**Headline:** Is the Right Wing ‘Whitewashing’ the History Curriculum Taught in Public Schools?

**Teaser:** A fight over new history curriculum standards in Virginia is part of a nationwide campaign to undermine public schools and prevent educators from teaching the truth about America’s inequality.

By Sandra Jones

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**[Article Body:]**

“People still want to hide the truth about Black history,” Dione Archer, a resident of Richmond, Virginia, said in an interview with Our Schools. Her response came after being reminded about Virginia Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin’s November 2022 [unveiling](https://richmond.com/news/local/education/youngkin-administration-releases-new-draft-history-standards/article_2d4da891-2927-5a92-a951-5e652bacdfc5.html) of a draft revision of the state’s curriculum standards for teaching history in K-12 schools. The revision was roundly criticized for “[whitewashing](https://dianeravitch.net/2022/11/18/virginia-governor-youngkin-directs-right-washing-of-history-standards/)” American history, as education historian Diane Ravitch put it in her blog, because of its treatment of African American content (all references to Martin Luther King Jr. were deleted), its [description](https://dianeravitch.net/2022/11/18/virginia-governor-youngkin-directs-right-washing-of-history-standards/) of Native American and Indigenous peoples as “the first immigrants” to the country, and other white, Eurocentric guidelines followed by it. “I was very upset,” said Archer, whose 15-year-old African American grandson attends Henrico High School in Richmond. “Politicians want to deny the truth, good or bad, about this country,” she said. “I didn’t learn about [Katherine Johnson](https://www.nasa.gov/content/katherine-johnson-biography) [a pioneering African American mathematician who worked for NASA and was a Virginia native] until I was 67 years old. That’s horrifying to me.”

Youngkin’s proposed changes to the state’s history and social sciences Standards of Learning (SOL) set off an immediate firestorm among public school students, educators, and parents, according to the [Washington Informer](https://www.washingtoninformer.com/teachers-rail-against-virginia-gov-youngkins-proposed-curriculum-updates/). In addition to objecting to the emphasis on promoting “[white conservative ideology](https://www.washingtoninformer.com/teachers-rail-against-virginia-gov-youngkins-proposed-curriculum-updates/),” critics of the proposed new guidelines also opposed them because they would eliminate mention of LGBTQ+ history from K-5 standards and “delay instruction about lynching until the 6th grade and Christopher Columbus’ role in the slave trade by the 11th grade. By kindergarten, students would learn to equate citizenship to following rules,” the [article](https://www.washingtoninformer.com/teachers-rail-against-virginia-gov-youngkins-proposed-curriculum-updates/) stated.

State lawmakers and community activists were just as appalled.

“It is important that students and educators learn and teach the truth about the many contributions of African Americans and not attempt to revise history to make others feel good,” Virginia House Delegate Reverend Delores McQuinn told Our Schools. McQuinn, who’s a member of the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus and co-chair of [Virginians for Reconciliation](https://virginiansforreconciliation.com/), said she was offended by the governor’s effort, stating that future generations will be the losers if these changes are implemented. “The lack of knowledge about our history is a contributing factor to the racial divisiveness in this country,” she said. “We must all begin to think about racial reconciliation and how to get there. The dismissal of our history and culture will not help.”

“It’s been shown, especially via various in-depth examinations of textbooks used in Virginia, that many Virginia public school students have been miseducated over the years,” said Rachel Levy, a teacher, parent, community leader, and 2023 candidate for the newly drawn 59th district seat in the Virginia House of Delegates. “It has created a vicious cycle of ignorance,” said Levy, which a previous and [highly praised](https://www.cbs19news.com/story/42779262/board-of-education-approves-edits-to-history-and-social-science-sol) standards revision—conducted by the administration of former Democratic Governor Ralph Northam in 2021—“was trying to begin to break.”

The backlash over Youngkin’s proposed curriculum changes persuaded the Virginia State Board of Education “not to move forward” with his proposed draft, WRIC [reported](https://www.wric.com/news/virginia-news/virginia-education-board-punts-new-history-standards-after-harsh-criticism/) in November 2022, and in January 2023, the Youngkin administration issued a revised, shorter [draft](https://www.wric.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/74/2023/01/History-and-Social-Science.pdf) that they said “fixes errors,” WRIC [reported](https://www.wric.com/news/virginia-news/virginia-education-department-unveils-new-k-12-history-standards-draft/), but it still contains language that experts find concerning.

On February 2, 2023, the state Board of Education [voted to advance the latest revision](https://www.wdbj7.com/2023/02/03/virginia-board-education-advances-controversial-history-standards/), but final adoption isn’t expected until June 2023. Educators and public school activists continue to try to thwart Youngkin’s whitewashed history curriculum from being taught in Virginia’s K-12 schools. Should their efforts ultimately be successful, it may cause a brief setback for a national campaign conducted by shadowy right-wing groups and led by Republican politicians to turn public schools into [political battlegrounds](https://apnews.com/article/entertainment-elections-education-school-boards-teaching-059f2465829ab009394469b95c8cc94a) and undermine how teachers engage students in thinking critically about important and sometimes controversial topics.

The campaign began as a strategy to falsely target schools for teaching students about [critical race theory](https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-is-critical-race-theory-and-why-is-it-under-attack/2021/05)—a concept taught in higher education that has been turned into a grab bag of complaints about efforts in schools to become more welcoming and provide more inclusive learning environments that embrace teaching diverse points of view about subjects, including the history of race, gender, and religious discrimination in the U.S. Then, the campaign swiftly moved on to efforts to [ban books](https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/) and [limit teachers’ speech](https://www.forbes.com/sites/petergreene/2022/02/16/teacher-gag-laws-are-everywhere-how-do-we-sort-them-out/?sh=4523d9a37024) in schools.

Now, this movement is trying to make an end run around the democratic process and alter school curricula that have been formally created by education experts and passed by deliberative bodies and elected officials.

**‘Imbued With Christian and Conservative Tenets’**

“[A]t least 36 states have adopted or introduced laws or policies that restrict teaching about race and racism,” [according to a February 2022 article in Chalkbeat](https://www.chalkbeat.org/22525983/map-critical-race-theory-legislation-teaching-racism).

In 2021, Oklahoma lawmakers considered a new bill that “would limit how slavery is taught in schools and ban teaching that ‘one race is the unique oppressor’ or ‘victim’ in slavery’s history,” [NBC News reported](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/republican-oklahoma-lawmaker-introduces-bill-limit-slavery-taught-scho-rcna9132). In Texas, new laws considered in the state legislature “[tried] to reframe Texas history lessons and play down references to slavery and anti-Mexican discrimination that are part of the state’s founding,” [stated a New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/20/us/texas-history-1836-project.html) article in May 2021. That article referred to similar efforts [underway](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/20/us/texas-history-1836-project.html) in “Republican-led states [that] seek to ban or limit how the role of slavery and pervasive effects of racism can be taught.”

In Florida, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis revamped the state’s approach to civics “in a new direction,” Education Week [reported](https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/revamped-florida-civics-education-aims-for-patriotism-will-it-catch-on-elsewhere/2022/07), “[toward] an overtly patriotic approach that some educators say is imbued with Christian and conservative tenets. And all of that is occurring as Florida’s law limiting classroom discussions on race—a key theme in social studies—takes effect” in the 2023-2024 school year.

In some of these efforts, state lawmakers have solicited the influence of right-wing pressure groups that seek to diminish the voices of educators and limit what schools can teach. Among those pressure groups, Hillsdale College, a conservative Christian college that led former President Donald Trump’s [1776 Commission](https://info.hillsdale.edu/1776-commission), is especially influential.

Hillsdale College, according to a [three-part investigation by Salon](https://www.salon.com/2022/03/16/salon-investigates-the-on-public-schools-is-being-fought-from-hillsdale-college/), “has inconspicuously been building a network of ‘classical education’ charter schools, which use public tax dollars to teach that systemic racism was effectively vanquished in the 1960s, that America was founded on ‘Judeo-Christian’ principles, and that progressivism is fundamentally anti-American.”

In 2022, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee, a Republican, announced a partnership with Hillsdale College to “open upward of 50 new charters with Hillsdale’s ‘1776 Curriculum,’” [according to WPLN News](https://wpln.org/post/the-fallout-over-hillsdale-college-charter-schools-and-tennessee-school-districts-explained/).

In Florida, where Hillsdale is [rapidly expanding](https://www.abcactionnews.com/news/state/classical-education-charter-schools-on-the-rise-in-florida-with-help-from-small-conservative-michigan-college) its network of affiliated charter schools, the Michigan-based college was an influential force in revising the state’s civics curriculum and rejecting math textbooks that included “what DeSantis called ‘indoctrinating concepts,’” the Tampa Bay Times [reported](https://www.tampabay.com/news/florida-politics/2022/07/01/conservative-hillsdale-college-is-helping-desantis-reshape-florida-education/).

In Virginia, among the outside institutions Youngkin enlisted to assist in his effort to rewrite the state’s history standards was Hillsdale College, VPM News [reported](https://www.vpm.org/news/2022-12-21/youngkins-revised-history-standards-draw-from-broader-conservative-movement). The college was asked by the Virginia Department of Education “to review a working draft of its social studies standards.”

**A ‘Cycle of Miseducation’**

By law, the Virginia Board of Education is [required](https://www.doe.virginia.gov/teaching-learning-assessment/k-12-standards-instruction/history-and-social-science/standards-of-learning/review-revision-of-the-history-social-science-standards-of-learning) to review the standards in all subjects at least once every seven years. The board’s last revision for history and social science was in 2015.

A previous version of the history and social science SOL was created during the administration of former Governor Ralph Northam. But the state Board of Education’s vote on whether or not to adopt those standards was delayed when Youngkin appointed five new members to the board and tipped the board to a “conservative majority,” [according](https://wset.com/news/at-the-capitol/glenn-youngkin-virginia-board-of-education-grace-turner-creasey-suparna-dutta-william-d-hansen-andrew-j-rotherham-h-alan-seibert-scott-surovell-ralph-northam-jillian-balow) to WSET. The Northam draft included lessons on racism and on the LGBTQ+ community.

Defenders of Youngkin’s version of the standards are saying that those criticizing it are distorting the revisions’ intentions. “Are we mandating that our teachers tell our students that we’re a racist country? No. We aren’t mandating that,” Republican Delegate Glenn Davis, who chairs the House Education Committee, [told WTOP](https://wtop.com/virginia/2022/11/parents-and-teachers-criticize-proposed-changes-to-the-curriculum-from-youngkin-administration/). “Davis said that Youngkin’s version requires students to learn about the KKK, and Supreme Court cases that enshrined white supremacy, including *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Dred Scott*—which were not required in the Northam version,” WTOP [reported](https://wtop.com/virginia/2022/11/parents-and-teachers-criticize-proposed-changes-to-the-curriculum-from-youngkin-administration/). “All students will learn about the KKK and the inherent racism during one of the darkest periods of our nation’s history,” he [told](https://wtop.com/virginia/2022/11/parents-and-teachers-criticize-proposed-changes-to-the-curriculum-from-youngkin-administration/) WTOP. “So how is that not ensuring that our students are taught about racism and those time periods of our nation’s history?”

But Levy contended, “Replacing the intended, legitimately revised standards with Youngkin’s deeply flawed standards will continue that cycle of miseducation.”

The revised draft of the SOL introduced in November 2022 also received pushback from the [Virginia Education Association](https://www.veanea.org/). The group’s statement on the standards [read](https://www.veanea.org/vea-reacts-to-politically-motivated-history-standards/), “The standards are full of overt political bias, outdated language to describe enslaved people and American Indians, highly subjective framing of American moralism and conservative ideals, coded racist overtures throughout, requirements for teachers to present histories of discrimination and racism as ‘balanced’ ‘without personal or political bias,’ and restrictions on allowance of ‘teacher-created curriculum,’ which is allowed in all other subject areas.”

**‘Turning Back the Clock’**

But, as an article in USA Today [reported](https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/politics/2022/10/20/fight-over-race-gender-curriculum-may-mean-educational-segregation/8076520001/), the debate over Virginia’s history standards is even more relevant, as it comes at a time when the nation’s system of public education has become increasingly more racially segregated. “Education policy experts warn that efforts to keep certain books out of the classroom or ban the teaching of sensitive topics such as race and gender risk turning back the clock to a time when segregated schools meant separate—and vastly unequal—forums for learning,” the article [noted](https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/politics/2022/10/20/fight-over-race-gender-curriculum-may-mean-educational-segregation/8076520001/).

Citing the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case that made racial segregation in schools unconstitutional and “marked a major turning point in America’s attitudes about racial equality,” USA Today [noted](https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/politics/2022/10/20/fight-over-race-gender-curriculum-may-mean-educational-segregation/8076520001/) that “experts [now] see the dawning of a new era of school segregation—one in which certain topics will be verboten in some districts and how and what students learn will be determined by what their schools are allowed to teach.”

The USA Today [article](https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/politics/2022/10/20/fight-over-race-gender-curriculum-may-mean-educational-segregation/8076520001/) quoted Sarah Hill, a political science professor and education policy expert at California State University in Fullerton, who warned that states and school boards that refuse to teach certain kinds of topics and books they deem to be divisive will effectively segregate school experiences.

“Students will have very different educational experiences, different kinds of conversations in the classroom,” Hill [said](https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/politics/2022/10/20/fight-over-race-gender-curriculum-may-mean-educational-segregation/8076520001/). “As a result, many American children may wind up at the end of high school without a complete picture of the country’s history. Many will lack, under the guise of keeping them from feeling discomfort in school, exposure to aspects of the American story that undeniably define the country. They may be denied a chance to reconcile modern events and the past and be denied the opportunity to build empathy and compassion for people they are sure to face for the rest of their lives,” the USA Today article [stated](https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/politics/2022/10/20/fight-over-race-gender-curriculum-may-mean-educational-segregation/8076520001/).

Levy’s take was somewhat similar. “I don’t necessarily see a direct link between school segregation and Youngkin’s new history and social science standards,” she said, “but I could foresee if Virginia students don’t learn an accurate and full version of our shared history—they wouldn’t learn, for example, about the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and segregation—that they wouldn’t understand where racial and other disparities in access to power and resources come from in our society and institutions, or why and how they should be remedied.”