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Textbooks May Shed Civil Rights Icons

By Jennifer L. Berghom

A debate is raging over what counts as history in Texas public schools.

Perhaps most notable is the question of including historical figures such as Thurgood Marshall, the first black U.S. Supreme Court justice, and labor leader and civil rights activist César Chávez, in the curriculum — as well as whether the country’s founding fathers wanted church and state to be separate.

The State Board of Education is hearing public testimony today on proposed updates to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for social studies. It plans to vote on the proposal Friday and is expected to take a final vote on the matter in March.

TEKS standards serve as a guideline for school systems to follow in adopting textbooks and creating curricula for subjects. They are usually updated about every 10 years. But over the past year, experts appointed by board members to review and write guidelines for the social studies curriculum have clashed as to which figures should be included and how they should be represented, with conservatives assaulting the inclusion of Marshall and Chávez.

Board member Mary Helen Berlanga, who represents Cameron and Willacy counties and part of Hidalgo County, said minorities receive very little mention in the history books currently used. She worries school books will mention even fewer minority figures if the conservative experts get their way.

By way of example, she noted how little information textbooks include about Tejano patriot Jose Antonio Navarro, as well as Adina Emilia De Zavala and Clara Driscoll, two women who fought to preserve the Alamo in the early 20th century.

“I think it’s time we paint an accurate picture of history,” Berlanga said.

So far, much of the squabbling has surrounded conservatives’ push to exclude particular historical figures like Marshall and Chávez. But beneath such spats lie far deeper ideological tussles, over disputed biblical underpinnings of the nation’s founding; the notion of the United States as uniquely superior, even divinely ordained; and the proper context and credit in exploring the struggles of oppressed minority groups.

Dagoberto Eli Ramirez, social studies coordinator for the La Joya school district, said he’s concerned that conservatives’ proposed changes to the standards might not accurately represent the state and country’s diversity. Being the social studies coordinator for a large district — La Joya has more than 27,000 enrolled students — with an overwhelming majority of its students being Hispanic, Ramirez

said he's concerned that any omission of the contributions made by Hispanics could send the wrong message to the children.

"Children get this false representation that they don't count. (The TEKS revision conservatives propose) doesn't reflect the reality," he said. Changes to how history and other subjects under the social studies umbrella are taught not only affect students at the grade school level.

South Texas College history professor Trinidad Gonzales said many of his freshman students come into his U.S. history class with little knowledge of the fundamentals of how the country formed and how its system of government works.

"The most common comment I hear from students is, 'Why didn't they teach us this in high school?' said Gonzales, who teaches U.S. history, women's history, and Mexican-American history courses at the college. What some conservative experts are suggesting for the TEKS update is problematic and anti-scholarly, Gonzales said. Omitting the role of women and minorities in the development of the country presents an inaccurate view of history and hurts the democratic process today.

"How you see the past is how you see the present," he said. "Women and minorities have contributed greatly [to the country's growth and success], and to deny that perpetuates the current racist and sexist [attitudes that exist]."

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