

Agencies to know

PROGRESSIVE VIEWS



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One of the least known state regulatory boards, the State Board of Education (SBOE) proposes and adopts curriculum and textbook standards for all public schools in the state of Texas (among other duties).

The SBOE has 15 members (only five of whom are Democrats), each one represents about 1.8 million Texans and each serves a four-year term. Most have no public school teaching experience whatsoever.

Our representative is Ken Mercer, who was elected in 2006. His seat is up for re-election in 2020, although some have heard that he plans to step down. Democrat Rebecca Bell-Metereau, a veteran educator, has run against Mercer three times, and in 2016, came within four points of winning – in a very conservative district.

Why should you care about the SBOE and who serves on it? Because those curriculum standards and textbook approvals are critical to what public school students learn here in Texas. For the past several years, a conservative majority has prevailed and has succeeded in inserting items from their own political agenda into curriculum standards and textbooks, particularly those in science and history, over the objections of legions of qualified experts in those respective fields.

During a March 2009 debate over the teaching of evolution, then-SBOE chairman Don McLeroy infamously stated, “Somebody’s gotta stand up to experts.”

In 2011, during a debate on science curriculum standards, our own Ken Mercer demonstrated his ignorance about evolution when he said in a radio interview, “If your theory’s right, all these species would get together and form a new species, then where is the cat-dog or the rat-cat.”

He has also downplayed slavery as a primary cause of the Civil War (Google “Texas Articles of Confederation,” and you’ll find “maintaining and protecting the institution known as negro slavery” in the third paragraph as a primary cause for secession). He voted for new social studies standards that even

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the conservative Thomas B. Fordham Institute criticized as filled with “political distortions” of history.

More recently, in November the SBOE shredded draft history curriculum standards proposed by teachers and scholars. The Texas Freedom Network, a watchdog for monitoring far-right issues, asked the board to “remove the ‘states’ rights’ lie from the list of causes of the Civil War” and to “remove Moses from a list of major influences on the American founding documents” (which leading scholars have told the board makes no historical sense).

According to Dan Quinn, communications director for TFN, the preliminary vote in September “was a perfect demonstration of why it’s a really bad idea for politicians to write curriculum standards that guide what public schools teach. Because then you end up with history that’s decided by a majority vote instead of by facts and historical accuracy.”

Speaking of the proposed curriculum standard revisions, University of Texas at El Paso professor Jonna Perrillo wrote, “The result is a curriculum that does a poor job of teaching the complexities of American history and does little to inspire students to engage with history in ways that are important to building a brighter American future.”

In years past, when Texas adopted textbooks on a statewide basis, “Texas curriculum [held] a disproportionate sway over the content of textbooks

printed for a national audience,” said Dr. Margaret Crocco of Michigan State University.

Since Texas was one of the largest buyers of school textbooks, that purchasing power often meant that other states were stuck with ridiculous statements in their history books (such as slaves being called “millions of workers” in a 2015 McGraw-Hill Education textbook).

That influence has waned in recent years, with the advent of online textbooks and the Texas Legislature giving more control to local districts over the textbooks they adopt. But that doesn’t stop ridiculous statements like “Moses influenced the Founding Fathers” from appearing in curriculum standards.

Evolution is real and the basis of all biological science, and 97 percent of scientists accept that man-made climate change is real. In 2014, the SBOE proposed a standard stating that scientists “disagree” on the causes of climate change.

If they’re taught otherwise, our children enter post-secondary education at a disadvantage, needing remedial instruction in these areas, and they must relearn parts of American history that the SBOE felt were unimportant to include. The SBOE, as currently comprised, is doing our kids a vast disservice.

The election may be two years away, but I urge you to learn more about the candidates for this important board, and vote for ones who will maintain the accuracy and integrity of what our children are taught.

Laura Bray is a leader in the Kendall County Democratic Party.

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