

Politics, Power and the Past: Government Intervention into Social Studies Education

The Texas Lyceum

2025 Quarterly Meeting – Marfa TX

How public policy has influenced social studies curriculum in Texas public schools

John Sherrill

Master of Public Affairs, expected May 2026

Ph.D of Curriculum and Teacher Education, 2015

Master in Educational Leadership, 2011

Bachelors of Business Administration (Marketing), 2008

Texas Tech University

Introduction

The world of curriculum is a nuanced platform that requires sequencing of concepts; concepts that are approved through the legislative process. Focusing documents, such as a year at a glance, help teachers understand the when of teaching. Pedagogical strategies help instill best practices of how to teach. But, the legislative process drives back to what is taught. Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) are approved by the legislative process and the State Board of Education (SBOE). The crux of this policy brief will revolve around incidents that occurred within the state board of education, in conjunction with actions from the state's highest office.

Areas of Focus

1. **Ethical demands of a public office:** The state board of education (SBOE) is comprised of 15 districts across the state of Texas. Candidates run for office through a primary and general election cycle. When a vacancy arises, it can either go unfilled through the remainder of the term or a successor may be appointed to fulfil the remainder of the term. In the 2024 election cycle, Aisha Davis chose to run a successful campaign for the Texas House of Representativesⁱ. The SBOE was split on the future of the curriculum, largely along party lines. Although Mrs. Davis' unopposed successor had received 460,000 votes in the primary – and was running unopposed in the general election – Mr. Abbott's choice of a republican political appointee to fill the last weeks of the term do not pass the smell test.
2. **Political and procedural precedents in the appointment of Leslie Racine:** As documented in local, state, and national media outlets, a number of process irregularities afforded Governor Abbott the opportunity to replace an uncontested Democrat with a Republican political appointee who had no educational leadership experience to a vacancy on the State Board of Education one week before a critical vote on state curriculum.
3. **Implications for future political appointees/government transparency:** The appointment of Leslie Racine highlights the urgent need for greater transparency and accountability in filling vacancies, not just on SBOE but all gubernatorial appointments. This process should be done with openness and there should be a structured format to ensure the public confidence in the official and that they will carry out voters' intent.

Background

Public servants face a barrage of ethical decisions daily. When considered with a hard topic, such as the alignment of social studies curriculum, they can often rest on the “will of the voters” or voters intentⁱⁱ that their platform aligned with the expectations. This gives the bureaucrat a foundation to make changes. However, when a political appointee assumes a post, they do not have such a background. In the case of Leslie Racine, who was appointed weeks before the new board changes went in to effect, the will of the voters gets marginalized for that of the appointing official.

Context of Vacancy. Aiesha Davis served on the State Board of Education (SBOE) since her election in 2018. Through her political aspirations, she sought to represent her district in the Texas House of Representatives, a campaign she would later win. As a democrat in the Ft. Worth region of the metroplex, she desired to have a replacement that would stand on the same principles that she was elected on. That endeavor appeared to be secured when Dr. Tiffany Clark emerged in the primaries as a contender with over half a million votes. There was no one to run against Dr. Clark in the November general election. She would take office after the November primaries. While this was playing out, *Bluebonnet* curriculum had been proposed by the state to infuse Texas values in lessons. Actually, it merged folk stories with biblical applications in the reading components. From the federal level through the bluest parts of Texas, this created a political firestorm. Republicans, emboldened by Governor Abbotts rhetoric, wished to push the envelope in providing scriptures for Texas students. Democrats, conversely, raised the Establishment Clauseⁱⁱⁱ as the reason that church contents should not be brought up in the classroom. After many moves by the SBOE committee to table the conversation, a hard date was set for the second week in November.

During the first week in November, Governor Abbott unilaterally appointed Leslie Racine – who holds no formal teaching experience – to the State Board of Education. Immediately after her appointment, which tipped the balance at the board in favor of the republicans, the meeting was set to adopt the state’s curriculum. Public comment yielded a divided field in support and against the initiative. At the meeting, the curriculum was adopted, largely along party lines. Mrs. Racine, naturally, voted in support of Governor Abbott’s initiative.^{iv}

Methodology

This brief is comprised from a qualitative content analysis of publicly available documents and media sources surrounding the appointment of Leslie Racine to the State Board of Education in Texas. Sources include newspaper postings, shared postings from Texas Association of School Administrators, Raise Your Hand Texas and the like. These datapoints were used to find commonalities and trends that were represented in the presentation to Texas Lyceum Fellowship at the quarterly meeting in Marfa Texas in April 2025.

Rationale. This approach was utilized to understand the timeframe around the appointment of Mrs. Racine, the departure of Ms. Davis as well as Dr. Clarks running for office and subsequent election to the SBOE. Trends were evaluated due to the emotional climate of political postings and authors occasional slant towards their beliefs.

Limitations. A qualitative approach relies on the words printed. Often, in this contextual nature, there may not be quantifiable data behind the events. Further, there may be one author that reports on the nuance of SBOE; however, much of the data was confirmed by more than one author. Further limitations would be that a study of such data elsewhere may not yield the same findings. One of the things I attempted was to get stakeholder feedback from Region 16 (Amarillo) administrators as well as the Texas Council for Social Studies Educators (TCSSE). This information was requested through an anonymous Google form. Two participants filled out the form. Future studies may implement more stakeholder engagement methods^v.

Policy Implications

Texas is a state where red and blue tend to blend. A unilateral appointment of a political appointee will continue to erode trust in the governmental structure and further perceptions that voters will be marginalized or usurped altogether.

The timing of Leslie Racine's appointment by Governor Abbott's office and the subsequent 8-7 vote for the social studies curriculum effectively means that Abbott's appointee had the sole vote over the state's 5.5 million kids in public schools. This is a slippery slope that essentially creates a backdoor for Abbott to control whichever split board he may take interest in. Again, this manipulation of the system usurps the will of the voters^{vi}.

Structural reform in a bi-partisan effort should be implemented at once to ensure that overreach does not further influence our elected officials. At a minimum, standardized timelines and minimum qualification should be considered in the approach.

Conclusions

This policy brief is about social studies curriculum. However, it is an ethical and political cautionary tale of how executive overreach can be used to write the story of Texas. Governor Abbott found an opportunity to control the narrative for the SBOE and write the story for church and state in Texas. His actions thwarted the will of the voters and he knew there would be no political fallout. Such actions are shortsighted and create a venue for the next political leader to impose their will. A critical look of governance and political authority is critical to rebuild the relationships this action has tarnished. However, it does raise questions about how vacancies are filled on elected boards and where the transparency begins and ends. To uphold the integrity of education in Texas, it is critical to utilize those that have a minimum working knowledge of the classroom and contents within. Watchdog groups will oversee the process because anything less puts the legislators or executive in a position of a monarch without accountability to their constituents. Community stakeholders and advocates demand transparency. Much could have been done that would have matched the will of the voters. However, this overreach can still be used as a teachable moment. Afterall, we are educators.

ⁱ Notice. (2024, August 9). *Texas Democratic Party*. Texas Democratic Party. <https://www.texasdemocrats.org/media/notice-of-state-board-of-education-district-13-executive-committee-meeting>

ⁱⁱ Behn, R. D. (1995). The Big Questions of Public Management. *Public Administration Review*, 55(4), 313–324. <https://doi.org/10.2307/977122>

ⁱⁱⁱ Edison, J. (2024a, July 19). *Groups raise worries with Bible-infused school curriculum*. The Texas Tribune; The Texas Tribune. <https://www.texastribune.org/2024/07/19/texas-christianity-school-curriculum-worries/>

^{iv} Edison, J. (2024, November 19). *Texas signals support for Bible-infused curriculum*. The Texas Tribune. <https://www.texastribune.org/2024/11/19/texas-sboe-bible-christianity-curriculum/>

^v Wei Zhang, & Brundrett, M. (2010). School leaders' perspectives on leadership learning: the case for informal and experiential learning. *Management in Education*, 24(4), 154–158. doi:10.1177/0892020610376792

^{vi} Edison, J. (2024, November 20). *Approval of Texas' Bible-infused curriculum will likely depend on Abbott appointee*. The Texas Tribune. <https://www.texastribune.org/2024/11/20/texas-curriculum-greg-abbott-tiffany-clark-leslie-recine/>