

# Defending History: Educators Stand Up to Protect Virginia's Social Studies Standards

Beau Dickenson, Brendan Gillis, and Chris Jones

In October 2022, the administration of Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin commissioned a secret rewrite of the state's History and Social Science Standards of Learning to replace the draft that the state Department of Education had developed through its own standards revision process. This unprecedented step galvanized supporters of public education and spurred them to action. In partnership with a broad alliance of state and national organizations, Virginia educators successfully defended the integrity of social studies education. The final version of the standards, approved in April 2023, were far from perfect, but the advocacy of educators and their allies resulted in clear and measurable improvements that will benefit the state's public school students. As the story in Virginia demonstrates, educators are a powerful force for leading dynamic coalitions to combat political interference in state education policy.

## State Politics and Standards Revision

During his campaign for governor, Youngkin embraced education reform as a signature issue. His first executive order took steps to purge Virginia's public schools of Critical Race Theory along with other topics he labeled "inherently divisive concepts."<sup>1</sup> Youngkin then announced an anonymous "tip line" for parents to report teachers and schools for violating this order.<sup>2</sup> Despite rhetoric about unity and pragmatism, the governor framed his education policy as a corrective to what teachers were doing in classrooms across the Commonwealth.

When Youngkin took office in January 2022, a

scheduled "review and revision" of Virginia's 2015 History and Social Science Standards of Learning had been nearing completion. Initiated in July 2021, this revision followed a long-standing and transparent process that weighed input from committees of classroom teachers, curriculum supervisors, historians, museum professionals, students, and other stakeholders.

The Virginia Social Studies Leaders Consortium (VSSLC) advocated for a more thematic, conceptual, and inquiry-based curriculum that adhered to the principles of the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* produced by NCSS in collaboration with the American Historical Association (AHA) and more than a dozen other organizations. The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) initially supported this goal by forming a comprehensive team of professionals to re-envision the standards.

However, as nearly two years of work toward significantly revised standards came to an end in the summer of 2022, it became clear that the Youngkin administration viewed the social studies standards as an opportunity to deliver on campaign promises to shake up education. Through political maneuvering, the governor secured five new appointments to the nine-member Virginia Board of Education (VBOE) during the summer of 2022.<sup>3</sup> The new board took its seat in July, just weeks before the revised standards draft (the "August draft") was scheduled for preliminary approval.

## The November Rewrite

On August 15, 2022, just two days before the

VBOE was scheduled to meet, Governor Youngkin told a reporter that the standards “still need significant work.” In misleading comments echoed by allies and appointees, Youngkin insisted that the revised standards had deliberately removed language describing George Washington as the “Father of our Country” and James Madison as the “Father of the Constitution.” A Virginia Department of Education spokesperson clarified that this language had been moved, not deleted.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, State Superintendent of Instruction Jillian Balow cited this example as justification to set aside the draft for a more thorough review before the next board meeting.

Over the next weeks and months, Balow and her supporters on the board repeatedly mischaracterized the revision process, offering hyperbolic assessments of the August draft, and frequently departing from previous promises. At the board’s September meeting, the superintendent delayed the vote and asked the VDOE to organize “Community Engagement Roundtables,” to take place in October and November.<sup>5</sup> These never occurred. Instead, at the October 20 meeting, the superintendent pushed for another delay, citing concerns that the 402-page document was overly cumbersome and should be “decoupled” to separate the standards from curriculum frameworks.<sup>6</sup> In subsequent statements, however, board member Andy Rotherham insisted that he objected to the August draft because it did not contain *enough* historical content.<sup>7</sup> Those who followed this process with close attention struggled to make sense of the inconsistent and incoherent reasoning offered to reject the August draft.

Alarmed at these developments, educators, scholars, and community leaders involved in the revisions process began to draw attention to the lack of transparency surrounding the board’s actions. In an October 19 statement, the AHA expressed concern about the developments and called on the Board of Education to adopt the standards as originally proposed.<sup>8</sup> Board member and former Virginia Secretary of Education Anne Holton warned that further delay would suggest that the board was “rewriting and starting from scratch.”<sup>9</sup> This last concern turned out to be prescient.

Late on the afternoon of November 11, the

Veterans Day holiday, Balow’s office quietly released a complete rewrite of the standards (dated the previous day), proposing a dramatic overhaul of the structure, content, and goals of history and social studies education in Virginia. The board was scheduled to vote on potential adoption of this draft just six days later.

Many Virginians found this brazen attempt to hijack the standards revision process shocking. The “November Rewrite” was politically biased, historically inaccurate, culturally insensitive, and developmentally inappropriate. The initial draft removed prominent Black Americans, including Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jackie Robinson from elementary school study. It undermined the culture of native peoples by referring to them as “America’s first immigrants.” And the document included numerous instances of age-inappropriate content. Social studies teachers took particular offense, noting that these Standards of Learning with an overt political and ideological agenda came from the same administration that had lodged repeated accusations of “indoctrination” in public schools.<sup>10</sup> They responded by applying their own civics lessons in a months-long advocacy campaign in defense of their curriculum.

### **From Outrage to Advocacy**

Social studies educators and various partners immediately sprang into action. Some teachers were hesitant to take a public stance on the standards after a year of political vitriol, during which educators had been attacked on social media, harassed by partisan groups, and even doxxed, by having their personal information revealed on the Internet. The Virginia Social Studies Leaders Consortium (VSSLC) quickly took steps to establish a public position while also providing avenues for private communication for anyone who felt threatened. VSSLC leadership organized a landing page for communication that was not subject to the Freedom of Information Act by creating an open-edit Google Doc with a simple, memorable address ([tinyurl.com/VA-socialstudies](https://tinyurl.com/VA-socialstudies)). The tinyurl served as an informal hub for advocacy efforts. Within hours, teachers evaluated the new standards and began to compile a list of errors and omissions. This confirmed suspicions that the

document had been assembled in haste and with little professional input.

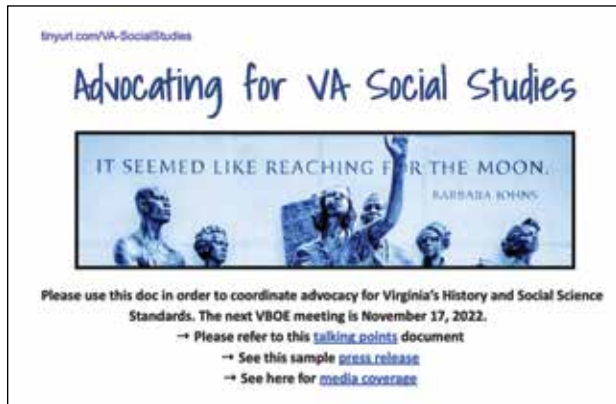


Figure 1. The tinyurl advocacy landing page developed by the Virginia Social Studies Leaders Consortium

The buzz on the tinyurl message board reached a fever pitch when one user noticed that the November Rewrite had removed Martin Luther King, Jr., from the entire K-5 curriculum. A provocative meme in the style of a Youngkin campaign sign with an image of King waving goodbye went viral, generating thousands of reposts on multiple platforms, including from political scientist Larry J. Sabato, comedian W. Kamau Bell, and the popular Baller Alert Instagram account.<sup>11</sup> The Youngkin administration immediately went into damage control and uploaded a new, post-dated version of the document with the MLK national holiday added back into the Kindergarten standards.<sup>12</sup> The governor's office subsequently released a statement attempting to clarify the previously unannounced "revision," but the accusations of "whitewashing" cast a shadow over the entire process. Meanwhile, anxious Virginians reached out to state and national organizations, including the Virginia Council for the Social Studies (VCSS), the Virginia Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (VASCD), NCSS, and the AHA.

Opponents to the November Rewrite generated media coverage and coordinated in-person public comment at the November 17 Board of Education meeting. VSSLC repurposed its tinyurl landing page to feature directions to the meeting, as well as guidelines for providing public comment and suggested talking points. The next morning, a rally

of demonstrators from the Sikh Coalition and the Hamkae Center, an advocacy group that organizes Asian Americans in Virginia, met board members as they arrived to consider the new draft.

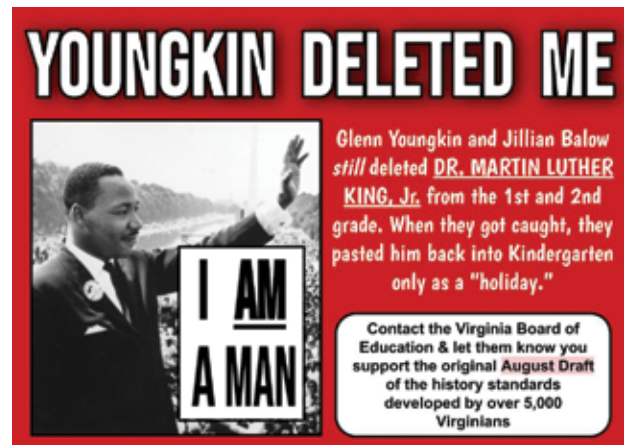


Figure 2. The MLK Erasure meme

The public comment portion of the meeting took more than three hours, as dozens of speakers came forward to express opposition to the November Rewrite. Dr. Aaron Winston of the Virginia Tribal Education Consortium called out the board for its offensive distortion of indigenous history. "I'm a Native American from the Pamunkey tribe," he fumed, "and now I'm an immigrant in my own land? I am not an immigrant!"<sup>13</sup> Nearly every comment called attention to the November Rewrite's many flaws.

These criticisms clearly resonated with board members. When pushed for clarification on the missteps, Superintendent Balow stated that the VDOE had hired a consultant for \$1,000 a day for up to 15 days to rewrite the standards, underestimating the amount of time, energy, and expertise required to do so effectively. As public records requests would later confirm, the consultant sought input from a small group of organizations—Hillsdale College, the Civics Alliance, and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute—as well as a hand-picked list of 10 scholars known for airing conservative political views.<sup>14</sup> This process unfolded so haphazardly that most of the individuals invited to evaluate the standards declined. In a subsequent letter of apology, the consultant admitted that the standards she provided to the VBOE were "deeply flawed."

Near the end of a 10-hour meeting, the VBOE voted unanimously to send the standards back to the Department of Education for further review. The coordinated effort to completely overhaul the standards had been averted by the advocacy of educators and their allies.

### The December Collaborative Standards and the January Draft

Given the rushed and sloppy nature of the November Rewrite, the VSSLC decided to develop a realistic alternative rooted in best teaching practices. The consortium opted to deliver its own version of the crosswalked standards specifically requested by Virginia's Board of Education, setting out to restore the spirit of the original August draft and remove some of the glaring flaws of the November Rewrite. Simultaneously, the VASCD invited the AHA to initiate a similar effort, and the two plans soon merged. The three organizations united behind a shared vision that prioritized the needs and interests of Virginia students instead of political concerns. The AHA brought the knowledge and expertise of professional historians, VASCD offered a history of leadership in K-12 best practice, and VSSLC completed the alliance as a collective of curriculum experts who had authored much of the original August draft. The coalition initially worked asynchronously, but the final push required in-person collaboration. Twenty representatives of the three groups quietly gathered in Richmond for two days of intense curriculum writing.

These efforts produced the aptly named Collaborative Standards. The coalition organized a press release and sent the Collaborative Standards to Superintendent Balow, Virginia Secretary of Education Aimee Rogstad Guidera, and the members of the VBOE on December 20, 2022. Reports of this independent set of standards appeared the same day in the *Virginia Mercury*, the *Richmond-Times Dispatch*, and on state-wide nightly news segments. Two days later, the Virginia Civics Commission voted to endorse the Collaborative draft.<sup>15</sup> In early January, the Virginia Council for the Social Studies released a joint statement with NCSS endorsing the Collaborative Standards. This was followed by the Virginia Geographic Alliance, the Virginia NAACP, and a number of other state organizations.

On January 6, 2023, the anniversary of the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, the superintendent and Virginia's Department of Education released yet another set of social studies standards ("the January draft"), which combined elements of previous drafts with entirely new standards. The three organizations behind the Collaborative Standards now expanded their coalition to include VCSS, NCSS, and the Virginia Geographic Alliance, and assembled a detailed and comprehensive press release known as the Collaborative Response.

Released on January 17, the Collaborative Response systematically critiqued the January draft, warning that such standards were "not viable" as a roadmap for public education. Referencing 187 different historical figures, the January draft would add 132 new standards to an already bloated curriculum. It would be impossible for teachers to cover so much content without "an increased emphasis on rote memorization at the expense of deeper learning, understanding, and skill development." More troubling, portions of the January draft had no precedent in previous versions, suggesting that those responsible for the revisions had solicited input from additional, unnamed sources. The January draft, for example, deleted references to fascism and militarism from discussions of World War II; removed the already scant coverage of labor unions and working conditions; and added language that sought to blur distinctions between racialized chattel slavery and indentured servitude.



Figure 3. The Collaborative Standards meme



Figure 4. Advocacy meme for the Virginia Board of Education meeting

As additional organizations continued to endorse the Collaborative Standards, the coalition coordinated efforts to generate even more public support by repurposing [tinyurl.com/va-socialstudies](https://tinyurl.com/va-socialstudies) with sample press releases,

directions for submitting written comments, and talking points to inform potential allies and supporters.

When the VBOE met on February 2, 2023, the room was packed. In light of robust public response, the board instituted new crowd control procedures and strictly limited speakers to three minutes each. For more than four hours, speaker after speaker rose to criticize the shortcomings of the January draft. While the draft opened with a promise to “restore excellence, curiosity, and excitement around teaching and learning history,” VCSS President Sam Futrell noted, “These standards train Virginia students to be passive, compliant actors.... How can Virginia ‘restore’ any curiosity without any questions?” Over the course of the meeting, more than 50 different speakers ended with the common refrain: “I urge the board to accept the Collaborative Standards for first review.” The consensus could not have been more clear.



VCSS President Sam Futrell at the February 2, 2023, Virginia Board of Public Education meeting.

The nine-member board of education was divided between five Youngkin appointees and four members appointed by the previous Northam administration. The board considered a motion to accept the Collaborative Standards, but this failed by a narrow five to four vote. The coalition had expended considerable effort to appeal to potential swing votes on the board, but to no avail. The five Youngkin appointees held in their support of the January draft, voting to adopt these standards for “first review” in opposition to overwhelming public comment.

### **Public Hearings and April Adoption of the Standards**

The VBOE’s February vote transferred responsibility for the new standards from the state Department of Education to the board itself. Following precedent, board members scheduled a series of six public hearings for March 13-21 in locations across the Commonwealth to solicit additional feedback, suggestions, and corrections. As teachers continued to point out on social media the most glaring issues in the framework, the coalition of six education organizations took a more formal approach, creating a Collaborative Strikethrough version of the new standards with detailed explanations for proposed deletions and changes to submit for the board’s consideration. During this period, Superintendent Balow resigned from her

position without explanation.

Yet again, a clear and overwhelming majority of public commentary sided with teachers, curriculum leaders, historians, geographers, and others in the growing coalition. The Virginia Social Studies Leaders Consortium repurposed its tinyurl advocacy page once more to provide instructions and talking points as well as a PDF of the full strikethrough document.

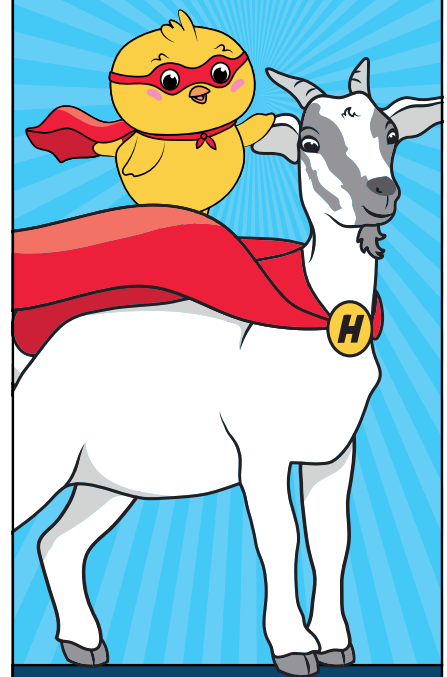
Using these simple tools, the coalition’s message of respect for teachers and their professional expertise continued to draw new groups and organizations into the campaign. For example, members of the United Mine Workers appeared at the public hearing in Abingdon to protest the removal of labor unions from the American history standards, one of many flaws identified in the coalition’s advocacy materials. Underscoring this point, the Virginia AFL-CIO led a public demonstration in downtown Richmond on the same day that the VBOE gathered to discuss final revisions to the standards draft.<sup>16</sup>

Over the course of a marathon working session on April 19, 2023, the VBOE gathered with VDOE staff to talk through extensive revisions that each member had proposed. Several board members clearly used the Collaborative Response and Collaborative Strikethrough documents that the coalition provided as a guide for correcting the most egregious

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mistakes and omissions. The many changes included adding fascism back to the standards on World War II; restoring the limited coverage of labor unions; recognizing that Nairobi is, in fact, in *Kenya*; asking second graders to learn about John F. Kennedy rather than his son, *JFK, Jr.*; and acknowledging the presence of Indigenous peoples prior to European exploration in eleventh grade U.S. History.

The final standards adopted on April 20, 2023, were much better than they might have been without the leadership and work of teachers and their supporters. Unfortunately, much of the superfluous content remained, and the board adopted a standards framework that is broadly incompatible with the constraints of a 180-day school calendar. Political compromise is important, but it need not come at the expense of professional expertise and insights gleaned from decades of practical experience. Youngkin appointee Andy Rotherham exemplified a fundamental misunderstanding of the coalition's advocacy efforts when he declared the new standards "a victory for content."<sup>17</sup> The end result would have been much better had the board paid nearly as much attention to how that content was organized, the disciplinary skills that help make sense of it, and how Virginia's students are assessed.

### **Lessons Learned and the Future of State Standards**

The experience in Virginia is part of a larger struggle over state educational policy and public memory that is playing out across the country. In South Dakota, state education policymakers successfully threw out the social studies standards developed through a well-established, democratic process, replacing these with a hastily assembled framework written by a retired professor from Hillsdale College (for more about this, see the article by Stephen Jackson on page 355). The Colorado State Board of Education voted narrowly along party lines to approve a new version of the state's own history standards instead of the American Birthright model promoted by Civics Alliance. In early 2023, legislators in both Ohio and North Carolina debated proposals that would have stripped state education agencies of authority over social science standards.<sup>18</sup>

In each of these contexts, teachers, school administrators, and an array of supporters and allies have worked to defend the integrity of history and social studies education from political interference. The coalition that formed in Virginia serves as a valuable model for the importance of collaboration, tolerance, integrity, and professional expertise. The conversations that informed our Collaborative Standards were profound and invigorating, blending the knowledge and specific expertise of many individuals to produce a richly layered framework that far exceeded what any single consultant could have cobbled together. And it was both humbling and inspiring to see new communities take shape, as observations highlighted in our advocacy materials inspired powerful testimony on the transformative potential of education and the deep significance of inclusive histories.

Our coalition provides a blueprint that can be repeated in any state or locality. At the core of this alliance is a commitment to collaboration grounded in democratic participation. We urge students, families, teachers, and leaders to build on these foundations. In Virginia, educators and allies worked to improve the standards with concrete results; we can point to dozens of corrections, phrases, sentences, and standards where the state Board of Education made changes based on the suggestions of our coalition and its members. Our takeaways, lessons learned, and recommendations for other communities that may find themselves in similar situations are included here.

### **Build a Coalition**

Political advocacy can seem like a daunting challenge, but there is strength in numbers. The power of a coalition amplifies the specific contributions of each of its members. Our Virginia coalition relied on elementary educators to highlight instances where draft standards were developmentally inappropriate for young learners; encouraged geographers to articulate the importance of geo-spatial technologies to the success of students in the twenty-first century; invited historians to assess the significance of what content was included and what had been ignored; and provided a platform for experienced

classroom teachers to explain the consequences of stripping skills and inquiry from the curriculum. Our coalition incorporated both Virginia-based and national organizations, emphasizing our need to lean on others for their expertise. All of these perspectives are essential to the development and implementation of effective state standards. They are also crucial to building a network to provide mutual support and mobilize public opinion.

### **Designate a Coordinator**

Coalitions can and should endeavor for something approaching consensus, but the quick turnaround and rapid timelines necessary for effective political advocacy necessitate identifying an individual or group to serve as coordinator. The person in this role can initiate collaborative drafts, set deadlines, negotiate between stakeholders, and provide gentle guidance toward a shared outcome. Mutual agreement to defer to a single coordinator on questions of procedure and formatting allows coalition meetings to focus on more substantive decisions.

### **Leverage Networks and Elevate Voices**

Our coalition formed out of a shared sense of concern for public education in Virginia and outrage about the concerted effort to derail the state's standards revision process. We soon realized, however, that there were many like-minded organizations and potential allies who understood that something was amiss but lacked the time or the inclination to analyze drafts of the standards for themselves. Providing concrete examples that illustrated where secret interventions introduced factual errors, skewed historical content, or failed to account for age-appropriateness allowed colleagues, peers, students, parents, labor unions, and civil rights organizations, for example, to amplify the message and articulate passionate pleas of their own. We encouraged each and every member of our coalition to speak at public hearings and share their own stories about teaching, learning, leading, and the power of education. Engaging students, and encouraging them to voice their own feelings on education policy, proved especially effective. Vulnerable teachers and others who feel threatened can contribute in meaningful ways, too. It takes an

army of knowledgeable readers to comb through a new standards draft, and much of this valuable work can be completed without risking public exposure.

### **Media, Media, Media**

Attention from local, state, and national media can make or break an advocacy campaign. Develop press releases and distribute them widely to contacts at any outlet your members can think of. Email journalists. Call a press conference before a public hearing or meeting. Submit an op-ed to a local or state newspaper. And identify members of your coalition who feel comfortable speaking with the press. Remember that journalists may already have a narrative in mind that will not always account for the full complexity of issues of educational policy. Where possible, have a few talking points and, ideally, a memorable phrase or two in mind when going into a conversation with a journalist. Any publicity can call attention to the work of your coalition and its members; even the least generous representation of your group's message might have unexpected consequences down the road.

This Virginia story may have begun as part of a nationally coordinated effort to politicize history and social science education, but *history* will remember how that scheme was stalled and mitigated by the educators of the Commonwealth who took a stand—and remain standing—in defense of their curriculum, their classrooms, their students, and their communities. 📌

### **Notes**

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\* The Collaborative Standards and related advocacy documents can be accessed via [tinyurl.com/collaborative-coalition](http://tinyurl.com/collaborative-coalition)



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