

HISTORY TEACHERS VIEW THEIR PROFESSION:
A CLOSE LOOK AT KANSAS

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History continues to occupy a "special" place in the secondary curriculum. It still remains the main ingredient of all social studies offerings, and very few history teachers are suffering from "burnout." These are two of the more than 2000 pieces of information gleaned from a major study recently completed on Kansas secondary history teachers.¹ The study set out to answer who teaches history, what are the curriculum concerns, and what are the future prospects and problems. Specifically, we wanted to know what is the state of the history profession.

The chances are greater than 80% that the history teacher is male. He is also 35 years old, with eleven years of teaching experience. He teaches American history at the eleventh grade level in a school with 300 or fewer students and has five classes each day. While the typical history teacher majored in history, many of his fellow history colleagues did not (45%). Our composite history teacher does not hold a Master's degree and is not actively pursuing graduate work toward one--a fact we found quite disturbing. The prototype of our study also is likely to have graduated from a Kansas college or university (79%) and demonstrated about equal odds at working a few hours in non-school related employment to supplement his income (48%). His first reading preference is a newsmagazine followed closely by non-fiction books. His first television preference is newsprograms with sporting events ranking second. Kansas may be a part of H.L. Mencken's "Bible Belt," but only three percent of our surveyees watch religious television programming. We assume that in this regard Kansas history teachers are more typical of history teachers nationally than they are of their fellow Kansans.

Most educators know that there is a history-coaching connection. Our study shed interesting light on this topic. Fifteen percent of the history teachers in our study majored in physical education, and when vacancies are advertised with placement offices in our state, a majority list coaching first, history teacher second in order of priority. Nearly two-thirds of our respondents said the ability to coach plays a larger role in the hiring of history teachers than in the hiring of other teachers. In contrast, a recent Iowa study found that this was no longer the case in that state. Furthermore, in our study, 71% cited coaching as a contract consideration when first hired--particularly at the smaller schools. Even though some respondents believed that deemphasis on coaching would strengthen the history program in their schools, most (60%) thought that coaches should be full-time teachers and not auxiliary staff members. Emotion ran rampant on this issue. Some teachers made a case for abolishing all competitive sports, while some believed we were biased (against sports) by even bringing forth the issue in our study. If our study is correct, a history teacher wanting out of coaching should get a graduate degree in history. Even Marv Levy, ex-head coach of the Kansas City Chiefs (MA in History from Harvard), subscribed to this insurance policy. Conversely, a graduate degree in physical education insures coaching for a history teacher.

The history-coaching connection also helps to explain why the profession is male dominated. One woman history teacher mentioned matter-of-factly that even though she is considered an excellent history teacher, she is told each time there is a coaching position open at her school that she may be shifted to the English department. The study shows that women have a much better chance of teaching history in the large public schools in urban areas.

An alarming finding for us in today's ever-shrinking world was that world history offerings are being cut back and have been completely eliminated in some schools. We asked our respondents if they believed world history is more valuable than other social studies courses such as sociology, psychology, economics, and geography. A plurality of them said no it is not. Equally disturbing is the fact that only nine percent of the history teachers stated that state or local history was taught in their schools.

An apparent advantage of teaching history in a Kansas secondary school is class size. Many history teachers have no more than fifteen students in each class. Could this account for the fact that only six percent of our respondents considered "burnout" as a serious reason for leaving the profession? We believe that it partially does. Class size may be a critical factor in teacher stress. However, before packing and moving to Kansas for a teaching position in history, one should realize that a plurality of our respondents have at least three different history and social studies preparations.

A majority of our surveyees believe that history is distinct from the social studies. Twenty years of the "new social studies" has not convinced many Kansas history teachers that their discipline is merely equal. Strangely enough, these history teachers are willing to concede that American Government may be equally valuable in the high school curriculum. We are pleased to report that 72% of our respondents indicated a need to teach multicultural considerations in history classes. Multicultural education appears to make good sense and is being prompted convincingly by many national organizations.

For the first time that we can remember, history teachers are reporting adequate library resources to support their endeavors, and we also found that for the first time, teacher-led discussions have become the predominant strategy, replacing lecture. While textbooks are the victims of increased criticism, our history teachers are sticking with traditional texts, such as Rise of the American Nation by Todd and Curti.

Clearly, there are many things right with the teaching of history in our secondary schools. Nevertheless, we would like to see more history teachers interested in their own professional development and greater emphasis on global education in light of the cutbacks in world history. We would also like to have studies similar to ours replicated in other states as a basis of comparison.²

NOTES

¹These conclusions are based on a stratified random sampling of 132 (76%) returned mailed questionnaires which were subjected to an SPSS computer software program analysis.

²The authors will provide interested readers with a copy of the full research report and give assistance to individuals wishing to conduct their own profile survey. Contact Miller and Wilson at Fort Hays State University, Hays, KS 67601-4099.

From the Editor: This survey of history teachers in Kansas presents an interesting look at secondary history teachers in only one of the fifty states. If similar research is being done on other states or regions, TEACHING HISTORY would be interested in sharing that information with its readers.

Other "research notes" that could be reviewed for possible publication in TEACHING HISTORY should be sent to the Editor, Stephen Kneeshaw.