

BACKGROUND

THE UNITED STATES HISTORY CURRICULUM OF THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA



NORTH AMERICAN VALUES INSTITUTE

Executive Summary

The School District of Philadelphia’s United States History curriculum prioritizes activism and identity politics over comprehensive history education. The curriculum frames American history primarily through the lens of oppression, embedding critical theory and entirely omitting our nation’s founding events and principles. As a result, the curriculum deprives students of a full understanding of the nation’s complexities and undermines their ability to engage thoughtfully in academic and civic life.

Introduction

Philadelphia’s United States History curriculum is built on ideological frameworks. Developed under the leadership of [Ismael Jimenez](#), Director of Social Studies Curriculum and an activist with [radical](#) views [influenced](#) by critical theory, the course trains students to interpret American history primarily through the lenses of oppression and identity. Foundational knowledge, historical accuracy, and context are replaced with ideology and activism. This report shows how the curriculum distorts historical events, elevates ideology over scholarship, and funnels students toward predetermined conclusions. The curriculum deprives students of a coherent and meaningful understanding of their nation’s past at a time when academic outcomes in Philadelphia remain alarmingly low.

Missing Foundations in United States History

A full understanding of United States history begins with the nation’s founding, where the revolutionary ideals of liberty, self-government, and individual rights first emerged. This United States history curriculum, however, entirely omits this essential foundation. There is no study of the Revolutionary War, the Constitution, or the birth of America’s democracy. Instead, students are introduced to the nation’s story with the Civil War. By bypassing the founding, the curriculum severs the study of American history from the core principles that give it meaning. Without this context, the past is reduced to a series of disconnected struggles that are unmoored from the foundational ideas that shaped them.

Identity over History

The curriculum begins the year by focusing on identity, asking students, “Who am I, Who is America?” in order to center personal and national identity as the starting point

Educational Outcomes in Philadelphia

- 35% of students scored Proficient or Advanced in English Language Arts.
- 20% of students scored Proficient or Advanced in math.
- 66% of students attended 90% or more of enrolled days.

[The School District of Philadelphia, School Profiles 2023-2024](#)

for studying history. While reflection on identity can help students connect personally to history, the curriculum's heavy emphasis on identity risks overshadowing the study of historical events themselves. Unit 1, titled 'Civil War Review,' states:

"students will embark on a comprehensive exploration of the causes and consequences of the Civil War, framed within the context of identity. This unit's primary objective is to dissect how historical events have left an indelible mark on both individual and collective identities... [S]tudents will not only gain a deeper insight into the past but will also be encouraged to introspect and reflect upon their own identities... The overarching goals of this unit include an exploration of the profound impact of history on personal and national identities, with a particular focus on the role of racial attitudes in shaping America's identity."

— From the SDP U.S. History Curriculum

Assignments in this unit prioritize identity over historical understanding. In the first unit, students must conduct an "[a]nalysis of personal identity through analysis of personal history, experiences, culture, and beliefs." An "Identity Infographics" assignment involves "[t]he creation of two infographics that represent 4-6 components of individual student identities and 4-6 components of America's identity up to 1865." To complete this assignment, students "create symbols, images, phrases, etc. that represent the various components of identity and will decide what percentage of their identity ... the components they've chosen represent."

Throughout the course, the word "identity" is mentioned 70 times. The guiding question of the course asks students: "Based on her history, what is America's identity?" Students are guided to answer with the following bullet points:

- Critical analysis of American Identity in the late 20th century.
- Unbalanced economic growth
- Continuance of racism and its lingering impact (1619 Project)
- Assessing notions of American identity ("American Dream," "Liberty and Justice for All," "American Exceptionalism," "Greatest Nation" etc.) in the late 20th and early 21st century

— From the SDP U.S. History Curriculum

These bullet points embed assumptions that are drawn from an activist framework. They steer students toward predetermined answers rather than fostering independent inquiry or conclusions.

Overthrowing Capitalism

The focus on identity quickly merges with an ideological interpretation of American history. A unit on the Gilded Age and Progressivism focuses on oppression and economic exploitation with subtopics including "Immigration and Exploitation of Labor," "Social Darwinism," and "Scientific Racism and Exploitative Capitalism."

The unit then prompts students to ask:

1. What do you need to overthrow oppression?
2. What roles do groups and individuals play in changing the social, political, cultural, and economic trajectory of American History?

3. What role do governmental policies play in fundamentally shaping societies?
4. What are the consequences of political, cultural, and social conflict and compromise in American society?
5. What are/have been the benefits and drawbacks of Capitalism on American life?

— From the SDP U.S. History Curriculum

Rather than presenting a balanced view of the Gilded Age as a complex era of industrialization, innovation, and transformation, as well as exploitation, the curriculum presents industrial expansion primarily as a story of “greed and oppression,” reinforced by terms like “exploitative economic structures.” The Director of Social Studies Curriculum, Ismael Jimenez, publicly aligns himself with similar radical critiques of capitalism, for example, by quoting Assata Shakur, an [FBI Most Wanted](#) terrorist and convicted cop killer who fled to Cuba.

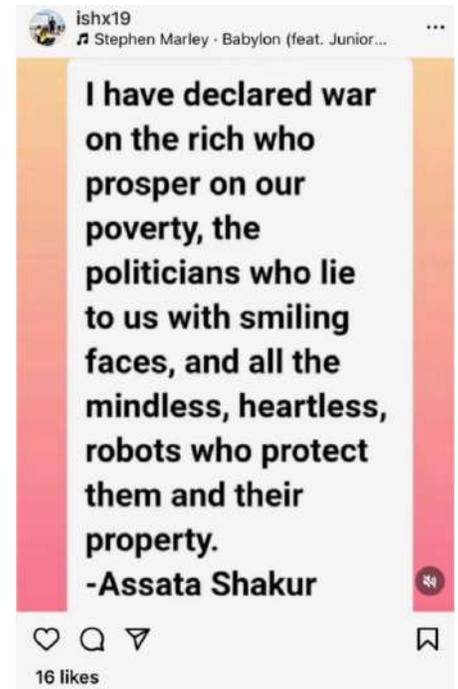
Viewing Foreign Policy through a Single Lens

The curriculum’s treatment of American foreign policy, wartime decisions, and postwar developments continues to frame history narrowly through race and oppression. A unit on U.S. foreign policy begins with the question, “What role does race and racism play in influencing the development of American Foreign Policy?” Rather than inviting students to form their own judgments, it immediately answers its own question: “Race and racism have historically played a significant role in shaping American foreign policy.”

In this unit, geopolitical considerations such as historical alliances, economic interests, and regional stability are acknowledged but framed primarily as instruments of oppression and exclusion:

“The pursuit of liberty and justice for all has evoked a wide array of political, social, and cultural responses throughout history. These responses have ignited movements, policy changes, and ongoing debates, fundamentally impacting societies and the global human rights discourse. Geopolitical considerations play a pivotal role in the determination of the legitimacy of independence movements. The recognition such movements is influenced by factors like historical ties, economic interests, regional stability, and international alliances.”

– From the SDP U.S. History Curriculum



This same pattern emerges in a unit on World War II, which assigns an essay asking students to take a position on why the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. Rather than allowing them to form their own opinion and arguments about a complex moment in history, they are limited to only three narrowly framed choices:

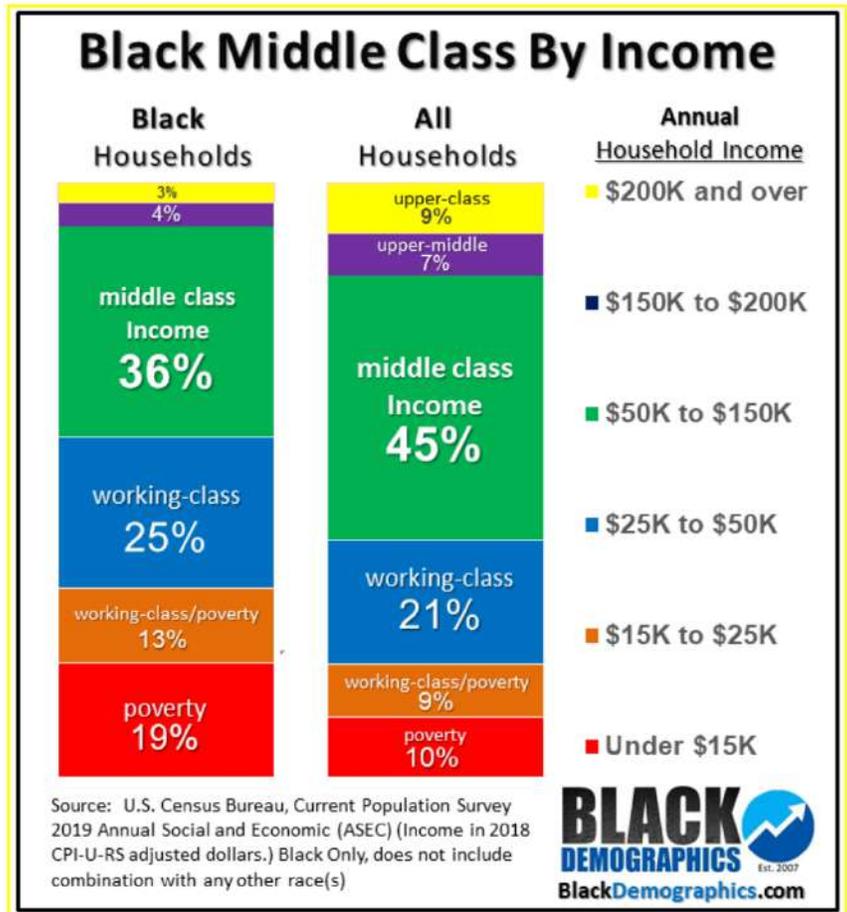
- Bombs were dropped to send message to Soviet Union (political)
- Bombs were dropped on Japan and not Europe due to racism (social)
- Bombs were dropped due to Japan’s unwillingness to surrender (military)

— From the SDP U.S. History Curriculum

Rather than encouraging students to explore full considerations of the decision—including military strategy, projected casualties, and wartime alliances—the curriculum funnels students into simplified, identity-driven interpretations through the lens of race. Important historical context is omitted, such as the fact that the [Manhattan Project](#) was originally launched to counter Nazi Germany’s atomic program. Without this background, students are left with a distorted view of the use of the atomic bomb, promoting cynicism rather than understanding.

A follow-up unit on “Post War American Identity” is similarly simplistic in its emphasis on racism. It asks students to consider, “What is white flight and how did it contribute to the rapid growth of suburbs?” and “How did the boom of the automobile and the creation of roads and highway systems contribute to white upper class mobility while at the same time disrupt black and brown communities?” The curriculum frames suburban expansion primarily as a tool of exclusion and economic injustice, rather than a broader historical phenomenon shaped by multiple economic, cultural, and demographic factors.

The portrayal of America’s middle class reinforces racism as the primary lens through which to view American history. It aims to provide students with “an examination of the concept related to middle-class identity and mythology of whiteness tied to normalcy of status quo economics.” It seems to accuse “elites” of equating African American ideals with “interests associated with Communism.” In addition, it states that “American elites utilized American mythology associated with equality and fairness for a propaganda campaign around image against the Soviet Union.”



The final unit of the course, “American identity leading into the 21st Century” returns to the class’s essential question, “Based on her history, what is America’s identity?” Throughout the course, students have been led to conclude that America’s fundamental identity is rooted in racism and oppression. The curriculum cites the [widely criticized and debunked](#) 1619 project, as it asks students to develop a final thesis statement and research paper based on this perspective. The course concludes with the Reagan era, omitting decades of subsequent progress, racial and otherwise.

Conclusion

Philadelphia’s U.S. History curriculum denies students a full understanding of the nation’s history. In place of a comprehensive education, students are left with a narrow framework that reduces complex events to a single lens of oppression. They lose the opportunity to grapple with founding ideals, to understand the evolution of American democracy, and to see both the nation’s failures and its progress. Without a foundation in historical knowledge and critical inquiry, students are deprived of the tools they need to think independently, participate meaningfully in civic life, and imagine their own place in the American story.