

The 1619 Project and 1776 Report: A Guide for Educators

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Abstract

During the days following the January 6th riots a report was issued by the Trump administration that's effect on education is slowly spreading. On Martin Luther King Jr. day, January 18, 2021 two days before the end of Trump's presidency, the 1776 Report was released. The report was immediately attacked by numerous historians and associations. However, in the two years that have followed its release, seeds of the report are beginning to appear in educational doctrine and policies across the nation. The purpose of this article is to reflect on the events of the release of the report, connect it to a competing project and provide resources to high school social studies teachers attempting to instruct on these studies.

The New York Times 1619 Project

In August 2019, to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the landing of the first Africans in the English colony of Virginia, the New York Times published what became known as the "1619 Project". The project is a collection of essays and artwork that argue that the legacy of American slavery can be seen today across areas in society. These areas could include traffic patterns, sugar consumption, health care, incarceration, racial wealth gap, capitalism, and reactionary politics (Morel, 2020). The central theme of the original publication was to call for a re-examination of the legacy of slavery in the United States. Stretching to 100 pages, the special edition included ten written essays, a photo essay and a collection of poems and fiction. New York Times investigative journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones would later state "Through a series of essays, we really assess the ongoing legacy of slavery to show that across American life, nothing has been left untouched by that decision to purchase that first group of 20 to 30 Africans. (Kelly, 2020). Therefore, the central argument from the project is that the true founding fathers of America did not emerge in 1776 but arrived enslaved in 1619. The report would continue to be expanded on and ultimately be awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

The Creation of the 1776 Committee

Standing in the White House press room on August 31, 2020, President Trump declared that the nation must restore "patriotic education" in schools to calm unrest in cities and counter lies about racism in the United States (Gaudiano, 2020). President Trump declared "Many young Americans have been fed lies about America being a wicked nation plagued by racism" (2020). He concluded his speech by stressing the need to restore patriotic education in the nation's schools. During his campaign for the 2020 election against Joe Biden, Trump would continue his rhetoric on this topic. On September 17, 2020 he called for the creation of a commission that would promote "patriotic education". Directly naming the 1619 project, President Trump called it "toxic propaganda, ideological poison that, if not removed, would dissolve the civic bonds that ties us together." He continued his attack by labeling the concept that systemic racism existed was a "form of child abuse" (Wise, 2020). Finally, on November 2, 2020, two days before the Presidential election, Trump signed an executive order establishing the "President's Advisory 1776 Commission." The commission would ultimately include 16 voting and 7 Ex-officio members.

The January 5th and 15th Meetings

The 1776 Committee would ultimately have two meetings ten days apart, with each meeting having a different tone. The January 5th meeting, one day before the January 6th riots started with a review of the executive order. During the meeting all members read pre-written statements. Ex-Officio member Brooke Rollins stressed Americans wanted and needed patriotic education. HUD Secretary Ben Carson, also an Ex-Officio member, quoted President Lincoln's Second Inaugural address in an attempt to connect Lincoln's vision that the 1776 founding fathers had placed common values on the society. He then stressed "every sin from our past is highlighted and every triumph is buried". He concluded that the lies of revision have been spread throughout the public school curriculum.

As the speeches from other members continued one after the other, the recurring theme was a returning to the founding of our country and the core values of the American Revolution. This could only be done through a study of the founding documents. One member even called for a re-emergence of Judeo-Christian values that had been a large part of United States history.

Voting member Jerry Davis, basically took the time he was allotted to promote his College of the Ozarks as a model for patriotic education. In an interesting shift in the meeting, Ms. Hart Gaines stated in the year 2000, National Standards of History were attempted to be created and was an attempt to erase the correct history. She said for 20 years we have not been teaching the wisdom of the past that “we have learned”. She stated all textbooks in the classrooms were “revision history” and she wanted the commission to influence textbook development. She concluded “how can we get the accurate textbooks back into the schools”. The meeting concluded with quotes from Abraham Lincoln and Director Spalding stated he was going to follow up with the commissioners to discuss ideas and report language.

The January 15th meeting, ten days later, struck a different tone. The energy of the previous meeting seemed to have escaped the members. Instead of stressing the future curriculum changes and ideas, the committee discussed if there would even be a committee under the incoming President Biden. The Chairman of the committee, Larry Arnn, stated Matthew Spalding, Executive Director, was putting the final touches on the report and would put all comments he had received into the final product. One member stated it was now up to local education leaders to carry the report’s findings forward. Many members stressed the need to “look to the Declaration of Independence to help reunite the country.” Former Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant, praised the work of the committee but stressed that there needed to be an effort to reach state education agencies and encourage them to implement the changes. In an odd turn Mr. McEwen attempted to address the verbiage of the draft report. However, Director Spalding interrupted him and stated this was a “draft version” and they were still working on the report. Director Spalding stated all draft material will be made available to the public. He then called for a vote to see if the committee members approved the draft materials so that they could proceed to draft and publication. Director Spalding then stated he would be in touch with individual committee members about the report as they finalized it.

The Report and Reactions

In a clear indication that the 1776 Report was a counter to the 1619 Project, the committee chose to release it on Martin Luther Kings Jr. Day (January 18, 2021) just like the 1619 Project did two years earlier. The 41-page report stressed the Declaration of Independence. When addressing slavery, the report called it an institution that had been more the rule than the exception throughout human history (p.10). They painted the founding fathers as attempting to change the institution of slavery that had gripped the world and therefore they were ultimately civil rights leaders (even though many owned slaves). Once again quoting the Declaration of Independence, the report stated the founding fathers included the passage “all men are created equal” signifies they understood slavery was “incompatible with that truth” (p.11). Ultimately the committee argued the founding of the republic by our founding fathers was a noble effort because it planted the seeds to the end of slavery. Therefore, ultimately, the founding fathers were abolitionists in their own right because their actions ultimately brought about an end of slavery (over 70 years and a Civil War later). The report would conclude by conducting a full attack on American universities which the authors claimed had produced “destructive scholarship.”

Ultimately this report faced immediate criticism by multiple groups. The American Historical Association noted the report had been written “hastily in one month after two desultory and tendentious hearings without any consultation with professional historians.” They continued that the report failed to engage any rich and vibrant bodies of scholarship. Historian Timothy Messer-Kruse concluded “If American Education was organized according to its blueprint it would look strikingly like the schoolrooms common in 1776, complete with rulers used primarily to rap the knuckles of students who answered their questions the wrong way” (Messer-Kruse, 2021)

Termination and Evolution of the Committee

On January 20, 2021, hours after he was sworn in, President Biden issued an executive order dissolving the 1776 Commission. The executive director, Matthew Spalding, announced the committee would operate in a private capacity and be housed at Hillsdale College. Ultimately the committee remained quiet until July 2021 when it released, on the school website, the Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum. The release was classified as “Phase 1” with more phases to come. At a continuation of a swipe at the New York Times, Dr. Kathleen O’Toole, the Assistant Provost of Hillsdale College stated the curriculum “comes from years of studying America, its history, and its founding principles, not some slap-dash journalistic scheme to achieve partisan political end through students.” (Hillsdale College, 2021)

The biggest turn of events coming out of the report occurred one year later in the state of South Dakota. Governor Kristi Noem announced in May 2021 she had signed the “1776 Pledge to Save our Schools”. This pledge had been created by a group of people who supported the 1776 report. A few months later in September 2021, South Dakota altered their education standards to resemble the Hillsdale 1776 curriculum. It was later discovered Governor Noem had recruited William Morrissey, a former Hillsdale professor of politics to develop the state social studies standards and paid him \$200,000.

Suggested Teaching Strategies

High school educators should shy away from assigning work on these projects without possessing the proper foundation of instruction. A strong foundation of teaching controversial topics with opposing viewpoints should be utilized. When addressing governmental reports such as the 1776 Report, educators must show the political motivations behind the need for a committee. When comparing the 1776 report with the 1619 Project, educators must also examine the origins of the 1619 Project and attempt to share the knowledge contained in the publication. Throughout the 1619 project oral histories are utilized. When addressing oral histories, the instructor should originally assign readings that will promote the students’ understanding of the importance of oral histories. Another critical technique comes when discussing historical events in the curriculum. For example, when the instructor is teaching about George Washington, he should ask the students what questions they would ask the late president if they could have the chance to personally interview him? This method of questioning about interviewing allows the students to put themselves in the perspective of an interviewer which is the basic premises of oral history. While instruction concerning oral pedagogy is important, teachers should not downplay discovery learning. It is best for the students to operate in a discovery method. By using intuition they are allowed to operate more freely.

Selected Educational Resources

Even though the events surrounding the reports/projects are relatively recent, two books have emerged which can assist educators in a better understanding of the 1619 project. Once a strong understanding of the 1619 project is obtained, the educator can review the 1776 report and compare and contrast. They are as follows:

Hannah-Jones, N., Roper, C., Silverman, I., & Silverstein, J. (2022). *The 1619 project: A new origin story*. Random House Large Print, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

The New York Times bestseller and NAACP Image Award Winner book that was a follow up to the New York Times 100 page original publication. The book attempts to go beyond the 1776 vs 1619 debate by presenting numerous other facts. The book is extremely thought provoking and allows for the reader to see the “big picture” as it relates to the 1619 project. The reader will leave this book with a stronger understanding of the role of slavery and how it has shaped our contemporary life.

Wilkerson, I. (2020). *Caste the origins of our discontents*. Random House.

The author points to an entire social structure as an unrecognized caste system that has its roots in slavery. While slavery is seen as a “sad, dark chapter”, it is done so to regulate it as a chapter in America’s history. Instead, the author argues, there is an underlying caste system that has followed throughout the history of the country. The conclusion of the author is America, as a whole, is viewed as racist. The book can be considered controversial because of an attempt to connect America’s racist past with Nazi Germany. However, the author navigates the waters of the controversy in a well researched manner.

Sample Lesson

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Students will compare and contrast the 1619 Project with the 1776 Report.
2. Students will use the reports to better understand institutional racism and how it can be combatted.

National Curriculum Standards

Culture and Cultural Diversity: Students will look at different groups of people develop social norms. Students will see how this development of society and culture can cause disagreements that lead to civil war. Students will also see how different groups of people can use economic conditions to rally as a political cause.

PROCEDURES

1. Review and discuss the 1619 Project.
2. Questions may include: What role does racism play in our society? Was the 1619 Project well received?
3. Discuss the roots of the 1776 Project

4. Talk about how the 1776 Project was published.
5. Bring up how the 1776 Project was hurriedly published at the end of Trump's Presidency.
6. Introduce the 1776 Report and show excerpts to the class.
7. Have the students break into groups to compare and contrast the two reports/projects.
8. Bring class back into whole group, have each table group share what they talked about.
9. Ask the students how can we as a society better understand systematic racism in order to combat it?

Conclusion

Over the past two years, two separate reports, the 1619 Project and 1776 Report have emerged. While both of these could be argued to have different motives, their existence is pushing curriculum in different directions. An educator can create a quality comparison/contrast lesson which will help the students understand the two different documents. From these discussions the classroom will begin to understand racism as it relates to the founding of a country.

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