

## Testimonies before Virginia Board of Education regarding textbook accuracy (Jul 26, 2018)



Paul Noursi – Co-chair  
Nancy Wein – Co-chair

### Participating Organizations

American Muslims for Palestine  
Appalachian Peace Education Center  
Arab American Association of Central Virginia  
Community for Justice in Palestine & Israel of the Alliance of Baptists  
Defenders for Freedom, Justice, and Equality  
Israel Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church - USA  
Jewish Voice for Peace  
National Arab American Women's Association  
New Dominion PAC  
Northern Virginians for Peace & Justice  
Palestinian Christian Alliance for Peace  
Plowshares Peace & Justice Center  
Richmonders for Peace in Israel and Palestine  
Unitarian Universalists for Justice in the Middle East, Northern Virginia Chapter  
United Methodists for Kairos Response  
US Campaign for Palestinian Rights  
Washington Interfaith Alliance for Middle East Peace

Good morning. We are here today representing the Virginia Coalition for Human Rights (VCHR)— a broad coalition of 17 organizations representing more than 8,000 Virginians.

My name is *Ghassan Tarazi*. I'm a retired educator, having spent 37 years as a History & Social Studies teacher and middle school principal in Fairfax County Public Schools and ended my professional career as an associate professor at James Madison University's College of Education.

Our Coalition believes that the Palestine-Israel conflict is a human rights issue that requires an open and free debate. For that debate to be free and open, access to unbiased and accurate information is essential. The information that our children receive in school will shape their perceptions for decades.

During the recently completed Textbook Review Process conducted by the Virginia Department of Education (DOE), the California-based Institute for Curriculum Services (ICS) submitted edits that our panel of academicians in the field of Middle East history and culture found to be inaccurate and biased. The inaccuracies contained in the ICS edits raised questions about the content of the history and social science textbooks approved by the Virginia Board of Education (the Board) and the DOE review process of these textbooks.

When General Assembly Delegate Patrick Hope brought our concerns to the attention of Leah Dozier Walker, Community and Minority Affairs Liaison within the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, she advised the VCHR to "submit comments regarding inaccuracies in Board-approved textbooks to the DOE electronic mailbox"—which we will do. And with regard to questions about the Textbook Review Process, Ms. Walker advised the VCHR to "submit comments to the Board, either by written comment or by addressing the Board during the public comment period"—which explains our appearance before you today.

Our objectives in reviewing the Textbook Review Process with you today are threefold. We want to provide feedback to the Board that will lead to a process that, **1) leads to greater accuracy** in the content of history and social sciences textbooks; **2) provides greater transparency** into the composition of the textbook review committees, and the criteria by which they make textbook recommendations; and **3) safeguards the integrity of the content** by insulating the Textbook Review Process from the pressures of political and market-driven concerns.

Our first presenter is Nancy Wein, who will provide testimony on the **makeup of the textbook review committees**. Our second presenter is Faedah Totah, who will provide testimony on the **need to foster historical understanding**. And our third presenter is Jim Metz, who will provide testimony on the **process for summarizing public comments**.

Copies of our testimony with addenda have been provided for inclusion in the public record.

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I am *Nancy Wein*, a member of the Richmond Jewish community and a member of Richmonders for Peace in Israel and Palestine. Our organization was formed about 5 years ago in an effort to educate the Richmond community towards a better understanding of Israel/Palestine.

I would like to address the selection of the textbook review committees, specifically for the history and social science textbooks. Section IV of the Textbook Review Process describes the formation and selection of the committees, but still leaves some questions to be answered. According to the document, the search includes collaboration with community colleges and institutions of higher learning. Attempts are made to find committee members who are subject matter experts and who do not have a potential conflict of interest. However, once the committee is selected, there is no requirement to publicize the names and credentials of those selected.

VCHR has requested a list of the names and credentials of those “qualified educators and content experts” who served on the most recent review of the history and social sciences textbooks. We have been informed that we must file a FOIA request in order to get such a list. We intend to do this, but we also think that in an effort to be transparent, this information should be readily available on the DOE website. The names and qualifications of the committee members must be public information in order to ensure that these individuals do not have any bias or conflict of interest.

In the past few months, we have contacted a number of expert academicians from several universities in Virginia. These professors have excellent credentials, having written books on the specific subject matter of Israel/Palestine and having taught undergraduates for many years. A complete list of these professors will be provided to you as an addendum to the transcript of our remarks. These academicians have reviewed the suggested edits proposed by the ICS, and they have requested that the textbook publishers not incorporate any of these changes until “a diverse panel of qualified and nonpartisan academic experts is consulted for feedback.” In the meantime, some of these professors are reviewing one of the textbooks that has been approved by the DOE, and they have already identified inaccuracies and omissions that are problematic. You will find the review of William B. Quandt, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Politics at the University of Virginia as an addendum to our testimony.

We are asking the Board to provide a list of the names and credentials of the most recent history and social science textbook review committee on the DOE webpage so that the public can review their credentials. We want to ensure that the committee does, in fact, represent a varied and diverse group of academicians, so as to include experts in the history and culture of the Middle East.

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My name is *Faedah Totah*. I am a Professor of International Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University with expertise on the Middle East.

VCHR contends that inaccuracies and biases in the way the Middle East is presented in textbooks approved by the Board undermine the goal of preparing citizens with a global perspective that will enable them to participate in a global economy. Our concern is that by not exposing students to content that is broad in perspective and rich with historical context, they will not learn to recognize the difference between fact and fiction; between objectivity and bias—skills that are hallmarks of responsible global citizens.

Committees that are charged with the review of history and social science textbooks must evaluate the presentation of subjects that are complex and controversial. Units covering the history and culture of the Middle East are especially challenging. The reviewers must rigorously evaluate content and accompanying exercises for inaccuracies and biases.

We have found that units on the Palestine-Israel conflict reflect a clear bias that emphasizes Arab culpability for crisis-initiation leading to military action, and never Israeli culpability, even with undisputed historic facts.

As an example, in one of the textbooks approved by the Board, the assertion is made that after the Six Day War in 1967 "Israel **gained control** of new territory," rather than "Israel **occupied** new territory"—a significant distinction in light of the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention that protect the rights of people living under occupation until the two sides resolve the conflict. Among those provisions is the prohibition of the movement of any civilians from the occupying country into the occupied territory. As of 2018, according to William B. Quandt, a member of our panel of Middle East experts, "[Israeli] settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem number over 500,000". Despite this evidence, the impediment to resolving the Palestine-Israel conflict is attributed to an Arab unwillingness to recognize Israel.

To master the disciplines of history and the social sciences, students must do more than learn names and dates. They must learn to engage in historical thinking, where events are examined critically within an historical context. VCHR contends that students do not have the opportunity to exercise these higher-order thinking skills because the approved textbooks do not present the facts on the Middle East in an accurate and unbiased way.

We ask that Virginia's students be given textbooks that contain factually-based content on the Middle East with exercises that promote the critical thinking skills that foster historical understanding.

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My name is *Jim Metz*. I began my adult life as a secondary school English teacher with a specialty in learning disabilities. I switched careers to information technology, retiring from Philip Morris. Since 2013, I have been working with Richmonders for Peace in Israel and Palestine (RPIP), a group I helped start. We are involved in educational outreach and political advocacy to promote a more even-handed approach to the Palestine-Israel conflict. RPIP is a member of the VCHR.

When the VCHR became aware of the efforts of California-based ICS to submit edits to the history and social science textbooks under review, we became alarmed that the provision for public input could be exploited by a special interest group to promote their political agenda at the expense of objective, commonly accepted facts based on evidence.

We understand that comments submitted during the **30-day Examination Period** are summarized by DOE staff and forwarded to the Board as input to your “second” review and approval process. By not involving subject-matter experts in the summarization process, the presence and significance of a textbook inaccuracy identified by an individual or group might be misrepresented or ignored. On the one hand, the summarization might pass along partisan views as fact. Or, on the other hand, the summarization might downplay the significance of an inaccuracy found in a textbook. In either case, we believe that the participation of subject-matter experts in the summarization of the public comments would enhance the value of the public input that the Board receives.

The **Ongoing Public Comment** process is even more vulnerable to misrepresentation. After the textbook approval takes place, individuals or groups can submit comments about inaccuracies in a textbook to an electronic mailbox. The “manual” for **Virginia’s Textbook Review Process** states that DOE staff “will inform publishers of any errors identified.” It appears that neither subject-matter experts nor the Board are involved in evaluating the presence and significance of textbook inaccuracies reported as a part of the ongoing public comment process.

**Our ask** is that the Board establish a process that involves the relevant subject-matter experts in the evaluation of public feedback in order to gauge the presence and significance of textbook inaccuracies so identified.

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