Gaming the System

Social Studies Textbook Adoption in Indiana

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> As we noted in our Statement and Action Regarding Social Studies Textbooks taken as a group we perceive that many of the available social studies textbooks do not provide content that is interesting, engaging and supportive of effective and interested student learning.[1]

As a U.S. history teacher, department chair, and participant in social studies textbook adoptions for most of my forty-year career, I cannot recall ever receiving a communication from the state board and its chair effectively throwing the state's textbook selection procedure under the bus. When we teachers received the above note in 2009, we were engaged in the statutorily required local review of proposed textbooks,

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[1]The Members of the State Board of Education and Dr. Tony Bennett, Chairman, "An Open Letter to Indiana Educators about Textbooks, Computers and Instructional Materials," February 6, 2009, online at http://www.roadmaptolastbesthope.com/_images/IndianaEducators.pdf.

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a process which included teacher recommendations, community comment, public review, and adoption by the local school board. In addition, school officials were to closely examine all materials for their conformity with state standards. I can recall being reminded in previous years of the absolutely inviolate nature of the steps required to adopt texts. What was this new process all about?

The answer appeared in an article published online in *T.H.E. Journal* later that month. Contributing editor Geoffrey H. Fletcher reported on a "Statement and Action Regarding Social Studies Textbooks" issued by the Indiana State Board of Education in October 2008.[2] The statement expressed the board's objections to the textbooks submitted for adoption, but stated that local districts were to proceed with the review process. Included in this statement was the rationale that the board alluded to in its February 2009 "open statement," namely the belief that the books in question did not "provide content that is interesting and engaging and supportive of effective and interested student learning."

A close reading of the board's February 2009 open letter, as it was posted online, reveals the board members' willingness to concede some exceptions to their criticism of extant U.S. history texts, specifically "an individual social studies text written to tell the story of the United States in a manner conducive to student interest rather than a lengthy amalgamation of facts for memorization." An insert to the letter (added to the online version) explains, in red-letter type, that this statement has been "confirmed by Mr. David Shane, Indiana State Board of Education member on 2/9/09, as referencing *America: The Last Best Hope* by William J. Bennett." Bennett's text is the only one mentioned by name. [3]

Conservative support of Bennett's text resonated widely around the state. In 2010, Indiana's Sagamore Institute partnered with the former U.S. secretary of education to encourage the adoption of the books.[4] Sagamore fellow Rex Bollinger (named 1997 Indiana High School Principal of the Year for his work at Angola High School) convened a team of award-winning

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[2]Geoffrey Fletcher, "Signs of a Significant Disruption in the Traditional Textbook Model," *T.H.E. Journal*, February 25, 2009, http://thejournal.com/articles/2009/02/25/signs-of-a-significant-disruption-in-the-traditional-textbook-model.aspx?sc_lang=en#X3OEbQWLJcUE5uiZ.99.

[3]"An Open Letter to Indiana Educators about Textbooks, Computers and Instructional Materials," February 6, 2009; William J. Bennett, *America: The Last Best Hope*, 3 vols., (Nashville, Tenn., 2006-2011). The volumes have been re-issued in combined and expanded versions.

[4]Jay F. Hein, "In Prospect," December 15, 2010, http://www.sagamoreinstitute.org/article/in-prospect/.

educators to "create and promote curricular materials tied to Dr. Bennett's narrative."[5] Sagamore praised the series "as an engaging and interesting narrative, rather than an analytical study"—the implication being that analysis of the issues in American history was an undesirable activity for students.[6] Despite this effort to promote Bennett, the website Roadmap to America: The Last Best Hope, reports that only forty-seven schools have adopted *Last Best Hope*.[7]

The straw dog in this game was Howard Zinn's book *A People's History of the United States,* which was not on the Indiana textbook adoption list. The book has been used as a supplemental resource in many high school history classes since its 1980 publication. According to board of education policy, a school system could secure a waiver to adopt any book that supported state standards. It appears, however, that even if a school had applied for a waiver for Zinn, the board would not have approved it.

To a degree far greater than Bennett's books, Zinn's work has been subject to intense scrutiny by historians and social studies educators. Writing in the winter 2012-13 issue of *American Educator*, Stanford philosopher of history education Sam Wineburg critiqued Zinn's work for lacking primary-source information, dealing inadequately with the possibility of multiple causation, and distorting the analytic process by presenting questions in "yes-no binaries" and "either-or" rhetoric.[8]

My reading of Zinn confirmed for me Wineburg's critique. The book has many of the negative features of standard textbook offerings. Yet Zinn's book is the only text ever voluntarily referred to me by students and parents, which is surprising in this very conservative community. In my own teaching, I have found the book helpful in setting up analytical problems of multiple interpretations using a variety of historical sources. Zinn was also instrumental in producing *Voices of a People's History*, a useful series of videos which features various performers reciting historical mandates, testimonies, and speeches, such as Frederick Douglass's 1852 Fourth of July speech enacted by James Earl Jones.

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[5]"Sagamore and Bill Bennett Team Up for Civic Education," *American Outlook* 13 (Summer 2013), 21, http://www.americanoutlook.org/sagamore-and-bill-bennett-team-up-for-civic-education.html.

[6]Ibid., 20.

[7]See http://www.roadmaptolastbesthope.com/about/last-best-hope-adoptions. Site accessed May 1, 2014.

[8]Sam Wineburg, "Undue Uncertainty: Where Howard Zinn's *A People's History* Falls Short," *American Educator* 36 (Winter 2012-2013), 27-34.

While I and other teachers seemed to have found the benefits of using Zinn's work in the classroom, it became clear that former Indiana governor and newly installed Purdue president, Mitch Daniels, had not. Writing in the *Huffington Post* on July 19, 2013, Tom LoBianco reported that "after being told Zinn's work was being used at Indiana University in a course for teachers on the Civil Rights, feminist and labor movements, Daniels wrote: 'This crap should not be accepted for any credit by the state. No student will be better taught because someone sat through this session. Which board has jurisdiction over what counts and what doesn't?'"[9]

Responding to the revelation of Daniels's emails in *Inside Higher Ed*, Indiana University adjunct associate professor of history Carl Weinberg discussed his recent use of Zinn in a summer teachers' institute—the institute referenced by education advisor Scott Jenkins in one of his notes to the governor. High school teachers taking the class, Weinberg wrote, were assigned a "wide range of pieces based upon social movement theories, some of which actually challenged aspects of Zinn's account as romantic and misleading."[10] As Weinberg described his use of materials, he was upholding academic integrity as well as providing his students with a solid grounding in best practices of instruction. The governor, however, saw only Jenkins's cursory comment that Zinn was "prominently featured" in the course's syllabus.

Daniels himself, by now relocated from the governor's mansion to Purdue University, responded to the protests of some ninety Purdue faculty members by saying: "Protecting the educational standards of middle schoolers, to me an important duty of any governor, has nothing to do with protecting against encroachments of academic freedom in higher education, a similarly central duty of any university president. I have and will attend to the latter duty with the same resoluteness I tried to bring to the former."[11] Yet Daniels's conversion to academic freedom on the road to West Lafayette appears to have been only a partial one.

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[9]Tom LoBianco, "Mitch Daniels: I Just Wanted to Keep Kids from Reading Howard Zinn," *Huffington Post*, July 19, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/19/mitch-daniels-howard-zinn_n_3625599.html.

[10]Carl Weinberg, "Thank You, Governor Daniels," *Inside Higher Ed*, July 22, 2013, http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2013/07/22/essay-one-professors-who-taught-howard-zinn-drawing-criticism-mitch-daniels#sthash.HdsPS1sv.dpbs.

[11]Tom LoBianco, Associated Press, "Purdue Profs Blast Daniels on Academic Freedom," July 22, 2013, http://bigstory.ap.org/article/purdue-profs-troubled-daniels-zinn-comments.

No account of the Zinn/Daniels affair would be complete without a few words about the textbook industry. Most U.S. textbooks are published by the same two or three conglomerates that also produce the millions of tests that purport to measure student achievement. Theirs is a billion-dollar industry subject both to commercial and political pressure—particularly in states such as Texas and California, whose massive purchases dwarf the scale of a place like Indiana. We know from research that students rarely read these books, and that when they do, they read them uncritically. All of the texts submitted for Indiana review fit this category.

Stanford's Sam Wineburg points out another problem: time and financial constraints result in teachers using the textbook as a basis for all curriculum development. I know that I have, in the past, been chastised by my colleagues for suggesting that we abandon textbooks altogether and replace them with a wide variety of sources.

In short, the present system of textbook selection and instruction should be abandoned. Textbooks are no longer aids to learning. Instead, they are hindrances that will at best continue to reduce education to a matter of test preparation and at worst serve as obstacles to teaching and learning. There may have been a time when this system was cost-effective, but it is no more. The promise of technology is blunted when schools invest in laptops and digital notebooks, only to purchase online versions of print textbooks, neglecting many excellent and engaging history websites now available.

Abandoning textbooks could free up the money needed to train teachers in evaluating and applying a variety of history sources and in planning lessons that incorporate critical thinking. For now, we need to focus on critical, creative use of all historical sources. Perhaps we can use both Zinn and Bennett when teaching the New Deal, Herbert Hoover, and FDR. We should ask our students both, "What was the case against evolution posed by fundamentalists?" and, "What were the counter-arguments of modernists?" By bringing a variety of sources and a range of viewpoints into the classroom, we can lift history and its relevance for our community life to the respected place that it deserves.