

OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

The Most Radical Thing About Texas' Book List Isn't the Bible

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By James Traub

Mr. Traub is a journalist and the author of “The Cradle of Citizenship: How Schools Can Help Save Our Democracy.”

This summer the Texas State Board of Education approved a [mandatory reading list](#) for public school students that includes fairy tales and nursery rhymes for little children, stories of America’s founders and Aesop’s fables for elementary schoolers, poems by Rudyard Kipling and Langston Hughes for middle schoolers and Shakespeare’s plays and Dante’s “Inferno” for high schoolers — and passages or stories from the Bible for every grade, save kindergarten.

In our highly decentralized educational system, states don’t tell teachers which books to assign — the model Texas will begin using in 2030 makes it an outlier. Yet almost all of the reaction to the list, pro and con, has centered on the Bible. The Freedom From Religion Foundation, an organization that promotes strict separation of church and state, [described](#) the list as “a brazen promotion of religious doctrine” that threatens to convert public schools into Sunday schools.

This is a wild overreaction to what is, after all, a tiny fraction of the required readings. What’s worse, the whole debate obscures the pedagogical radicalism of what Texas has done in issuing a mandatory reading list full of classic works at all.

I spent the 2023-24 academic year in public schools across the country researching a book on civic education. I was braced for the culture war in the classroom: conservative versions of history in red states, progressive versions in blue ones. And I did see that.

What I had not expected to find was that the pedagogical and curricular problems in American schools are more damaging than the political ones. Most students, even in the well-regarded high schools I visited, knew precious little about American history and government and had only a hazy sense of chronology. Teachers in English classes complained that students would not read whole novels — and so teachers didn’t assign them.

There are many culprits for this failure, including everyone’s favorite, children’s addiction to social media. But the root of the problem lies in the way we think about teaching and learning. The view that has dominated education for several generations holds that students learn by mastering general critical-thinking skills that can be applied across disciplines and occasions. If you learn to find the main idea, you can navigate through texts. If you can recognize and articulate perspectives, you can make sense of a primary document in history.

This doctrine makes content (that is, the specific material from which these skills derive) a secondary consideration. Combined with children’s real or apparent resistance to struggling with difficult material, that leads many teachers to choose works that pose

the fewest challenges or have the most surface appeal — short excerpts from classics or young adult novels about troubled teens.

Texas seeks to solve that problem not only by requiring schools across the state to teach specific books but also by choosing works that are — with some telling exceptions — rich in language, ideas and feeling. (The list is meant to constitute only part of each year's reading curriculum; the rest will be supplied by local schools and teachers.)

More than that, the list embodies a very different pedagogical theory, one most famously propounded by E.D. Hirsch in his 1987 best-selling book, "Cultural Literacy," and other works. Literacy, he argued, is context-specific. We become good readers and learners not by mastering generalizable skills but by acquiring the vocabulary, grammatical knowledge and stock of information that allow us to make sense of a text. A child who knows a lot about baseball will do a better job reading and summarizing a passage on baseball than a child with a higher reading level but no knowledge of the subject.

From this perspective, it is better to read a classic than a relatable contemporary story not only because one is beautiful and the other is not but also because a classic, by the very fact of its persistence over time, has become part of our shared culture. It thus increases our conversancy with all the texts from that culture. That is why it makes sense for fifth graders in Texas to read "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," "The Phantom Tollbooth," "Paul Revere's Ride" and even, speaking of baseball, "Casey at the Bat."

Texas has also created a social studies curriculum that has received less attention. It embodies a kindred principle to the one behind the reading list: You cannot learn to think like a historian until you have gained fluency in the materials history is made of — dates, places, events, names.

Children in Texas will start studying chronological history in third grade, a time when social studies is often devoted to broad themes like community. Fifth graders will be expected to explain how the Protestant Reformation encouraged people to question religious and political authority and why Montesquieu believed in divided government and the like, according to a draft of the new curriculum.

The Texas model will not suit everyone. The state's idea of classic literature might not pass muster in, say, California. While educators everywhere regard Pericles' funeral oration, which Texas students are to read in high school, as a rhetorical masterpiece, they may not feel the same way about Margaret Thatcher's eulogy for Ronald Reagan or the works of Ayn Rand and the conservative Black economist Thomas Sowell, which are also assigned. Although 53 percent of students in Texas public schools are Hispanic, the state school board included works by only a few Hispanic authors in the reading list.

Those choices reflect Texas' conservatism. But there is nothing inherently conservative about the idea of a stipulated reading list or about the belief that children need to be exposed from an early age to great works of literature and to history taught chronologically, that they should memorize poems and speeches, that they should learn

grammar. A different reading list could achieve the same goals. Cultural literacy is not a Procrustean bed: As we become more diverse and less anchored in the Western tradition, what it means to be conversant in our culture changes as well.

After my book was published, I was contacted by some of the leading philanthropic funders of public schools; they wanted to talk about how they could help improve civic education. Here's an idea for them: Raise Texas' bet by promoting an equally rich reading list suitable for students in blue states. Show the world that academic rigor is not just for conservatives.

James Traub is the author of "The Cradle of Citizenship: How Schools Can Help Save Our Democracy" and writes the newsletter [A Democracy, if You Can Keep It](#).