

COURSE CHANGED IN HISTORY LESSONS

[THIRD Edition]

Boston Globe - Boston, Mass.

Subjects: Elementary school students; Ancient civilizations; Curricula; History

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Date: Jun 4, 2002

Start Page: B.1

Section: Metro/Region

Document Text

Reversing a policy that was crafted after months of often rancorous debate, the state Department of Education decided yesterday to put ancient history back into curriculum guidelines for fourth-graders.

Education officials, bowing to pressure from critics, now propose combining the study of ancient China and Egypt with North American geography. Opponents had contended that dropping the unit was xenophobic and shortsighted, particularly after Sept. 11, a time when world events beyond the borders of North America are assuming greater importance.

The reversal came days after the state Board of Education first discussed the revised guidelines, which were based in part on more than 700 comments on the draft proposal and often testy public hearings.

The rapid reversal, however, has sparked debate about the feasibility of the curriculum guidelines and the credibility of the Education Department.

And some school departments, already facing tough financial times, say they are wary of spending resources on guidelines issued by the department.

Newton canceled its summer curriculum development. In Sudbury, the district spent \$10,000 on training and history materials based on earlier guidelines, only to see last week's revised proposal undercut that spending. With yesterday's flip-flop, it appears again to be money well-spent.

"We're trying to offer a compromise for teachers who feel that ancient civilization should be in elementary schools," Anders Lewis, who oversees the agency's history standards, said yesterday.

But Abigail M. Thernstrom, a state Board of Education member, yesterday described the curriculum framework presented to the board last week as "superb, and I do hope that it remains basically unchanged."

She said she was disturbed by the Education Department's retreat on that draft, which pushed public school pupils' first look at world history back to middle school. "There's just no way of pleasing everyone," she said. "It's just utterly impossible."

The Board of Education will vote next fall on the guidelines, which Lewis said will probably have few additional changes. He added that for now, the fifth-grade MCAS tests would not include history questions on ancient civilizations.

Sid Smith, director of curriculum and instructional practices at Boston public schools, said that "as the state continues to flip-flop, we struggle to take these guidelines seriously."

Disagreements over curriculum guidelines have escalated nationally over the past several years as standardized testing has prompted legislatures and state boards of education to dictate broadly what teachers should teach.

Lewis said the state Education Department revised the proposed history and social studies framework less than a week after it was presented to the Board of Education because of a flurry of calls from educators.

Those guidelines released last week centered the entire elementary school history curriculum on North America, with the major emphasis on the United States. Under that plan, pupils would have gotten their first exposure to world history in sixth or seventh grade. Those guidelines had departed from an earlier draft, in December, that called for fourth-graders to study ancient civilizations - a history unit that has been part of the state's recommended curriculum since 1997. That curriculum also ignited controversy when it was proposed five years ago.

The absence of global studies in elementary schools in last week's revised guidelines was an unintended consequence of the Education Department's attempt to have US history taught in consecutive grades, according to Lewis.

That didn't sit well with some educators.

"What you're saying, until the sixth grade, is that there is no world," said Daniel Leclerc, assistant superintendent in Ashland.

Critics in and out of the education field described the framework released last week as a retreat to America's borders, which they said was a grave error when soldiers are fighting in Afghanistan, the Mideast conflict is flaring, and anti-American sentiment is rampant around the world.

"Our country is part of the world community. Nothing has made that more clear than the events of last year," said Wendell C. Bourne Jr., the coordinator of multicultural curriculum and programs in Cambridge public schools. "It's important for students to know and be able to talk about the world beyond our shores," said Bourne, who also serves on the Massachusetts Council for Social Studies.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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