



[REDACTED]

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Dear [REDACTED],

On behalf of our organization, the Sikh Coalition, [REDACTED] [REDACTED], which would establish a task force to review and make recommendations for the adoption of the social studies curriculum standards prescribed in “American Birthright: The Civics Alliance’s Model K-12 Social Studies Standards.” We stand against this legislation given American Birthright’s embrace of precisely the kind of mischaracterization of the Sikh identity that has long subjected our community to hatred, fear, and intolerance, as well as numerous other additional harms and shortcomings throughout the standards. We also believe that [REDACTED] existing standards review process has produced academically sound standards that are reflective of the state’s communities and values, rendering political efforts by outside actors like the Civics Alliance wholly unnecessary.

For more than 20 years, the Sikh Coalition has challenged rhetoric which seeks to paint Sikhs as extremists and terrorists. The danger of such rhetoric has been especially acute in both the post-9/11 environment here in the United States, as well as consistent attempts by the government of India to further these same harmful narratives about Sikhs. Founded in response to a wave of bias against Sikh Americans that targeted the Sikh community after September 11, 2001, on account of Sikh turbans, beards, and other articles of faith, the Sikh Coalition has since become the nation's largest Sikh American civil rights and advocacy organization. A key part of our work includes advocacy for increased awareness and understanding of Sikhism through proactive education and community development efforts. This entails calling for the improvement of the Sikh community’s reflection in social studies standards, educational materials, textbooks, professional development initiatives for educators, and more.

Alarming, one of the only two mentions of the Sikh community in the American Birthright Standards is in 10th grade World History, and it asks students to “describe the history of independent India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka,” using “Sikh terror” as an



example.¹ What the standards fail to acknowledge is how defining religious minority communities in India solely through a lens of being terroristic furthers misinformation on historical accounts and produces a dangerous environment for Sikhs in present day.

In the decades following India's independence from the British Empire, the Indian government stigmatized minorities in the nation as being terroristic and internal enemies in an attempt to justify discrimination when confronted with nonviolent resistance against provincial issues going unaddressed.² The use of this characterization to rationalize state sponsored violence is seen in the Sikh genocide of 1984. During this time, a campaign of premeditated, organized violence—including killings, sexual and gender-based violence, torture, the desecration and destruction of gurdwaras and libraries, and the destruction of Sikh homes and businesses—with the goal of eliminating Sikhs across the nation, occurred.³

The severity of one of the only mentions of the Sikh community being as terrorists exacerbates the hate crimes, discrimination, and bullying experienced by Sikhs across the nation. Although Sikh Americans have experienced xenophobic violence dating back to the early 1900s, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 resulted in a violent backlash that continues to reverberate in modern America. In schools, Sikh students often report being referred to as a 'terrorist' by their peers (and even teachers) given their visible identity as a Sikh that goes misunderstood due to a lack of proper and accurate inclusion in the classroom.⁴ As a community, a lack of understanding has resulted in continuous attacks against us on the basis of our identity. One of the first fatal hate crime casualties of a post-9/11 America was Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh immigrant living in Mesa, Arizona. Furthermore, in 2012, a gunman with neo-Nazi ties ultimately killed seven Sikhs at a gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. Sikhs around the country reported hundreds of hate incidents in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and these attacks have continued ever since.

Beyond the harm of these standards to our community, we are also alarmed by their numerous other inaccuracies and incomplete histories. Examples of this include but are not limited to the lack of inclusion of emancipation and the eventual abolition of slavery when discussing the "various effects of the Civil War." Additionally, asking students to analyze the "George Floyd riots" purposefully and maliciously misrepresents the overwhelming majority of the civil rights-focused protests across our nation following the unjust killing of Mr. Floyd as a result of police brutality.

¹"American Birthright: The Civics Alliance's Model K-12 Social Studies Standards," *Civics Alliance*, Version 1.3. (2023):119. <https://civicsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/AmericanBirthright.pdf>.

² Mandair, Arvind-Pal S. *Violence and the Sikhs*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 65.

³ Jaijee, Inderjit S. *Politics of Genocide: Punjab, 1984-1998*. (Ajanta Books International, 1999).

⁴ "Where Are You Really From? A National Sikh School Climate Report," *Sikh Coalition* (2024): 17, 29. <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/2024.04.16-WAYRF-report.pdf>.



In addition, the American Birthright standards work to actively discredit current pedagogical frameworks that have been informed by social studies educators and professionals used in many states [REDACTED]. The pedagogy of these standards claim to counter frameworks that promote subjects such as “civic engagement” claiming that they “inhibit student learning.”⁵ However, incorporation of civic engagement in social studies has proven to create a bridge between what students learn in the classroom to the real world as it prepares them to make informed decisions as members of society.

We are not alone in our low opinion of these standards; indeed, their distorted approach has been criticized by educators and historians nationwide. The National Council for the Social Studies, the largest professional organization devoted exclusively to the teaching and learning of social studies, deemed the standards as having “damaging and lasting effects on the civic knowledge of students and their capacity to engage in civic reasoning and deliberation.”⁶ In addition, the American Historical Association, which consists of more than 11,000 historians, states that these standards will leave “students with a parochial worldview and deprive them of the chance to become tomorrow’s global leaders.”⁷

By contrast, the current [REDACTED] Elementary and Secondary Social Studies Standards are representative of the contributions made through review and feedback from social studies professionals and communities. These standards uphold their intention of helping students develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for college, career, and civic life. In fact, students have the opportunity to learn about the Sikh community at the Elementary and Secondary level through inquiry into local history, migration and related experiences, and the Sikh experience post 9/11.⁸ This is particularly relevant in the state [REDACTED], which is home to a sizable and vibrant Sikh community, including five gurdwaras (Sikh houses of worship). Sikh residents [REDACTED] have contributed significantly to [REDACTED] history and social fabric. Current standards work to highlight these contributions and to address the erasure of Sikh history from public education that has had devastating impacts on Sikh students around the country.

To this end, the Sikh Coalition requests that the American Birthright standards are not considered for use [REDACTED], given that they would replace standards that are a genuine representation of Sikh history and identity with a far more harmful and inaccurate

⁵“American Birthright: The Civics Alliance’s Model K-12 Social Studies Standards,” *Civics Alliance*, Version 1.3. (2023): 25, 132, 142. <https://civicsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/AmericanBirthright.pdf>.

⁶“NCSS Statement on American Birthright: The Civics Alliance’s Model K-12 Social Studies Standards,” *National Council for the Social Studies* (2022), <https://www.socialstudies.org/current-events-response/ncss-statement-american-birthright-civics-alliances-model-k-12-social>.

⁷“AHA Submits Testimony Opposing Ohio Learning Standards Legislation,” *American Historical Association* (2023), <https://www.historians.org/news/aha-submits-testimony-opposing-ohio-learning-standards-legislation/>.

[REDACTED]



portrayal. Thankfully, the harm that could well come from such a replacement can be avoided entirely [REDACTED] and committing to supporting the state's existing standards review process [REDACTED].

Thank you for your consideration of our feedback and request. We look forward to the opportunity to engage you on this issue further.

Sincerely,

Upneet Kaur
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The Sikh Coalition

Graham F. West
Managing Director of Policy and Communications
The Sikh Coalition