

Teaching Slavery More Accurately and Thoroughly Than Ever Before in Texas Public Schools

By Aicha Davis and Lawrence A. Allen, Jr.

Back in the 1930s, the author Pearl Strachan Hurd wisely observed, “Handle them carefully, for words have more power than atom bombs.” Nothing could be truer. The words we choose can either create or destroy, build up or tear down, elicit understanding or provoke confusion and hostility.

The members of the State Board of Education recognize the power of words.

On June 15, a working group of nine educators presented the board with recommended changes to the social studies curriculum for Texas schoolchildren in kindergarten through grade 2. The proposals involved the introduction of the subject of slavery, including the idea of initially referring to it as “involuntary relocation.” A firestorm erupted and rightfully so.

The SBOE rejected the phrase, although we understood the working group’s intention. It was a logical but ill-conceived way of introducing slavery to young kids by drawing a contrast between immigrants who freely chose to come to America seeking better lives and those who were brought here forcibly, as chattel. Without a doubt, it is a key distinction we must make in teaching slavery, but surely we can come up with better words to describe it.

For this piece, however, we don’t want to dwell on those two ill-chosen words. The point we want to make is this: The State Board of Education does not intend to stifle or sanitize the teaching of slavery in Texas schools. To the contrary, we aim to introduce the subject earlier and teach it more accurately and thoroughly than ever before in the 25-year history of Texas school curriculum. We want all Texas schoolchildren to understand exactly what slavery was, its place in our nation’s history, why it was wrong, how it ended and that its lingering effects persist even today.

That requires a curriculum that uses thoughtfully chosen words and plans presented in a developmentally appropriate way at every grade level. It means there can be no whitewashing, but also no incitement. We are capable of teaching a subject so endemic to our nation’s history that, 200 years later, we still feel its repercussions — with respect for every child in the classroom.

In any curriculum we approve, the basis for introducing slavery begins in kindergarten and first grade with foundational learning about history, geography, government and various cultures. In second grade come lessons about movement and migration throughout the world, each child’s own cultural identity and their connections to other cultures. It is here that we broach the

subject of enslaved people in America, striving in every lesson to bring humanity to the forefront and recognizing “We the People” to include all the people.

At this very early stage, we begin to lay a foundation and intentionally construct a scaffolding to accommodate a logical progression and layering of facts and perspectives about slavery. We consistently and continually explain where slaves came from and the brutality of their struggle. We acknowledge that struggle that persists and the changes that need to occur to ensure a better future for us all.

This is a process that continues at every stage of our students’ learning experience, building fact upon fact and deftly weaving in nuance, all the way through grade 12. We don’t undertake this endeavor lightly; we know creating the right curriculum that strikes the right formula and tone will take many hours of thought and collaboration among educators, board members, and a diverse group of stakeholders. But we are up to the task.

More importantly, we are committed to teaching slavery as it has never been taught in Texas public schools fully, honestly and pulling no punches.

Public education is a volatile landscape today. It’s incumbent on us all need to tamp down tempers and try to ensure cooler heads prevail in any discussion of curriculum, particularly involving the teaching of slavery. That involves choosing words wisely, but it also requires listening carefully and setting aside preconceptions. We all want our children to receive the best education possible in all subject areas. Slavery is no different. We can and will get this right, but it will require us all working together, cooperatively and positively.

Aicha Davis are members of the State Board of Education, which sets policies and standards for Texas public schools. Ms. Allen represents District 13, which includes parts of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, and Mr. Miller represents District 4, which encompasses the Houston area. Together, they represent about 3.4 million Texans.