

Good day and hello,

I wish to present written testimony in support of Senate Bill 702 that legislators may find helpful in their deliberations.

I am a public school teacher in Springfield, Oregon with twenty-seven years of teaching experience. I am also an eyewitness to what has been going on with regard to social sciences education in our state. I have had the opportunity to see this in Springfield on two different levels: as a English Language Arts/Social Studies teacher in eighth grade and as a fifth grade teacher who teaches “all” subjects.

When I began teaching ELA and Social Studies to eighth graders in 2008, I was quite surprised by how little my students knew at the start of each year. My teaching partners and I would spend quite a bit of time in September assessing what the kids knew, and it was startling. One of our pretests involved answering forty-five questions taken from the U.S. Naturalization test that addressed content from the fifth grade social science standards. Most students would only be able to correctly answer five to ten of the questions (out of forty-five.) Other probing via discussion and pretests showed us how little they knew. Typically, very few of the students knew anything at all about democracy or the U. S. Constitution or the Declaration of Independence. Most students could not identify more than five to ten states on a map, and usually only a handful could name Salem as the capital of Oregon. It was rare to have students who could describe the structure of our government with its three branches. It was disturbing and fairly depressing to see how little the kids knew considering that we were asking them about things they should have learned just three years earlier in elementary school.

As a result, my eighth grade teaching partners and I would spend the bulk of the year focusing on content from the fifth grade social sciences standards. By the end of the year, our students typically were able to excel on the assessments on which they had done so poorly at the start of the year. While we teachers were proud of the growth our kids had made, we knew that we had not done enough to prepare them for high school, because our time and energy had been on making sure the kids had mastered material they should have learned as fifth graders.

Four years ago, I made a move to teach fifth grade at an elementary school within the same district. Throughout my years as a middle school teacher I had been curious as to why my students would arrive so unprepared, and this move would allow me to do something about it. Or so I thought.

I was completely shocked by how elementary school had changed since I had worked as an elementary teacher two decades prior. My new school had a master schedule created by the principal and approved by district leadership which staff were to follow to the minute. This schedule dictated that the vast majority of the day was dedicated to reading and math instruction exclusively. I soon learned that the rationale behind this schedule was to focus as much time and energy as possible on preparing students for the battery of standardized tests that they would be taking in the spring. Subjects were not integrated (as they had been in

middle school), and we were strongly discouraged from integrating science with math or history with reading and writing.

There are two more things about this district-approved master schedule you should know. First, the master schedule said that each day there was a thirty-minute chunk of time in which the teacher could choose to teach either science or physical education. However, state law already mandates that elementary students **MUST** participate in thirty minutes of moderate to strenuous physical activity each day. This means that if a teacher were following the law, then her students would never receive any science instruction at all. To teach science meant that you were flouting the law, and so that is what I did, since it is important that children receive instruction in science as well as exercise.

The second thing you should know is that social studies was nowhere on the master schedule. This meant that to teach history and civics was a violation of the district-approved school master schedule, and such violations could be interpreted as insubordination. I chose to make time each week to sneak in some social studies anyway as a few of the other veteran teachers did. In time, I came to see that my decision made me a target for attack by the principal, because I told him that I felt it was my duty to address social studies standards in spite of the schedule. His subsequent mistreatment of me resulted in my request for a transfer away from this school after teaching there for three years.

Returning to teach in an elementary school answered my question as to why my former eighth grade students were so completely unprepared to learn history and civics. Elementary teachers had been following the rules and obeying school and district administrators, and no one was supposed to be addressing social science standards with the kids. This awful situation continues to this day during distance learning. In my current position teaching elementary school students, reading and math are the only academic subjects on the school's master schedule.

I strongly recommend that you support SB 702 as a first step in pushing back against what is currently happening in our schools. It is wrong that district administrators can go unchallenged in their efforts to remove history and civics education (as well as science, art, music, etc.) from our schools. Something needs to be done now as our fragile democracy depends on it.

Sincerely,

Mikell Harshbarger  
Eugene, Oregon