

## RESEARCH NOTE

### HISTORY IN GEORGIA SCHOOLS A REPORT ON THE ROLE OF HISTORY IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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The age of "high tech" has taken its toll on the humanities in general and history in particular. Study of the old masters, whether in the arts, literature, or music, has gradually assumed a status of secondary importance to "hands on" computer experience. Nevertheless, it has now become increasingly apparent that too much emphasis on keyboarding (typing in the good old days) has not only failed to confer literary grace upon its practitioners but also may have retarded the development of rudimentary reading and writing skills. In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching both published findings and recommendations for educational reform, particularly at the secondary level. Meanwhile, responding to a steady decline in Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores and basic literary levels, Georgia Governor Joe Frank Harris appointed his own educational review commission to examine public education in Georgia.

The purpose of this project was to assess the extent to which the policies and practices of the Georgia State Board of Education and its affiliated local school districts conformed to the recommendations of the aforementioned commissions. The assessment involved three primary areas: (1) curriculum requirements on the state and local level; (2) teacher certification requirements; and (3) teaching assignments and the classroom situation. Besides examining published curriculum and certification requirements, a survey of Georgia high school history teachers was conducted in an effort to develop a profile of the Georgia history teacher, her educational qualifications, teaching methods, classroom and extracurricular assignments, and teaching priorities related to improvement of instruction. The study produced the following findings and recommendations.

#### FINDINGS

A. Social Studies Requirements: State and local curriculum requirements in the social studies area are, for the most part, in line with the recommendations of both the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The social studies requirements included in the Georgia Core Curriculum stipulating three years of social studies education conform closely to the recommendations of the latter group. Moreover, the requirement that one of the three Carnegie units in the social studies must be in world studies deserves special commendation.

In a core-related area stressed by the authors of the Carnegie Foundation study, greater emphasis on English and writing, Georgia schools did not measure up as well. History is a natural subject in which to emphasize writing. As is, however, the large student load dictates against essay examinations and the assignment of book reports, term and research papers, and other written work.

B. Teacher Certification: Georgia policies and practices in the area of teacher education and certification vary significantly from the findings and recommendations of state and national education study groups. The most serious problem in this respect is the growing popularity among school administrators of broad field social science certification. This involves a

minimum of seventy-five quarter hours in four social science areas. The area of concentration consists of thirty quarter hours, half of which must be in upper division courses. The remaining forty-five hours are divided into three areas of fifteen quarter hours each. Under this program, then, a social science major would be qualified to teach history in Georgia high schools with as few as fifteen quarter hours credit in history, all of which could be taken at the lower division level.

Both the National Commission on Excellence in Education and the Carnegie Foundation study emphasized the need for teachers to major in their subject area. Moreover, the authors of "The Making of a Teacher," issued by the National Center for Education Information, a private institution of education research, was particularly critical of education majors. The certification process should be designed to encourage the appointment of the most qualified people possible. It sometimes has had the opposite result. This is not to imply that professional education courses are without value, but it does relate to the issue of emphasis and balance in educational requirements. Any certification process that discourages a teacher from earning an undergraduate or graduate degree in his or her primary teaching field is a prescription for mediocrity.

C. The Teacher and the Classroom: Teacher survey results revealed that Georgia high school history teachers are long-time state residents who matriculated at one of the smaller Georgia or neighboring state colleges; only a tiny percentage earned degrees outside of the South. Approximately half of these teachers earned undergraduate degrees in history, and an even smaller percentage are pursuing graduate degrees in history. The vast majority of these teachers, however, either have or are working toward a graduate degree, usually in education. Moreover, they are at an age, averaging about forty, at which such desirable qualities as experience, vigor, and enthusiasm are combined.

Georgia high school history teachers, who met classes averaging 30 students each, used a combination of lectures and discussion as their primary method of classroom instruction. Objective tests were the most common form of examination. The failure to utilize essay questions is, of course, a major weakness in history instruction at the secondary level, but, realistically, it can only be altered through a reduced student load and a greater commitment on the part of teachers to essay-type examinations. Conversely, almost all of the state's history teachers used one or more special assignments to complement regular classroom instruction. Short research papers were the most common, followed by written book reviews and term papers in that order. Other than their large student load, teachers identified the following problems most frequently in discussing obstacles to teaching effectiveness: extracurricular activity assignments, excessive paperwork, classroom interruptions, the political environment within the school, student absenteeism, and working students who did not complete homework assignments and appeared listless during the school day.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The size of classes and the teaching loads of secondary school history teachers should be reduced.
2. Encourage and reward excellence in teaching by stressing the primary function of academic instruction.

3. Establish a merit system to reward the most effective performance by teachers.
4. The broad-fields certification program in social studies should be modified considerably so that teachers of history can complete a major in history.
5. The number of education courses required for secondary school teachers should be reduced.
6. A plan to attract more of the brighter students to the teaching of history and the other social studies should be devised.
7. Encourage close collaboration with professional historians or with social scientists in the fields of secondary school instruction.
8. Conduct further studies of the status of secondary school history and other social studies programs.

CONCLUSION

History must play a vital role in the education of youth about our past. Only through an enlightened citizenry can an open and free society thrive. History is a crucial avenue to such enlightenment. But it must be history as a critical inquiry into the past in order to arrive at the closest approximation of the truth about the development of our nation and of civilization at large. Hence, history in the schools must be taught well, and it must be taught by teachers who are informed, trained in the discipline, and aware of the nature and complexity of critical inquiry. Tolerance, understanding, appreciation, and open-mindedness result from the critical study of the past, and these are the foundation blocks of enlightenment. Certainly, other disciplines unquestionably add to our knowledge of humankind in societies, but only history can provide a context for the whole and offer a broad picture of the changes and continuities that characterize communities, regions, nations, and civilizations over time. A good sense of history is essential to the welfare of the nation and its citizens. Certainly history is not the only subject of significance in education, but the teaching of history is indeed important; because it is important, it must be lifted from a general state of poor health to a condition of vigor that enriches society at large. The preceding recommendations should imbue the teaching of history in Georgia once again with the vigor necessary to enhance our knowledge, our appreciation, and our understanding of how the world and its components have come to be what they are.