

A CASE STUDY:
MANDATING A COURSE IN
AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

The Philadelphia School Reform Commission made a landmark decision requiring all students to take an African American History course in order to graduate from high school. Beginning with September's freshman class, this year long course will join U.S. History, world history and geography as one of the 23.5 units required for high school graduation.

“Those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history.”

Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson

Carter G. Woodson, known as the “Father of Black History,” strongly believed that Blacks should be proud of their heritage and that other Americans should also understand it. Dr. Woodson also hoped that it would be unnecessary in the future to have a Black History Week and that all Americans would ultimately recognize the contributions of Black Americans as a legitimate and integral part of American history. Although blacks have been in America at least since colonial times, it was not until the 20th century that they gained a respectable presence in the history books. Is Black history Month enough? Although Americans recognized African American history since 1926, black history had barely begun to be studied. In 1926, during the Harlem Renaissance,

Dr. Carter Woodson launched a movement to observe black history. Carter felt an annual celebration during the month of February was appropriate since both Frederick Douglass and President Abraham Lincoln were born in that month. First it was called “Negro History Week,” and then in the 1960’s “Black History Month,” to accommodate the many outstanding achievements of African Americans to the fields of science, literature and the arts. Although some attention has been paid to introducing some African American history into the schools, some evidence indicates that it was not enough. Darlene Clark Hine, a history professor at Northwestern University, states, “This is the irony: Some of my students coming from suburban schools, white students coming from the academies and prep schools and Advanced Placement courses in their high schools, come into my classroom, and many of them will know more African-American history than students coming into the classroom who were trained or educated in the inner city, where the majority of students were black.” A former student supports this by stating, “If I had one problem it would be that in my 13 years of schooling, too much time was spent on European history. Sure, that stuff’s important, but I can honestly say “African” history is something that was never touched upon.” The absence of African history has caused some distortion in the identity of Egypt as an African country. Some believe, “Egypt may be on the continent of Africa, but Egyptians were not Africans.” Others embrace the notion that although the Egyptians depicted themselves as racially separate from the Semetic peoples to their north and the black Africans to their south in their pictograms, there is no doubt that they were African and darker than the Semetic people of Judah and Arabia. Also, they were ruled by black Africans, from the first kings to later dynasties, the line of the pharaohs was African.

In adopting the Multi-Cultural Cross-Cutting Competency, the school District of Philadelphia has stated that cross-cultural understanding “is indispensable” if we are to succeed in creating the culturally inclusive educational environment necessary for all of our students to thrive in today’s world and into the 21st century.

Since its inception in the seventeenth century, African Americans have been a vital part of the Philadelphia community. The Free African Society formed in 1787 was the first African-American beneficial society in the country. African Americans played prominent roles in the abolitionist movement, literary and social organizations. Schools and labor support guilds also flourished during this time. By the beginning of the 20th century, Philadelphia accounted for some of the most prominent leaders in the nation representing a wide array of disciplines. In the 1960’s Philadelphians played major roles in the Civil Rights Movement.

On November 17, 1967 over 3,500 African American high school students walked out of schools across the district in a protest. Among their demands were: the teaching of African-American history, the right to wear traditional African clothing in schools and changing some of the names of predominantly African-American high schools to honor African- American leaders. A rally of students and community leaders at the Board of Education resulted in a riot instigated by Police Commissioner Frank Rizzo and two busloads of uniformed policemen. David A. Horowitz, Deputy Superintendent for Instruction, then responded to an Ad Hoc Committee which met 14 months prior by issuing a directive on African and Afro-American History and Culture. It stated that “the policy of the School District of Philadelphia requires every school to provide a well-rounded program of African and Afro-American history and culture for

every child as an integral part of his total school experience.” A nine point strategy which included: staff development, curriculum reform, program planning, the identification of appropriate instructional materials and textbooks, and the initiation of courses for parents were implemented to insure that the Africana experience became a mandatory part of the school curriculum. Model curricula and a number of resource guides were generated. Over the next several years, general historical outlines were used in curriculum guides to infuse African history and the African experience from prehistoric times to the present and there were contributions by various local historians and researchers. In 1971, Frank Rizzo was elected as Mayor, made good on his campaign promise to force the resignation of Superintendent Mark R. Shedd, and stymied the efforts of the school board with regard to a number of initiatives, including the curriculum infusion of African-American Studies. It wasn’t until 23 years later, in 1994, that a news release was issued by the district which stated that the Board of Education and the Superintendent “reaffirmed their commitment to the inclusion of African and African-American history and culture as an integral part of its overall instructional program for every student, kindergarten through 12th grade.”

Now, forty years since the demonstrations and riots of the sixties, Philadelphia became the first state to mandate the teaching of African American history. At the center of this issue is Sandra Dungee Glenn. Ms. Glenn is a member of the Philadelphia School Reform Commission and was a driving force behind making the course mandatory. Community service and leadership has been a constant in Ms. Glenn’s career. With over 20 years of experience in public policy, electoral politics and community organizing, Ms Glenn is a strong supporter of the change in the high school graduation requirement. In

1978 Ms. Glenn graduated from Pennsylvania State University with a Bachelor of Science degree. Since then she has held many public positions including Chief of Staff to State Senator Chaka Fattah, Regional director of Pennsylvania Citizen Action and Associate Director with the Philadelphia Area Project on Occupational Safety and Health. Through her work with these and many other community organizations, Sandra Glenn became extremely interested in the education of the students in the Philadelphia community. In 1998 she became a significant organizer of the Pennsylvania Campaign for Public Education and served as co-convener at the conference. In March of 2000, Mayor John F. Street appointed Ms. Glenn to the nine member Board of Education for the School District of Philadelphia. Using her experience as a community organizer, Ms Glenn was then named to the then newly created School Reform Commission on January 14, 2002. On January 19 of 2005, Ms. Glenn was reappointed by Mayor Street for another 4-year term. Ms. Glenn is one of five commissioners that are committed to improving the quality of education of Philadelphia's public school students. Ms. Glenn has been a strong advocate to improve teacher quality, recruitment and retention. Ms Glenn has played a major role in the development of the Declaration of Education and curriculum reform in the Philadelphia School System.

“Too often, African-Americans are marginalized in American society,” said Sandra Dungee Glenn. “People’s views and understanding of who we are focus on us as descendents of slaves. It begins and ends there, giving us inferior status.” She also states that, “Given the history of this country and still given our problems of discrimination and racism, for all of our children to have a more accurate picture of history, a more complete picture of history, is important.”

Currently, the racial demographics of the Philadelphia school system are as follows: 65.5% Black, 14.5% Latino, 14.2 %White, 5.3% Asian, 0.2% Native American and, 0.3% other. This issue has sparked a lot of controversy both inside and outside of the educational setting and has many philosophical and political ramifications. Since two thirds of the population in Philadelphia is comprised of African Americans, the community has expressed their overwhelming desire to incorporate African American History into the school curriculum since the 1960's. As the columnist, Acel Moore of the Philadelphia Inquirer, wrote in the June 23, 2005 article concerning the implementation of the African American course into the curriculum, he expressed opposing views to State House Speaker John Perzel. Moore stated, "I salute those responsible for the decision to make Philadelphia city schools the first in the nation to teach African-American history." Whereas State House Speaker Perzel mentioned in a letter sent to school officials, the mandate to teach African- American history can not be justified due to the lack of interest among black students who were not significantly interested in learning about African-American history. Some people believe that African history doesn't exist, or if it does exists, it offers nothing to be proud of. In contrast, Acel Moore insulted the opinions of the nay sayers by stating "the irrational ignorance of some who oppose the teaching of the African American History course...insults the memory of those black scholars who, for centuries, struggled to have African American history taught in our institutions of learning."

Moore argued with Perzel who said most students would never go to Africa and the decision of the School Reform Commission (SRM) to incorporate African American history would create racial boundaries that would divide rather than unite students. The

founding principal of the republic is protecting the minorities from excesses of majority rules. Given the racial breakdown of Philadelphia, the majority of the students welcomed this new focus on African American history as a mandated course.

Nay sayers felt that this mandate was a step backwards. An African American history course would be divisive. Instead of being more inclusive, this was a step towards becoming more segregated. In the U.S. News June 22, 2005 article, House Speaker Perzel asked Pennsylvania legislators to reconsider the black history requirement. Perzel felt that the requirement was “unnecessary” because he “...would like the see them (high school students) master basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. Once we have that down pat...They should understand basic American history before we go into African American history.” Perzel urged that courses should be taught that focus on “many cultures” rather than one particular ethnic group. “Given the history of this country and still given our problems of discrimination and racism, for all of our children to have a more accurate picture of history, a more complete picture of history, is important,” said Commissioner Sandra Dungee Glenn, who is African American. Paul Vallas, the CEO of the School Reform Commission, adds, “This isn’t about being politically correct. It’s about being comprehensive,”

Since African American history is a mandated course, one argument was how to deal with the Jewish American history, Korean American history, etc. “There are other races in this city,” said Miriam Foltz, president of the Home and School Association at Baldi Middle School. “There are other cultures that will be offended by this. How can you just mandate a course like this?” African American history is the core and other histories are studied as well. In contrast to these ideas, Acel Moore of *Philly.com* retorted,

“Including African American history in the public school curriculum will teach all students about the contribution African Americans made to the building, defense and development of all aspects of American culture- despite 246 years of enslavement followed by another 100 years or more of overt racial discrimination.

Some felt that African American history, properly conceived and taught, is a legitimate course; but, forcing it as a mandatory course, rather than allowing it as an elective course, is a mistake. In support of this mandate, the School Reform Commission (SRC) unanimously decided to offer this course for all high school students in order to meet graduation requirements. Paul Vallas, the district’s Chief Executive Officer, stated that the new mandate is part of a comprehensive curriculum aimed at addressing the lack of African history in previous scope and sequence. The district is not excluding the heritage of other cultures and is amenable to the development of additional courses that specifically focus on their ethnic background.

Another next hurdle was establishing a curriculum. The curriculum writer, Molefi Kete Asante, is a controversial individual because he is viewed as an ethnocentric scholar by some and a militant by others. The person most responsible for developing the discipline at the graduate level is Molefi Kete Asante of Temple University. According to the Association for Nubian Kemetic Heritage, he has clearly been the champion of the idea of black studies as a discipline, not simply an aggregation of courses about Africa and African Americans. The Chronicle of Higher Education indicates that he has done more than anyone to create a theoretical base for the discipline of black studies. In one sense, according to Dr. Ama Mazana of Temple University, “He is like the legendary Imhotep of ancient Africa, a scholar who influences many fields.” Asante stated, “Much

of what we call education today is nothing more than the gathering and regurgitation of European heroics and triumphalism. Education must be more than that if our children are to gain sanity. My argument...is that Afrocentricity, as the acceptance of African agency, is basic to the progress of education.” According to the Philadelphia Inquirer, Asante is an outspoken fellow who compares the Iraq War to Hitler’s invasion of Poland and opposes African history being taught by white professors and teachers. He likens it to Nazis teaching Holocaust history.

Trying to find a suitable text that the Commission could reach consensus on was an issue until July 21, 2005. In the beginning they didn’t want to use a text, but follow a course outline. It was decided that the textbook for the course is The African American Odyssey by Darline Hine. The Return to Glory book was discussed as one of many other resources for the course.

The eyes of the nation will be on Philadelphia as it implements this initiative. The city of Philadelphia provided a temporary solution which only manifested other issues of concern. Discussing the issue leads the researcher to discover problems behind problems. Some of the patterns, themes and discrepancies may have far fetching effects on Philadelphia as well as the rest of the country. Further thought may lead to changing one’s position as one attempts to address the issues. The paradox continues.

Study Questions

- What are the feelings regarding the importance of African American History in the Social Studies curriculum?
- How will all students benefit from studies linked to heritage?
- What role do various stakeholders hold in establishing the curriculum and how does a scholar, such as Asante, influence the adoption of the curriculum?
- Which highlights in African American History do you feel are important to include in a course curriculum and what criteria should be used to adopt the text?
- What is the paradox that exists as a result of mandating a course in African American History?

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