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A Half-Century of Nebraska Education

Theodore Degner

The pioneers' journey across Nebraska was rough and ever changing, and the same can be said for the educating of Nebraskans on the state's history. Since the centennial of Nebraska statehood in 1967, changes to the education of Nebraska history has made students metaphorically traverse over both rough, hilly topics and flat, grassy lessons. These changes can be seen by examining sources from various Nebraska schools dating back to the 1960s. The variety and pace of Nebraska history curriculum change throughout these schools is wild and varied, with periods of little changes between the decades to overarching changes in only a few years. The examination of these sources will inform educators as to how the education of the state's history has changed, what it is in its current form, and what this will tell educators about the future of state history education.

Rewinding to the 1960s, there was much experimentation with changing the traditional school system in America and the curriculum. In David Tyack and William Tobin's article titled, *The "Grammar" of Schooling: Why Has it Been so Hard to Change?* they describe the 1960s as "a time of optimistic innovation when reforms in the grammar of schooling burst into public attention and then largely disappeared."¹ Bellevue Public Schools' 1965 curriculum guidelines for social studies reflect this optimism but not extensive innovation. Nebraska history at Bellevue, like elsewhere in the state, was and is taught in the fourth grade, and the scope for the program that deals with Nebraska is to, "Teach Nebraska History in greater depth..., Relate State

¹ Tobin, William, and Tyack, David, "The 'Grammar' of Schooling: Why Has It Been So Hard to Change?" *American Educational Research Journal* 31, No. 3 (1993): 455

History to the development of the United States, Investigate the contributions of great men and women of the State,” and to, “Relate current events to change in ways of living in our State today.”² This scope is vague; however, this vagueness was intentional to allow for teacher flexibility in writing lessons to accommodate for different learners, class sizes, and timing in the classroom. The “greater depth” part is of note, as it means Nebraska history was touched upon in previous grades, but it also does not give a goal for teaching Nebraska history. This obscurity is again to accommodate different classrooms with different levels of prior knowledge, ability to learn, and so on. The scope about contributing persons does show how the teaching of Nebraska history, in Bellevue, did explicitly count the contributions of both men and women, since it states explicitly they both be included, rather than being too vague and allowing teachers to exclude women or men from their curriculum.

The curriculum also has a brief list of themes that it plans on covering, and the second theme, “Recognition and understanding of world interdependence,” is the one in which Nebraska history is the focus.³ Three of the four content areas deal with Nebraska in an explicit way: “A. Nebraska in early times; B. Nebraska today: Periods of development and its relationship to the other states; C. Contemporary Nebraska living compared to global communities.”⁴ The first content area is vague and does not give any definition for “early times.” This content area would have started with the involvement of either Europe or the first evidence for Native American settlements and move forward from there. The second content area would deal with Nebraska

² *Guidelines: Social Studies K-6*, (Bellevue NE: Bellevue Public Schools, 1965 [Guidelines does not use page numbers.])

³ *Guidelines: Social Studies K-6*

⁴ Ibid.

once it became a part of the United States in some way, starting with the Louisiana Purchase as the earliest piece of history looked at. This would advance chronologically, starting with government expeditions such as Lewis and Clark's, advancing to a military presence at places such as Fort Kearny and how they helped travelers and settlers move along to other states, to involvement in the Civil War, becoming a state in 1867, to the pioneer days, involvement in World War I, the impact of the Great Depression, WWII, and finally the Korean War that had taken place roughly ten years prior. This would then transition into the third content area comparing how Nebraska functions as a state in America and other countries. This would include topics such as the agricultural economy, unicameral legislature, population, and other related topics. Bellevue's vagueness so far has allowed quite a bit of flexibility with what it wanted students to learn regarding Nebraska history, which allowed for teachers to discuss a variety of topics at their choosing.

Later in the curriculum guide, a basic ten-week unit for Nebraska history is laid out for teachers. Each week has a topic, and these start with ones such as, "This is Nebraska," and, "Indians and Explorers" and ends with ones such as, "Famous Nebraskans," and, "Seeing Nebraska."⁵ The unit then lists a considerable amount of references for teachers to draw from, as well as some suggested activities. Many of the references are textbooks about Nebraska history, magazines, films, and others. Suggested activities ranged from visiting a farm to visiting museums, and most interestingly to, "Visit Joslyn Memorial (Indian and Pioneer Displays.)"⁶ These activities are notable because Bellevue fourth graders were able to see artifacts in addition

⁵ *Guidelines: Social Studies K-6*, 45

⁶ *Ibid.*, 45

to classroom instruction. This means Bellevue Public Schools valued associating what students learned directly with reality. Bellevue certainly valued Nebraska history enough to have field trips planned and dedicated solely to learning about it. This dedication displayed that showing a more accurate account of Nebraska history and making it seem real was valued in 1965.

Bellevue's curriculum was a traditional one, with little to no new or revolutionary approaches to teaching found in their guide, unlike in other parts of the country at the time.

Progress and change does begin to show up in the following decades, starting with the 1970s. Norfolk Public School's 1971 social studies curriculum guide shows several major differences from Bellevue's 1965 curriculum guide, starting with the amount of time dedicated to learning about Nebraska's history. In the Bellevue guide, Nebraska history was taught through a single ten-week unit, whereas in Norfolk, fifteen weeks is dedicated to teaching state history, and is divided into three units. The first, titled, "Early Beginnings, Nebraska Indians" is a three-week unit; the second, titled, "Early beginnings, Nebraska from Territory to state Pioneer Living in Nebraska," a six-week unit; and the third, titled, "Our Nebraska from Past to Present," also a six-week unit.⁷ It is a noteworthy development that the first unit focuses on the Native American and pre-European era of Nebraska history, albeit only dedicating half as much time to it as to the other units. The second unit discussed Spanish involvement in Nebraska, moved forward quickly to the Louisiana Purchase and the expeditions of Louis and Clark, and traveled chronologically until the end of the pioneering days around the end of the nineteenth/early twentieth century. The third unit would then focus on, from the perspective of the 1970s, the modern history of Nebraska, with a focus on the history of their area, mostly due to the use of the wording "Our" in

⁷ *A Curriculum Guide for Social Studies K-6* (Norfolk, NE: Norfolk Public Schools, 1971 [Guide does not use page numbers.])

the unit.⁸ This additional five weeks dedicated to teaching Nebraska history shows the importance of it not only in Norfolk, but can be extended to the state at large due to the centennial of statehood having occurred in 1967.

In the outline for the second unit, topics range from the period just before Nebraska being a territory, and focus mostly on what pioneer life was like in Nebraska. In the first section of this unit, titled, “Nebraska From Territory to State,” only a few aspects are focused on, with the most specific lesson being called simply, “The Homestead Act” and the vaguest titled, “Important Years.”⁹ This range of specificity is interesting, as it shows that Norfolk weighed heavily on the importance of teaching students about the Homestead Act of 1862, and likely discussing how large of a part it played in the settling of Nebraska. The vagueness of the latter is to help keep the curriculum mostly in the hands of teachers, so they can pick and choose certain subjects at their discrimination or tailor them to their classrooms. “Pioneer Living in Nebraska” is the title of the second section in this unit.¹⁰ This section contained lessons that go into precise detail of Nebraska pioneer life. This focus on pioneers is evidenced with lesson titles such as, “A pioneer,” “Furnishing the pioneer home,” “Soap making,” “Pioneer clothing,” “Early schools,” “Pioneer religion,” and even “Pioneers had fun.”¹¹ Norfolk Public Schools must have considered pioneer life a quintessential part of Nebraska history due to this extravagant level of detail and their chosen topics.

⁸ *A Curriculum Guide for Social Studies K-6*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Among the suggested activities, students were instructed to, “On a map of Nebraska draw the Oregon Trail, Mormon Trail, and the Santa Fe Trail. Mark the famous landmarks along these trails and tell why each was so important.”¹² This activity shows students were taught not only about the Oregon Trail, but also the less iconic Mormon and Santa Fe Trails. Marking landmarks of the trails serves as a doorway into learning about the history of other monuments and the history of various regions for this unit, and provides a natural segue into said topics. Not all activities were as progressive as this one though, as another one for this unit asks for students to, “List some of Nebraska’s great men who have changed the history of your state as well as of our nation.”¹³ This activity is a bit mixed, as it excludes the contributions of women to Nebraska’s history, but it teaches students about the interconnectedness of the world by showing them how Nebraskans have made a difference to the nation in the past. On a more positive note, the meticulousness of the focus on pioneer life is reinforced by an activity that called for students to, “churn butter, bake bread, make candles or darn a sock in the classroom to show some of the duties of the children.”¹⁴ These activities were chosen to help students understand better what pioneer life was like by having them perform duties similar to their peers of the era. The *Guide* also recommends for students to read Laura Ingall Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie*, once again reinforcing this focus on pioneer life.¹⁵

Topics of the third unit include those such as, “Agriculture in Nebraska,” “Importance of Conservation,” and, “Nebraska Will Always Remember These People.” This unit shows the

¹² *A Curriculum Guide for Social Studies K-6*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

school also saw the importance of a well-rounded modern education, as they focused on a wide variety of topics. The lessons within these topics reinforced this approach as they have titles such as “The Republican River Valley,” “What of the future,” “New Industries,” “Importance of the Soil,” and, “Nebraska, a part of our nation.” These topics show a focus on helping prepare students for the future and how they may impact it, as well as once again connecting Nebraska history to that of the nation and world at large.

One activity of interest in the third unit would be an example activity for students to create a timeline for the city of Norfolk. The guideline suggests students, “Include schools, business and industry, government, churches, farming and housing.”¹⁶ Including any type of item on the timeline is accepted, showing that Norfolk weighed the importance and impact of the previously mentioned items equally on the history of Norfolk, and by extension, Nebraska history itself. The *Guide* does not require this activity though, so this was not deemed a vital part of Nebraska history. This activity was performed at some point during the year though, as the word choice was driven by a motivation to once again allow teachers to be in ultimate control of what they taught in their classrooms. Another activity, or rather, series of activities, are found in a subsection titled “Conservation.”¹⁷ These activities include to “Make a map showing the dams on the Missouri River,” and “Plant grass seed in a large box to use in showing how grass breaks the fall of rain, thus preventing erosion.”¹⁸ Norfolk put a lot of importance on teaching conservation to their students, from both a historical and practical perspective. Focusing on

¹⁶ *A Curriculum Guide for Social Studies K-6*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

conservation is likely in response to Nebraska's economy being primarily agricultural, and that introducing conservation to students at an early age showed them its importance. Conservation and its importance would be reinforced by teaching students about the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, and the real-world impacts of not practicing conservation served as a warning sign for the students as well as reinforced what they learned about it and its importance in Nebraska historically and practically.

The curriculum guide also lists a slew of vocabulary words, sorted by topic, such as “atomic power, unicameral, topsoil, windbreaks, Corn Belt, dehydration, glaciers, poet laureate,” and most intriguingly in words relating to agriculture, “dinosaurs.”¹⁹ Choosing these words shows the variety within Norfolk's teaching of Nebraska history, and the breadth of the history can also be deduced from some of these words. Many of the words once again reinforce the importance of conservation being taught to the students. Introducing the idea of the unicameral legislature to students this early on shows the importance of this topic in Norfolk Public Schools. Discussing dinosaurs is unusual, but they possibly discussed how the climate of Nebraska has changed throughout time, which is supported by another vocabulary word, “inland sea,” referring to the Western Interior Seaway that covered up most of modern-day Nebraska during the latter half of the Cretaceous period, and contributed to the creation of the Ogallala Aquifer.²⁰ Glacial presence in Nebraska is also mentioned and how it shaped parts of Nebraska. Public works were also discussed, as the mentioning of officially appointed poets points towards the United States government hiring various artists and creative minds during the Great Depression. All these

¹⁹ *A Curriculum Guide for Social Studies K-6*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

choices for vocabulary further show Norfolk Public Schools focused on teaching a well-rounded Nebraska history.

After the next seventeen years, some of these ideas about Nebraska history will change, while others remain untouched. North Platte Public Schools' 1988 *Social Studies All Grades* curriculum guide provides evidence for this. The guide first lists North Platte's ideas for what each of the Social Sciences means to them, with the subject of History being defined as, "the surviving evidence of the oral and written record of man."²¹ To North Platte Public Schools, the use of evidence when it came to teaching History was held in the utmost importance. Previous sources have not explicitly stated that curriculum must be based on evidence like this one, so there is a gradual shift towards relying more heavily on fact based curriculum than on interpretative or experimental curriculum, at least when it comes to teaching history.

In this guide, like in the other sources, Nebraska history is once again taught in the fourth grade. Almost all the topics for Nebraska history are marked as introduced in the category of scope, which so far is a departure from Norfolk's focus on pioneer life. One of the two topics not marked as introductory would be in the "State Government" unit, with the topic of "Function/Taxation" being marked as optional since this would be teaching how state taxes work for fourth graders, which was seen as less important or too advanced for these students in North Platte.²²

The previously mentioned topics in North Platte's curriculum include but are not limited to the following: "The Dust Bowl," "Comparison of East & West," "Native Nebraskans-early

²¹ *Social Studies All Grades* (North Platte, NE: North Platte Public Schools, 1988 [*Social Studies* does not use page numbers.])

²² *Ibid.*

years,” “Beliefs/customs,” “Native Nebraskans-later years,” “Explorers, Traders, Missionaries,” “Trails/forts,” “Branches,” and, “Legislative- Unicameral.”²³ Selected topics such as these show what North Platte saw as important parts of teaching Nebraska history. It is important to note the wording change from previous curriculum guides, mainly in using the word “Native” or “Native Nebraskans” instead of phrases such as “Nebraska Indians,” and these word choices reinforce the school’s definition of History, as it uses more accurate and respectful words to describe the subjects of some topics. North Platte only introduces Spanish involvement to its fourth graders, but this inclusion is certainly a change. The curriculum also required discussion on the motives of the various groups for exploring this region, albeit again briefly. There is an increased focus on exploring the way of life of Native Americans in Nebraska than before, even discussing their religions and referring to them as belief systems, putting them on a similar level as a western idea of religion. The topic of reservations was also to be introduced with this curriculum guide, which was not explicitly present in Nebraska history in the previous sources. Pioneer life is not focused on as much in this guide as in the previous source, mostly focusing on where the settlers were coming from and why they decided to live in the Nebraska region. When discussing trails and forts, the guide once again required the brief discussion of the reasons for their existence. It seems North Platte focused on including the “why” of history in addition to learning the facts, to justify discussing their topics, and to teach their students why what they are learned is important and should be remembered.

State government is a focus in the curriculum guide, as it introduces much more specific and relevant topics about state government than previous sources. These topics include, “Duties

²³ *Social Studies All Grades*

of governor,” “Current governor,” “Districts-49 (North Platte 42nd),” “Duties,” and “Current Senator.”²⁴ Focusing on the state government has as many topics as that of Native Americans in Nebraska, and much more than that of pioneers. It seems North Platte wanted to educate their students on what was relevant to them, as well as what impacted them directly. This desire for relevancy was also seen in Norfolk, but the focus of direct impact was more agricultural than governmental, perhaps due to the locations and surroundings of both towns. North Platte also viewed explaining what the different governmental branches do as important, creating a base layer of knowledge for students to draw upon in future classrooms. The discussion of the current governor of Nebraska is the other topic not marked as being introduced; instead, it is marked as being reinforced, meaning that students learned in previous grades who the governor was.²⁵ This reinforces the idea that North Platte focused on what directly impacted their students in a governmental way, and that they went more in depth about the responsibilities of the state government in lieu of merely introducing and defining its various parts.

Around the same time, Crete Public Schools had a different approach to teaching Nebraska history. Crete Public Schools’ 1990 *Social Studies Curriculum: K-12 Grades* curriculum guide does not go into much detail for Nebraska history, simply listing the topics for discussion, including but not limited to the following:

- B. Identify and compare agriculture today and in earlier years
- F. Identify the main structural elements in local, state and federal government (3 branches)
- G. Identify and study the Indian tribes
- J. Identify and study the prairie pioneers: town builders, sod busters, railroad developers, cowpunchers

²⁴ *Social Studies All Grades*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

K. identify and study class's pioneer heritage²⁶

This curriculum difference is a step backwards compared to what North Platte was teaching, indicated mostly by Crete's word choice when describing Native Americans. Crete does put a similar focus on the pioneers to what Norfolk did, going so far as to connect the current students back to their pioneering ancestors, which has not been seen in any of the other sources. This practice shows Crete wanted to help connect and invest its students personally to a part of history. Crete was vague in describing the topics, but this allowed teachers to have ultimate control over what was taught in the classroom. Neither Crete nor North Platte indicated the amount of time to be spent on these topics, unlike Bellevue and Norfolk. This again kept control in the hands of teachers, or kept the schedule for learning flexible and adaptable should problems arise, making it easier for teachers to adapt or change their curriculum, which is a problem in the older sources with rigid schedules.

At the same time these curriculums were created, the United States began to properly respond to 1983's *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, a report conducted under the Reagan administration. The report mostly called for raising college requirements and creating a standard level to assess education. Today, most states in the U.S. have adopted Common Core, a set of national standards and assessments for education. The state of Nebraska has not adopted Common Core, instead opting to create their own state standards, which reinforces this idea of keeping ultimate control of curriculum in the hands of the local teachers and school districts to more easily adapt to the standards and their curriculum.

²⁶ *Social Studies Curriculum: K-12 Grades* (Crete, NE: Crete Public Schools, 1990 [Social Studies does not use page numbers.])

Comparing the most recent Nebraska social studies standards, which are from 2012, and the 1998 social studies standards reveals noticeable but not near as drastic changes. For example, the 1998 state standards requested students learn various topics, “By the end of fourth grade,” and listed topics broken down into various subjects.²⁷ By comparison, the 2012 standards have a list of standards sorted by grades, then broad subjects, then sub-sections, then specific ideas or concepts, and then with indicators providing examples.²⁸ The indicators, “are there to help guide what you need to... in order to accomplish that particular standards,” as explained by Harris Payne, who is the social studies specialist for the Nebraska Department of Education.²⁹ The main difference between these two sets of standards is the 1998 standards are vague and open-ended, whereas the 2012 standards are still open to interpretation, but provide examples and topics to serve as guides for how to meet their standards, which the 1998 set lacked.

One interesting standard from the 1998 set would be standard 4.2: “Students will identify and describe the past and present contributions of people such as the Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, African Americans, European Americans, and Asian Americans in Nebraska”³⁰ This kind of specificity was not seen in any of the other sources, at least in regards to stating important persons of all races/ethnicities be discussed and their contributions noted, whereas

²⁷ Nebraska Department of Education, *Nebraska Social Studies/History Standards Grades K-12*, (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1998), 10, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED430888.pdf>

²⁸ Nebraska Department of Education, *Nebraska Social Studies Standards Grade 4* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 2012), 17-21, https://2x9dwr1yq1he1dw6623gg411-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2012December7VerticalNE_SocialStudiesStandardsApproved.pdf

²⁹ Harris Payne (Social Studies Specialist for the Nebraska Department of Education) in discussion with the author, 4, November 2017

³⁰ *Social Studies/History Standards*, 10

previously it was either only men, men and women, or a combination of Native Americans and European Americans showing that between 1990 and 1998, the standards called for including as many persons of note as possible so long as they contributed to Nebraska's history in a significant way.

An interesting standard in the 2012 set are those under the broad subject of "Multiple Perspectives:"

SS 4.4.3 Students will describe and explain multiple perspectives of historical events.

SS 4.4.3.b Compare and contrast primary and secondary sources to better understand multiple perspectives of the same event (e.g., The Homestead Act, Oregon Trail diaries, military journal of Ponca Removal).³¹

This list of standards shows another shift in the fourteen years after the 1998 standards: the consideration of perspective into the history classroom. This incorporation of perspective is done by examining multiple primary and secondary sources to help give context or information directly from that time to students to help them understand the content.

The process for creating the 2012 standards is also relevant. In regard to the changing and altering of standards, Harris Payne explained the consultation process for the standards thusly: "The committees are usually comprised of K-12 teachers and they usually have one or more college professors on each of the committees."³² Thus, a shift towards having a group of teachers and academics decide what should be changed about the standards; moreover, the standards will likely be impacted by the progress of academia when it comes to interpreting and teaching history. Consequently, the state standards became more in line with the current ideas in the field of history at the time, making for a higher quality of Nebraska history education. The next

³¹ *Social Studies Standards Grade 4*, 20

³² Payne in discussion with the author, 2, November 2017

revision for the state social studies standards will begin in Spring of 2019, according to the standards timelines published on the Nebraska Department of Education website.

For the past 50 years, changes in Nebraska history education have created a turbulent ride through the relatively flat state for students on their education journey. These changes were shown and analyzed by examining curriculums from 1965, 1971, 1988, and 1990, along with the 1998 and 2012 Nebraska state standards. The changes between these sources shows that Nebraska history education has transitioned to being more inclusive in the form of showing as much of Nebraska history that is known, regardless of the topic and its subjects. In the future, teaching Nebraska history will become more important, especially after the state's sesquicentennial, and will become more and more in line with modern academic thinking on the subject until the two are the same.