

**A Review of the TEKS  
Donald S. Frazier, Ph.D.  
Content Advisor**

## **General Impressions**

Overall, a close reading of the most recent iteration of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies has done much to dispel my misconceptions about what we teach the K-12 students in Texas, while also introducing me to areas of instruction of which I was unaware. So, this has truly been a journey of discovery for me. In the following paragraphs, I will describe some of the overarching impressions I have of the TEKS and the scope and sequence of material we put before the next generation of Texans. As a scholar of the American Civil War, Emancipation, and Texas, I paid special and close attention to those topics.

### The TEKS Treatment of the topic of Slavery.

For me, this was the most enlightening. In popular culture, in the recent literature, and in public forums, I was under the impression that the institution of slavery was not covered in public school, or slavery as a motivation for the expansion of the US was ever discussed. Some have accused scholars of “whitewashing history.” After reading the TEKS, I find that argument uninformed and misleading. Slavery as a phenomenon that informed political motives is covered extensive at several grade levels, most notably 113.16 (b) (4) B, D; 113.19 (b) (2) (D) and (4) (A), 113.20 (b) (12) (B).

However, there are some items that might be addressed. The economics of slavery is only obliquely referenced. As a result, the entire institution is cast as merely industrialized cruelty without reference to why or how the mechanics of slavery worked. As a result, we are missing the opportunity to discuss

- why people would even own slaves;
- what owning property in mankind actually meant in practice;
- the US Constitution—as a commercial document—and its role in protecting slavery;
- the laws that outlined the responsibilities of enslavers and the legal scaffolding of owning people as property;
- the baked in racism of perpetual raced-based slavery and then trend toward mixed race slavery;
- the role of slavery in crippling economic diversity in areas where it existed;
- the role of slavery in wealth building and its attending balance sheet and net worth issues. Owners carried titles on their slaves like present day vehicles and farm equipment and often used the enslaved to collateralize loans. This form of property (in man) therefore factored into the net worth of an individual’s estate. These workers, this kind of labor, was not a simple income and expense issue like having employees. Interestingly, too, is the fact that the legal trend ran against the ability of enslavers to manumit (free) their enslaved workers. When the Federal Government broke the back of the institution and

emancipated the 4,000,000 enslaved Americans at the point of a bayonet in the 1860s, it eliminated \$22 Trillion (adjusted to modern dollars) from Southern balance sheets.

- How southern states retained the prerogative for slavery as an example of American Federalism even though the national policy was that all people are born free in keeping with the concept of Natural Law;
- How this southern state prerogative was defended as a “states right” and informed the formation of the Confederate States of America and its founding documents.
- The term “slave” and “slavery” have become laden with cultural baggage. Yet, in many ways, the society the enslaved built around their lives and condition seems to receive short shrift, as though we cannot imagine them as enslaved human beings with the same wants, needs, desires, schemes, ambitions, and other complexities of the human experience. The humanity of the enslaved should be mainstreamed.
- There were Southerners who opposed slavery, and there were slave owners who would have sincerely loved to be freed from owning slaves. Planters’ wives left several accounts that would be instructive of how uncomfortable this weird and cruel institution was even for practioners;
- Slavery as a human phenomenon and in a global context should be introduced in an early world history class and a discussion of modern slavery and human trafficking.

As I read the TEKS, it seemed as though the old trop that slaveowners were simply misguided in their practice of slavery and does not acknowledge in a meaningful way the undergirding economics that encouraged the institution that horrifies modern audiences. In addition, the actual conditions under which slaves lived and toiled, and the complex relationships they had with each other and with their owners, remains mysterious even after a good public school education. We are missing a huge opportunity to have a mature discussion about the realities of slavery and the operations of the slave labor industry in support of the cotton, sugar, tobacco, and other industries. As a result, we open the door to uninformed teaching about this most American reality. As a result, entities and movements interested in exploiting this incomplete understanding of slavery in its American context to cause rancor and division have an easier time controlling the conversation using emotional levers rather than more rational approaches. We have a real opportunity to move toward mutual respect as a people if we get serious and honest in our approach to the study of slavery and its aftermath.

**Conclusion:** Slavery is covered, extensively, but could benefit from a general overhaul in the approach that would include placing slavery as practiced in the United States in a larger world history context in a useful way and to prepare students for a world where slavery and human trafficking still exist.

#### The TEKS Scope and Sequence issues

Texas History is taught in fourth and seventh grade, followed by US History in fifth and eighth grades. I think this is backwards. Students should understand the nation(s) that spawned Texas before we jump into the details of Texas history to provide necessary context. It would probably be too much to hope for to get a unit that compares the colonial experience of the United States to that of the Republic of Mexico, but we can dream! This is probably especially important given the changing demographics of the state. As it stands now, Texas history appears to happen in

something of a vacuum, and the need for American settlers in Texas really makes no sense without knowing how Napoleon Buonaparte's invasion of Spain and Father Hidalgo's *Grito de Dolores* set into motion events that would lead to the Alamo, Goliad, and San Jacinto. Or, how international players like Spain, Great Britain, and France played their parts in this process and set up an interesting post-colonial atmosphere that informed national development.

I would also teach Economics earlier, perhaps in 6<sup>th</sup> Grade. I fear it is wasted on high school seniors who are heading toward the exits and not as inclined toward their studies. So much of history is about following the money. This concept should be introduced early and reinforced often.

Likewise, bringing the large view of the world and national developments down to a state and local level—across disciplines and topics—would be a way of dropping a little Texas into the story potentially all the way from K-12. I am still an advocate for a comprehensive course on Texas History in middle school, but I think the process of creating retained learning and vertical alignment by localizing and showing how world and national events have local connotations and counterparts will be useful. In short, a “Texas Thread” throughout the curriculum.

In short, History is a process. We just have it out of sequence, and we currently don't emphasis the processes as much as the who, what, when, where, why, and how.

#### Why this is important

The TEKS are all well-intentioned but lapse into a sense of tokenism to satisfy various political agendas and wind up being a “mile wide and an inch deep” as the saying goes. The processes of history are intertwined, more like yarn or cordage, rather than individual “threads.” I am coming around to the Fordham study's reaction to the state's approach to teaching history and social studies.

The past informs the present, and the present prepares for the future. By 2050, Texas will double its population. We need to help these natives and newcomers understand what they are inheriting—and what they are building upon—as they put their own stamp on the story. Besides, Texas has always been at the intersection of people, cultures, and ideas, and populated by immigrants. As a result, it has become an exceptionally diverse state with a history of redeeming, restoring, and transforming ordinary individuals into people who achieve the extraordinary. It has always been a borderland, inhabited by people who resist the urge to be homogenized and contained, while appreciating and promoting the ways in which our neighbors are different and unique.

Texans has always been multicultural without really trying, but throughout its history the people who have called it home always seem to be pulling in the same direction.

The Texas story is far from perfect, like most human enterprises. Even so, it is a story of optimism, energy, grit, and gumption that sets a bold example for the rest of the nation. Our state is the best example of the American ideal, is a robust backer of the free market, and understands American Federalism; and this should be reflected in a Texas public education.

Specific Recommendations:

- 113.15 (10) (A). Perhaps a rudimentary discussion of capital, and how the enslaved were seen to be property which in turn drove a cash crop economy.
- 113.16 (b)(4)(B) there is an opportunity to show the interdependence of the cotton gin and the expansion of the slave labor system in the US.
- Perhaps include a discussion of the Buffalo Soldiers in 113.16 (b) (5) (C)
- 113.18 (b)(8)(B) Perhaps the start of a conversation about competing economics models, namely Capitalism, Socialism, and Communism, and . . . as practiced in China, Capitalistic Communism.
- 113.18 (b) (11) (A), perhaps a discussion about the difference between citizens and subjects.
- 113.18 (b) (13) (B), multi-culturalism is very different than cultural pluralism and diversity. We don't send our kids to school to become better (insert culture here) but rather to see where their home culture is an important part of the overall American culture.
- 113.19 (b) (6) (A), many modern Comanches consider Quanah Parker a controversial figure, and not representative of their nation.
- 113.19 (b) (6) (B), there were certainly Spanish influences on cattle culture, but they were by no means the only influence. The American settlers of Scots Irish descent had developed a cattle driving industry quite independent of the Spanish, and brought that tradition with them to Texas.
- 113.19 (b) (7) (B), the Texas timber industry might be mentioned.
- 113.20 (a) (1) This seems to be an appropriate place to mention Adam Smith and *The Wealth of Nations* (and the concept of self-interest) as being highly influential on the development of the nation.
- 113.20 (b) (3) (C), when discussing virtue, what exactly is meant? Aristotelian virtue? Civic virtue? Public virtue?
- 113.19 (b) (4) (A), perhaps insert the phrase “virtual representation versus actual representation in Parliament”
- 113.19 (b) (8) (D), I believe this to be brilliant! Well done!
- 113.31 (a). This is a scope and sequence note. This class should be taught much earlier than 12<sup>th</sup> Grade. Perhaps as early as 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade.
- 113.41 (c) (2) (B) including 2008 simply because of the election of Barack Obama seems a magnitude less important than the other items mentioned since he governed not as a Black president but rather as an American president.
- 113.42 (b) (1) I believe this course to be a model for other courses in that it provides very broad instructions and leaves it to the teachers to decide who to apply the lessons.
- I would include a discussion of slavery as a human phenomenon (including the problem with modern day human trafficking) as part of this course as well.
- 113.43 and beyond. The strands break down.

### Review these Courses

**Sociology 113.46** is an interesting course to me. Thinkers in the late 1800s and early 1900s crafted this discipline to justify the overthrow of the status quo and political structures then in place. The course is not taught in American universities until early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and clearly drew inspiration from French socialists. While this course is entirely appropriate for college classrooms, but I doubt high school kids are adequately prepared to approach this topic critically, nor are they at liberty to debate the teacher’s instruction. This discipline is theoretical, and not as clearly fact based as another subject.

The Ethnic Studies courses, including Mexican American Studies, 113.50 and African American Studies, 113.51 are largely breakouts of the other general offerings. Ideally, these coverage in these courses would inform our general history courses and be seamless additions to the offerings. That said, there is a lot of material in these courses already. If these courses, which I recognize were initiatives from teachers and school districts in an admirable “bottom-up” approach, maintain their academic focus and avoid becoming grievance studies courses I applaud the effort. As a dual citizen (I am Cherokee), I would like to see the list of courses include one on the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Ultimately, these courses help identify the important themes and content that could then be “mainstreamed” into the general history courses. I would be interested in elective courses on The History of Mexico and a course on the African Diaspora in the catalogue as well.

The purpose of public education which is to build consensus and teach toward a common culture. We must remember, in public school, students do not have as much liberty to debate what they are learning in class, nor are they as equipped to do so from an informed position, as they will be later in their educational journey. This is an important distinction to keep in mind.

### Final Thoughts

History does not have to be a student’s least favorite subject. Teachers can create enthusiasm by how they choose to approach the education process. Teachers are encouraged to master their subjects as part of their professional development. Prepared teachers are better at organizing their materials, and organization is key to successful teaching. They should be empowered to follow their passions.

Imagine if we taught kindergartners the alphabet, but never taught them that these letters can form words, and words can form sentences, and sentences can convey thought. We would be educating them, just not completely. Simply making history a litany of names and dates robs our students of the rich complexity of their own humanity. History is about people—most of whom were pretty much like you and me—who faced many of the same challenges we face today. If educating children is supposed to prepare them for lives well-lived, then the discipline of history is one of the most powerful tools at hand. The future of Texas depends on it.