**Do Core Democratic Values Belong in Schools?**

By [**Nancy Flanagan**](https://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teacher_in_a_strange_land/) on June 15, 2018 9:35 PM

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Several years ago, my school district brought in a Big Famous Ed-Presenter to do an August workshop on lesson design. Because she was expensive, surrounding districts were invited to send interested teachers, those who wanted to learn how to craft [**engaging lessons and units with aligned performance assessments and instructional strategies.**](https://www.ascd.org/research-a-topic/understanding-by-design-resources.aspx) This was pre-Common Core, but all the teachers would be creating curriculum using the MI Grade Level Content Expectations.

Once we had been seated in rounds by subject area, the presenter asked us to come up with a common, overarching topic to turn into age-appropriate instructional sequences. We at the humanities table quickly settled on '[**Core Democratic Values' which were part of the MI standards**](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/hal_mhc_mhm_corevalues-documents-pg4-5_76508_7.pdf). We then went around the room sharing our chosen topics.

The presenter held up a hand when she heard from our table. No—you've misunderstood, she said. I meant something like "Westward Expansion" or "Industrial Revolution"—a topic that's a key concept in your state Social Studies standards. We all believe in core values, of course, but this is about disciplinary content.

All the K-12 teachers in the room hastened to assure her that Core Democratic Values were indeed a key topic in the state standards, pulling up [**documents**](https://www.learningtogive.org/sites/default/files/handouts/Core_Democratic_Defined.pdf) ([**and other published units**](http://www.macomb.k12.mi.us/cc/cdv/cdv.htm)) to prove it. The presenter conceded, saying that she did this work all over the country and had not yet encountered such a broad concept—open to a range of interpretation and uses in instructional practice—anywhere in the country.

It was a point of pride, really, having these core democratic values as an anchor in the Mitten State standards.

Here's the official definition: *Core democratic values are the fundamental beliefs and Constitutional principles of American society, which unite all Americans. These values are expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution and other significant documents, speeches and writings of the nation.*

And here's a list of those identified values**: Life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, justice, the common good, equality, truth, diversity, popular sovereignty and patriotism**.  Things we all agree on, right?

We are now living in different times, fellow citizens. In the most recent (legislatively led) overhaul of the MI Social Studies standards, the [**core democratic values have been altered, deleted and/or renamed**](https://www.bridgemi.com/talent-education/history-gets-conservative-twist-michigan-social-studies-standards).

*References to gay rights, Roe v. Wade, climate change and "core democratic values" have been stripped from Michigan's new proposed social studies standards, and the historic role of the NAACP downplayed, through the influence of Republican state Sen. Patrick Colbeck and a cadre of conservatives who helped rewrite the standards for public school students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

"They had this term in there called 'core democratic values,'" Colbeck said. "I said, 'Whatever we come up with has to be politically neutral, and it has to be accurate.' I said, 'First of all, core democratic values (is) not politically neutral.' I'm not proposing core republican values, either."*

This isn't only about confusion between 'Democratic'—the party—vs. 'democratic' (the time-honored. foundational principle of our government), although that's the first thing that comes to mind. Check the [**comments in the linked article,**](https://www.bridgemi.com/talent-education/history-gets-conservative-twist-michigan-social-studies-standards) which start with that point and devolve into arguments about whether this nation is a republic, a democracy or an oligarchy.

In fact, reading the article and comments would be a great classroom exercise for older students. The [**essential question**](https://www.ascd.org/publications/books/109004/chapters/What-Makes-a-Question-Essential%EF%BF%BD.aspx) would be something like: *Read and discuss the diversity of opinions shared here, in a*[***representative democracy with a free press.***](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/05/13/is-the-united-states-of-america-a-republic-or-a-democracy/?utm_term=.e99377efa12c)*Who should determine what students learn in a public school?*

When you look at the list of what's been stripped from the standards, however, you see the [**folks in charge of rewriting curriculum standards are bent on changing a whole array of critical ideas**](https://www.senatorpatrickcolbeck.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/New-Standards-Review-Table.pdf), not merely flipping a word or two. This is about redefining concepts like equality, diversity, justice, the common good—and truth. 'Civil rights,' for example:

*A high school standard about the expansion of civil rights and liberties for minority groups cut references to individual groups, including immigrants, people with disabilities and gays and lesbians. The new proposal includes teaching "how the expansion of rights for some groups can be viewed as an infringement of rights and freedoms of others." Colbeck told Bridge he added that phrase.*

Who's Patrick Colbeck? A state Senator who's running for governor.

The irony of all this? The argument over Social Studies standards is a perfect example of applying core democratic values to a civic issue. Everyone gets their say in a representative democracy, then those who have been elected vote to set policy.

There are still hearings scheduled, and comments are being accepted. The [**State Board has weighed in**](https://www.bridgemi.com/talent-education/michigan-school-board-dems-we-will-block-conservative-social-studies-changes), as have [**Democrats in the state legislature.**](https://www.bridgemi.com/guest-commentary/michigan-sen-david-knezek-social-studies-changes-are-mind-numbing)  There will be lots more political wrangling, guaranteed.

The purpose of public education in America has never been clearly defined or widely accepted. It's a moving target. When I started teaching, in the 1970s, we thought our umbrella goal was building good citizens—providing basic knowledge and skills for the workplace and home and for some, a foundation for college. An understanding of how our government worked, and socialization, the opportunity to learn how to get along with others.

Clearly, most public school teachers aren't suggesting that not everyone deserves equity and civil rights, because granting those rights might impact someone else's beliefs or "freedoms."

I believe the original definition and explication of core democratic values Michigan schools adopted were spot-on, nested in that most traditional American ideal: a free, high-quality fully public education for every child. One that will prepare them for active, informed citizenship. To become good neighbors, stewards of our collective environment, smart consumers and engaged voters.

Aren't core democratic values just about the only thing worth fighting for?