounds for our believing a person's account of the past.

2. *Examining Evidence* > **PRIMARY SOURCE** : A primary source is a document or artifact which existed or was created at the time in the past which we wish to study. Sometimes called traces, primary sources are one of the fundamental sources of knowledge about the past.

3. *Diversity: Multiple Perspectives* > **PERSPECTIVE** : To speak of the perspective of a person is to recognize that he or she had a particular set of assumptions and a limited way of seeing the world. To understand a person's perspective is to be able to see where the person is standing as they look outward. To talk about a person's perspective is value-neutral, and thus different from talking about their bias, which has a negative connotation. We can also speak of the perspective of a document or a group of people.

3. *Diversity: Multiple Perspectives* > **HISTORICAL EMPATHY** : : Historical empathy is the ability to understand what the world looked like from the perspective of a person who lived in the past, in very different circumstances from our own.

3. *Diversity: Multiple Perspectives* . **MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES** : To consider multiple perspectives of individuals or groups of people in the past is to recognize that people had different assumptions, interests, beliefs, and points of view. The best understanding of history comes from considering the multiple perspectives of those involved in any event.

4. *Historical Interpretation* . **ACCOUNT / NARRATIVE** : An account of the past is a narrative or a story telling how things happened. Accounts are more than lists of events: an account provides answers to the questions, "How and why did x I happen?" They may also include a moral judgment. Historians, textbook writers, novelists, and filmmakers frequently offer different accounts of the same event, because they ask different questions and bring different assumptions to their work. Thus every account is also an interpretation. Good historical accounts are based on evidence.

5. *Determining Historical / Geographical Significance* . **SIGNIFICANCE** : We can't know everything about the past, and what's more, we're not interested in everything about the past. Historical significance is a way of talking about what is worth knowing about the past. There are different kinds of reasons for a particular event or person being historically significant.

- * They may have affected large numbers of people (like the dropping of the atomic bomb).
- They may have had important consequences for us today (like the Bill of Rights). Different events may be significant for different people or groups or they may be significant in different ways. Thus judgment of significance are like accounts, *interpretations*.

IV. REFERENCES

Final Note: *We developed these subdivisions (chronology and spatial, evidence, diversity and multiple perspectives, interpretation, and significance) so that teachers could work to develop students' capacity in each area. However, in reality these categories often overlap and are sometimes hard to distinguish from each other. Nevertheless, the creation of these categories should help teachers develop a more systematic way of teaching and assessing students' ability to think historically.*

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