

# Whitewashing the Past

A proposal for a national campaign to rethink textbooks

By **BOB PETERSON**

EVER SINCE the Civil Rights Movement, there has been grassroots pressure by educators and community activists to change the textbooks used in U.S. schools. Progress was made. Blatantly racist references to Africa and favorable comments about slavery were eliminated, photos were diversified, and stories of famous African Americans and women started appearing, if not in the main text, at least in scattered sidebars. Despite improvements, however, most mainstream social studies textbooks remain tethered to sanitized versions of history that bore students and mislead young minds.

This was brought home to me in 2008 when I examined the social studies textbook series being considered for adoption by the Milwaukee Public Schools. The books were from the dwindling constellation of large textbook publishers—Houghton Mifflin, Macmillan McGraw-Hill, and Scott Foresman. In keeping with state social studies standards, the 5th-grade textbooks in each series focus on United States history. Even though publishers make claims about being “multicultural” and honoring our nation’s “diversity,” none of the 5th-grade United States history textbooks—even those exceeding 800 pages—examines the role of racism



Milwaukee school board member Terry Falk (left) listens as local NAACP leader Wendell Harris argues against the proposed social studies textbook adoption.

in U.S. history or even mentions the word “racism.” In two textbooks, the word “discrimination” doesn’t even appear. Nor do the texts tell students that any United States president ever owned slaves, even though 12 of the first 18 did, and all of the two-term presidents up until Lincoln owned and sold human beings.

As my colleagues and I examined the books more closely, a picture emerged that profoundly disturbed us. With important issues like racism, inequality, and conquest falling through the cracks of the historical narrative, there is little reason to recount the resistance to those types of oppression. There are occasional terse summations of resistance, but the bountiful history of people working together, crossing racial boundaries, and building social movements to make this country more democratic and just is omitted. Instead, history is more often viewed from the vantage point of the rich and powerful, the conquerors.

For example, in Houghton Mifflin’s 5th-grade text, *United States History: Early Years*, the section “Life in New Spain” covers Spanish colonization in what ultimately became the U.S. Southwest. Haciendas and missions are described favorably. One sentence references the “mistreatment” of the Indians, but without any description. We then briefly read that the Indians did resist: “In 1680, a Pueblo Indian leader named Popé led a revolt against the Spanish in New Mexico. A revolt is a violent uprising against a ruler. The Pueblo kept the Spanish out of New Mexico until 1692, when the Spanish returned and conquered them again.” The actions of Indians were “violent” while no such adjective describes the behavior of the Spaniards who merely “conquered them.” The section ends with a single “review” question that pushes students and teachers to ignore conquest and resistance, but instead to celebrate European influence: “What did some American Indians learn when they moved to Spanish missions?”

The omissions and shortcomings in these texts

are not limited to race, but a host of other key narratives in U.S. history such as class, gender, and imperialism.

For example, even though there were an estimated 200,000 indentured servants at the time of the American Revolution, the Houghton Mifflin 5th-grade textbook that focuses on that time period fails to note this key aspect of the American Revolution and mentions indentured servants only once in reference to 1619 Jamestown. This failure to help students understand the conditions under which many impoverished Europeans came to the United States corresponds to a near absence of any mention of labor unions, strikes, poverty, and the broader worker movement in the entire textbook series from kindergarten through 5th grade. In the 3rd-grade book “workers” are “producers” who “make things and provide services,” while in the 4th-grade book they are “human resources.” César Chávez and Dolores Huerta make cameo appear-

ances in a few textbooks, but the fundamental failure of these books to story the long history of people joining together to fight for unions and progressive social change is another glaring case of historical amnesia.

This tendency to downplay conflict and not show how people disagreed—even within social movements—takes the drama and story out of our nation’s rich history. History becomes a

boring sequential listing of events to be memorized. History appears to be inevitable, a march of forces well outside of the power of people, at least common people. Rarely is the idea presented that people—groups of people—had choices. For example, what might have happened if people in the labor movement had listened to those in their ranks who fought as strongly against racism as they did against large corporations?

However, my aim here is not to present a full critique of these textbooks, but to urge that social justice-minded educators, community activists, and academics build a national campaign to demand that issues of race, inequality, and

---

*As my colleagues  
and I examined the  
books more closely,  
a picture emerged  
that profoundly  
disturbed us.*

---

imperialism be adequately addressed in the social studies books students read. We need curriculum materials that deal honestly with history and society; we need materials that help students question and understand the real world and that equip them to make that world a better place.

Recent experience in Milwaukee shows that a small group of educators and community activists can stop the adoption of a questionable textbook series and begin a vital discussion about teaching issues of race and inequality. In Milwaukee, some of us associated with Rethinking Schools and the Milwaukee-based Educators' Network for Social Justice raised concerns about the content of social studies textbooks being considered for adoption. We enlisted other community-based organizations, such as the NAACP, the Milwaukee Area Jewish Committee, and the YWCA, and after several weeks of lobbying school board members and letter writing, we convinced the superintendent to withdraw his proposal to spend \$4.1 million on the K-8 social studies adoption for that year. After the decision to delay, a broader group of educators, community organizations, and academics came together to form the Social Studies Task Force (SSTF) ([www.socialstudiesresources.org](http://www.socialstudiesresources.org)) to develop a plan to improve social studies teaching in Milwaukee. The group started meeting at the offices of the NAACP and continued its organizing and lobbying of the school board and administration.

The task is enormous and complicated. What *should* our children learn about history? What is developmentally appropriate for different ages? Do young children even *need* textbooks to study their neighborhood and community? How can we build on the strengths of children's families and

communities and integrate those strengths into the learning experience? How do we overcome teachers' lack of historical knowledge?

How do we guard against the "open your book, read the chapter, answer the questions" method of teaching social studies and instead promote the thoughtful use of role plays, dramatizations, critical reading and writing activities, and debates to engage students? Given limited resources and testing mandates that prioritize math and reading, how can we secure enough time and resources for social studies? How should we approach social studies standards that themselves promote the biases and omissions we've found in the textbooks? The list of questions will undoubtedly grow.

At a recent meeting at the local NAACP chapter, 32 people from 14 community and education organizations and four area universities and colleges gathered to discuss these and other questions. While reflecting a diverse range of opinions, the group was unified by a strong opposition to the school district adopting a textbook series like those that had been considered the previous year. "I have been involved too long

in these struggles to let this go by," Carmen Mills, an African American woman who sits on the NAACP's education committee told the group. "The time is now for us to do something different."

During the subsequent year, the group met monthly, monitoring the administration and suggesting alternative texts, books, and resources. Eventually the SSTF convinced the administration to reject the Houghton Mifflin series, but instead purchase a series by a smaller publisher that emphasized an engaging, hands-on learning approach to social studies. Even with the alternative



Barbara J. Miner

*Two student "lawyers" put Christopher Columbus on trial in Bob Peterson's 5th-grade class, an engaging social studies lesson that goes beyond the textbook.*

series, however, the SSTF was not satisfied with the content. We convinced the administration to purchase additional alternative multicultural books and resources to supplement the series. Teachers developed lesson plans for the materials and these were posted on the district’s website. The district made a commitment to continue to buy supplemental materials in subsequent years.

During the organizing efforts around textbooks, the SSTF met with the superintendent several times and convinced him to start a broader anti-racist multicultural initiative called the “CLEaR Justice Initiative: Addressing issues of class, language, ethnicity and race.” The initiative, which has a budget of \$500,000 is using a variety of means to push the teaching practices and district policies to address these difficult issues.

For us in Milwaukee, to do something different means, among other things that we reach out to individuals, groups, and school districts around the country. We in Milwaukee are only, well, in Milwaukee. While \$4 million sounds like a lot of money, it’s cheese curds when compared to the statewide adoptions of Texas, Florida, and California. And in some states, notably Texas, the organized right wields immense influence on textbook selection, ensuring that topics such as global warming and evolution are downplayed in science texts and issues such as racism and imperialism are left behind.

We need a number of school districts—pushed by progressive coalitions of educators and activists, particularly those rooted in communities of color—to demand that textbook companies drastically revamp their texts. Our Milwaukee experience shows that the process of questioning the adoption of problematic texts affords progressives an ideal forum to speak not only about social studies *content*—and the need to address issues such as race, class, and gender—but also the opportunity to initiate a conversation about social studies teaching *methods*.

Every seven or eight years, most districts or states adopt new textbooks, thus providing opportunities for struggle. But there is no reason to wait for the adoption process to critique the racism and other problems in social studies

textbooks currently being used. In fact, I’ve found that enlisting students’ help in such a critique is one of the best uses for textbooks. If educators and activists in a half dozen cities worked together to get local school authorities to go on record stating that social studies texts should reflect our multiracial society and should examine issues of race, class, gender, and imperialism from multiple perspectives, that might constitute enough of a “market share” to get at least one major publisher to rethink its texts. But even if the major corporations refused to budge, the discussion and ferment created by campaigns in such cities would be beneficial. New non-textbook resources would be discovered. Teaching strategies and approaches would be shared. If enough activity were generated it might contribute to a much needed national discussion on race or perhaps help establish a new paradigm on how to teach difficult issues.

Progressive U.S. education activists have struggled for years with how to take a predominantly develop national organizing campaigns. We have also struggled with how to infuse issues of content, particularly around race, class, and gender, into educational “reform” discussions in meaningful ways. A campaign to demand the transformation of social studies texts and teaching might be just the place to start. ■

**Bob Peterson** (repmilw@aol.com) is a 5th-grade teacher at La Escuela Fratney and a co-founder of *Rethinking Schools* magazine.



This article was previously published in *Rethinking Schools* magazine. To order back issues of the magazine or to subscribe, visit [www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org) or call 800-669-4192.

This article is offered for use in educational settings as part of the **Zinn Education Project**, a collaboration of Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, publishers and distributors of social justice educational materials. Contact Rethinking Schools ([office@rethinkingschools.org](mailto:office@rethinkingschools.org)) directly for permission to reprint this material in course packets, newsletters, books, or other publications.

For more information:

**Rethinking Schools**  
[www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org)

**Teaching for Change**  
[www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org)

# rethinking schools

This article was previously published in [Rethinking Schools magazine](#).

*Rethinking Schools* is an award-winning quarterly magazine, featuring articles portraying some of this country's finest social justice teaching. *Rethinking Schools* is a must-read for everyone involved in education — first-year teachers, veteran teachers, parents, community activists, and teacher educators.

*Rethinking Schools* magazine, books, and other resources promote equity and racial justice in the classroom.



To order back issues or to subscribe, visit [rethinkingschools.org](http://rethinkingschools.org).

Zinn Education Project registrants get 15% off a [Rethinking Schools](#) subscription by using the code **RSMAGZEP** at checkout.

**As a teacher and researcher, I rely on *Rethinking Schools* for information, insight, and inspiration. — Sonia Nieto, Professor Emerita, University of Massachusetts Amherst**

## More from Rethinking Schools

Rethinking Schools also publishes books with articles and lessons about teaching climate justice, ethnic studies, teaching for Black lives, immigration, gender and sexuality, people's history, and more. Visit [RethinkingSchools.org](http://RethinkingSchools.org) to browse and order online.

