

Four Elements of a Good History Curriculum

Protesting parents showing up at school-board meetings is one of the new scenes in our cultural landscape in recent months. COVID policies and gender propaganda are big on the list of things parents oppose, but the teaching of critical race theory (CRT) is another issue that raises their hackles.

CRT disturbs many parents because it sees everything—cultural, political, historical—through a racial lens, and attempts to flip society's inequalities on their heads by [discriminating against allegedly privileged individuals](#). Such instruction gives a distorted picture of life to the young, impressionable children in our schools. Parental pushback has led to [CRT teaching bans in some states](#), with bans in progress in others.

But these bans sometimes cause confusion, leaving teachers wondering what's okay to teach and whether a ban on CRT means a ban on acknowledging the existence of racism all together. Such confusion appears to be happening in Texas. The author of Texas's law on how history and race should be taught in the classroom, Republican state Sen. Bryan Hughes, recently tried to clarify his bill's intent. "That bill is not an attempt to sanitize or to teach our history in any other way than the truth – the good, the bad and the ugly – and those difficult things that we've been through and those things we've overcome," [Hughes told the State Board of Education](#).

Reading about this confusion over CRT in Texas got me wondering about how we should teach history to our young people. Should we whitewash everything in the past? Or should we emphasize race extensively in history and in other subjects as well? In seeking to answer these questions, I turned to Benjamin Franklin's 1749 essay, "[Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania](#)," and found four guidelines

that many of us may find surprising.

History Should Focus on the Good

Today's instruction in history tends to emphasize every wart and flaw in historical figures such as [Thomas Jefferson](#) or Robert E. Lee. While Franklin encouraged us to look at both the good and bad in the character of these individuals, he exhorted us to emphasize the good—the ways these figures demonstrated qualities like “Temperance, Order, Frugality, Industry, [and] Perseverance.” Good history instruction, Franklin wrote, will “fix in the Minds of Youth deep Impressions of the Beauty and Usefulness of Virtue of all Kinds, Publick Spirit, Fortitude, [etc.]”

History Should Demonstrate Strong Leadership

Franklin strongly encouraged schools to teach the political oratories given by the great heroes and governing leaders in history. These speeches build admiration in young minds, he explained, and give students excellent leadership role models.

History Shouldn't Exclude Religion

Scrubbing religion from any aspect of public society seems to be the goal of today's woke, or politically correct, crowd. Franklin likely would have disagreed with such a stance, for while he himself was no Christian, he did see great benefit in religion and its influence upon society. History instruction, he wrote, should regularly show religion's “Usefulness to the Publick” and “the Excellency of the CHRISTIAN RELIGION above all others antient or modern.”

History Should Expound on the Benefits of Good Government

A good government, Franklin implied, is one which encourages and rewards a person's industry and inventions. Thus, a good history curriculum will encourage students to join and develop the types of governments and societies that do these things. Most of all, however, Franklin wrote that the teaching of history should promote "the advantages of liberty ... [and] good laws" in the lives of young people, and it should discourage unprincipled living.

How well does our education system follow these recommendations? Obviously, not that well. In fact, it almost seems like we do the exact opposite.

To be fair, we live in a different world from the one in which Franklin dwelt. But that doesn't mean we can't implement his ideas. In fact, we can probably just boil things down to one simple element: dwell on the past's good, and not so much on its bad.

This is really just common sense for life. Think about the kind and friendly people you know—the ones you want to be around. Do they dwell on the good and positive, or do they continually fixate on the bad and negative? I would guess they do the former.

The same is true with our history. Yes, we need to acknowledge that not everything in the past was good, but we should acknowledge it, accept it, and then move on to the things in history that encourage, uplift, and inspire all of us to be better individuals.

It is we who will be under the microscope one day. Let's treat our ancestors the way we hope our descendants will treat us.

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