Dear Members of the Texas State Board of Education,

We write as professors of U.S. history and related fields to respond to the wording of several of the Texas Social Studies and History standards, particularly those that relate to the issues of slavery, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights era. In 2010, the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE) rewrote the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) guidelines in a highly polarizing and hotly contested process.

Disregarding the input and testimony of several historians, the SBOE adopted standards that reflected the ideological commitments of board members rather than longstanding historical consensus. During the course of these discussions, one board member advanced the misguided notion that slavery had been an “after issue” or “side issue” of the Civil War. Board members also sought to diminish the role of women and minorities in the struggle for civil rights and to portray the resistance to civil rights legislation as a strictly partisan pursuit, ignoring key legislation and practices such as the Black Codes and subsequent Jim Crow segregation that followed. Now that these unwieldy and misleading standards have been in place for several years, the SBOE has recognized that they must “streamline” the TEKS and make them more coherent and consistent.

We hope your objective involves aligning the standards with historical truths grounded in primary document research and the work of practicing historians throughout the country. To this end, we commend the curriculum committee responsible for “streamlining” the TEKS for their hard work in clarifying some of the SBOE’s more troubling formulations. However, we urge the SBOE to go even further to bring the standards in line with settled historical knowledge. We take specific issue with the Grade 5 TEKS 4D and Grade 8 TEKS 8B, which highlight “states’ rights” as a cause of the Civil War. In doing so, the TEKS standards resurrect the “Lost Cause” myth, a long-discredited version of history first promoted in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to glorify the Confederate past and reinforce white supremacist policies such as the disenfranchisement of African-Americans and Jim Crow segregation. We are pleased to see that Stonewall Jackson is no longer suggested as a role model in the Grade 8 TEKS on “effective leadership in a constitutional republic.”

The TEKS as currently written also recast Civil Rights history in light of current political divisions. High school U.S. History TEKS 9G specifically singles out the “Congressional
bloc of southern Democrats” as the key “group” opposing civil rights legislation in what could only be construed as an effort to cast the Republican Party as the heroes of the Civil Rights era. Such a characterization drastically simplifies a history of bipartisan mobilization on both sides of the debate. It further ignores the role of a Southern Democrat, Lyndon Baines Johnson, who was instrumental in pushing legislation through a Democratic-controlled Congress.

As they are currently written, the TEKS standards promote a gross misrepresentation of history and leave Texas students ill-prepared to succeed in college level history courses. Perhaps more importantly, they deny our students a basic understanding of the historical roots of the most pressing contemporary problems. The morally unconscionable institution of slavery and the systematic denial of equal rights are difficult and shameful aspects of our collective past, but to minimize them in the historical education of Texas’ children is to hamstring our collective future.

Respectfully signed,

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