

6 Questions to ask on **Back to School Night**

A good, well-organized social studies curriculum seeks to teach students the key events, issues, and people in America's past, how our government works, our rights and responsibilities as citizens, and how our predecessors fought to defend democracy. How can parents tell whether their children are getting such a curriculum in school—one that is rich in historical content and provides a solid base for future learning? The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation suggests asking teachers and principals these six questions on back to school night.



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1. ***What are your goals for this course?***

Beware! If the goal is to “improve critical thinking skills” or “help children understand the world around them,” you can bet there’s little focus on vital historical content.

2. ***In this course, do you follow a chronology of history, or do you teach thematic units?***

Many educators belittle the chronological study of history—“what happened when?”—and prefer to base their curriculum on such “themes” as “community helpers” or various cultures. While some of that is valuable to the study of history, such themes do not give students the knowledge they need to understand the past and develop informed opinions about the present.

3. ***What textbook do you use for this course?***

When you find out which textbook is used, search on the Internet for an expert review of it. Or just read a few pages yourself. Look, in particular, to see how it handles key events like the American Revolution, the framing of the Constitution, World Wars I and II, etc. Many texts gloss over such events and the people who caused them, or

focus on what America did wrong—as judged by today’s standards—rather than helping children understand why things happened the way they happened, and when they happened.

4. Besides the textbook, what additional resources do you use in this course?

Over-reliance on the textbook is a bad sign, especially if the book is weak. It may signal a teacher with little personal knowledge of history. If the teacher does use additional resources, ask to see samples. Do they help explain complex historical lessons? Do they present a biased or balanced view of history?

5. How important is it to you that students get a multicultural view of history?

Listen closely to the answer. Multicultural history often overlooks or undervalues the Founders’ contributions and the chronological sequence of key historical events.

6. May I have a copy of the syllabus or “scope and sequence” for this course?

A detailed syllabus or (as educators often call it) “scope and sequence” should set forth just what the teacher plans to cover during the year, and how s/he plans to cover it. This is often more informative than the textbook alone and more complete than the verbal answers you get on “back to school” night.

Are you satisfied with the teacher’s (or principal’s) answers? Worried? Want to learn more? Be a fussy consumer. Don’t hesitate to press for more information, even to argue for a different approach. If the school won’t cooperate, supplement your child’s historical education at home. That’s a pretty good idea even when the school is doing a good job. Few schools today teach as much history as children need to learn. Want to learn more? Visit the website of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, at www.edexcellence.net, and see “Back to Basics: Reclaiming Social Studies.**” We’ll give you the inside scoop on what went wrong with social studies, and how to fix it.**

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