



Teaching Hard History: Understanding America's Past to Shape its Future

Throughout the United States, K-12 schools are not adequately teaching the history of American slavery, educators are not sufficiently prepared to teach it, textbooks do not have sufficient or accurate material about it, and – as a result – students lack a basic knowledge of the important role it played in shaping the United States and its enduring impact on racial inequalities.

Most educators recognize the need for this crucial education. Policymakers, textbook publishers and others, however, have failed to prioritize it. This failure results in children becoming adults who lack the knowledge and skills needed to confront slavery's modern-day legacy – racism, mass incarceration and white supremacy.

We must ensure a robust education on these issues that provides young people with a complete and accurate account of the hard history of slavery.

In 2018, the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance project released *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*, a report documenting discrepancies in the teaching of American slavery in K-12 schools. At the same time, it released a framework for addressing these issues in grades 6-12. Both publications offered unprecedented resources and guidance for educators.

In August 2019, the framework was updated for grades 6-12 by adding guidance for teaching about the enslavement of Native Americans to ensure that early European settlers' dependence on the enslavement of millions of Indigenous people is no longer ignored. Teaching Tolerance also released a first-of-its-kind framework for teaching slavery to K-5 students.

THE PROBLEM

Teaching Hard History: American Slavery identified numerous problems with the teaching of American slavery in K-12 schools, including the following:

- If slavery is mentioned at all in elementary school, it is often only implied by “feel good” stories concerned with slavery's end rather than its beginning and enduring legacy.
- Many students are taught that slavery is a primarily Southern institution. It existed, however, in all 13 colonies when the Declaration of Independence was signed, and throughout the Western United States before and after the Civil War.
- Only 8 percent of high school seniors surveyed could identify slavery as the central cause of the Civil War.
- The lived experience of enslaved people is often neglected to focus on the white experience of the enslavers. This causes students to perceive enslaved people as lacking diverse experiences and incapable of transforming their circumstances.
- These problems and others make it difficult for teachers of higher grades to unteach – or even teach for the first time – aspects of American slavery that should have already been taught and understood.

State policymakers, curriculum leaders and textbook publishers have not prioritized slavery education. According to *Teaching Hard History*:

- ➔ Fifty-eight percent of teachers believe their textbooks do not adequately address American slavery.
- ➔ States fail to set high standards for their students regarding slavery education. None of the state standards reviewed in the report speaks to white supremacy as the justification for slavery.
- ➔ Only four percent of curriculum standards emphasize slavery as an institution of power driven by racism and designed to subjugate and demoralize enslaved people while creating profit for the enslaver.

THE SOLUTION

Educators, curriculum leaders and textbook publishers can use the frameworks designed by Teaching Tolerance and informed by a distinguished group of scholars and teachers to improve lessons about American slavery and fully integrate it into U.S. history. The K-5 framework includes:

- ➔ Appropriate methods for introducing the concept of slavery to young learners. It begins with foundational concepts like “freedom” and “power” and builds gradually to support high-quality instruction about the history of enslavement in what is now the United States.
- ➔ Recommendations for teaching about slavery that exclude practices such as simulations of the Middle Passage or mock slave auctions which reduce and diminish the experience of enslaved persons and can be traumatizing for students.
- ➔ Methods for teaching about the enslavement of both Indigenous and African people in the United States.

The revised framework for secondary education improves upon Teaching Tolerance’s original framework by offering a more inclusive and accurate story about American slavery — one that details the widespread and pernicious enslavement of Indigenous people. It also includes new and revised summary objectives.

RESOURCES

Teaching Hard History: American Slavery bit.ly/2CU12Fr

New teaching framework for grades K-5 bit.ly/k5-thh

Revised Teaching framework for grades 6-12 bit.ly/612-thh