

# THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

## History Lessened

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The line in the proposed U.S. History high school curriculum seemed simple enough: “Explain actions taken by people from different racial, ethnic, gender and religious groups to expand economic opportunities and political rights in American society.”



*photo by: Abby Rapoport*

But then [State Board of Education](#) member and former chair [Don McLeroy](#), in one of a flurry of amendments at the board’s Friday meeting, wanted to axe the words “racial, ethnic, gender and religious” from that and another similar line. The move provoked deep emotions on a day when several members accused the conservative firebrand and others in his voting bloc of bending American history to suit a right-wing agenda and excising the nation’s history of oppression.

“It’s just redundant,” insisted McLeroy, arguing the standard already said “various groups.”

Other board members didn’t buy it. “It’s not redundant to me,” retorted board member Mavis Knight, who is African-American. “Because the racial and gender groups you are trying to strike overcame great obstacles to make great contributions. ... This board is rewriting history, wanting to sanitize anything that might reflect negatively on our country.”

The pointed exchange was one of many as the board plowed through the high school U.S. history standards, which have stoked controversy for many months. The arguments came a day after the SBOE had

conducted a relatively gentle session in which members of the conservative majority allowed some additions of minority history, particularly that of Hispanics. In turn, members outside the majority bloc largely did not object to many additions with conservative overtones.

When the previous night's session ended, McLeroy had gone out of his way in an interview to say the long-standing public brouhaha over his and other conservatives' alleged politicizing of the curriculum was overblown. Referring to an earlier dustup, he said board conservatives never wanted to remove labor leader Cesar Chavez or the first black U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Thurgood Marshall (Those recommendations were made by evangelists David Barton and Peter Marshall, who were appointed as "expert reviewers" by conservative board members.)

"There's not a conservative member on this board that doesn't want an accurate history," he said, in the context of including minority historical figures.

McLeroy then predicted that today's meetings would go smoothly. He said he knew that he "had the votes" for the all amendments he wanted to pass, without specifying them, but that none of them would be controversial. Both statements would prove wrong. McLeroy's amendments on Friday systemically sought to put a clear conservative spin on history; they caused much controversy; and in several cases he did not have the votes.

When board member Barbara Cargill backed McLeroy, arguing that such exploring of minority groups detracted from teaching students about "the melting pot," Knight was momentarily speechless. "I need a moment ... I need to gather myself," she told chair Gail Lowe, who thanked her for her decorum.

"You would have us think we're in some kind of Utopia that didn't exist," Knight continued, after a pause. "Look at what 'groups' in society do to keep other 'groups' from achieving. You made laws. You burned down something called 'Black Wall Street' because you didn't want them to

achieve. ... I'm sorry. I have to stop."

The board voted down the changes 7-7. Lowe, as chair, had the option to break the tie but declined, as she did on several other amendments that produced tie votes. After long sessions Thursday and Friday, the board did not finish revising and approving the social studies standards, so it put off completing them until March. The votes taken thus far on amendments have been nonbinding committee votes (though all members are on the committee), and still must be approved in a formal board vote.

### **"Let's just take out all the names"**

Long before the board took up the standards this week, 16 board-appointed committees, largely consisting of educators, had pored over them in multiple daylong sessions. The board charged with high school U.S. history included McLeroy's appointee, conservative gadfly Bill Ames, who had proposed a slew of right-leaning amendments that were shot down by his fellow committee members, all of them social studies educators. On Friday, McLeroy picked up where Ames left off, trumpeting many of the same additions and deletions Ames had proposed and the curriculum-writing committee had spurned.

McLeroy sought, for instance, to rehabilitate the reputation of red-hunting Senator Joseph McCarthy, adding a line to standards on McCarthyism reading: "and how the later release of the Venona papers confirmed suspicions of communist infiltrations of the U.S. government." The amendment passed without objection. Another change that had been defeated in the curriculum writing committee, adding "legal and illegal" before "immigration," also passed. In yet another victory for McLeroy, the board added a new standard describing "the conservative resurgence of the 1980s and 1990s, including Phyllis Schlafly, the Contract with America, the Heritage Foundation, the Moral Majority and the National Rifle Association."

McLeroy and his fellow conservatives lost votes on other amendments,

however. The board had an extended debate over McLeroy wanting to add conservative pundit William F. Buckley, Reagan foreign policy advisor Jeane Kirkpatrick, and former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich, among others. Board member Rick Agosto then countered with an amendment to add liberal stalwart Ted Kennedy, which failed, causing Knight to offer another unsuccessful amendment adding “the Kennedy family.” But then McLeroy’s original proposal also got shot down, in another tie vote, which chairwoman Lowe again declined to break.

As the board was winding down on its social studies deliberations, board member Cynthia Dunbar sought to remove African American activist Marcus Garvey and attorney Clarence Darrow, a leader in the American Civil Liberties Union and the defense attorney in the Scopes Monkey Trial, the landmark case in which a teacher was fined for breaking the law mandating the teaching of creationism.

Most of the debate centered on Garvey. Dunbar argued that Garvey, a Jamaican who led back-to-Africa movement, should be removed because he wasn’t an American citizen. Board member Lawrence Allen pronounced that argument weak, as did some other members. “You may be well aware of Marcus Garvey’s back-to-Africa movement, but I don’t think many people are, or how significant his movement was to other movements that came after,” Allen said. “You’re saying we should take him out just because he wasn’t born here?”

“Yes, my concern is that he was born in Jamaica and was deported,” Dunbar answered.

Before losing the vote on her amendment, Dunbar had also argued that it was no big deal to remove Darrow and Garvey from the standards because the curriculum only cite them as examples without mandating teachers use them — just like scores of other names in the curriculum she didn’t seek to remove. (Many others are mandated.)

“Well, by that logic,” remarked Knight, “let’s just take out all the names.”

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