



Michigan History in Our Schools: A Civics Lesson

by Sandra Sageser Clark

Last August some of us who provide Michigan history education programs and materials for our state's students learned that the State Board of Education was considering proposed Social Studies Grade Level Content Expectations that we believed would weaken the teaching of Michigan history. We



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decided to speak up and put the civics lessons we learned in school into practice. I'm pleased to report that open meetings and public comment, which are the keystones of democracy, are alive and well in Michigan. We expressed our concerns, and our elected officials, the members of the State Board of Education, listened and made a judicious decision that will benefit Michigan's children and our state.

The State Board of Education has undertaken an effort to raise achievement throughout Michigan's schools. In order to better prepare Michigan students for post-secondary education, it is adopting new Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs) for every core subject. It is basing its decisions on extensive research and study by advisory teams, public comment and its members' experience and judgment.

In this case, the advisory team recommended that Michigan studies be taught in the third grade. It placed the content expectation emphasis on the period "from exploration through attaining statehood." The expectations also included economic, geographic, civics and public discourse. Although some of the non-history expectations referenced themes that are important in Michigan history since statehood, they focused on economic activity "today" and "current" examples. The recommended fourth grade content expectations focused on American studies and had no specific history expectations.

We who challenged these recommendations—the Michigan Historical Center, the Historical Society of Michigan, museums, textbook publishers, the Capitol Tours, the Supreme Court Learning Center and others—knew it would not be enough to say that moving Michigan history to third grade would cause us a lot of work. This effort is about the students, not us. We had to convince the board of the importance of teaching the history of all of Michigan to our students and of the value of Michigan history in teaching the skills of inquiry, research and analysis; in building students' self-esteem; and in shaping future citizens of the state, the nation and the world.

My thoughts grew out our experiences at the Michigan Historical Center, particularly with the BIG History Lesson. This week-long, teacher-led program has convinced us that elementary students can learn to do history, not just remember facts about history. They can tackle complex subjects, ask important questions, find themes, evaluate sources and interpret the past.

Focusing on Michigan history gets their attention with history that is about them. As they see themselves in the continuum that stretches from the past to the future, they gain a stronger sense of their own possibilities. Focusing on Michigan history also gives them a manageable subject that lets them experience free-choice learning and dig deeply into a subject. The skills they learn prepare them for success in American and world history, as well as in life.

I also argued that as a state we have a stake in teaching our children about the broad set of experiences that make up Michigan. Without that knowledge they will have difficulty with the collaboration, concern for the common good, and understanding of differing perspectives that are essential to our pluralistic democracy. Without the pride that comes with knowledge of the state's heritage they will have less reason to build lives in Michigan. Without knowledge of their home

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state, they will lack the baseline essential to evaluating all of the other places and practices they will encounter in the global society of the future.

Our concerns resonated with members of the State Board of Education, but the Board also shared the desire for stronger economic, geographic and civics education expressed in the work of the advisory team that created the draft expectations. Our strongest supporter, Nancy Danhof, was also a strong advocate for civics education. The result was a compromise. Michigan history to statehood stayed in the third grade, but Michigan history since statehood became part of the fourth grade expectations, serving as a lens for examining fundamental American studies concepts in geography, civics and government, and economics.

This does not suggest that nothing has changed. There is no expectation that students will experience a traditional, chronological presentation of Michigan history. Rather, the expectation is that Michigan history will provide case studies that teach learning skills and the fundamental American studies concepts.

Our challenge as Michigan history organizations is to quickly become familiar with the new Grade Level Content Expectations and think about how our extraordinary resources can help teachers and students meet those expectations. If we do this right, the learning skills that students gain as they look at Michigan's past from multiple perspectives—economic, civic, social, geographic—will do more to prepare them for success in high school and beyond than any study of theories or memorization of dates and definitions

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To Review the Social Studies GLCEs visit http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/SSGLCE_218368_7.pdf