

Best history standard provokes thought

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

When President Clinton met with governors and corporate leaders recently at the National Education Summit in Palisades, N.Y., he urged each state to develop a set of high academic standards for its children. Not only did the governors respond by promising to create more rigorous standards within a two-year period but they also committed themselves to developing methods of assessing student skills in certain benchmark grades.



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Setting national standards in major subject areas will undoubtedly improve student accountability.

Students will be told exactly what they are expected to learn and will not be promoted or graduate until they learn it.

At the same time, however, the effort to establish national standards promises to generate more controversy than agreement.

Under Goals 2000 developed by the governors at the last major education summit in 1989, the movement for national standards in all major subject areas was put into motion by the federal government. Over the last five years, the resulting math and science standards have gained some acceptance among educators.

But the new National History Standards provoked widespread concern. At issue was what history to teach and how best to teach it.

Those standards, contained in a three-volume work released last year, left the historians, teachers and curricular specialists who produced them bickering over whether the perspectives of minority groups and ordinary people should take precedence over the academic history of the old school which emphasizes the great men and deeds

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that have shaped the past. It is a futile debate.

History teachers have two responsibilities to their students: first, to impart a substantial amount of basic historical information so that students can enter college or their own independent study of the subject equipped with a framework within which they can place historical figures and events; and second, to get students excited about history so they see it as something vitally and intrinsically interesting as well as relevant to their own lives.

Unfortunately, history education in this county has tended to treat these two responsibilities as mutually exclusive.

During the 1960s many schools abandoned the traditional history course with its chronological sequence of events and emphasis on great political and military leaders for a program in social studies, which ranged from course offerings in economics, sociology and psychology to a curriculum based on multicultural understanding.

While this development was initiated to enhance student interest in the study of society, it occurred at the expense of substantive content, all but eliminating the historical context students needed in order to understand their roles as citizens in a free society.

Recently, the National Endowment for the Humanities which is spearheading the drive for national standards, suggested not only a return to the more traditional approach with its chronological sequence of people, places and

events but to reinvent that history to accommodate those minority groups who were previously ignored.

Supposedly, this will make history pertinent to the lives of greater numbers of students. If nothing else, it is politically correct.

The real dilemma of teaching history these days has less to do with content or standards than with how to engage our young people about a past that was forged by different cultures, genders and religious groups and in which some figures were clearly more important actors than others.

Perhaps the best solution is to frame that history in terms of provocative questions that will appeal to the students’ curiosity.

How, for example, can the United States Constitution, a document that was drafted over 200 years ago, address the political and social problems that American society faces today? In what ways have the contemporary myths of American culture been influenced by our national experience? Who determines historical change, the exceptional leadership of an individual or the larger will of the masses?

These are the kinds of questions that excite students about history and can offer a more inclusive framework for the people, places and events that have shaped it.

More importantly, the process of answering them offers the strongest possibility for nurturing the critical thinking skills necessary to be an active member of a free society: the ability to discern fact from conjecture; to question rather than to accept blindly the stereotypes of our society; and the understanding that history does not teach “right” and “wrong” answers but “judgment” or the ability to exercise wisdom in the affairs of human nature and society.

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