

MORE THAN HISTORY BOOKS

Teaching the past to prepare students for their futures

Story by Akhila Gunturu

"It's today in history!"

This is Wilson Elementary fifth grade teacher Beth Brandenburg's first year of teaching history after 19 years of teaching, 15 of those spent at Wilson.

"This year, it's been really exciting," Brandenburg said. "So many things that happen in history are events that are [pertinent to] today, and the kids need to know about that. To me as a teacher, to give two sides to the story is really important because the learner needs to develop real opinions and know the facts behind how things are happening."

Elementary school lays the foundations for higher-level U.S. history education. According to the Grade 5 Social Studies Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), learners are expected to explore a survey of U.S. history from 1565 to present, with a focus on introducing historical content, geography, economics, government, culture and social studies skills, such as differentiating between valid primary and secondary sources and mapping geographic information.

"Fifth grade is a great year to start getting your feet wet into social studies," Coppell Middle School West eighth grade U.S. history teacher Margaret Anne Tucker said. "It gives them a very good introductory perspective; they get a cursory exploration of what we cover more in eighth grade. I like that we stair-step in that way."

But how exactly is this curriculum determined?

The State Board of Education (SBOE) determines

policies and standards for Texas public schools, which includes establishing social studies curriculum standards, adopting instructional material and determining graduation requirements. The SBOE consists of 15 members who are elected by the public to represent their districts. Representing Dallas (District 13) is Aicha Davis, who also serves on the Committee on Instruction.

The SBOE is split into three primary committees, with the occasional Ad Hoc committee created to address specific issues. The Committee on Instruction's main responsibilities include establishing curriculum and graduation requirements, instructional materials, library standards, curriculum implementa-

tion and more. The SBOE periodically reviews and revises TEKS for each subject area by creating work groups to make recommendations, holding public hearings on recommended changes and later voting on them. Work groups consist of educators, parents, business and industry representatives and employees.

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tion and more.

"It's a well-vetted process that is organic," Coppell High School U.S. history teacher Diane de Waal said. "In Austin, when I served [on a work group], there were parents, teachers, professors, all parts of life."

The last revision to the current social studies curriculum was in 2010. The curriculum was then streamlined in 2018, and is set to be revised again in 2023 to incorporate events that have taken

place since the last revision. When a curriculum is streamlined, the content required is reduced to fit instructional years. Streamlining does not involve the addition of new materials; instead, it condenses curriculum to what is essential for the time allotted to the course.

"When [the revision] process begins, I encourage both educators and learners to take part," Coppell ISD director of social studies Maria McCoy said. "Whether it is serving on a TEKS Committee, writing letters to your SBOE member or testifying in front of the SBOE, it is important to let your voice be heard."

The SBOE derives its authority from Article 7, Section 8 of

the Texas Constitution. The board is required to meet at least quarterly; the upcoming meeting is from April 14-16 and will be livestreamed.

"Back in the day, [history education] was very black and white," Brandenburg said. "I think certain things were kind of covered up when I was growing up, whereas things now are out in the open. It's more real. I want to teach more [history], so the kiddos know [what is happening]."

As children progress from elementary to middle school, they dive deeper into the metaphorical swimming pool of history. The eighth grade U.S. history curriculum provides more depth to the knowledge established in fifth grade, with TEKS focusing on historical content from the early colonial period through Reconstruction, gaining a better understanding of economics, government and culture, applying critical thinking skills and analysis.

"[Elementary school students] have a couple of years to learn more about a global perspective and focus on Texas," Tucker said. "We're always circling back because it gives them a chance to compare. [In middle school], we see a lot of 'Oh, I learned that in fifth grade,' so it bookends nicely when they're really learning how to do social studies."

Coppell students typically begin a topic in eighth grade U.S. history with an introductory activity, such as talking through notes or watching a video. The year is characterized by a development of writing skills and deeper understanding, with students focusing on primary and secondary source analysis rather than identification. Book studies are incorporated as well to balance between project-based learning and direct instruction.

"I would like to think that we are moving away from wholesale lectures and taking notes," Tucker said. "We're focusing more on turning it over to the students and providing them with good primary and secondary sources and letting them really construct their own interpretation. We do try to do a lot of

vertical alignment with the high school teachers, so we've tried to incorporate more writing and analysis."

At the high school level, individual research, analysis and critical thinking skills are heavily emphasized parts of history education. These are cornerstones of Advanced Placement courses and the International Baccalaureate (IB) program at CHS.

Though each history class may contain differences in teaching style and to an extent, content, there is one similarity connecting them all: the necessity of incorporating current events into everyday learning.

"We need to look more at current events," CHS Principal Laura Springer said. "All the time frames you're trying to cover with U.S. history are changing by the moment. We need to talk about everything, we need to weigh it, we need to research it."

On Jan. 6, the United States Capitol was stormed as a part of several protests in reaction to the results of the 2020 presidential election. A sea of people. Five deaths. Riots. Vandalism. Shootings.

"We always have groups waiting for somebody to let them hate," Springer said. "What you have to make sure of is that we hold those people accountable. You do that by teaching in schools what happened and showing them if you allow a person to legislate with hate, we're in trouble. Democracy is at risk."

For educators, the event posed different problems; how do they teach current events to students?

"Part of the difficulty is our students are being exposed to hard things at a much younger age than ever before because of social media," Tucker said. "It's our job as educators, not to prevent that from happening, but to come alongside them and help understand and process it on their own."

For schools nationwide, the debate on what to teach in U.S. history classes is never-ending.

"If you're teaching [a historical event] in sixth grade, it's going to look very different than how you teach it in 11th grade," Tucker said. "First and foremost is understanding where the students are at and what they can handle, because at the heart of social studies is teaching our students how to be human, how to coexist with the world around them - and it's a hard line to walk."

TEKS Review and Revision Process

1. TEA conduct educator survey

2. State Board of Education identifies content advisers

3. Collects regional feedback on TEKS

4. TEA posts review of the proposed timeline for the public

5. SBOE approves applicants to serve on a work group

6. TEA names Work Group A members, who meet with content advisers and SBOE representatives to review recommendations

7. TEA posts work products on its website and collect regional feedback

8. TEA confirm that written standards may be assessed

9. SBOE Public Hearing is conducted, followed by SBOE discussion

10. Content advisers review recommendations and make necessary changes

11. First reading of the TEKS and SBOE public hearing 2; 30-day public comment period begins

12. Content advisers review comments and make recommendations to SBOE

13. Final amendments of the TEKS

14. SBOE final adoption of the TEKS and implementation date