

**Continuously Uncertain Reform Effort: State-Mandated History and Social Science  
Curriculum and the Perceptions of Teachers**

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### Abstract

*This study examined teachers' attitudes and beliefs in one over-performing urban/suburban high school of the state-mandated curriculum framework under conditions that I label a continuously uncertain reform effort or a top-down mandated curriculum involving constant mixed-messages as to its content, accountability demands, and future existence. Data were collected from three sources: interviews (N=3), a survey of the department (N=16), and their students' (N=372) outcomes on the state pilot exam. Results from this study suggest that the teachers in this department expressed significant knowledge of the framework, held consistently negative views of the framework, and openly expressed diminished use of the framework in their teaching due to its political nature and lack of teacher contribution.*

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) of 1993 had a monumental effect on the public education system in Massachusetts. In less than a decade and a half, Massachusetts drastically reformed state oversight of education and embraced the standards-based movement in education. During this time, Massachusetts published statewide curriculum frameworks<sup>1</sup> in most subjects, including math, English Language Arts, science, and history/social science. Currently students must pass a math, English Language Arts, and science Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam to graduate from a public high school, and a fourth history and social science MCAS exam is scheduled to be a future graduation requirement for the class of 2014.

Since the MCAS test has high-stakes consequences, teachers and administrators have been focused on finding ways to help their students pass, particularly in districts where students

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<sup>1</sup> For clarification, in this study the terms "curriculum frameworks," "frameworks," "state-mandated curriculum," and "standards," refer to the Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework.

are economically disadvantaged, where there are more English Language Learners, or where there are more students in special education programs. This study of the attitudes and beliefs of history and social studies teachers<sup>2</sup> at one urban/suburban public high school in Massachusetts and their reaction to statewide educational reform policies is situated within this context of standardized curriculum and high-stakes testing. However, in the field of social studies, these demands have been a top-down mandated curriculum that involves constant mixed-messages as to its content, accountability demands, and future existence, conditions which I will label a *continuously uncertain reform effort*.

### **Background**

This study is situated within the theoretical perspective that for educational change to be sustainable, it must move beyond *implementation* to *institutionalization*, where new practices are effortlessly integrated into a large number of teachers' repertoires (Hargreaves, 2002). Government policies have potential to foster educational change, but too often design is the major barrier to sustainability. Since teachers are the curriculum and instructional gatekeepers (Thornton, 1991), if we want to have any meaningful educational change, we must understand what leads teachers to embrace or reject certain change efforts.

Educational change is also a highly political process. In recent decades, proponents of standards-based education have gained considerable influence over educational policy decisions. Delandshere and Arens (2001) argued that the current standards-based reform movement followed in the steps of previous reforms, such as the curriculum reform motivated by the launch of Sputnik in the late 1950's that increased educational competition with the Soviets, the

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this study, the terms "social studies," and "history and social sciences" will be used interchangeably. It is the preference of this researcher to use social studies, although others, including the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) prefer "history and social sciences."

measurement driven instruction of the 1960s, and the competency-based movement in the 1970s. Jennings (1998) argued that for the first time teaching standards were being developed within a political context, having the potential to monopolize the conversation about teaching and learning. This study takes place at the ground level, where politics and social studies teachers meet in the classroom.

### *History Standards, Politics, and Controversy*

At the national level, the idea of standards-based curriculum in history and social studies led to great controversy. In the early 1990s, Lynne Cheney, then director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, under George H. W. Bush, commissioned the creation of national standards for history. Developed over thirty-two months, these standards were written by a panel of academic historians, school administrators, and history teachers (Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 2000). Delayed over debates of content and a lack of guidance from the federal government, *The National History Standards* (1996) were eventually released in 1994 and revised in 1996 during the Clinton administration. In anticipation to its initial release, Cheney (1994) wrote a Wall Street Journal editorial that claimed the standards were motivated by “political correctness” and would not teach children about the greatness of America. Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn (2000) have argued this portrayal was unfair and greatly exaggerated. This political argument had taken a toll on the standards and today these standards are not widely used by history teachers.

Much like *The National History Standards*, it has been a turbulent and politically charged road for the *Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework* (Massachusetts Department of Education, 1997, 2003), which were created through a mandate of Massachusetts

Educational Reform Act (MERA) of 1993. Over the last 15 years, the history and social science framework has had two different published versions. The 1997 version of the framework had a heavy emphasis on world history, which may be better described as global history. After their release in 1997, many Massachusetts public school districts scrapped their previous curricula, and shifted their courses to require more emphasis on global history, especially for freshmen and sophomores (since the MCAS was administered to 10<sup>th</sup> graders). Many critics of these standards said that its scope was too broad and lacked a focus on U.S. history and civics.

Less than four years after their debut, the Massachusetts Board of Education began to draft a new framework in history and the social sciences. This version (and the one currently in use) was drafted in December 2001, and put into place in August 2003. Written after September 11<sup>th</sup>, it has a heavy emphasis on U.S. History. The previous curriculum framework's emphasis on world and global history was almost completely abandoned. Again, this sent schools and social studies departments scrambling to revamp their course sequences and curricula. Many schools, and especially urban schools concerned about their students passing MCAS, reduced content in world history and in many districts moved world history to the middle schools.

Many educators have heavily criticized the current 2003 version of the curriculum framework. First, they argued the standards lack focus on the historical and critical thinking skills students should develop, while increasing the required content to be taught. In fact the term "critical thinking" appeared only once: "The kind of critical thinking we wish to encourage must rest on a solid base of factual knowledge" (p. 2). Second, critics contended that the standards were politically motivated and reflected the conservative ideology of the framework authors. This has led to criticism that the American-centric revision of the content has underlying tones of nationalism. Third, some educators have argued the current revision dictated

that the curriculum be almost exclusively history, and less attention is paid to the interdisciplinary connections between history, government, economics, geography, and the other social sciences. Finally, critics expressed concern that certain content has been removed from the high school curriculum, specifically colonial history. Removing the teaching of Columbus, the interactions between American Indians and British settlers, and destruction of Native American society has led some to accuse the Board of Education of whitewashing an important and controversial period of U.S. history.

### *Research on Social Studies Standards and Assessments*

Although there has been a surge of research over the last decade on mandated curriculum in the United States, only a handful of studies examined the impact in the field of social studies. However, these studies illuminate two important themes. First, state-mandated tests have a strong influence on teachers' content choices, but despite this, there appears to be limited impact on their instructional practices. Second, when teachers do change their practices, it is typically in the form of test preparation and this focus on testing can result in a narrowing of the social studies curriculum.

Some studies showed that teachers changed very little about their actual classroom instruction as a result of state-mandated curriculum and testing. Grant (2001) found that high-stakes tests may influence the content teachers teach in history, but not how they teach it, making the tests an *uncertain lever* for influencing instruction. Yeager and van Hover (2006) found that the nature of the state-mandated tests in Florida and Virginia greatly influenced teacher decision-making; one teacher increased the content they covered, where the other teacher was instructed to focus students on improving their literacy skills. Finally, Segall (2003) found teachers

believed the Michigan social studies assessment was primarily a literacy assessment, disconnected from their teaching of social studies. The teachers' beliefs that a student could pass the test without ever having taken a social studies course should have liberated them, yet the teachers treated the curriculum as it was high stakes and they adhered closely to its content.

While other studies showed when teachers do change their instructional practices, it was typically in the form of test preparation. Grant et al. (2002) found that teachers believed the New York state global history exam was a poor measure of learning and exemplified a disconnection between the tests and standards and as a result the teachers changed very little about their practices besides adding test preparation. Gerwin and Visone (2006) found teachers tended to emphasize rote learning in state-tested courses, while in elective courses teachers had students write like historians, avoided using multiple-choice styled tests, and had more class discussions. It seemed clear from their data that the teachers chose to change their teaching to help students pass the test. Finally, through interviews with over 200 new teachers in New York City, Crocco and Costigan (2007) reported that one unintended consequence of the accountability movement may be the narrowing of curriculum, as well as pedagogy.

#### *Research on Standards and Assessments Across School Disciplines*

There are several key qualitative and quantitative studies of teachers' perceptions of mandated standards outside the field of history and social studies. Many of these studies indicated teachers have resistance or negative attitudes toward mandated curriculum and that when mandated tests do motivate teachers to change instructional practices, the changes are often superficial additions of test preparation. In her review of research on state-mandated testing, Cimbricz (2002) suggested that while state testing influence what teachers say and do, they may

be only one of the many factors that influence teachers' beliefs and practices, and subsequently are not the primary lever of change in practice.

Teachers generally saw state-mandated curriculum and assessments as negative and in one study there were clear negative effects on instruction. Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas (2000) showed that most teachers found no value in testing and a prevalent belief that the purpose of the tests were to prepare students for many more years of test taking. In a study of English teachers in Massachusetts, Luna and Turner (2001) found teachers had major concerns that the disparities between White and minority students would be further reinforced by the state mandated test. Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Lui, and Peske (2002) found teachers often felt overwhelmed by the responsibility and demands of planning daily lessons around that content dictated by state-mandated curriculum. Finally, in a national survey of teachers' perceptions of state-mandated testing, Abrams, Pedulla, and Madaus (2003) found that teachers reported limiting their instructional and assessment strategies to those which resembled the content and format of state tests. Perhaps most concerning was that many teachers had begun to contradict their own notions of sound educational practices to help increase student test scores.

Urban and low-income school districts may be most negatively affected by the demands of state mandated assessments. In a study of an economically disadvantaged elementary school, Booher-Jennings (2005) uncovered that teachers were focused on the students who were just below passing (which she terms "the bubble kids") in what was described as "educational triage" or an allocation of most resources to those students who are most likely reach passing score with a slight gain in their test scores. By using these methods, teachers were able to make the intended gains, but problematically at the cost of the other students. In their case study of Massachusetts schools' reaction to the Science MCAS exam, Falk and Drayton (2004) showed clear differences



in reactions between socio-economically advantaged, middle, and challenged schools. In higher and middle socioeconomic status (SES) schools, teacher reactions focused mostly on increased content coverage, while in challenged SES schools, teachers felt a sense of guilt at not being able to cover all the material that appeared on the test.

This study attempts to fill a gap in the research by examining specifically the beliefs and attitudes of social studies teachers of the state-mandated curriculum at a relatively successful urban/suburban school, under the conditions that I will label a *continuously uncertain reform effort*. The history and social science MCAS exam is a top-down mandated curriculum that involves constant mixed-messages as to its content, accountability demands, and future existence. Massachusetts social studies teachers have withstood two major changes in the curriculum content, numerous official dates for the test to be required for graduation, limited access by administrators and teachers to pilot test data, and an ever-changing rhetoric in the media by politicians, governing boards, and educational policy makers. Many of the teachers in this particular department, as well as many across the state, believed that the exam may never count for graduation and if it does count for graduation, it will be a substandard test due to lack of input from classroom teachers. In fact, during the final drafting of this paper, the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (formerly the Department of Education) announced the graduation requirement would be delayed for the third time in the last half decade. It is important to understand how teachers' beliefs are influenced by *continuously uncertain reform efforts*, as these types of reforms are becoming more common as the federal and state governments acquire more authority from local governments over education policy.

## Methodology

In an attempt to better understand the beliefs and attitudes of social studies teachers toward state-mandated curriculum framework, this study employed a multiple case design (Yin, 1989). The data included interviews with social studies teachers (N=3); a survey administered to the entire department (N=16); and their students' (N=372) MCAS History and Social Science test scores.

### *School Context*

Milltown High School<sup>3</sup> is located in what can be described as a Massachusetts factory town. Diverse economically, racially, and linguistically, Milltown has faced significant economic difficulties in the last 30 years with the closing of many local factories. It has also been traditionally an immigrant community and recently home to a very diverse group of immigrants/migrants from Brazil, Puerto Rico, Russia, Central and South America, the Caribbean, among many other places. Milltown High School was one of the largest high schools in the state. The school's racial demographics were 68% White (of which approximately 20% are Brazilian<sup>4</sup>), 18% Latino, 8% African American, and 6% Asian. About 30% of students at Milltown High had a language other than English as their first language. About 10% of students at the high school had limited English proficiency. About 23% of students were considered low-income. Milltown Public Schools was a Title I district, but the high school was not a Title I school. The reduction of low-income students at the high school level compared to the entire

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<sup>3</sup> All names are pseudonyms. All school data come from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary database.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that in population counts Brazilians often identify as White or Black. Brazilians comprise the second largest population within Milltown High.

district was a result of a higher percentage of low-income students attending the city's vocational school.

Milltown High is considered a successful urban/suburban district. Although I do not consider schools successful based solely on outputs on standardized assessments, the state of Massachusetts does. According to the Massachusetts Department of Education, Milltown's MCAS scores exceeded demographic expectations, meaning students score higher on statewide assessments than counterparts in other schools with similar economic and ethnic demographics. In 2000, only 58% of sophomores at Milltown High passed both the English and math MCAS assessment. By the class of 2005, 90% of Milltown High students passed both tests and in 2006, 92% of students passed both tests. In 2006, Milltown High also had for the first time a comparable rate of passage on the MCAS for both White and African-American students. This same success level was reflected in Milltown High students' results on the history and social science pilot exam administered in 2007, which will be examined in the results section of this paper.

### *Participants*

The three teachers in this study were chosen by using maximum variation sampling, which is a purposeful sampling strategy that maximizes the diversity of the participants (Patton, 2002). It was my intent to find patterns in common between three dissimilar teachers within this one department, hoping it would capture the core experiences of the teachers at this school. The teachers in this study all taught multiple sections of U.S. History, which made up the core of the current history and social science curriculum framework and MCAS exam.

Dennis is a White male in his mid-30s. He had been teaching for 13 years. Of those thirteen years, he taught ten years at two separate college preparatory schools and the last three at Milltown High School. Dennis taught U.S. History and Psychology and was a coordinator of the school's new teacher program. Mike is a White male in his mid-20s. He had been teaching for three years at Milltown High School. He taught U.S. History I and II and an American law elective. Lisa is a Black female in her mid-20s. She had been teaching for 3 years at Milltown High School. She taught U.S. History I, Afro-American History, Sociology, and Psychology.

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected using three methods: one-on-one interviews with triangulation through classroom observations, a survey using a Likert-type attitudinal measure and open response questionnaire, and student test scores gathered from the state database. While all three forms of data are incorporated into this study, the findings rely heavily on the interview data, because they provide insight into the inner thinking of these teachers and what drives them to use or not use the standards.

### *Interviews*

The participants (N=3) were interviewed in October 2006. Interviews were conducted in school classrooms either before or after school. Each interview took approximately 1 hour. Teachers were consulted in advance and were informed that the topic of our discussion would be the *Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework*. Before the interviews were conducted, the teachers were told they could consult a provided copy of the curriculum framework. No teacher used this before or during the interviews. The interviews were audio

recorded and transcribed soon after the interview. Before conducting the interviews, I created an interview guide. This guide included questions organized into five categories: knowledge of the framework, impact of the framework on lesson planning, abiding by the standards, perceptions of the framework, and revision of the framework. I have included my complete interview guide in Appendix 1.

After the interviews, I asked the teachers to look over the transcript for any misrepresentations. This member check was important to help increase the validity of this study. Besides member check, I also used observations of classroom practices to increase validity. I observed two of the three teachers (due to location and time constraints, I was unable to observe the third teacher's class). During these observations I took notes on what subjects the teachers taught and the methods they used for teaching those subjects. I then cross-referenced those lessons' content with the framework and found that both teachers directly covered several topics found in the curriculum framework in each lesson and that neither teacher at any point made specific reference to the framework.

Next, I organized the interview data. Using notes to track key ideas, I developed codes by hand. Once initial codes were developed and tested, I proceeded to code all three interviews. My initial coding resulted in a hierarchical arrangement organized into four codes and sixteen sub-codes. The first major code that emerged was labeled *knowledge*. This code marked the teachers' demonstrations of basic knowledge of the functions and organization of the framework. This code also included any data that demonstrated the teacher knew how to locate information within the framework. The second code that emerged was labeled *impacts classroom learning*. The intention of these codes were to label data indicating the teacher believed the state curriculum framework affected the type of learning done in their classroom. The third code that emerged

was labeled *accountability*. This organized the teachers' perceptions of the assessment and accountability of both students and teachers related to the state framework. The final code that emerged was labeled *effectiveness*. This labeled parts of the data that discussed any strengths or weaknesses teachers saw in the curriculum framework.

### *Survey*

During a professional development day, I administered a survey using a Likert-type attitude measure and open response questionnaire section to the history and social science department's teachers (N=16). Guided by Jaeger (1988), the purpose of this survey was to gain a better understanding of the attitudes of the teachers of the department. Sixteen of the twenty teachers responded to the survey (four were not present). The survey included eight questions about demographics, experience, and education about the state curriculum, nine Likert-type questions about use and influence of the framework, and three open ended questions. Overall, the interviews with the three teachers were closely aligned with the views of the curriculum by the departments as a whole. Some key results are illustrated in Appendix 2 and will be discussed further in this study's analysis.

### *MCAS Test Data*

The pilot MCAS History and Social Science test was administered by the state to Milltown juniors (N=372) in May of 2007 and I was able to gain access to the data in January of 2008. This was the first pilot test in MCAS History and Social Science. All students were administered identical tests. The exam included a total of 44 multiple-choice items scored by machine-scored by optical scanners, comprising 80% of the total score. Correct answers were

given 1 point and incorrect answers were given 0 points. It also included three open-response items, comprising 20% of the total score. The state had employed professional scorers to score these items from 0–4 points. The state reported by school raw scores and item analysis for 23 multiple-choice questions and 1 open response item (state test data are included in Appendix 4). Since this version of the MCAS was pilot data, the state data management software did not allow me to disaggregate the data by student or teacher. As a result, I am only able to examine the data as it reflects the entire department.

### **Results**

After analyzing the data, I found several consistent themes. First, the teachers said they rarely changed their practices as a result of the state-mandated curriculum or testing, and if they were to change their practices it would be to superficially add certain pieces of content. Second, they said they were more likely to adhere to department-created curriculum due to its legitimacy, rather than the politically driven state-mandated curriculum that was ever changing. Finally, they believed the curriculum framework compromised their professionalism and practical wisdom. As such, they were more likely to rely on their own judgment of what content was ultimately most important. First, I will examine the interview data, followed by the survey of the school's social studies teachers, and finally a brief examination of their students' test scores.

### *Interviews*

Although two of the three teachers believed they had a significant knowledge of what was included in the history and social science curriculum framework, all three teachers said they had not changed their lessons based on them. The teachers saw the framework as easily adapted

to their preconceived lesson plans. It was expressed by two of the three teachers that the standards could be inserted into almost any lesson plan. Dennis exemplified this when he said,

I have read the frameworks. I have read through it actually before, and you know I never had a problem with any of it, it seemed good, the things in it were useable, like the way we work with the curriculum units, is basically we wrote the units and then went back to the frameworks and figured out how to shoot out one of the frameworks, you certainly didn't go the other way and go and say this is something that must be covered and therefore let's do a unit on that.

He continued to provide an example of this from his own teaching,

So I did a thing on labor units, and went back and found that the labor units [in the curriculum framework], like Haymarket Strike and Pullman Strike, whatever were in the frameworks, and also Reagan's firing of the air-traffic control was in the frameworks, so it turned out, so those were like the three frameworks it fit in... I kind of started with the unit and went back to the frameworks, which is probably not the way they were designed to work.

The exception was Mike, who openly admitted that he knew very little about the organization of the state curriculum and that he had looked through it, but has never used it in his teaching. He explained this action was based on him being told that the curriculum maps his department used were based on the state's framework.



And then shortly after we started, my first year, we were talking about the curriculum maps and it was said that our curriculum maps mirror the framework that they had just rewritten it and so we were already lined up probably way ahead of a lot of other school districts with the state frameworks. So I took that to mean that when I planned out my classes I would follow the curriculum map, and I ought to be covering state frameworks when I go. I could probably make a guess of what is on the frameworks specifically, cause I think we cover a lot of the core content.

The other two teachers echoed Mike's perception that their department-created curriculum maps were aligned with the state-mandated curriculum framework and this allowed them to avoid using the actual state framework.<sup>5</sup> These department-created curriculum maps had an important impact on the teacher's lesson planning. All three teachers at various points of the interview mentioned using the department's curriculum maps when considering the content to teach.

All three teachers expressed a belief that these curriculum maps were more legitimate than the state curriculum framework because the department created them. The curriculum maps were a product of collaboration that adapted the state's curriculum framework into an easy to use format (including a month by month breakdown of what content and primary sources needed to be taught), additional content not in the state framework that the department agreed should be included, and recommended exemplar lesson plans from teachers in the department. The

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that although the teachers being interviewed believed their curriculum maps and state frameworks are interchangeable, the researcher would like to clarify that there are clear and significant differences in content, scope, and skill development.

curriculum maps were part of an on-going revision process through departmental collaboration. Dennis described the original process of creating these curriculum maps,

We looked at the frameworks, readjusted the curriculum to the frameworks and you don't have to think about it ever again. You set up your curriculum, and you leave room in the year, your certainly don't [make it] chock full so that nothing else can be taught, I mean you leave room so maybe half the time it will be the frameworks and half the time it will be local choice.

I also questioned Lisa about her use of the department's curriculum maps and her frequency of use compared to the state's curriculum framework. She said,

My department [curriculum maps] I use like everyday... we are always updating our curriculum maps here in this department so there is always a conversation on how it is made, I think there is a discussion on almost every collaboration. We were talking about someone working on the curriculum map or working on an assessment that refers to the curriculum maps... we always talk about it.

The teachers also appeared to have frustration over the constant revision of the state curriculum framework and MCAS test. After an initial discussion of the department's attempt to incorporate primary sources from the state framework and MCAS exam, Dennis elaborated on his frustrations that these documents either did not appear on the test or when included, simply tested literacy. He said,

The Department of Education set up guidelines for the MCAS test, which includes 15 or 20 primary sources that are going to ask questions about... and we figured out where those documents should fit, then we put them in our course maps, curriculum maps, so that all teachers will be covering these, these sources because the MCAS will put these on the exam. First of all they never finalized the exam, and what exists is a practice exam last year it had the *I Have a Dream Speech* by Martin Luther King, which was the only primary document they had and maybe one other, they had two. And then they asked questions about it and you didn't have to have known the documents ahead of time to get the questions right. In fact you might have known about the document ahead of time and got the questions wrong.

All three teachers mentioned use of the curriculum maps or the curriculum framework as a device to maintain their pacing of the content. The teachers were generally concerned that falling behind in the content of the course led to poor student performance on school-wide mid-term and final exams. The teachers also expressed concern to keep pace with their colleagues. They did not necessarily cover all the content in the curriculum map, but made sure to end the course at the right historical period. Mike captured this well when he said,

I would say I often consult the curriculum map, but that is more to think about my pacing. That is not content related. It is content related for my U.S. II class, because this is my first year teaching it. For my U.S. I class, I don't look at it in terms of content, I just look at it in terms of flow, because I taught it now for three years. A lot of the stuff I have

done in the past I build on so I don't cut out certain core areas... but I would stress I would rely on it more for planning than for content... I don't know that they impact my end result that much, because you might be given a document to cover but there is nothing that is said about how you cover it.

I also had a dialogue with the teachers as to the core rationale of the framework. The discussion gravitated toward two conflicting points. First, teachers have been traditionally allowed to make curricular and instructional decisions. But with the curriculum framework, the state has taken more power over curricular and instructional decisions. To rectify this, all three of the teachers felt that their professional knowledge should override the demands of the state. As such, the framework should be seen as a guide to help teachers determine what the state recommends, rather than a content mandate, which it was. Dennis took this a step further than Lisa or Mike, when he said,

That is what grades are for, that is what AP classes are for. There are ways to tell that students are well above their peers in knowledge. That is what teachers do, that is what grades do, the framework should be a minimum standard, you know the basics and a good student in a good course in a good school district wouldn't even have to bother to think or study for it, because they would be able to pass it, because it is a minimum requirement.

The teachers felt the curriculum framework and MCAS test was detrimental to their professionalism and ability to make educational decisions. Two teachers greatly considered

autonomy as an important part of being an educator. Two teachers vocalized the perceived constrictions from the curriculum framework on their teaching. They felt the framework and specifically the testing would limit their ability to “energize” and “excite” students about history, because it would take away time that could be spent on engaging and innovative lessons that may not rapidly provide better test-taking skills. Lisa expressed this when she said,

All the fun stuff in history, that gets kids really interested in history, gets them really interested in American culture and the origins of it. You have to work, work only an excerpt into our lesson plan... We can do a little more foreshadowing, they can pick up on other trends, make it so they do a little more guess-work, through history... but because of the frameworks, well I am not saying because of the frameworks, but with the frameworks, we're more, more needing to get on track.

Mike echoed this same sentiment. He teaches his classes by framing units with debatable topics, which he calls “arguments.” He attempts to make each unit an exploration in critical thinking. Mike said,

I think [the MCAS] test questions could be structured less for memorized facts then for use of arguments... I think the themes of history are much more important than the specifics. So if the assessments were structured through critical thinking, who was the better advisor to Washington; Hamilton, or Jefferson. Where a student has to argue a point as opposed to saying Hamilton was for strong government, period. We've got our facts and possibly connecting, I think you could assess that. Well, through a standardized

test I am sure that would be a pain to grade and it becomes much more subjective, even multiple-choice is still subjective... I think you can have a set of questions that are far-reaching enough to meet the highest achieving students and very low achieving students. I think "Should the U.S. celebrate Columbus Day?" is a question that anyone could weigh in on, and it is presentation of argument, its not they have covered these four specifics. So I think the type of question would dictate whether or not students would score similarly or differently.

Both Mike and Dennis expanded on that idea stating that the state is unable to regulate curriculum in this way and Dennis questioned the validity of the assessment of the framework as proof. Both teachers' perceptions of the standards seriously questioned the framework's usefulness or effectiveness. Mike said,

[The state] tries to, but I don't think it does. Well certainly with the advent of the History MCAS, I think the state is trying more and more to make me and all of us abide by their standards, but I think you can't, I am not so sure a state can regulate teaching standards, very closely. So I don't feel bound by the state's framework for the reason why I can't talk about it more in-depth is because I am not bound to it. I am sure the Department of Ed. would probably have a very different take on that. I ought to be able to memorize them and spout off every word.

As a result of the political nature of the standards, the three teachers were reluctant to use them for content guidance, yet they also realized that certain facts would be covered on future

MCAS exams. Lisa and Mike, both of whom were newer teachers, expressed a narrowing of their curriculum as a result of the standards and all three teachers discussed the political decisions made by the Department of Education were problematic. Mike discussed his view of the political forces behind the standards and testing, when he said,

I think there is a movement of standardized testing to show accountability for schools. And I think that movement is disconnected from actual teaching and while the state is pushing for standardized testing of the MCAS nature that doesn't fit teaching in schools and covering the material that should be covered, teachers want to cover, and communities say they want their students to learn.

He later added,

I think the idea, in general, of state standards could be a good idea but how they are implemented I think is the key. In the form of MCAS, I think they are terrible... I am under the impression that political bureaucrats pushed for the testing. And that I am sure they find academics to help out create them. I think it is more of a political issue.

### *Survey*

To determine if the perceptions of these teachers were representative of their department, I administered a Likert-type attitudinal survey and open response questionnaire. The results of this survey are represented in Appendix 2. To achieve a consensus, any data that supplied a response of more than a 2/3<sup>rd</sup> fraction of the department's members was considered to represent

the department's views as a whole. The conclusion of this survey was that, much like the three teachers interviewed, the department viewed themselves as being knowledgeable of the state-mandated curriculum framework. The department members said they generally consulted the framework either monthly or yearly (which was less than the three teachers interviewed). Many members of the department held the perception that both politicians and teachers influenced the frameworks, but that teachers should have more influence. These results helped validate my speculation that the perceptions of the interview teachers were representative of the views of their department colleagues and helped place the three interviewed teachers in the mainstream of their department.

In the open response questionnaire portion of the survey, teachers were asked: (1) How do you feel the curriculum framework has affected your lesson planning? (2) Do you follow the state curriculum framework in your teaching? (3) Do you think there should be a history and social science framework and what is your opinion of the framework? Some of the most pertinent responses to the first and third questions are available in Appendix 2. Of the open responses, three teachers suggested that there be more input from teachers as to the content included in the framework. In response to the second question, almost all teachers mentioned that the framework drove the department-created curriculum maps and most explained they rely on the curriculum maps over the framework.

#### *MCAS Test Data*

To better understand the context in which these teachers perceived the history and social science curriculum framework, I examined data from Milltown High student outcomes on the MCAS history and social science pilot test (see Appendix 3). Overall Milltown High students



performed better than the state average. This is particularly important considering Milltown High's large populations of low-income and limited English proficient students. Out of 22 multiple-choice questions, Milltown High students outperformed the state average on 18 questions. Milltown High students' scores on average were 5% higher than overall student performance statewide on their multiple-choice responses. On six questions, Milltown High students outperformed the state average by more than 10%. It must also be noted that three of the four questions that Milltown High students performed below the state average (questions 18, 21, 22, and 23) were the final three questions on the test. These three questions had the highest quantity of student-omitted answers. These questions may have been unanswered at a higher rate than the other questions due an imposed time limit (which is not imposed on the Math, English Language Arts, and Science MCAS exams). On the open response question, the average score of Milltown High students was 0.79 compared to the state average of 0.72, outperforming the state average by a difference of .07.

### **Discussion**

The data from this study revealed the reaction of the teachers as a result of the implementation of a state-mandated curriculum framework. Despite the varying backgrounds of these teachers, there were many themes consistent across all three interviews. Three main themes emerged about the perceptions of these teachers. First, the teachers in this study believed they have considerable knowledge of the state-mandated curriculum framework. Second, they negatively viewed the state-mandated curriculum framework and related testing, due to its political nature and lack of teacher contribution. Third, this led the teachers to have a limited use of the framework in their classroom and planning.

First, the teachers believed they had considerable knowledge of the framework. Two of the three teachers believed they had extensive knowledge of the framework and said they consulted them regularly. They easily cited the format of the framework and the general content included in it, without looking at the actual document. The third teacher said he had limited knowledge of the state framework, but believed he had substantial knowledge of the department-created curriculum maps, which he considered equivalent to the state curriculum framework. As a result of their knowledge of the framework, these three teachers were able to have informed and educated perceptions of it.

Second, the teachers negatively viewed the state-mandated framework and related testing. This was further complicated by their belief that the curriculum framework and MCAS assessment were substandard, politically motivated, and lacked teacher contribution in the creation process. The teachers believed it was unhelpful to mandate the type and amount of content included in the framework and that teachers should have more say in what content is chosen. On the eve of a required MCAS history and social science test required for graduation, the teachers were concerned that the mandate would not create better teaching and learning, but instead limit teachers' creative teaching methods, instead forcing them to focus on content facts. Lisa described the curriculum framework as restricting, "all the fun stuff in history, that gets kids really interested in history."

The teachers preferred to use curriculum maps created by their colleagues rather than the state-mandated framework. The teachers preferred the departments created curriculum maps because, although they did include the state-mandated content, they also included input from the teachers in the department. However, the teachers were concerned that the history and social science assessment was an attempt by the state to enforce its content demands and this in turn

may force them to adopt more of the content from the framework, especially if their students performed poorly on the exam. Finally, the teachers vented frustration over the fact that the state imposed a curriculum would be only applicable in lower SES districts and one teacher stated after our interview, “suburban schools will not need to change a thing to have the vast majority of students pass the MCAS, and the urban schools will commit all their resources in vain.”

Third, the teachers believed the framework had a limited impact on their teaching. The teachers believed little change about the content or instructional methods they used was necessary as a result of the framework. These beliefs were further validated by their students’ positive performance on the pilot exam. During my interviews, the teachers expressed that if their students performed well on the upcoming pilot exam, they would know if little change was needed, whereas they would be more likely to change practices if students did poorly. Beyond student performance on the pilot test, the teachers discussed several specific reasons as to why they felt the standards had little impact on their lesson planning. First, the teachers believed that professionally they had been entrusted with the authority to make their own curriculum and instructional decisions. The teachers also greatly considered autonomy an important part of being an educator. As such, they preferred to rely on their own judgment when lesson planning. The teachers believed that the curriculum created by their specific department was more important than the curriculum created by state policy makers.

Although some would argue that these teachers formed their beliefs about the state framework and assessment based on their practical knowledge, those who support the standards-based movement should see the lack of instructional modification by these teachers as a dilemma. A core concept of this movement is the emphasis that assessment data should drive instruction and school change. Clearly at this school the success of their students on the test only

decreased their attention to the test and curriculum framework. Even more problematic is the possibility that teachers may only be influenced by these state-mandated tests if their students perform poorly on them. If this is the case, it will continue to differentiate the types of instruction used in underperforming and over-performing schools, consequently exacerbating the gap between affluent and low-income districts.

### **Significance**

What emerges from this study is an illumination of the need for policymakers and curriculum writers to take into greater account the perceptions of the teachers when creating standardized curriculum. To accomplish this, teachers should have a major role in the writing of the standards. Teachers may be hindered from using curriculum standards that do not involve teachers as major players in their creation. It is a hope of this study to add to the conversation about top-down state-mandated reform by encouraging an increased voice of the teachers, those who are the instruments that deliver the curriculum.

Teachers must be empowered rather than diminished by the standards. As such, teachers should have a major role in their writing. Since teachers may be hindered from using curriculum standards that are not written by teachers, by having teachers be a major stakeholder in their creation, it increases the standard's utility and usefulness. The 2003 *Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework* was issued with a letter from then Commissioner of Education David Driscoll stating the writers, "drew upon comments from many teachers and administrators, college and university faculty, and staff members of museums, historical societies, libraries, and archives" (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003, p. iii). In actuality, it is questionable the role public school teachers actually played in the development of

the history and social science framework, since the primary authors were a team at the Department of Education lead by Sandra Stotsky.

The teachers in this study believed the standards created by their department through collaboration were more authentic and they were more likely to use them. A more innovative plan would allow individual districts to design and submit separate curriculum frameworks and their related assessments in place of the current top-down accountability plans. By allowing teachers to have ownership and authorship of the framework, the framework may have a greater impact on the classroom.

In light of this, policy makers and curriculum writers should make teachers one of the central voices in the writing of state-mandated curriculum. If history and social studies teachers in the state had standards largely written by their colleagues, which more closely resembled their professional opinions of what content and skills should be included, they might be more likely to use them. The negative feelings expressed by the teachers in this study toward the political nature of the framework's content would be minimized. Hargreaves (2009) has outlined a framework for the future of a post-standardization education system, which would include teachers working together to not only deliver curriculum, but also develop it. He has evidenced this with examples from the educational successes in countries like Finland, Singapore, and provinces like Ontario. It seems Massachusetts would more effectively implement educational change if it joined the ranks of these post-standardization educational systems.

Finally, it is also important to ask how the exam being required for graduation affects teacher's use of the framework. The teachers in this study genuinely wanted success for their students and during my interviews all three teachers expressed a possible change in instruction if their students scored poorly on a graduation test, but they also believed this change would

ultimately harm their ability to spend time on the content and activities they considered more meaningful, which may not be included in the state-mandated curriculum. One teacher even considered leaving the field if teaching became anymore test and results driven.<sup>6</sup>

Recent national policy decisions directly connect to the dilemma these teachers raised. With the Obama administration's *Race to the Top* program and its increased emphasis on standardized testing as the driver of educational change, including a preference for merit pay based on test scores, state-mandated curriculum and assessments carry even more weight and examinations of the beliefs of teachers and their classroom practices become more relevant. If teachers resist state-mandated curriculum and assessments because they believe them educationally unsound or politicized, it appears the Obama administration views the "silver bullet" to be tying teacher pay to the outcomes of those tests. The teachers in this study suggest that for any real instructional change to occur, teachers must be a major voice in the creation of those standards and assessments, but we do not know how this might change if there is a conflict between their personal beliefs and their economic self-interest. It seems the emergence of this new dimension only makes a complex problem more complex.

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<sup>6</sup> Since this study, Mike has left classroom teaching to pursue a doctorate in education.

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## **Appendix 1: Interview Guide**

### **I. Knowledge of Framework**

1. How much knowledge would you say you have of the Massachusetts framework for History and Social Sciences?
2. How often do you look at or consult the framework?
3. How often during your teaching do you think about the framework?

### **II. Impact on Lesson Planning**

1. How do you feel the curriculum framework impact your lesson planning?
2. Do you site the framework in lesson plans for formal observations?
3. Do you think there is an expectation at Milltown High to use the framework when lesson planning?

### **III. Abiding by the Standards**

1. Does the state make you follow the standards?
2. Are you assessed on using the standards in class?
3. How do you follow the state curriculum framework in your teaching and classes? Explain how you follow them or why you do not.
4. Tell me how your department uses the state framework?
5. How do they assess students according using the framework?
6. How does the state assess students using the framework?
7. Has the state standards changed the way you test/assess your students?
8. Do you address standards different from CP1, Honors, and AP students?

### **IV. Perceptions of Framework**

1. What is your opinion of the curriculum framework?
2. Do you think there should be framework?
3. What are your feelings on the framework?
4. Do you like or dislike the current framework?
5. How do you think the framework have influenced decisions made at Milltown High? In your department?
6. Do you feel pressure from your supervisor to follow the state framework?
7. What impact do the framework have on students?
8. Why do you think some teachers do not follow the framework?

### **V. Revisions of Framework**

1. If you could make changes to the curriculum framework, what would you suggest?
2. Would you eliminate the framework if you could?

**Appendix 2: Milltown High School's  
History and Social Science Department  
Selected Responses to Survey**

*16 of the 20 teachers in the department answered the survey. All responses are percentages of the whole.*

I have knowledge of the Massachusetts history and social science framework.

Strongly agree	25%
Agree	75%
Neither agree or disagree	0%
Disagree	0%
Strongly disagree	0%

The history and social science framework impacts my teaching.

Strongly agree	13%
Agree	66%
Neither agree or disagree	20%
Disagree	0%
Strongly disagree	0%

As a classroom teacher how often do you reference or consult the history and social science curriculum framework?

Daily	0%
Weekly	0%
Monthly	40%
Yearly	46%
Never	13%

### Appendix 3: Survey Questionnaire Responses

How do you feel the curriculum framework has affected your lesson planning?

At times I use the frameworks to reference in class, but usually it is to draw students' attention to what may be beneficial or not in the frameworks. Usually it is the latter, i.e. to suggest those who write the frameworks are doing so to further their own narrow-minded agenda.

I also make sure to address the particular framework being taught when I am formally being observed.

Do you think there should be frameworks and what is your opinion of the framework?

I think there should be some type of uniform standards or frameworks but I think that teachers should have more say.

I think there should be frameworks especially if there is MCAS.

I was not happy w/ the last big revision to the frameworks

We need a Framework so as to be on the "same page" and to see what is deemed "important". The general tenor of the Frameworks is fine, - I can't really speak to the specifics of it I'm not hyper-aware of the content - I view it as a general guide. It seems to hit the common sense of content in history.

Frameworks - sure. But, they need to be usable and accessible and not attached to standardized testing.

I like frameworks - they should be a

"minimum" of what all students should know,

leaving much time for individual teacher/school

projects + planning.

Yes but I think politicians and special interest groups should not have as much influence. I also think there should be more on world history and less on US History.

### Appendix 4: MCAS Data 2007

Bold denotes the correct multiple-choice answer.

#### Item Analysis by School Report

MCAS High School U.S. History 2007

District: **X**  
School: **X**

Grade: **HS**

US History - Student Counts: All Students=372; State Average=All;

Item	All		State		Multiple choice items are based on Percent. Open response items are averages of Raw Scores				Item Description
	Students	Average	Diff	Omit	A	B	C	D	
1	86	81	5.0	1	0	2	5	6	<b>86</b> USI-9. Why was the Bill of Rights added to the Constitution
2	90	82	8.0	0	0	<b>90</b>	7	2	2 CS-15. When people purchase shares of stocks, what do they invest
3	82	69	13.0	1	0	8	4	5	<b>82</b> USI-31. What group was Frederick Douglass speaking on behalf of
4	85	80	5.0	1	0	2	5	<b>85</b> 8 USII-22. How did American households change 1940-55 according to	
5	56	52	4.0	1	0	10	13	19	<b>56</b> USII-7. Which explains why US Senate rejected the League of Nations
6	75	65	10.0	1	0	10	6	9	<b>75</b> CS-26. Which is most important responsibility of Federal Reserve
7	78	59	19.0	0	0	<b>78</b>	7	6	8 USII-4. How did the Homestead Act 1862 contribute to number of farm
8	33	30	3.0	2	0	<b>33</b>	28	20	18 USI-41. Important result of Hayes-Tilden agreement following election
9	47	43	4.0	1	0	14	<b>47</b>	8	30 USI-25. Supreme Court Marbury v. Madison established which principle
10	40	38	2.0	0	0	14	10	<b>40</b> 36 USI-12. Oligarchy is best described as government ruled by what	
11	60	58	2.0	2	0	16	<b>60</b>	17	4 USI-38. Why did Lincoln travel to Gettysburg to deliver 1863 address
12	47	41	6.0	2	0	13	26	<b>47</b> 13 USI-39. For which reason was Battle of Gettysburg an important event	
13	74	64	10.0	1	0	8	5	<b>74</b> 13 USI-38. Which event was Lincoln referring to with "Four score	
15	71	57	14.0	3	0	<b>71</b>	8	14	3 USII-28. Nixon's "Silent Majority" speech sought support for what
16	67	57	10.0	4	0	11	10	<b>67</b> 8 USII-6. Which policy was Beveridge advocating in 1898 speech	
17	61	61	0.0	6	0	6	11	15	<b>61</b> USII-27. Which letter marks the location of the Erie Canal on the map
18	43	47	-4.0	8	0	6	35	<b>43</b> 8 CS-16. Which term describes the decline in the US economy in 1937	
19	56	50	6.0	8	0	9	23	4	<b>56</b> USII-17. The illustrated World War II poster encouraged women to work
20	44	35	9.0	9	0	8	28	<b>44</b> 11 USI-36. Which issue was central to Nullification Crisis of 1832-33	
21	44	45	-1.0	11	0	28	10	<b>44</b> 6 USI-17. Which is a responsibility of the Mass. Supreme Judicial Court	
22	48	54	-6.0	15	0	12	<b>48</b>	12	13 USII-16. Which reason did Truman give for atomic bombing of Japan
23	37	41	-4.0	16	0	29	9	<b>37</b> 8 USI-20. Which summarizes G. Washington's view of political parties	

US History - Open Resp. - Student Counts: All Students=372; State Average=All;

Item	All		State		Multiple choice items are based on Percent. Open response items are averages of Raw Scores				Item Description
	Students	Average	Diff	Omit	A	B	C	D	
14	0.79	0.72	0.07						USI-38 4 pts. Explain points from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

Test Date: 5/1/2007

Date Printed: 1/25/2008

1