



By Chester Finn, Jr.

A Pause in the History Wars

What's taught to American children is often controversial nowadays, and our schools will forever be buffeted by the cultural waves that roil our universities. However, in that storm, the College Board deserves a cheer for trying to stabilize the vessel known as Advanced Placement U.S. History (APUSH). This particular tempest blew up when a new "framework" for high school instructors who teach the subject turned out to be biased in its treatment of the nation's past.

History has been part of the AP program since the mid-1950s. Among the thirty-eight subjects now spanned by that program, it's the second most popular with high school pupils seeking the possibility of college credit.

The end-of-course APUSH exam was always plenty rigorous, lasting three hours and scored during the summer by veteran instructors assembled by the College Board. The problem was that those actually teaching the course to tens of thousands of kids had no useful guidance to prepare students for it. They could consult a vague "topic outline" and look at old exams, but teachers complained that racing through so vast a subject in a single year, combined with the dearth of primary and secondary sources that surfaced on the tests themselves, led to neglect of the nation's founding documents. More generally, it necessitated the sacrifice of deep student understanding in favor of scads of near-random facts.

The College Board set out around 2005 to improve matters by revamping the exam and developing an APUSH framework that clarified what content might appear on the test. The framework would require many more questions to focus on analysis of primary sources, and would also emphasize thought-provoking essays over multiple-choice items.



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When the redesign first surfaced, teachers generally cheered its delineation of historical periods, outline of specific concepts and learning objectives, enumeration of key themes, and focus on analytic thinking and close reading of key documents.

As others scrutinized the new course framework, however, its acute case of left-wing bias stood out, particularly in key realms such as national identity (missing), the contributions of capitalism (mostly pernicious), the nature of intergroup relations (fraught, to put it mildly), and the overall value of the American experiment. A seventeen-year-old student dutifully learning her country’s history according to this framework would likely end up viewing the United States as a place of conflict and inequality, with minimal understanding of the dreams it has fulfilled, the problems it has striven to

solve, the world catastrophes it has averted, and the example it has set. Why, after all, do so many people still yearn to come here?

How had this happened? Recall that the AP mission is to certify high school students who do well on its exams as having learned the equivalent of an introductory college class. To frame those exams and the courses that prep kids for them, the College Board appoints committees of professors from the relevant discipline, as well as some high school teachers (most of whom had studied with such professors).

What went wrong here—and could yet go wrong in other AP subjects as they get updated—is that by the time a committee was formed to update APUSH, the academy had lurched leftward. And in no field did it lurch further than in history. Professors commonly teach intro courses today that focus on race, class, gender, and oppression, and many of them view the country’s past through the lens of what’s now politically correct and academically fashionable. Unsurprisingly, the 2012 APUSH framework channeled that view and incorporated its biases—and likely did so without its authors even noticing. Fish, after all, don’t notice the water they’re swimming in.

College courses, however, are optional. High school is a different matter. At least forty-four states require students to pass a U.S. history course before graduating, and those taking the AP version are unlikely to have taken any other (at least not since middle school). So what’s in the APUSH framework is as much about shaping future citizens as about garnering college credit.

When David Coleman took the helm of the College Board in 2012, the framework was done. He and his team focused elsewhere and were caught by surprise when the outcry over bias arose, initially from non professors who take seriously what future Americans are taught in school. The backlash led a number of distinguished historians to read the framework closely—and led the Board’s new leaders to do the same.



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Pretty much everyone who studied it came to the same conclusion: the framework was biased. Key figures were omitted. Industrialization was mostly evil. Westward expansion was hegemonic. Almost every imaginable group had been oppressed and abused (ditto the environment). Ronald Reagan was “bellicose.” And identity politics had displaced American identity.

The problem was real and the outcry loud and intense. The College Board had little choice but to respond. Led by AP chief Trevor Packer, they encouraged further public comment, convened mostly new committees, and enlisted veteran history teachers and serious scholars to pore over the framework and suggest ways to root out the biases without introducing new ones.

This past month, the revamp was unveiled. To my eye and those of many who reviewed it in advance, the bias appears to be gone. America again has a national identity. The failings and blemishes of our past are still there, as

they should be, but they’re no longer the main story. Teenagers competently taught by teachers versed in the revised framework will be a lot closer to readiness for responsible citizenship.

What they may not be ready for is what awaits them in college! Indeed, they might be wise to avoid the history department when they get there. (Maybe it’s just as well that few colleges still require their students to study history while on campus.)

Obviously, the College Board should not have allowed this problem to arise in the first place. It should have better supervised its own process and insisted on a balanced product. However, its leaders deserve credit for addressing the problem, and they’ve mostly solved it. How many outfits today—especially those associated with the academy—have the guts to acknowledge error, organize to set matters right, and actually produce an acceptable repair job? ■

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Chester E. Finn, Jr., scholar, educator, and public servant, has devoted his career to improving education in the United States. At Fordham, he is now Distinguished Senior Fellow and President Emeritus. He is also a Senior Fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution.

AAE Legal Services: A Q&A with Sharon Nelson, Esq.

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Additionally, AAE provides legal assistance for employment due process issues, such as a negative evaluation, reprimand, transfer, suspension, nonrenewal, demotion, termination, or reduction in force notice.



Here are some words of wisdom from our legal expert, Sharon Nelson →



Q: What do teachers need to know about liabilities this school year?

A: Liability concerns increase exponentially each year and this year will be no exception. Claims against teachers are more common than ever but teachers are not alone. Our organization provides unique and unparalleled support for teachers facing liability through either lawsuits initiated by parents or licensure issues.

The best general advice to give teachers with respect to liability: do not be naïve. Liability issues can arise at any time against any teacher. Don't assume it will not happen to you and do not wait until it does to gather the support you will need to address liability issues.



Sharon Nelson is AAE's Director of Legal Services. She has nearly 13 years of experience with employment law. Before forming Nelson Law and working primarily for employees, Ms. Nelson worked for several large law firms defending employment suits.

Q: What kinds of cases are most frequent?
Q: Are you noticing patterns?

A: Out of the hundreds of legal issues we deal with each year, two areas of liability are the most prevalent. First is an allegation by a student of improper interaction or touching. No teacher is exempt from these allegations and sadly there is a segment of the student population that will make allegations against a completely innocent teacher in retaliation for a poor grade or discipline. The second common liability theme is the allegation by parents or guardians that the teacher is discriminating in some fashion against the student. Forms of discrimination complaints against teachers include those based on race, disability, gender, and more.



Q: How would you recommend teachers protect themselves?

A: Again don't be naïve. Do not assume it will not happen to you. You can take basic steps to help avoid liability issues or at least minimize your exposure if sued.

Those include ensuring you are never alone with a student, documenting interactions with problem students; including administration in communications with difficult parents; and ensuring you have adequate liability protection in place.



Q: When should a member call you?

A: Always sooner rather than later. When dealing with a liability claim or even a disciplinary matter, a legal strategy should be implemented immediately. Often times teachers think if they just answer questions the matter will “go away.” This is the worst possible course of action to take. Teachers often unwittingly give information to try to make a situation go away that is later used against them.



Q: Why are legal services so important to teachers? What could happen to a teacher who didn't use this service?

A: Because legal services provide a guarantee that someone is in your corner...always. It is protection for you, your career and your family. Teachers who do not have legal services available to them can literally see careers destroyed or reputations ruined. It is vital that teachers have someone in their corner.



AAE LEGAL SERVICES

To access your legal benefits, simply contact us at **800.704.7799** or email us at **legalservices@aaeteachers.org**. You will receive caring, professional support and direct contact with our legal team for confidential advice with no conflicts of interest.

Don't hesitate to contact AAE or your AAE state chapter representative. Remember, we're here to help!



Recognizing Outstanding Kansas-AAE Member Dan Whisler

One member from the Kansas chapter of AAE deserves special recognition for his hard work and dedication in the classroom. Sterling High School Science instructor, Dan Whisler and his students at Sterling High School were recently recognized by the National Energy Education Development (NEED) Project Board of Directors for their outstanding energy education projects. These projects earned them the Kansas Senior School of the Year award as well as the National Outstanding Energy Engineering and Design Project award.

But none of it would have been possible had it not been for Dan's hard work and dedication. See, Dan has spent

the past three years developing a comprehensive science project involving a battery-powered Chevy Volt for his students. He even won a Kansas-AAE classroom grant to help fund the initiative. Specifically, Dan used his grant to put in a charging station for the Volt at his school.

This SHS Chevy Volt Project was featured in the Kansas Energy Expo hosted by the Kansas Corporation Commission at the 2014 Kansas State Fair and will be on display there again next month at this year's fair. Dan and his students will also be setting up a wind tunnel to host a Kansas State Fair KidWind Challenge for area students and the general public.



[Top] Dan Whisler (left) and Taryn Gillespie (right) at the ceremony in Washington, D.C., after receiving the NEED Youth Award.



[Bottom] From left, Alan Batey, President of GM North America and Global Chevrolet Brand Chief; Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors Company; Dan Whisler; Taryn Gillespie; and former student Brett Smith at the 500 Million Thanks! event hosted by GM in Kansas City. Photo: courtesy of GM.

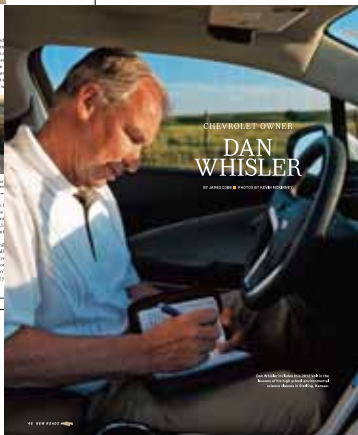
This isn't where Dan's accomplishments began. Dan Whisler and his students also participated in the statewide KidWind Challenge last year. His students not only won the Kansas competition, but they were selected to go to Washington, D.C. for the national competition. And now here's the result, in Dan's own words:

Thanks to the efforts and support of school officials and the community, Sterling High School was one of the first schools in Kansas selected for the Wind for Schools program in 2007 and our energy-related projects have been growing ever since. With additional training provided through the KidWind Project, I have been using hands-on STEM activities to engage and challenge students to think about the demands of meeting society's needs for electricity in ways that are both economical and environmentally-friendly. Students have responded to this real-world challenge, too, with teams from SHS taking the top two spots at the Kansas KidWind Challenge at Kansas State University the past two years. I have hosted KidWind workshops across Kansas to help train other teachers, so it is exciting to see more students learning from these hands-on activities and taking on this real-world challenge!

AAE is proud to be home to so many devoted teachers like Dan. And we're excited to pass along his accomplishments to fellow teachers who have the same enthusiasm for students. Congratulations, Dan! ■



[Left] Dan and his projects were featured in Chevy's monthly magazine *New Roads*. The article is available online at newroads2.mynetwork.com on pages 50 and 51.



SCHOLARSHIP & GRANT APPLICATIONS DUE OCTOBER 1ST!

The AAE Foundation's National Scholarships and Grants competition is held twice a year in the fall and spring and helps innovative teachers like Dan with projects like KidWind. The deadlines are March 1 and October 1 of every year. For more information, visit aaeteachers.org/awards.



Do you have a teacher (or a school) we should feature? Email us at editor@aaeteachers.org with a brief description of what makes this teacher (or school) great in 500 words or less and we may feature them in an upcoming edition of *Education Matters!*



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AAE Teacher Survey of the Month

Should school boards, state government, or the federal government have the most influence in local education?

▶ Take the survey at tinyurl.com/September15Survey today and be entered to win an AAE Prize Pack just for letting us know.



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