

The Fight to Change Social Studies in Nebraska

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By Leah Cates

March 8, 2021



Every day in seventh grade social studies is the same for Ángeles Mora Dominguez. PowerPoint slides pass by as she jots down notes from a book that offers praise for Christopher Columbus and suggests some slaveholders were benevolent.

For years, the 13-year-old said, the message from her white social studies teachers and the curriculum they teach has felt clear: White people taught people of color like her to make butter and milk cows. They taught them to bathe and farm. White people showed them how to build a nation from the bottom up.

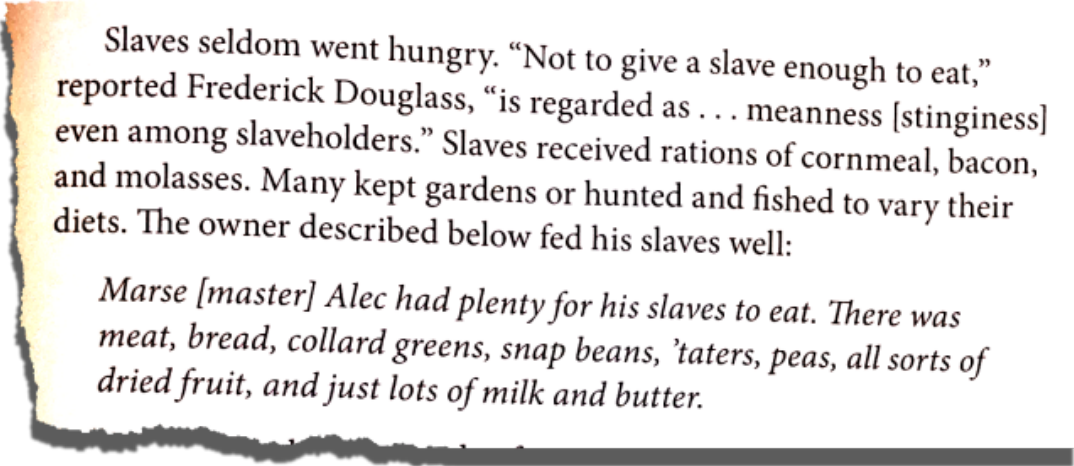
“They’re trying to push on us that white people are our saviors,” said Mora Dominguez, who attends Norris Middle School in Omaha Public Schools and hopes to enroll in college as a first-generation Mexican-American student. “They ... make it sound like everything we’ve

gotten is from white people.”

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Mora Dominguez’s experience is typical. Conversations *The Reader* had with half a dozen metro-area middle and high school students reveal a social studies curriculum that centers white men and pushes BIPOC to the margins, if not off the map entirely.



Slaves seldom went hungry. “Not to give a slave enough to eat,” reported Frederick Douglass, “is regarded as . . . meanness [stinginess] even among slaveholders.” Slaves received rations of cornmeal, bacon, and molasses. Many kept gardens or hunted and fished to vary their diets. The owner described below fed his slaves well:

Marse [master] Alec had plenty for his slaves to eat. There was meat, bread, collard greens, snap beans, 'taters, peas, all sorts of dried fruit, and just lots of milk and butter.

Textbook pictured: *History Alive! The United States Through Industrialism* (TCI, 2011). Used in Millard and OPS middle schools.

Frederick Douglass also said: “I have often been so pinched with hunger, that I have fought with the dog...for the smallest crumbs that fell from the kitchen table, and have been glad when I won a single crumb in the combat....Many times have I followed, with eager step, the waiting-girl when she went out to shake the table cloth, to get the crumbs and small bones flung out for the cats.” Indeed, enslaved people — a term that should be used instead of “slaves” — usually did go hungry, and the food they were given was often nutritionally deficient. As a result, many enslaved people developed scurvy and rickets. In addition, enslavers weaponized food against the people they enslaved. | Photoshop work by Chris Bowling. Photo by Leah Cates.

But that has slowly begun to change. A team of 65 educators from throughout Nebraska sat in countless meetings to revise statewide social studies standards that were completed at the end of 2019, and they were intentional in their efforts *not* to whitewash history. Curriculums *can* change — in some classrooms they’ve already begun to — but centering marginalized voices remains an uphill battle, from textbooks that present a glossed-over version of history to teachers who fear saying the wrong thing will put their careers in jeopardy.

While students were more than willing to talk, the schools responsible for implementing state recommendations were not. Requests to interview teachers at multiple school districts were denied or never received a response.

Inside classrooms, students say Nebraska's efforts to diversify education has yielded mixed results.



Millard North junior Will Ramsey stands inside Culxr House, a longtime hub for protesters, on Feb. 12, 2021. A member of two student-activist groups (What YOUth Can Do and Diversify Our Narrative), Ramsey refuses to accept the sugarcoated version of U.S. history he often finds in the textbook and classroom. “While we’re learning about the good stuff, it’s in the back of my mind that, at this time, women couldn’t vote, people were still [enslaved],” Ramsey said. “It’s important to teach the good, but you really need to pay attention to the bad.” | Photo by Chris Bowling.

“We always learn about the winners. We never learn about the culture that ‘lost,’” said Will Ramsey, a junior at Millard North High School who remembers learning about Native American genocide as a series of displacements.

“These cultures are only [portrayed as] defeated, broken and degraded ... I want to hear about different cultures’ successes ... and accomplishments, not just how colonizers killed them.”

The Reader asked local students to create TikToks about their social studies curricula. Press the “play” icon to watch Ramsey’s TikTok, which shows how curricula can center the accomplishments of marginalized communities. | TikTok by Will Ramsey. Submitted on Feb. 6, 2021.

To combat what Millard West sophomore Megan Shepherd calls sugar coating the brutalities of U.S. history, she and Ramsey joined the Millard chapter of [Diversify Our Narrative](#), a nationwide initiative to promote anti-racist and historically accurate K-12 curriculums. Co-led by Shepherd and Millard North junior Shreeya Shapkota, the Millard Chapter is building a [petition](#) to add anti-racist texts to English reading lists. The chapter's [Instagram](#) page educates more than 1,000 followers on topics ranging from BIPOC in history to debunking the white savior narrative.

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Ramsey and Mora Dominguez are also members of [What YOUth Can Do](#), a student-led organization fighting for equity in Omaha schools. In addition to demanding that OPS remove armed officers from schools and offer more mental health resources, WYCD pushes for schools to diversify upper-level classes (honors, AP and IB) and teach Black history, including that of Omaha.

“In every American history class, [the teacher’s] like ‘Black history starts in slavery,’” said Isabel Gott, a senior from Omaha South High Magnet School involved with WYCD. “No it doesn’t. There’s so much to learn, and I’ve been deprived of that.”

Too Many Dead White Males

A grandfather of three and veteran of Nebraska social studies education, starting as an OPS teacher in 1979, Harris Payne believes every student down to first graders can grasp concepts like social justice and fairness. When he spearheaded the 2019 revisions, which took place from October 1, 2018, through November 8, 2019, Payne was determined to create more inclusive standards for the next generation.

“*Way* too much of our narrative in social studies has primarily been about dead white males who oftentimes had a lot of power,” said Payne, who retired from his role as social studies education specialist in late May. “Including groups that have oftentimes been left out of the story is the spirit of [what these] particular standards are trying to do.”

Throughout the process of evaluating and updating standards — which each core subject area undergoes every seven years — Payne and 65 social studies educators from across the state worked with representatives from marginalized groups, including the Native American and LGBTQ communities. Over 13 months, college professors, civic leaders, content experts, administrators and members of the general public offered input on multiple drafts. After undergoing review by the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center, the Nebraska State Board of Education approved the standards on November 8, 2019.

European Exploration and Settlement

How did Europeans explore and establish settlements in the Americas?

2.1 Introduction

Europeans had no knowledge of the people of the Americas, half a world away, or the land where they lived. When Europeans looked west, they saw only a vast ocean.

Europeans were far more interested in the lands that lay to the east. In the late 1200s, a young man named Marco Polo traveled through Asia with his father, a merchant and trader from Venice, Italy. Marco Polo spent 17 years in China. When he returned to Venice, people flocked to hear his stories of “the Indies,” as India and East Asia were then known. He was called “the man with a million stories.”

Eventually, a writer helped Marco Polo put his adventures into a book. The book described the wonders Polo had seen in China. It told of rich silks and rare spices, gold and jewels, and luxurious palaces.

When Marco Polo’s book was published, very few people in Europe could read. Those who did read it were fascinated by its description of riches to the east. Merchants and traders were eager to find the fastest way to get there. The land route Polo had traveled was long and dangerous. His tales inspired explorers to find an alternative route by sea.

Some explorers would seek a route to China by going around the southern tip of Africa. But a few brave souls looked to the west for another route. Such a trip took courage, because no one knew how far west sailors would have to sail to reach Asia or what monsters and terrors might await them far from Europe’s shore.

In this chapter, you will learn how Christopher Columbus faced these dangers and sailed west to find a route to China. As you will see, his unexpected discovery of the American continents led to competition among European nations to explore and profit from these lands. You will also learn how Europeans established settlements in the American continents and, in the process, changed both Europe and the Americas.

◀ European explorers confronted many dangers and fears as they voyaged to new lands.



In this statue in Barcelona, Spain, Christopher Columbus points toward the Americas.

Textbook pictured: *History Alive! The United States Through Industrialism* (TCI, 2011). Used in Millard and OPS middle schools.

Columbus did *not* “unexpectedly discover” the American continents, nor did he find “monsters and terrors” waiting for him — instead, he found millions of people already inhabiting the Americas, and he, as well as others who came after him, pillaged, enslaved, murdered and raped them. The chapter overview could instead discuss the atrocities of colonialism, including genocide of indigenous populations, for which Columbus, his “brave” contemporaries and European nations were directly responsible. | Photoshop work by Chris Bowling. Photo by Leah Cates.

The new guidelines mandate that, starting in fourth grade, students “analyze and explain multiple perspectives of events in Nebraska, including historically marginalized and underrepresented groups.” In eighth through 12th grade, students should:

- examine historical events from the perspectives of marginalized and underrepresented groups;
- identify how differing experiences can lead to the development of perspectives; and
- interpret how and why marginalized and underrepresented groups and/or individuals might understand historical events similarly or differently.

The Depression Affects Women

Traditional roles took on added importance during the Depression. Homemakers had to stretch family budgets to make ends meet. Some women took in laundry to earn extra money. Others took in boarders to help pay the rent. Wives also found that unemployed husbands needed more nurturing to feel worthwhile.

Working women faced special problems during the Depression. If jobs were available, employers hired men before they would hire women. In order to spread jobs around, the federal government refused to hire a woman if her husband had a job.

Working Women Despite such obstacles, millions of women earned wages in order to support themselves and their families. During the 1930s, the number of married

women in the work force increased by 52 percent. Educated women took jobs as secretaries, schoolteachers, and social workers. Other women earned livings as maids, factory workers, and seamstresses.

Some women workers struck for better pay. In San Antonio, Texas, at least 80 percent of the pecan shellers were Mexican American women. When employers lowered their pay, a young worker, Emma Tenayuca, organized the shellers and led them off the job. Tenayuca said later, “I had a basic faith in the American idea of freedom and fairness. I felt something had to be done.”

The First Lady Takes a Stand Eleanor Roosevelt created a new role for the First Lady. Acting as the President’s “eyes and ears,” she toured the nation. She visited farms and Indian reservations and traveled deep into a coal mine. She talked to homemakers, studying the condition of their clothing on the washline to measure how well they were doing.

The First Lady did more than just aid the President. She used her position to speak out for women’s rights, as well as other issues. In her newspaper column, “My Day,” she called on Americans to live up to the goal of equal justice for all. By speaking out on social issues, Eleanor Roosevelt angered some people. However, many other Americans admired her strong stands.



DESCRIBE two ways the depression affected women's lives.

Textbook pictured: *American History* (Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2016). Used in OPS middle schools, including Mora Dominguez’s classroom.

The book pushes women’s experience into a short subsection instead of integrating women into the textbook’s main Great Depression narrative, which centers white men. And “women” really means *white* women; as in every era, BIPOC faced, and fought back against, unique challenges. Plus, Black women, who often came from families that couldn’t survive solely on the man’s salary, were already working before the Depression began. |Photoshop work by Chris Bowling. Photo by Leah Cates.

For example, students may “compare primary accounts by American Indian peoples and American settlers regarding the expansion of the United States.” Or they can study the Stonewall Riots and perspective of LGBTQ persons.

“We are making a concerted effort to make sure that ... our curriculum is inclusive of all people, regardless of race, color, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic statuses,” said Ebony McKiver, the new social studies education specialist since Payne retired.

McKiver became a social studies educator because, as a child of color in a predominately white school district in Colorado, she said she longed to figure out more about herself and her history. But she never got those answers in the classroom.

“I didn’t want to continue pushing the same stories that I heard growing up,” McKiver said.



Ebony McKiver, Nebraska’s social studies education specialist, stands in her home on Feb. 10, 2021. McKiver’s childhood experience as a student of color in a predominately white Colorado school district fuels her commitment to centering underrepresented communities as a social studies educator. “We are trying to ... make sure the stories of marginalized populations are included in the [narrative] as a whole,” she said, “so it doesn’t seem like minority groups were not involved in the building of America or the huge stories and events of the United States.” | Photo by Chris Bowling.

When she was Mora Dominguez’s age, McKiver said she read the epic saga *Queen* by Alex Haley, which tells the story of the author’s mixed-race grandmother born into slavery. McKiver also began studying U.S. presidents and realizing they made mistakes. Now an educator, McKiver remodeled the social studies website with the passion and curiosity for her discipline that came naturally to her at age 13.

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The revamped Nebraska Department of Education Social Studies [website](#) provides educators with extensive culturally inclusive material, including resources on anti-racism, the 1619 Project, which suggests the nation’s founding should be marked the same year the first enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia, the LGBTQ community, and social and emotional learning, which helps students build empathy for marginalized groups.

“I really want students to take a look and say, ‘Why are these [whitewashed] stories being told?’” McKiver said. “And what can we do?”

“A fundamental flaw”: Why Students Aren’t Seeing Change

But that’s where the state’s control stops and the districts’ begins.

Nebraska is a local control state. Although districts must follow the 2019 Nebraska State Social Studies Standards, as well as abide by laws and state board policy regarding social studies (including a 2012 multicultural education law), *how* institutions implement the guidelines — in other words, the specific curriculum — is up to each school district and, to some degree, classroom. Unlike English, mathematics and science, there’s no statewide social studies assessment.

So McKiver can’t mandate that teachers bring specific content into the classroom or review anti-racist resources. A lot of her work amounts to suggestions and recommendations.

Local control is common in the U.S. As McKiver explained, “one curriculum doesn’t fit all” in states where school districts range from small and rural to large and urban.

But local control doesn’t guarantee that all, or even most, classrooms will implement a curriculum that is culturally diverse in the way that McKiver, the Nebraska Department of Education and students themselves envision it. Individual districts (some of which haven’t finished implementing revisions) decide on activities, assignments, textbooks and in what ways — and, arguably, how much — to center underrepresented voices.

The Reader asked local students to create TikToks about their social studies curricula. Gott’s TikTok sheds light on students’ lack of education about BIPOC history in their own backyards. To watch, click the “play” icon. | TikTok by Isabel Gott. Submitted on Feb. 6, 2021.

“Classrooms are where the learning happens,” said Kevin Bower, an associate professor of history at Nebraska Wesleyan University who consulted on the changes. “Teachers are the front line.”

Teachers have a lot at stake. *The Reader’s* requests to speak with teachers and administrators at several districts across the metro, including OPS, Millard and Gretna, in addition to Walthill and Umó^h Nation (located on the Omaha Reservation), were either denied or

ignored. A Millard educator and OPS administrator agreed to interviews but had to back out when their districts got involved.

An education coordinator for the Institute of Holocaust Education and former Millard teacher who works with teachers across the state, Kael Sagheer, said delving into topics like genocide and systemic racism in the U.S., which some parents consider controversial, can cause teachers to fear for their livelihoods.



Pictured above is Mora Dominguez’s social studies textbook, *American History*, published by Pearson/Prentice Hall in 2016. The book’s final section, “American Progress,” portrays the modern-day U.S. as a nation of equality, glossing over the oppression and brutality that millions of Americans experience every day. | Photoshop work by Ken Guthrie. Photo by Chris Bowling.

“Teachers ... have said to me ‘I weigh [the] risk every day because my students will ... talk to their parents,’” she said, “then their parents talk to the principal, then the principal talks to me, and I may lose my job.”

Sagheer knows one English teacher who was accused of “bludgeoning her students over the head with the truth” after showing them the film *12 Years a Slave*.

Career social studies educator Sonya Stejskal, who teaches in the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s department of history and offered input on the state’s social studies standards, isn’t confident in district administrators’ willingness to defend teachers against parental attacks.

“Usually administrators are trying to be on the safe side and not rock any boats. That really drives me crazy because you *should* rock the boat,” Stejskal said.

But Stejskal also said these new standards are designed to protect teachers against uneasy administrators. At least in some schools, they seem to be working.

Payne recalled his conversation with a rural educator who expressed gratitude for the standards’ inclusion of LGBTQ communities, about which he can now talk without administrative pushback.

“The state taking the lead in putting marginalized groups into the standards makes a big difference in [supporting] teachers to have courageous conversations,” Payne said.

Not all teachers are equipped to talk about tough topics in the classroom. Tim Royers, who recently began his tenure as president of the Millard Education Association after teaching social studies in Millard for 13 years, is concerned about what he considers a fundamental flaw in social studies educators’ training: the narrow lens of history with which they graduate college.

“If teachers aren’t [able] to take classes that give them the foundational knowledge to [teach an inclusive curriculum], they’re going to look at these expectations and get frustrated because they haven’t been equipped to do it well,” he said. “That’s a piece we need to still address.”

Most of the time, these teachers are themselves white.

Neither Mora Dominguez, Ramsey, nor Shapkota said they’ve ever had a social studies teacher of color. Royers, who’s spent more than 20 years in Millard schools, said he’s only ever had one Black teacher.

If kids don’t see teachers who look like them, white educators will remain overrepresented, Royers said. He and fellow Millard educators are recruiting students of color for their district’s in-house education academy. He hopes, six or so years from now, those students will return to Millard as educators. They’ll have to be patient, he said, because this is the first time Millard has prioritized those perspectives. But it’s worth it.

“Unless we have people that are truly, authentically speaking to the different experiences of what it’s like to be in America, we’re not going to fully move the needle,” Royers said.

The job paid very little. In addition, the work was hard and the conditions were tough. Kerr wrote in his journal, "God knows any money a man earns in California, its dearly won, for he deprives himself of all the comforts . . . in addition to being burned up with a scorching sun . . . and eaten alive by Muskeatoes [mosquitoes]."

Kerr returned to San Francisco, where his wife and child joined him in 1852. He continued to get odd jobs, ending up in the grocery business. But he never made the fortune he imagined. "People may talk . . . about the Gold of California," he wrote, "but its very difficult to obtain it."

Women were rare in gold rush towns—and even rarer in the goldfields. Some cooked meals and washed clothes for miners. In return, the miners paid them well and treated them with respect.



Textbook pictured: *History Alive! The United States Through Industrialism* (TCI, 2011).
Used in Millard and OPS middle schools.

It's tough to imagine women being unequivocally respected in any historical U.S. community — after all, we're living in a patriarchal society. In reality, while some women in gold rush towns were treated well, others — including prostitutes and dance hall girls — were objectified, beaten up and abused by miners. | Photoshop work by Chris Bowling.
Photo by Leah Cates.

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Learning from a teacher of color impacts how — and what — students learn. OPS senior Gott recalled her freshman year history teacher, a Hispanic man who was born and raised in Omaha and attended her high school. Seeing him at the front of the classroom, particularly

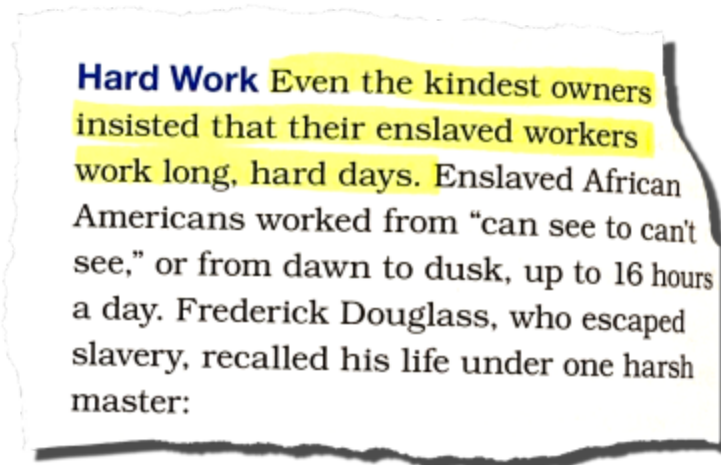
when he taught Mexican-American history, showed Gott that it's possible for someone like her to be a strong adult who is proud of their heritage.



Isabel Gott, a senior at Omaha South High Magnet School and member of What YOUth Can Do, pictured in Omaha South High School on Feb. 10, 2021. Gott learned about topics like colorism in the Black community and the history of LGBTQ rights through an internship at the Omaha Women's Center for Advancement. "Why am I not learning [this] in school?" Gott asked. "Not everybody has the ability to do an internship...things like this should be required in curriculums." | Photo by Chris Bowling.

"[Teachers at my school] understand what it's like to be a person of color in the United States [and] what it means to be an immigrant," she said. "It makes me feel at home."

"Ignore what the textbook is saying"



Textbook pictured: *American History* (Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2016). Used in OPS middle schools.

Enslavers (a term preferable to “slave owners”) perpetuated a lethal atrocity — nothing about which was “kind” — and words like “long” and “hard” sugar coat a brutal system of forced labor that killed 1.8 million African Americans in the Middle Passage alone. Instead of sympathizing with enslavers, books should center the experience of enslaved people. | Photoshop work by Chris Bowling. Photo by Leah Cates.

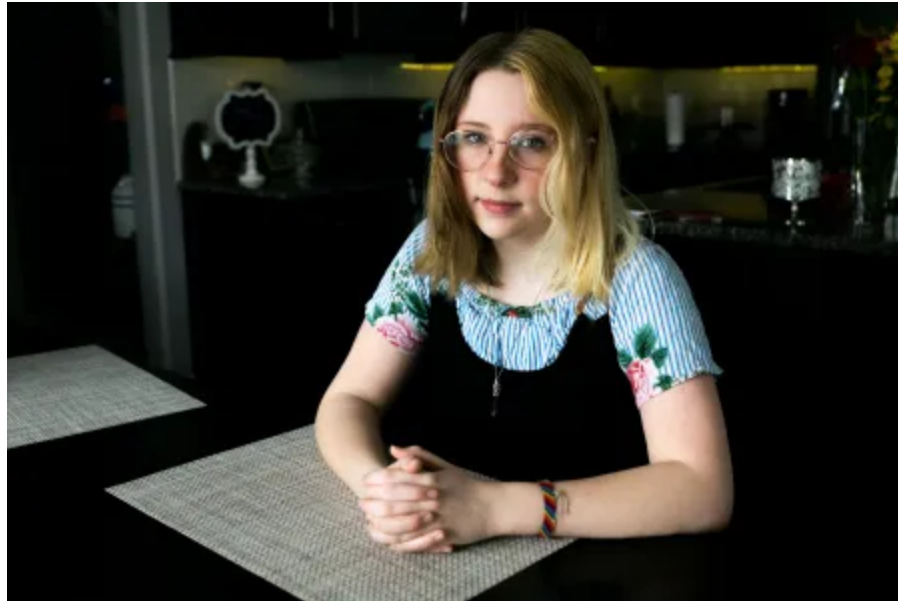
Mora Dominguez is a member of the LGBTQ community; yet, only three of the 936 pages in her textbook, *American History*, published by textbook giant Pearson, mention LGBTQ issues. When Mora Dominguez reads about slavery, she finds political deals made by white men — the Missouri Compromise, the Fugitive Slave Act — and next to nothing about the lived experiences of enslaved people from the perspectives of BIPOC.

So students like Ramsey, Shepherd and Shapkota turn to social media.

“I’ve learned more from [Diversify Our Narrative’s] Instagram page than I probably ever have in public education,” Ramsey said.

Shapkota’s teacher did tell his class to “ignore what the textbook was saying” about Christopher Columbus and indigenous populations, but not all teachers are willing to push back against textbooks.

“We mostly read word for word from the textbook, like “This is what you need to ... remember for the test, and then we’re gonna move on,” Shepherd said. “The authors of these textbooks are white people getting their notes from white journals.”



Megan Shepherd, a Millard West sophomore, in her home on Feb. 11, 2021. Shepherd hopes to one day serve marginalized communities as a politician. In the meantime, she fights for an inclusive curriculum as Co-Lead of Diversify Our Narrative’s Millard Chapter. “We’re lacking information we need to form unbiased opinions,” Shepherd said. | Photo by Chris Bowling.

The Reader asked local students to create TikToks about their social studies curricula. In her TikTok, Shepherd expresses disappointment in her sugarcoated and Eurocentric middle school education. Click “play” to watch. | TikTok by Megan Shepherd. Submitted on Feb. 5, 2021.

Gott said she challenged her book’s whitewashing, and the teacher responded, “I don’t know; that’s just what the textbook says.”

Some educators use textbooks as an opportunity to teach students about the danger of consulting just one whitewashed narrative. When Royers taught, he said he reminded students that there are multiple versions of history and presented them with competing sources that offered radically different viewpoints.

Educators in the Native American community are acutely aware of textbooks’ limitations. Shelly Stark, Native American liaison for the standard changes, said her former social studies students at Walthill Public School in Thurston County were not engaged in a curriculum that failed to represent them. So she ditched textbooks, instead using novels and other alternative sources that taught U.S. history from an indigenous perspective.

pressure for equal treatment. Slowly, they made a few gains. However, the struggle for civil rights would take many more years.

RECALL What was the purpose of Roosevelt's "Black Cabinet"?

Other Americans Weather the Depression

The hard times of the Great Depression created fear and insecurity among many Americans. These feelings sometimes erupted in discrimination and hostility toward Americans with different ethnic backgrounds.

Mexican Americans By the 1930s, Mexican Americans worked in many cities around the country. A large number, however, were farmworkers in the West and Southwest. There, they faced

discrimination in education and at the polls.

In good times, employers had encouraged Mexicans to move north and take jobs in factories or on farms. When hard times struck, however, Americans wanted Mexicans to go back to their original country. More than 400,000 people were rounded up and sent to Mexico. Some of them were American citizens.

Asian Americans Some Americans resented Chinese, Japanese, and other workers who competed with them for scarce jobs. Sometimes, violence erupted. Responding to the government's request, the number of Asians in the United States fell. In 1935, FDR signed a law that allowed transportation for Filipinos to return to the Philippines and to come back.



John Collier (center) was appointed commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Here, he meets in 1938 with Sioux leaders who testified before Congress to demand rights for American Indians.

American Indians In 1924, Congress had granted all American Indians citizenship. Still, most Indians continued to live in deep poverty. President Roosevelt encouraged new policies toward American Indians.

In the 1930s, Congress passed a series of laws that have been called the **Indian New Deal**. The laws gave Indian nations greater control over their own affairs.

The President chose John Collier, a longtime defender of Indian rights, to head the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Collier ended the government policy of breaking up Indian landholdings. In 1934, Congress passed the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA). It protected and even expanded landholdings of Indian reservations. The Roosevelt

administration also strengthened Indian governments by letting reservations organize corporations and develop their own business projects.

To provide jobs during the depression, the government set up the Indian Emergency Conservation Work Group. It employed American Indians in programs of soil-erosion control, irrigation, and land development.

RECALL What was the purpose of the Indian New Deal?



Literature and Arts During the Depression

Creative artists powerfully portrayed the hardships of depression life. Many wrote and depicted the hard times Americans face

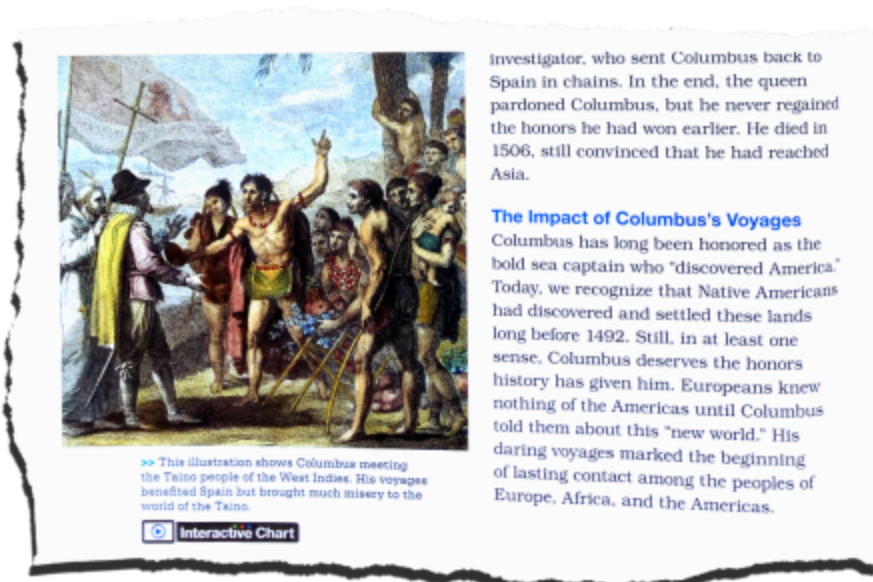
Textbook pictured: *American History* (Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2016). Used in OPS middle schools.

American History shoves the experience of Mexican Americans, Asian Americans and American Indians into tiny sections, “othering” them and painting a picture of the prototypical American as white. The book also downplays the discrimination faced by Mexican Americans, Asian Americans and American Indians, and makes no mention of their accomplishments or resistance to oppression during this period. | Photoshop work by Chris Bowling. Photo by Leah Cates.

Vida Woodhull Stabler, director of Umó^hoⁿ Nation Public School’s Language and Cultural Center and Title VI Native Education Program, teaches students about Umó^hoⁿ culture through immersive experiences, from hand making regalia to playing traditional games.

“[Culture is] not from a book. It’s from ... our community members being brought into our schools ... You can integrate culture into all aspects of education,” Stabler said. “Our focus has always been a more robust, deeper level of learning.”

McKiver, Payne and their colleagues likewise don’t believe textbooks prepare students for



Textbook pictured: *American History* (Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2016). Used in OPS middle schools.

Textbooks like *American History* celebrate Christopher Columbus without showing the perspective, culture and accomplishments of the tens of thousands of indigenous peoples he pillaged, enslaved, raped and murdered. | Photoshop work by Chris Bowling. Photo by Leah Cates.

civic duty. The new standards emphasize inquiry-based learning and the College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Instructional Framework, which challenges students to ask questions, analyze primary sources, think critically and develop conclusions instead of being spoon-fed history from a book. For example, Royers said, students should be able to apply these skills to grapple independently with a news article about the experience of Latinos in the U.S.

“That’s really the ultimate litmus test if we’ve done our job or not,” Royers said.

But students insist that historical inquiry still isn’t happening in many classrooms, and if it is, it’s exclusive to electives and upper-level classes, such as honors, AP and IB. Nationally, Black and Latinx students are underrepresented in upper-level classes; for example, 15% of high schoolers are Black, but just 9% are in AP courses. Plus, AP exams are pricey, posing barriers to access for low-income students, who are often BIPOC.

Students also say regular classes don’t delve into the experience of marginalized communities. So BIPOC who populate these classes don’t see themselves represented.

Bower, who teaches racial justice to first-year students, noticed that most of his students’ existing knowledge comes from elective or dual enrollment courses on topics such as African American History — *not* from regular classes.



Textbook pictured: *History Alive! The United States Through Industrialism* (TCI, 2011). Used in Millard and OPS middle schools.

This segment centers women's and BIPOC's resistance to oppression in a nation where "we the people" meant well-off white men. It's great, but it's a brief bonus section ("Reading Further") that's cut off from the main narrative. Imagine how students might see themselves in the curriculum if the entire book — not just four pages — illuminated marginalized Americans' experiences and accomplishments, and clearly portrayed the U.S.'s history of discrimination. | Photoshop work by Chris Bowling. Photo by Leah Cates.

and studied."

"I don't know why my school is trying to shield us"

For Mora Dominguez, racism isn't a textbook concept — it's everyday reality.

Yet, the racism faced by Mora Dominguez, who said she experienced police brutality at age 12, remains conspicuously absent in classroom curriculums.

"I don't know why [my school is] trying to shield us from the fact that people are getting killed just because of their skin color," Mora Dominguez said. "That's something that we're gonna have to deal with, even people of color my age."

Shapkota, who's from Nepal, is asking the same question. When Shapkota told white friends she was being treated unfairly, they couldn't relate. And they're not going to better understand Shapkota's experience at school, where Shapkota said she isn't represented and the curriculum fixates on past wrongs.

The past has a material effect on the present, Sagheer said. It's not enough to tell people that America has moved on from its racist history, painting a pretty picture rather than facing the



Shreeya Shapkota stands in a park near her West Omaha home on Feb. 20, 2021. As a person of South Asian descent, Millard North junior Shapkota has always struggled to see herself in social studies curricula. “All my white friends have some kind of representation in the curriculum, whereas mine is not even a representation of me,” said Shapkota, who serves as Co-Lead of Diversify Our Narrative’s Millard Chapter. “I end up grouped into a broader region.” | Photo by Chris Bowling.

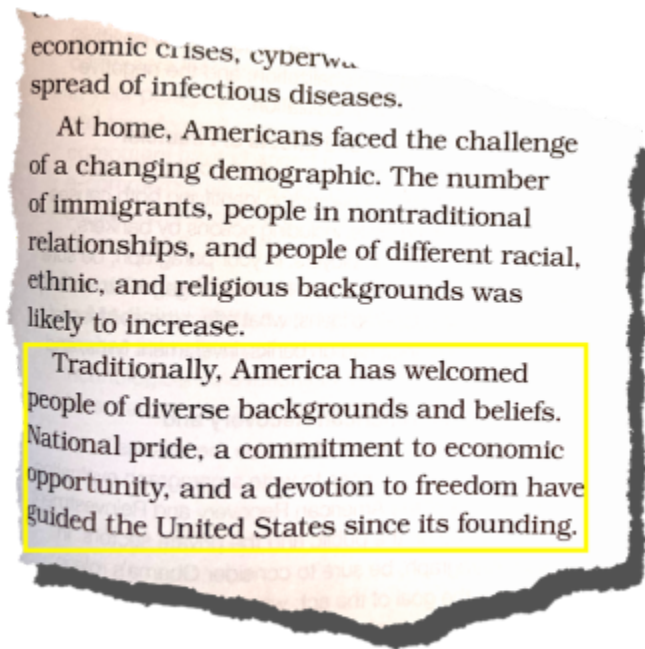
ugly truth.

“There is this inability to look at the shadow side of our country, because then we have to look at the shadow side of ourselves, the icky stuff that we don’t wanna see,” Sagheer said. “There’s this fear then somehow that makes us lesser than we thought we were as a country. I happen to think it would make us stronger and better. I think that’s called growing up.”

Educators acknowledged that, while the 2019 changes were a step in the right direction, there remains significant work to be done. Come spring, McKiver said the state plans to review schools’ instructional materials, textbooks and curriculums to identify gaps, some of which may be in multiculturalism.

Meanwhile, students continue to fight. Whether challenging administrators to center voices like theirs or rallying for racial justice on school steps, they’re demanding a curriculum that is historically accurate, culturally inclusive and representative of all students.

“For the past seven, eight years, we’ve heard the exact same thing over and over again. It’ll be an eye-opener, and it’ll make [students] *want* to pay attention,” Mora Dominguez said.



Textbook pictured: *American History* (Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2016). Used in OPS middle schools.

The U.S. was founded on enslavement of Black Americans and genocide of indigenous populations. In its culminating paragraph, the book says America is devoted to freedom; America holds 25% of the world's prison population, despite having just 5% of the global population. Black people make up nearly 40% of inmates but just 13.4% of the population. It says the U.S. is committed to economic opportunity; America has the highest level of income inequality of all G7 nations. | Photoshop work by Chris Bowling. Photo by Leah Cates.

“They’re going to be talking about stuff that directly affects them, and not stuff ... from white people.”

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