South Dakota Board of Education approves controversial social studies standards

Tod Stephens Apr 17, 2023 Updated Apr 27, 2023 4

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An opponent of the proposed South Dakota social studies standards placed a T-shirt on the statue of President John F. Kennedy outside the Rushmore Hotel in Rapid City.
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After hearing public proponent and opponent testimony of proposed social studies standards at the fourth and final public hearing in Pierre on Monday, the South Dakota Board of Education Standards voted 5-2 to institute the contentious standards.

The most recent version of the proposed social studies standards, released on March 30 on the the department's website, will now enter a two-year transitional period that districts will use to research and adopt curriculum and training resources to implement the new standards. Beginning in the fall of the 2025 school year, the standards will be statewide.

Voting in favor of the standards were Rich Meyer, Phyllis Heineman, Linda Olsen, Julie Westra and Steven Perkinss. Terry Nebelsick and Steve Willard voted against. Four of the five affirmative votes were by members appointed by Governor Kristi Noem. Noem, who had greatly influenced the process, ordered the suspension of the original working group tasked with drafting the standards in 2021. This group consisted of 40 to 50 educators from across the state, represented every grade level and was formed similarly to the state's previous revisions through an application and nomination process then chosen by the Department of Education.

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Instead, in August 2022, Noem replaced the work group with the Social Standards Revision Commission, of which its members were appointed through the Governor's Office. The 15-person committee included only two South Dakota educators — both of whom have spoken out against the process.

After 90 minutes for both proponent and opponent testimony, the State Title Administrator Shannon Malone said she received 121 written proponent comments, 1,137 opponent comments and 37 that were neutral. Proponent testimonial themes appreciate that the standards are accurate, comprehensive, engaging and will inspire students to be proud patriotic citizens, she said.

South Dakota Education Equity Coalition, South Dakota Education Association, Rapid City Education Association demonstrate their opposition to proposed social studies standards outside of the Rushmore Hotel in Rapid City.
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She added, opponent themes include criticisms that there are too many standards, the process was political, the cost for curriculum implementation would be high, age-inappropriate content, includes Christianity ideology and does not include enough Native American content.

Since their proposal, board members discussed the standards for the first time in a public setting.

Board President Terry Nebelsick spoke first and opposed the standards in an extensive oration. He said the adoption of the standards would go against the clear majority of educators in South Dakota who were typically born within 75 miles of the school where they teach. It would also go against the Native American communities which have orchestrated highly attended opposition demonstrations at all four meetings.

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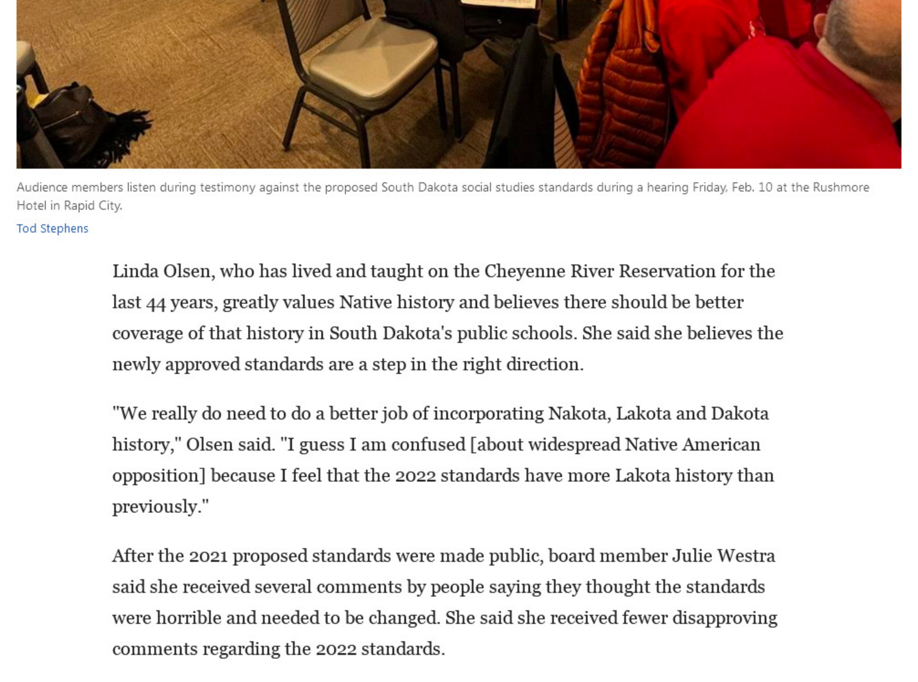
Nebelsick denounced the numerous conspiracies of a "progressive agenda" by pointing out the numerous school districts across the state that opposed the standards despite their overwhelming Republican electorate.

Concerning the content of the standards, he feared they would steal the innocence of children in grades one through three by having them learn the brutality of humanity like massacres and wars. Since the standards focus on memorization, he predicts teachers and students will enjoy social studies lessons less. As a result, students will fall behind and teachers will leave the profession or the area.

Nebelsick said those concerns, combined with the millions of dollars it will cost each school district to implement, led him to propose the revision process be picked up where the 2021 working group left off and having the Noem-appointed work group join in the revision. He is very comfortable continuing with the current standards as they do so.

"Those that oppose these standards are the educators that are the sons and daughters of the prairie and Hills of South Dakota and our Native American brothers and sisters," Nebelsick said. "Great teachers know that you need to connect and love not hammer if you want learning to improve. There will be an outward migration of teachers to other professions or other states where their intellect, their commitment and their professionalism is valued."



Audience members listen during testimony against the proposed South Dakota social studies standards during a hearing Friday, Feb. 10 at the Rushmore Hotel in Rapid City.
Tod Stephens

Linda Olsen, who has lived and taught on the Cheyenne River Reservation for the last 44 years, greatly values Native history and believes there should be better coverage of that history in South Dakota's public schools. She said she believes the newly approved standards are a step in the right direction.

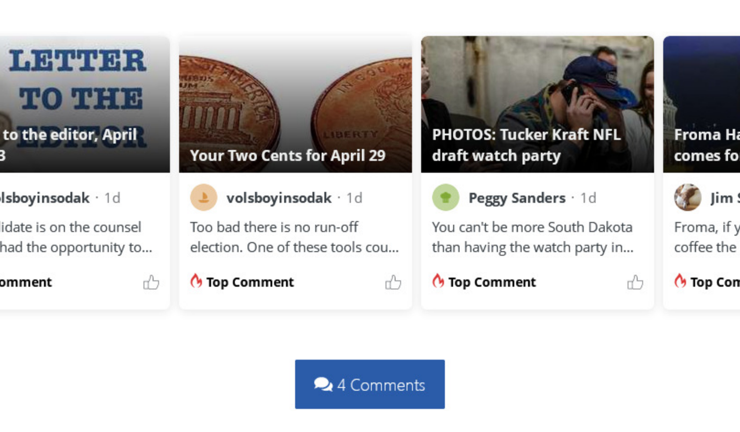
"We really do need to do a better job of incorporating Nakota, Lakota and Dakota history," Olsen said. "I guess I am confused [about widespread Native American opposition] because I feel that the 2022 standards have more Lakota history than previously."

After the 2021 proposed standards were made public, board member Julie Westra said she received several comments by people saying they thought the standards were horrible and needed to be changed. She said she received fewer disapproving comments regarding the 2022 standards.

"I'm also talking as a mom," Westra said. "I have three children, all that have gone to school K-12 and now are in college. We took them to Washington, D.C. 10 years ago, and frankly I was appalled by what they didn't know. All of the monuments, all the museums, it's like they heard of it for the first time, which actually I think is embarrassing. I do feel that we need to change these standards, and I do feel that these are very good."

South Dakota Secretary of Education Joseph Graves said the two-year implementation process is already underway. The process will include history and civics summits held by the state this summer and next summer. The state will form professional development for teachers and include teachers in the selection process of curriculum book previews by the 95 publishers at the request of the state. The state hopes to provide these books to districts to curb the expensive implementation of the new standards. Additionally, Graves claimed the material will not be textbooks but readings books for students to learn social studies during designated reading that will help lessen the time needed to teach social studies.

Though the vote asserts the standards will be implemented in every public school in South Dakota, there is still much work to be done by school boards, administrators and teachers. Malone said the standards are not permanent and may still be revised during the transitional period at the request of the board.



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The Rapid City Area School Board of Education passed a policy during Tuesday's meeting that lessens voting restrictions required to pass a measure.

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Starting Strong Rapid City is hosting its Tenth Annual Breakfast at the Rushmore Plaza Holiday Inn on Friday, April 28.

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