

Shaping the Ideal American Citizen: How the Culture Wars Shaped Education in Virginia, 1980-2000

Introduction

The 2021 gubernatorial race in Virginia was extremely close. Former Democratic governor Terry McAuliffe lost to newcomer Republican candidate Glenn Youngkin by less than 65,000 votes.¹ Youngkin's win can be attributed to his stance on education, which had become a hot button issue in the months leading up to the election. Not only were parents upset about school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and the mandatory mask mandates that followed once school began to re-open, but they were also greatly concerned about Critical Race Theory in the classroom. One of Youngkin's first actions as governor was to sign an executive order with the goal of rooting Critical Race Theory out of Virginia's education system.² There is no evidence that Critical Race Theory—which can be seen as either “a way of understanding how American racism has shaped public policy” or as “a divisive discourse that pits people of color against white people” depending on which side of the political aisle you stand on—is actively taught in schools.³ However, parents felt that they deserved to have a say in what their kids learn in the classroom, and they did not want their (white) kids to feel about American history.

¹ CNN. “2021 Virginia Governor Election Results | CNN Politics,” Accessed May 8, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/election/2021/results/virginia/governor>.

² Matthew Barrakt and Sarah Rankin, “Youngkin Looks to Root out Critical Race Theory in Virginia,” *AP News*, February 15, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/education-richmond-race-and-ethnicity-racial-injustice-virginia-8ad5da65b9cb05265f2b8081c41827cd>.

³ Stephen Sawchuk, “What Is Critical Race Theory, and Why Is It Under Attack?” *Education Week*, May 18, 2021, sec. Equity & Diversity, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-is-critical-race-theory-and-why-is-it-under-attack/2021/05>.

The parental concern over Critical Race Theory is not the first time Virginia education faced controversy. In 2010, Carol Sheriff, a history professor at William and Mary, discovered a falsity in her daughter's fourth grade history textbook: "the claim that thousands of African Americans had served in the Confederate army, including two battalions under the command of Stonewall Jackson."⁴ This discovery and surrounding controversy led to a change in the Virginia state textbook review process, but it was not Virginia's first encounter with a textbook controversy. Fred Eichelman wrote his PhD dissertation on the Virginia textbook controversy between 1948 and 1972. He states that "a major problem is the tendency for state histories to favor regional biases as a result of public and local government pressures."⁵ He argues that rather than discarding state histories, they should instead be reformed. Adam Dean Wesley, in his exploration of Virginia textbook controversy during the Civil Rights Movement, observed that "segregationist politicians, such as Harry F. Byrd, Sr., J. Lindsay Almond, John Stewart Battle, Garland Gray, and William Tuck, intended to keep Lost Cause history alive by creating a series of history textbook they hoped every Virginia school child, black and white, would read."⁶ The controversy Eichelman observed in the early 1970s was a result of Civil Rights activism against the textbooks Virginia adopted during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In their landmark study of how Americans engaged with the past, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen observed that "most respondents said that history classes seemed to be shaped by remote bureaucrats, to cover subjects remote from their interests, and to feature memorization

⁴ Carol Sheriff, "Virginia's Embattled Textbooks: Lessons (Learned and Not) from the Centennial Era," *Civil War History* 58, no. 1 (2012), p. 38.

⁵ Fred R. Eichelman, "Introduction and Background: The Role of State History Courses," "A Study of the Virginia History and Government Textbook Controversy, 1948-1972," Dissertation, 1975, p. 1.

⁶ Adam Wesley Dean, "'Who Controls the Past Controls the Future': The Virginia History Textbook Controversy," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 117, no. 4 (2009), p. 321.

and regurgitation of senseless detail.”⁷ In other words, Americans found their high school history classes incredibly boring and, to varying degrees, untrustworthy. The information they encountered was highly filtered and they did not feel connected to the past. The sense of estrangement was even more pronounced, according to Rosenzweig and Thelen, with African Americans and Native Americans. Despite this portrait of apparent apathy towards high school history, education has been a hot bed of contention in American politics.

Rosenzweig and Thelen conducted their survey in the early 1990s, in the midst of the Culture Wars and the federal government’s efforts to establish “codified baselines of knowledge and skills” (better known as standards).⁸ The process to create national education standards was also heavily impacted by the Culture Wars, which ties into Joseph Moreau’s argument in *School Book Nation: Conflicts over American History Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present*. Moreau states that “writing history is always political” and argues that conflicts over how history is taught shape the textbooks used to teach it.⁹ By exploring major conflicts over American history education from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and examining over one hundred textbooks, Moreau pieces together a narrative that shows how various interest groups have clashed over what children should learn about the United States. He challenges the notion that the narrative of U.S. history was static until the political, cultural, and social upheaval of the 1960s.

James Loewen, sociologist and author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, goes beyond Moreau’s analysis of textbook conflicts to

⁷ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, “‘Experience is the Best Teacher’: Participation, Mediation, Authority, and Trust,” *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 111.

⁸ Joseph Moreau, “Introduction,” *School Book Nation: Conflicts over American History Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 3.

⁹ Moreau, “Introduction,” *School Book Nation*, p. 16.

decry the contents of the textbooks. Loewen examines eighteen textbooks, far fewer than Moreau, but he also explores a much narrower chronological scope: 1974-2007. He argues that textbooks are “often muddled by the conflicting desires to promote inquiry and indoctrinate blind patriotism” and end up stifling meaning “by suppressing causation.”¹⁰ Loewen’s inflammatory analysis stems from both his experience as a professor who teaches incoming freshmen and his recollections of his own precollegiate history education. He charges that while history textbooks have progressively gotten longer and heavier, they fail to prepare thoughtful citizens. Students are not taught to question their textbooks and are therefore “hamstrung in their efforts to analyze controversial issues in our society.”¹¹ This is especially a problem when textbooks occasionally contain outright lies.

Historians tend to focus on the Culture Wars through the lens of their own area of study, but sociologist James Davison Hunter focused on the broader issues of contention in American society in his 1992 book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle To Control The Family, Art, Education, Law, And Politics In America*. Hunter’s goal in the book is to explain why American citizens “regularly witness [the country’s] national consensus being shattered and its basic principles becoming a battleground for the organized forces of both the cultural left and the cultural right.”¹² The Culture Wars were a reaction to the social change of the previous decades, especially the 60s and the 70s, like the Redemption Era that followed the Civil War and Reconstruction. Former Confederates worked their way back into state and federal government during the Redemption Era and worked to roll back some of the progress freed men and women made during Reconstruction.

¹⁰ James W. Loewen, “Introduction,” *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: The New Press, 2018), p. 3.

¹¹ Loewen, “Introduction,” *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, p. 8.

¹² James M. Morris, “Everyone can benefit from these wars,” *Daily Press*, 19 Jan 1992.

Conservative politicians instigated the Culture Wars in their effort to regain the “moral” high ground of social and political life in the United States. The political movements of the 50s, 60s, and 70s redefined America by introducing far more political actors into the nation and legitimizing them in a way they had not been previously. Black and Indigenous people of color and women gained a recognized autonomy that has been attacked through the Culture Wars and their focus on race, political correctness, abortion rights, and more. Today, conservative politicians are running on platforms that attack Critical Race Theory, gender and sexual orientation in schools, and abortion access in part as a reaction to the recent Black Lives Matter, gay rights, and the #MeToo movements. Family life education became a particular area of focus for Virginians during the 1980s, as the state Board of Education worked to standardize education across the Commonwealth.

Politicians turned the classroom into a battleground for the Culture Wars because children develop a shared consensus of the values that define American citizenship in the classroom. The fundamentally different paradigms that separate conservatives and liberals impact their concepts of the “ideal” American citizen. Should children grow to be obedient workers that help the economy grow and run smoothly? Or should they be critical thinkers that help to solve big problems? These questions are admittedly reductive and oversimplified examples of the difference in thinking. However, they illustrate that both sides of the aisle are concerned with shaping good citizens; they just disagree with what being a good citizen looks like.

This study examines the standards created in Virginia, rather than the textbooks used, because they had greater impact on the material taught in the classroom. Teachers were expected to use the Virginia Standards of Learning to shape their lesson plans. The Virginia State Board of

Education—whose members are appointed by the governor and were responsible for crafting the standards—was an extension of the administration they served under. The Board of Education listened to feedback from the public and took it under consideration, but they ultimately created policies and drafted standards that reflected their personal beliefs, biases, and loyalties. While there was a need to update the Standards of Learning regularly to reflect recent scholarship, politicians used the Culture Wars of the 1980s and 90s to influence the shaping of educational standards and what the Board of Education deemed important for students to learn.

The 1980s: The National Story

Politicians of the 1980s were concerned with the sanctity of the family. The rift between politicians concerning family policy revolve around a competing vision of what defines family. Progressives, on one side, understand family policy to include “economic assistance and social services that would put a floor under family income and lead the way to self-sufficiency.” Conservatives, on the other side, “tend to view such policies as promoting indolence, promiscuity, easy abortion, and parent indifference to the task of childrearing.”¹³ Progressives and conservatives disagreed about what defined the idea of family fundamentally, and that difference led to debate over family policy. Conservatives, such as Phyllis Schlafly, believed that the federal government had no business sticking their nose into the realm of family life.

To determine the best route to aid families, the Carter Administration established the White House Conference on Families (WHCF). In a publication announcing the WHCF and describing its goals, the chairperson of the WHCF stated that “families have always been this nation’s fundamental institution and source of strength. They are certainly our most precious

¹³ Hunter, “Family,” *Culture Wars*, p. 195.

asset, because within ‘ordinary’ American families an extraordinary thing takes place: our nation’s future is shaped and formed.”¹⁴ The conference’s goal was to examine how institutions impacted families, noting that “too often, government, whether in the Nation’s Capital or in a small town’s city, has compounded the problem by creating public policies and programs—in taxation, education, social welfare, and so on—that work to a family’s disadvantage.”¹⁵ While elected as a Democrat, President Jimmy Carter was much more conservative than he was progressive, as the tone of the WHCF publication shows. It appears that citizens of Virginia agreed with this sentiment: in a letter to the editor of Newport News’ *Daily Press*, one resident of Hampton, Virginia, stated that “the family is the sustaining force of society. Government should not become the sustaining force of the family.”¹⁶

Families surveyed by the WHCF listed education as one of their top priorities. During the summer of 1980, conferences were held in Los Angeles, California; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Baltimore, Maryland. The Baltimore conference supported “priority attention to family life education, with a program focus on parenting, communication, and life skills at all levels of education” and further recommended “increased appropriations for current federal education programs, with priority for increasing state and local funding and standards for sex equitable education.”¹⁷ Family life education courses, according to the WHCF, should include “human development; marriage and the family; parenting education and child care skills; interpersonal

¹⁴ White House Conference on Families, “A message from Jim Guy Tucker,” *White House Conference on Families: Listening to America’s Families*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare National Institute of Education, 1980), p.5.

¹⁵ White House Conference on Families, “A Message from Jim Guy Tucker,” *White House Conference on Families: Listening to America’s Families*, p.6

¹⁶ Laura M. Cole, “Views of our Readers: More On Family,” *Daily Press*, 22 Feb 1980.

¹⁷ White House Conference on Families, “White House Conference on Families: Listening to America’s Families. Action for the 80s. A Summary of the Report to the President, Congress and Families of the Nation,” 1980, p. 36.

relationships, communication and decisionmaking; human sexuality” and more.¹⁸ The Virginia Task Force that attended the Baltimore conference listed an “emphasis on family life programs in both elementary and secondary schools” as one of their four areas of focus in their efforts to strengthen families.¹⁹

Education was also a major feature of the Family Protection Act (FPA) of 1980, which was officially titled “a bill to strengthen the American family and to promote the virtues of family life through education, tax assistance, and related measures.”²⁰ The act, which was introduced by Senator Paul Laxalt in 1980 but not passed until 1981, “eliminated the ‘marriage tax,’ protected parental rights, required informed consent of parents for minors seeking abortions, and allowed for discrimination against homosexuals in employment.”²¹ The FPA’s section on education amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 “to authorize appropriations for the payment of allotments to States for the financing of elementary and secondary school programs” but prohibited “Federal control over the curriculum, administration, or personnel of any State or local school system.”²² The provisions in the Family Protection Act can be linked to the suggestions that came out of the WHCF, which recommended funding for the implementation of programs to support the family and a reduced amount of involvement in forming policy from the federal government.

¹⁸ White House Conference on Families, “White House Conference on Families: Listening to America’s Families. Action for the 80s,” p. 29.

¹⁹ “The Changing Family Now A ‘Hot’ Issue,” *The Observer*, 17 April 1980, p. 2.

²⁰ “Titles - H.R.3955 - 97th Congress (1981-1982): Family Protection Act.” Webpage, July 2, 1981. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/97th-congress/house-bill/3955/titles>.

²¹ Hunter, “Family: Defining the Family,” *Culture Wars*, p. 178; “DAR program relates to conservation,” *The Daily News Leader*, 18 March 1980, p. 6.

²² “Titles - H.R.3955 - 97th Congress (1981-1982): Family Protection Act.” Webpage, July 2, 1981. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/97th-congress/house-bill/3955/titles>.

The 1980s: The Virginia Story

The effort to reform education in Virginia began in the 1960s, following the advent of desegregation. Adopted in 1971, the Virginia Constitution enshrined equal access to education to all citizens of the commonwealth. The previous constitution, adopted in 1902, had been written with the “stated purpose of disenfranchising Black people, which it did with bureaucratic efficiency for decades.”²³ The 1971 Constitution, however, provides access to “a system of free public elementary and secondary schools for all children of school age throughout the Commonwealth.”²⁴ The standards of quality are required under Section 2 of Article VIII of the Virginia Constitution, and were officially adopted in 1972. Written by the Virginia Board of Education and approved by the General Assembly, the standards of quality laid out goals students should achieve through their education.²⁵ They essentially served as mechanism to ensure equal access to education for all students in the Commonwealth.

However, education disparities continued to exist and state politicians saw the need for further reform. By the early 1980s, the Virginia Department of Education began developing Standards of Learning objectives. As Mark Middlebrook—a staff reporter for Newport News, Virginia’s periodical the *Daily Press*—noted, “the standards of learning are essentially an extension of the standards of quality” and that the standards of learning “provided the [mechanism] to achieve” the goals laid out in the standards of quality.²⁶ Beyond being an extension of the standards of quality, the standards of learning were published in 1984 as part of *The Virginia Design for Learning*.

²³ Gregory S. Schneider, “He Helped Rewrite Virginia’s Constitution to Guarantee Black Voting Rights — ‘a Blessing’ 50 Years Ago,” *Washington Post*, July 1, 2021.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/07/01/virginia-constitution-black-voting-rights/>.

²⁴ Virginia Const., Art. VIII, § 1.

²⁵ Virginia Const., Art. VIII, § 2.

²⁶ Mark Middlebrook, “State Still On Time In Developing Learning Standards,” *Daily Press*, 24 August 1980.

The Virginia Design for Learning consists of three publications (an introduction, the Standards of Learning, and Competency-Based Education) and grew out of an objective adopted by the Virginia Board of Education in June 1981. The Board of Education states that SOLs were, in addition to teachers and students, “designed to help parents and other citizens know what students are expected to learn in the public schools.”²⁷

The concept of standards of learning met some resistance when they were first proposed. The National Education Association (NEA) charged that “Virginia’s new plan for minimum standards of learning for public school students will actually lower classroom achievement standards” because teachers would focus on “teaching the test” and exclude subjects not included in the standards, narrowing the curriculum.²⁸ Graduates of the public school system would see this as a valid criticism. As Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen found in their survey of Americans’ interactions with history and the past, respondents felt that their high school history classes were filled with the endless regurgitation of useless information.²⁹ Despite this early criticism, however, most of the controversy around the initial standards of learning appeared in the mid-1980s.

Despite the widespread support between families, federal and state governments for increased family life education, it became a source of debate as Virginia worked to craft their family life education standards of learning. Prior the development of the SOLs, family life and sex education were part of special programs and not necessarily a regular part of public education.³⁰ Then the Sussex County school board approved the use of school facilities for a sex-

²⁷ Virginia Board of Education, “Preface,” *Introduction... the Virginia Design for Learning* (Richmond, VA: Department of Education Curriculum and Instruction, 1984), p. iv.

²⁸ “NEA Criticizes New Standards For Schools,” *Daily Press*, 9 November 1980.

²⁹ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *Presence of the Past*.

³⁰ Gene Phillips, “Program Designed for Teen-Agers,” *Daily Press*, 19 Feb 1980; “Health Activities Planned,” *Daily Press*, 6 February 1980.

ed program aimed at eighth graders. Students were required to obtain parental consent to attend the panel, which would cover such issues as “hygiene, communication, relations with family and other people, and grooming.”³¹ In 1980, Virginia Governor John Dalton declared the week of February 10th as Family Life Sex Education Week as part of a wider effort to curb unwanted pregnancies, especially those involving teenagers. The prior year saw 22,871 teen pregnancies, according to an article in Staunton, Virginia’s *The Daily News Leader*.³²

The Board of Education included family life education under health standards in the original publication of *The Virginia Design for Learning* in 1984. In this edition of the Standards of Learning, sex education does not appear until the standards for tenth grade, under “Parenthood and Family Relationships.” These initial standards tackle dating, preparing for courtship and marriage, family planning, pregnancy and birth, parenthood, family role, and resources for assistance with parenthood and family matters. The standards themselves are vague; each standard is followed up with a descriptive statement that explains what the standard is meant to cover. These descriptive statements left room for interpretation, allowing teachers to cover material they felt was most appropriate.³³

While these descriptive statements may be vague, they still reveal the Board of Education’s biases. Concern for the family, for example, is present in health standard 10.33: “The student will evaluate the roles and responsibilities of each family member.” The descriptive statement for this standard articulates the Board’s preference for a particular view of “the family.” It states that “the emphasis is upon the family as a unit and contributions and

³¹ Philips, “Program Designed for Teen-Agers.”

³² “Family Life-Sex Education Week: Governor proclaims observance,” *The Daily News Leader*, 14 February 1980.

³³ Virginia Board of Education, “Health Education Standards of Learning Objectives Tenth Grade,” *The Virginia Design for Learning: Standards of Learning Objectives for Virginia Public Schools* (Richmond, VA: Department of Education Curriculum and Instruction, 1984), pp. 117-118.

responsibilities of each member. Attention should be given to how changes may affect the family members by such occurrences as divorce, relocation, death, and both parents having to work.”³⁴ Despite the neutral language, the Board of Education reveals a preference for assigned gender roles in the nuclear family. While the phrase “both parents having to work” itself does not place direct blame on either parent for working, it implies that a working mother is disruptive to the family dynamic. Men working outside the home has never been an issue; career women, however, have long been impacted by cultural stigma. Each of the four changes listed in the descriptive statement carry negative connotations.

The Board of Education’s concern over divorce reflects national concerns about the family. The divorce rate in the United States peaked between 1979 and 1981.³⁵ (Around the same time divorce rates were reaching an all-time high, the Carter administration had begun focusing on family issues through the White House Council on Families.) The Board of Education wanted to protect traditional family values and saw divorce as a threat to the proper family dynamic they wanted to instill in school-aged children. Health standards 10.27 states that “the student will identify factors to be considered in preparation for courtship and marriage.” Students should learn to figure out “individual and mutual interests, values, and expectations” before entering committed relationships.³⁶ While helping students to create healthy relationships is vital for the well-being, the Board of Education was interested in doing so to maintain the concept of the traditional family that had become an important part of the American identity.

³⁴ Virginia Board of Education, “Health Education Standards of Learning Objectives Tenth Grade,” *The Virginia Design for Learning*, p. 118.

³⁵ Clarke, Sally C. “Advance Report of Final Divorce Statistics, 1989 and 1990.” *Monthly Vital Statistics Report* 43, no. 9, supplement (May 24, 2019): 1–32. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/95facts/fs_439s.htm.

³⁶ Virginia Board of Education, “Health Education Standards of Learning Objectives Tenth Grade,” *The Virginia Design for Learning*, p. 118.

Controversy over the Family Life Education standards did not really start to heat up until the mid to late 80s, when the Board of Education began discussing expanding and revising the 1984 standards. The 1987 Session of the General Assembly in Virginia enacted a statute for the creation of comprehensive family life education (FLE) standards for grades K through twelve in response to a 1986 study on the issue of teenage pregnancy in Virginia. Adelard L. “Abe” Brault, a member of the Virginia Board of Education, detailed his objections to the FLE standards to Dr. Margaret N. Roberts, a member of the Virginia Department of Education. Brault believed the FLE standards the Board approved on November 16, 1987, were inappropriate “for the age of the student in family living and community relations. Or, in some instances, the content to be taught is such that it should be acquired from the family.”³⁷ In Brault’s views, the family should be responsible for teaching their kids about breast feeding and the fact that babies grow inside the mother’s body. That information should not be imparted on kids by their first and second grade teachers. Brault criticizes the 1987 FLE standards for a lack of emphasis in the curriculum on abstinence, stating that “the mere fact that methods of contraception (birth control) are to be taught commencing the seventh grade (students are now age 13) would tend to negate the teaching of abstinence.”³⁸

Parents critical of the program also charged that “the curriculum does not adequately emphasize premarital celibacy.”³⁹ One of the biggest myths about sexual education is that teaching about sex and birth control leads to more sex among teenagers. In actuality, states with better and more comprehensive sex education have significantly lower rates of teen pregnancy

³⁷ Adelard L. Brault to Margaret N. Roberts, November 27, 1987; Adelard L. Brault folder, Box 9, R.G. 27, Correspondence of the Virginia State Board of Education, 1974-2005, Library of Virginia (Richmond, VA), p. 1.

³⁸ Adelard L. Brault to Margaret N. Roberts, November 27, 1987, p. 3

³⁹ “Sex ed opponents seek celibacy emphasis,” *Daily Press*, 9 February 1988.

than states that teach abstinence only education.⁴⁰ Parents also reacted negatively to the FLE standards, criticizing them for including information on birth control, abortion, homosexuality, and other “controversial” and “sensitive” topics. They feared that the curriculum around sex education would undermine their parental authority and result in experimentation and promiscuity.⁴¹

The Culture Wars had a firm grasp on the classroom as the Board of Education, supported by a vocal base of concerned parents, influenced the development of sex education in schools with their own personal views. Responsible citizens did not have premarital sex, engage in homosexual relations, get divorced, or seek abortions. The Board of Education’s family life education standards were not reflective of current scholarship. Instead, as Brault’s attack on the 1987 proposed standards shows, the standards were reflective of the Board’s attitudes towards “traditional” family values. The debate over family life education gets revived again in the late 1990s with the complete overhaul and revision of the Standards of Learning program. However, history education takes the center stage during the 1990s as debates over “politically correct” curriculum heat up at the national level.

The 1990s: The National Story

National education reform began in the early 1980s in the form of the National Commission for Excellence in Education (NCEE). The commission and its report, *A Nation at*

⁴⁰ Pamela K. Kohler, Lisa E. Manhart, and William E. Lafferty, “Abstinence-Only and Comprehensive Sex Education and the Initiation of Sexual Activity and Teen Pregnancy,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 42, no. 4 (April 1, 2008): 344–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2007.08.026>; Kathrin F. Stanger-Hall and David W. Hall, “Abstinence-Only Education and Teen Pregnancy Rates: Why We Need Comprehensive Sex Education in the U.S.” *PLOS ONE* 6, no. 10 (October 14, 2011): e24658. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0024658>.

⁴¹ “Sex education divides family life hearing,” *Daily Press*, 28 April 1987.

Risk, were the first major projects to come out of the newly created Department of Education. Previously a part of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the Department of Education was reorganized into its own cabinet position in an act signed in 1979 by the Carter administration. The U.S. Department of Education was not officially established until the next year, when the act went into effect. While Ronald Reagan promised to abolish the Department of Education after taking office in 1981, by 1985 he backed down from his position, citing a lack of congressional support.⁴²

The NCEE was created by Secretary of Education T. H. Bell “because of his concern about ‘the widespread public perception that something [was] seriously remiss in our education system.’”⁴³ Bell served as the Secretary of Education under the Reagan Administration from 1981 to 1985. He had previously served as commissioner of education under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford.⁴⁴ Despite serving as the Secretary of Education, Bell supported the Reagan Administration’s efforts to abolish the agency, commenting that “this administration favors doing as much as we can in the private sector, removing some of the burden on the taxpayer. It’s in our national interest to have strong, viable private schools.”⁴⁵ He believed that private schools provided better education than public schools, and that those who chose to send their kids to

⁴² United Press International, “Education Dept. Won’t Be Abolished: Reagan Backs Down, Citing Little Support for Killing Agency,” *L.A. Times*, January 29, 1985. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-01-29-mn-13948-story.html>

⁴³ The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *Meeting the Challenge of a Nation at Risk* (Cambridge, MA: USA Research, 1984), p. 2.

⁴⁴ Associated Press, “Former Education Secretary Terrel H. Bell: [North Sports Final Edition],” *Chicago Tribune* (Pre-1997 Full text), Jun 24, 1996. <http://mutex.gmu.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.mutex.gmu.edu/newspapers/former-education-secretary-terrel-h-bell/docview/291142792/se-2?accountid=14541>.

⁴⁵ “How to Improve Our Public Schools”, *U.S. News & World Report*, June 8, 1981. <https://advance-lexis-com.mutex.gmu.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3SJ4-FGC0-000C-D04T-00000-00&context=1516831>.

private schools should get a tax credit so that they were not paying for education twice (in taxes and tuition). Bell's political leanings clearly informed his approach to education.

Even with national attention on education reform, the NCEE's efforts through *A Nation at Risk* still largely focused on enacting changes at the local and state level. Bell blamed local school boards for the mediocre quality of education in public schools across the country, stating that "a school board's first objective should be to set high standards of classroom accomplishment and to make those standards widely known. Too often, that is not being done."⁴⁶ By 1983, one hundred-sixty-five task forces had been established in all fifty states. According to the NCEE's report, forty-two states had enacted curriculum reform initiatives. The report states that "prior to 1983, State legislative efforts to improve curriculum standards had focused primarily on adopting student competency tests. In 1983, the most frequent legislative initiative to improve the curriculum has been in strengthening basic course requirements."⁴⁷ Forty-four states updated their graduation requirements, and thirty-five states focused attention on student evaluations. Only seven states sought to improve education through textbooks and only five amended school accreditation policies.

After their survey of all fifty states, the NCEE declared "Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world."⁴⁸ Clearly influenced by Cold War politics, several of the research studies that came out of *A Nation at Risk* focused on science and technology education and compared the United States to the Soviet Union (among other nations).

⁴⁶ "How to Improve Our Public Schools", U.S. News & World Report.

⁴⁷ The National Commission on Excellence in Education, "Report to the Secretary: A Summary of Recent Efforts to Improve Education Across the Nation," *Meeting the Challenge of a Nation at Risk*, p. 6.

⁴⁸ The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Full Account* (Cambridge, MA: USA Research, 1984), p.5.

The pressure to excel in education has existed “since the first Soviet space satellite shook American confidence in its public schools in 1957.”⁴⁹

But the external pressures of the Cold War were not the only forces that impacted the Commission and their analysis of American education and its failings. In their description of the risk of an inadequate and uncompetitive education system, the commission states that “for our country to function, citizens must be able to reach some common understandings on complex issues, often on short notice and on the basis of conflicting or incomplete evidence. Education helps form these common understandings.”⁵⁰ This language is a direct reflection of the Culture Wars, which were (and still are) a debate over the shared values that define America.

Politicians turned education into a battle ground for the Culture Wars because the public school system in the United States is where children develop a shared understanding of the values that define the Nation and their community. The NCEE believed that “life-long learning will equip people with the skills required for new careers and for citizenship.”⁵¹ The commission’s list of the goals of a social studies education highlight this belief:

(a) enable students to fix their places and possibilities within the larger social and cultural structure; (b) understand the broad sweep of both ancient and contemporary ideas that have shaped our world; and (c) understand the fundamentals of how our economic system works and how our political system functions; and (d) grasp the difference between free and repressive societies. An understanding of each of these areas is requisite to the informed and committed exercise of citizenship in our free society.⁵²

These goals are a clear example of American exceptionalism, seeking to define American by a shared set of values that set it apart from other world societies. American citizenry, according to

⁴⁹ Phil Gailey, “Education Emerges as Major Issue in 1984 Presidential Campaigning,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 1983, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/06/09/us/education-emerges-as-major-issue-in-1984-presidential-campaigning.html>.

⁵⁰ The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), p. 10.

⁵¹ The National Commission on Excellence in Education, “Recommendations,” *The Full Account*, pp. 69-70.

⁵² The National Commission on Excellence in Education, “Recommendations,” *The Full Account*, p. 71.

this list, is unique because it values freedom and its political system enshrines liberty and justice for all. During the culture wars, however, reverence for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were not enough to keep American society glued together.

President George H. W. Bush made education reform a feature of the 1990s, as it was a part of his party platform. However, education reform was seemingly sidetracked when new controversy arose over the creation of national standards for history. The effort to create national standards grew out of an agenda set by Bush's administration. While the National Commission for Excellence in Education in the early 1980s surveyed the contemporary state of education in the United States and offered up recommendations for improvement, Bush's six National Education Goals represented the first truly national effort to improve education.⁵³ Bush's education goals, created in tandem with the nation's governors, was a top-down effort to improve American education. According to an article from United Press International, Bush wanted to be the "education president" and developed the National Education Goals to "revitalize America's schools, including a call for a 90 percent high school graduation rate by the turn of the century."⁵⁴ Bush announced his goals during his 1990 State of the Union address, declaring "education is the one investment that means more for our future because it means the most for our children. Real improvement in our schools is not simply a matter of spending more: It's a matter of asking more—expecting more—of our schools, our teachers, of our kids, of our parents, and of ourselves. [...] The Nation will not accept anything less than excellence in education."⁵⁵

⁵³ Gary B Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, "Setting National History Standards," *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

⁵⁴ Thomas Ferraro, "Bush announces six 'national education goals,'" *UPI*, Feb. 1, 1990. <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1990/02/01/Bush-announces-six-national-education-goals/2945633848400/>

⁵⁵ George H. W. Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union," January 31, 1990. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-2>

Bush's statements in his State of the Union address were later translated into America 2000, "a bold, complex, and long-range plan to move every community in American toward the national education goals adopted by the president and governors [in 1990.]"⁵⁶ America 2000 created national tests, known as American Achievement Tests, that were meant to "examine the *results* of education." These tests, however, did not mean a national curriculum would follow "although surveys and polls indicate that most Americans have no objection to the idea of a national curriculum."⁵⁷ Congress created the National Council on Education Standards and Testing in June 1991 to "advise on the desirability of national standards and tests and to recommend long-term policies for such an agenda."⁵⁸ The efforts to create a system for national assessment died in Congress in 1992, but the effort to create some national unity in education reform continued through the movement to create national standards.

The *National Standards for United States History: Exploring the American Experience* were published in 1994 after two years of collaboration among teachers, scholars, parents, school administrators, and professional organizations from across the political spectrum. Arnita Jones, the then-Executive Director of the Organization of American Historians, wrote that the standards "reflect not only the best recent scholarship but also classroom realities. They pay appropriate attention to the work of previous generations of historians as well as to the new subjects and new methods of historical research which have enriched the discipline over the past several decades."⁵⁹ Jones was writing in defense of the standards, which became a source of controversy after Lynne Cheney attacked the standards for offering a "distorted, 'politically correct' view of

⁵⁶ Lamar Alexander, "A Message from the Secretary," *America 2000: An Education Strategy*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of Education, 1991), p. 3.

⁵⁷ "Some Questions and Answers," *America 2000*, p. 44.

⁵⁸ Nash et al, "Setting National History Standards," *History on Trial*, p. 153.

⁵⁹ Arnita A. Jones, "Our Stake in the History Standards," *OAH Magazine of History*, Spring 1995, Vol 9 no. 3, p. 5.

the county.”⁶⁰ As chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Cheney helped to fund the effort to create national history standards but complained they were “not what she intended” after they were published.⁶¹

In the preface to the standards, co-directors Gary B. Nash and Charlotte Crabtree declared that “the History Standards, as finally drafted, would in fact mark a critical milestone but not the final destination in what must be an ongoing, dynamic process of improvement and revision over the years to come. [...] standards drafted for the schools must be open to continuing development to keep pace with new refinements and revisions in this field.”⁶²

Supporters of the standards, especially those involved in their creation, were adamant that the national standards were optional and flexible. Jones argued that “fears about a centrally imposed national curriculum are unfounded” and that “the standards would be voluntary and serve primarily as a model to inspire appropriate efforts at the state and school-district levels.”⁶³

Despite these reassurances from the people who helped to craft the standards, conservatives did their best to destroy the standards in the media.

Lynne Cheney “received one of the early drafts and immediately began counting.” The bulk of her criticisms about the standards come from what she perceives to be a focus on the negative aspects of American history. The standards reference McCarthyism and the Ku Klux Klan far more than they do George Washington, Robert E. Lee, the Wright brothers, and more. She charged that the standards’ authors “used ‘celebratory prose’ only to describe people, places,

⁶⁰ Hugh Dellios, “Critics say panel don’t know nuthin ‘bout U.S. history,” *The Indianapolis Star*, 20 Nov 1994, p. B5.

⁶¹ Jones, “Our Stake in the History Standards,” p. 5.

⁶² Gary B. Nash and Charlotte Crabtree, “Preface,” *National Standards for United States History: Exploring the American Experience* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, 1994), p.iii.

⁶³ Jones, “Our Stake in the History Standards,” p. 5.

and events that she regarded as ‘politically correct.’”⁶⁴ Arnita Jones shot back against this bean-counting, asking “do observers seriously believe [George Washington] could be omitted, when one of the standards requires ‘analyzing the character roles of the military, political, and diplomatic leaders who helped to forge the American victory?’”⁶⁵

Part of this controversy can be chalked up to pure politics. While the push for voluntary educational standards began under President George H. W. Bush’s administration, the national history standards were released during Bill Clinton’s presidency. Clinton had been a major part of the development of Bush’s American 2000 plan as the governor of Arkansas and president of the National Governors’ Association. Clinton continued much of his predecessor’s education reform in his own administration, passing Goals 2000 legislation in 1994. According to conservatives, Goals 2000 turned a bipartisan effort into an initiative that encouraged “politically correct curriculum, permissive sex-education classes, and a feel-good, student-centered environment that turns out poorly trained, undisciplined youths.”⁶⁶ A former member of the New Hampshire Board of Education rejected Goals 2000, stating that “if there are truly no conditions, all the government had to do was mail us a check to the state of New Hampshire.”⁶⁷ The only other state to out-right reject federal funding from Clinton’s Goals 2000 was Virginia. Governor George Allen, who was a prominent proponent of education reform in Virginia during the 1990s, stated that too many strings were attached to the funds (although he did not enumerate what those strings were).⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Dellios, “History,” p. B5.

⁶⁵ Jones, “Our Stake,” p. 6.

⁶⁶ Sarah Lindenfeld, “Goals 2000 plan slips from consensus to controversy,” *The Baltimore Sun*, July 23, 1995.

⁶⁷ Lindenfeld, “Goals 2000 plan slips from consensus to controversy,” *The Baltimore Sun*.

⁶⁸ “Budget,” *Daily Press*, 21 December 1996.

The 1990s: The Virginia Story

The falling achievement levels that inspired education reform at the national level had also inspired Virginia politicians to reform education in their own state. Beginning in 1993, a year after the effort to craft the National History Standards kicked off, Virginia began to rework their Standards of Learning. Conservative politicians were motivated to pursue education reform because of their mistrust of the public school establishment. As Frederick Hess stated in his analysis of Virginia's move to establish mandatory standards, "the allure of standards-based reform is straightforward. Standards are a statement that—at a minimum—schools ought to teach children certain knowledge and skills and that the state should ensure that both children and schools meet minimal standards."⁶⁹ The process, however, to determine "what students need to know, when they need to know it, and how well they need to know it is an ambiguous and value-laden exercise."⁷⁰ In Virginia, conservative politicians took on this exercise, controlling the bulk of education reform undertaken in the Commonwealth during the 1990s.

Virginia Governor Douglas Wilder, a Democrat and Virginia's first governor of African American descent, cut the education budget, forcing schools to deal with limited funds and fewer teachers to handle an increasing number of students, according to Nick Palter, a resident of Staunton, Virginia. Palter criticized Wilder, charging that Wilder had not paid enough attention to President George H. W. Bush's plan to improve education by the year 2000. Instead, Wilder was too focused on his bid for the Democratic presidential nomination when he should have been working on improving Virginia. Wilder had criticized the Bush administration for a "lack of

⁶⁹ Frederick Hess, "Reform, Resistance,... Retreat? The Predictable Politics of Accountability in Virginia," *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, No. 5 (2002), pp. 69-70.

⁷⁰ Hess, "Reform, Resistance,... Retreat?" *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, p. 100.

vision on education” and credited his fellow governors for drafting Bush’s education goals at the 1989 Education Summit, held in Charlottesville, Virginia.⁷¹

Governor Wilder blamed the federal government for the dwindling state funding that led to cuts in the education budget in the early 1990s. Wilder stated that “Uncle Sam is handing off to the states more responsibilities at a time when the federal government’s own financial mismanagement is handicapping state economies.” Speaking at the Governor’s Conference on Education in 1990, Wilder encouraged school officials, parents, and businesspeople to work together to improve education amidst these financial issues.⁷² Wilder himself did not lay out a specific plan for improving education. Instead, he shifted that responsibility to the state Board of Education, which began considering new education reforms in 1991.⁷³ The Standards of Learning that were created a decade previously were deemed outdated and no longer effective at producing the improvements in student achievement. The modern Standards of Learning program was developed in the mid-1990s, “in the wake of several ineffective attempts at reform and dramatic declines in the achievement of Virginia students on national assessments.”⁷⁴ The bulk of the reform of the Standards of Learning occurred under the governorship of George Allen and his Champion Schools Commission.

Governor Allen’s initial goal through the Champion Schools Commission “was to create support for charter schools and vouchers by placing blame on public schools who, Allen

⁷¹ Nick Palter, “Letters to the Editor: Wilder Exposed,” *The Daily News Leader*, 25 September 1991; “Wilder credits governors for education reforms,” *The Daily News Leader*, 2 October 1991.

⁷² Bob Kemper, “Wilder urges cooperation to improve schools,” *Daily Press*, 25 July 1990.

⁷³ “Wilder credits governors for education reforms,” *The Daily News Leader*, 2 October 1991.

⁷⁴ Virginia Board of Education, “Appendix A: Historical Overview of the Standards of Learning Program,” *2013 Annual Report on the Condition and Needs of Public Schools in Virginia* (Richmond, VA: Department of Education, 2013), p. 32.

suggested, were responsible for a ‘crisis’ in education.”⁷⁵ Allen’s Commission supported a “back-to-basics” approach that would reintroduce rigor into the Virginia education system, threatened to shut down and reorganize poor performing schools, and provide private school students with vouchers. In pursuit of this goal, Allen, his commission, and the Virginia Board of Education wanted to make the standards mandatory across all districts in the Commonwealth but (initially?) lacked the legislative support required to do so. The revised standards, if approved, would not have any tangible effect because at the time they were written and proposed there were no consequences in place for not meeting the new standards.⁷⁶ Previously, the standards had been guidelines that local school districts could tailor to meet their own goals. The Standards of Learning from the early 1980s had been revised in 1988 and 1989 but were deemed weak, immeasurable, and vague.

While the science and math revised standards were accepted without controversy, the social studies standards were denounced by several statewide education organizations, including the Virginia Education Association, the Virginia Association of School Superintendents, and the Virginia State Reading Association Board.⁷⁷ Critics of the social studies standards, especially teachers who helped to draft initial revisions and felt their work was largely changed at the state level, suggested that political bias shaped the standards after they reached the Board of Education. Anne Marie Smith, then a PhD student at the University of Maryland, observed that “if the educators did not know about the revisions, they could not object, and the commission could maintain control over this final draft, which is exactly what occurred.”⁷⁸ Some critics

⁷⁵ Ann Marie Smith, “Negotiating Control and Protecting the Private: History Teachers and the Virginia Standards of Learning,” Research Presentation (Chicago, IL: American Educational Research Association, April 2003). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED475360>, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Robin Farmer, “Revision Battle Lines are Formed—Language Skills, Social Studies Focus of Conflict,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, June 18, 1995.

⁷⁷ Farmer, “Revision Battle Lines are Formed.”

⁷⁸ Smith, “Negotiating Control and the Protecting the Private,” p. 4.

believed that “conservative politics were behind the move to emphasize ancient history and rote learning in the social studies standards.”⁷⁹ A Washington Post article on the governor’s plan emphasizes this point, reporting that “some say the goals are unrealistically ambitious for lower grades, promote rote memorization over critical thinking in upper grades and would turn back the clock on 20 years of research about how students learn. Contending the commission was dominated by conservatives, others say the goals are designed to advance a certain ideology.”⁸⁰ After several public hearings held across the state, a team from the Champion Schools Commission reviewed comments and revised 124 of the 138 social studies standards.

These criticisms, however, circle back to some of the most important questions regarding education: what is the goal of an education? Why are states and the federal government focused on investing in education? How does education create good citizens? Virginia teachers recognized the Standards of Learning as an example of a political agenda, one that overshadowed teachers’ voices and agency in their own classrooms.

Smith performed a grounded theory ethnographic study to investigate what teachers thought about the Standards of Learning. The teachers were frustrated with the standards’ approach because “objective assessments that test ‘official knowledge’ often reflect *heritage* approach to teaching history, where history is presented as truth, and sources of facts are not interrogated.”⁸¹ Mr. Anderson, one of the teachers she observed and interviewed as part of her study, said that the standards had not changed the way he taught material in his class that much. He occasionally had to revert to fact-delivery lectures to catch students up on standards, but he still emphasized critical thinking and writing skills. He said that the standards “haven’t changed

⁷⁹ Joel Turner, “School-Rule Critics Allege Political Bias,” *The Roanoke Times*, March 26, 1995.

⁸⁰ Spencer S. Hsu and Robert O’Harrow Jr, “Allen’s Back-to-Basics Plan for Schools Draws Outcry,” *The Washington Post*, March 29, 1995.

⁸¹ Smith, pp.4-5.

the way I have presented the material; however, they've changed the way I'm being evaluated, and the evaluation is flawed." For Anderson and others, the multiple-choice format of the Standards of Learning tests forced students to prioritize the memorization of historical facts over learning how to interpret and critically analyze sources.⁸²

Another teacher, Mrs. Hanson, taught ninth grade humanities and an elective course for juniors and seniors on minority cultures. She was particularly incensed by the conservative ideologies that shaped the standards, stating, "I have very little in the way of respect for the S.O.Ls, to tell you the truth. I feel that the S.O.Ls were developed and provided by a bunch of people who are white, middle class—and came out of the school of the fifties. And I think they purposely tried to bring all of that time period back because it enhances one groups power, I suppose."⁸³

The Board of Education's revised Standards of Learning were far more detailed and ambitious than the standards released in the early 1980s. The 1984 standards for eleventh grade Virginia and United States history, for example, do not name any historical figures or events. Instead, these early standards state that "the student will identify individuals, events, and eras of Virginia and United States history and explain their influence on the state and nation."⁸⁴ While the descriptive statement following the standard placed emphasis on "outstanding figures and major events," the vagueness of the standard left room for teachers to present material they deemed important for their students to learn.⁸⁵

⁸² Smith, p. 5.

⁸³ Smith, p. 10.

⁸⁴ Virginia Board of Education, "Social Studies Standards of Learning Objectives Eleventh Grade Virginia and United States History," *The Virginia Design for Learning*, p. 321.

⁸⁵ Virginia Board of Education, "Social Studies Standards of Learning Objectives Eleventh Grade Virginia and United States History," *The Virginia Design for Learning*, p. 321.

The Board of Education reasserted control over education with the release of the revised standards in 1995. Teachers had far less opportunity to structure their classes how they wished because of the amount of information listed in each standard. The standards for grade eleven United States history are roughly broken down into eras: the Age of Discovery, the Revolutionary Period, the Constitutional Era, the Early National period, Civil War and Reconstruction, the Industrial Revolution, World War I, Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, Civil Rights, and contemporary issues. The only standards that do not fit into this neat breakdown are 11.7, which focuses on the impact of immigration on American life; 11.15, in which the student should learn how to use maps, pictures, and computer databases; 11.16, which places emphasis on famous speeches and documents; 11.17, which lists the skills students should develop for historical analysis; and 11.18, in which students should develop skills in discussion and debate. The 1995 revised standards include six more standards than the original 1984 version, and they are far more detailed.

The Board of Education reveals their biases in the details they chose to outline in the standards. These biases are more pronounced when they are compared to the 2001 revised standards. The 1995 standard that covers the Civil Rights movement states, for example, that

the student will evaluate federal civil rights and voting rights development since the 1950's, in terms of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and its impact on education; civil rights demonstrations and related activity leading to desegregation of public accommodations, transportation, housing, and employment; reapportionment cases and voting rights legislation and their impact on political participation and representation; and affirmative action.⁸⁶

The focus on affirmative action is particularly revealing of the political leanings of the Board of Education. Republicans in the 1990s were carefully towing the line between opposing

⁸⁶ Virginia Board of Education, "Grade Eleven: United States History," *History and Social Sciences Standards of Learning: Secondary Courses* (Richmond, VA: Board of Education, 1995), p. 55.

affirmative action and minimizing the impact of raced-based discrimination.⁸⁷ Any mention of affirmative action is absent from the 2001 standards, which state that

the student will demonstrate knowledge of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s by a) identifying the importance of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the roles of Thurgood Marshall and Oliver Hill, and how Virginia responded; b) describing the importance of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the 1963 March on Washington, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.⁸⁸

The 2001 standards were greatly reduced from their 1995 standards, but they were more specific about what information needed to be covered. The Board of Education could have made these changes in response to the criticisms that were launched at the national history standards. Like the national standards, the 1995 Virginia standards did not mention historical figures. In 1999, the Board of Education released a teacher's resource guide that further outlined what information should be covered in each standard, including important figures, documents, definitions, and more. The 2001 standards, while shorter than the 1995 version, are more specific about who and what should be covered in each standard. More research needs to be done as to why exactly these changes were made and if the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act had any influence on these changes.

Conclusion

The election of George W. Bush to the presidency in 2000 led to yet another round of education reform. In 2002, Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act into law after it passed through Congress with overwhelming bipartisan support the prior year. The act was a response to

⁸⁷ Helen Dewar, "Republicans Mix Signals on Affirmative Action: Strain Emerge as Lawmakers Wrestle With Hard Choices Involved in Rewriting Laws," *Washington Post*, December 14, 1997, p. A18.

⁸⁸ Virginia Board of Education, "Virginia and United States History," *History and Social Science Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools* (Richmond, VA: Board of Education, 2001), p. 40.

long running fears that the United States' education system was not competitive internationally (a rationale that has been used since the Cold War). No Child Left Behind increased the federal government's role in education policy and accountability in schools, requiring states to “test students in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school.”⁸⁹ The law also required states to bring all students up to the “proficient level” by the 2013-14 school year. States, however, were able to maintain control over education by developing their own standards, setting their own goals, and deciding what proficiency looked like. Schools that failed to meet their yearly achievement goals would be subject to “increasingly serious sanctions,” which could ultimately result in state intervention: “states can choose to shut these schools down, turn them into charter schools, take them over, or use another, significant turnaround strategy.” These sanctions, however, had little to no effect on student achievement, as states “shied away from employing dramatic school turnaround strategies for perennially failing schools.”⁹⁰

No Child Left Behind was a rewrite of President Lyndon Johnson's Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which was first signed into law in 1965 and meant to ensure quality and equality in American schools. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was revised and renewed every few years. Bush renamed the act No Child Left Behind as part of his reform effort, but it was highly unpopular among teachers and parents because of its focus on standardized testing. Critics claimed that the focus on reading and math led to a narrowing of the curriculum, believing that science, social studies, and foreign language were sidelined in favor of reading and math.

⁸⁹ Alyson Klein, “No Child Left Behind: An Overview,” *Education Week*, April 11, 2015, sec. Every Student Succeeds Act. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/no-child-left-behind-an-overview/2015/04>.

⁹⁰ Klein, “No Child Left Behind: An Overview.”

The focus on accountability through standardized testing is reminiscent of Virginia's Standards of Learning initiative, which remains in place to this day. This comparison, however, should not be taken as a necessarily good thing. While test scores and accountability increased, George Allen's reform started with the intention to make public school look bad. Allen favored private education and wanted a reason to increase support for charter schools and reduce funding for public education. The sanctions listed in No Child Left Behind reflect a similar line of thinking: if public schools fail, states can close those and turn them into charter schools. While few, if any, states took such drastic measures, the mechanisms existed as a way to favor conservative control over education.

Conservatives lobbied the criticisms of "permissive sex-education" and "politically correct curriculum" against Clinton's national education reform efforts, despite supporting similar policies under George H. W. Bush, because they disagreed with Clinton's politics. Education reform during the Culture Wars was less about what was best for students across the United States and more about controlling a certain vision of America. Conservative politicians, especially, wanted to pass on the values they believed the ideal American citizen possessed. Family life and history education became battlegrounds in Virginia because those are the two areas of education where a child is most likely to encounter those values outside the home.