



THE CENTER FOR INFORMATION & RESEARCH ON CIVIC LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT | www.civicyouth.org

For Immediate Release
September 8, 2011

Contact Sarah Shugars
Office: 617-627-2029
Cell: 617-947-3548
Sarah.Shugars@Tufts.edu

9/11 now in Textbooks and Standards
Many states require teaching it, but textbook treatments are cursory,
and state standards require only basic information
Washington State and Vermont standards more substantive

Tisch College, Tufts University, Medford/Somerville, Mass.: The attacks of 9/11/01 happened ten years ago, when a typical fifth-grader was an infant. But the attacks are now taught in American schools, along with Lexington and Concord and Pearl Harbor. They are specifically mentioned in 21 states' official standards for social studies and described in many of the best-selling history and civics textbooks, according to a new study by Prof. Jeremy Stoddard, College of William & Mary, and Prof. Diana Hess, University of Wisconsin-Madison/Spencer Foundation, that was released today by CIRCLE at Tisch College, Tufts University. The study finds that 9/11 is a commonly required topic, but the events of that day and their context are very briefly described in textbooks. Most of the 21 state standards that explicitly include 9/11 (with some exceptions) require cursory understanding of the attacks--just a few key facts without any context.

The earliest textbooks and curricula published after 9/11/01 uniformly presented America as the victim of a uniquely devastating attack and presented rich personal stories of the victims and iconic images of rubble, firefighters, and the American flag. That approach has now shifted to more dispassionate, but very brief, descriptions. Relevant concepts such as terrorism are either not defined at all or are used in contradictory ways (as when terrorism is defined as an attack on civilians but the bombing of the USS Cole, a naval vessel, is cited as an example).

“In most of the curricula that we have analyzed, terrorism is treated as a concept that has an agreed upon and concrete definition,” said Prof. Stoddard. “In public and policy debates, there are real disagreements about what constitutes a terrorist or a terrorist attack, yet these debates are not reflected in most of the curricula and standards.”

On the whole, textbooks and most standards do not use the attacks of 9/11/2001 as opportunities for students to exercise higher-order skills such as understanding events in

historical context or deliberating about controversial issues. Students are mostly expected to memorize the basic facts about the event. By comparison, many of the supplemental curricula provided by nonprofit organizations include more robust narratives and multiple perspectives on issues of controversy, such as how democracies should strike the right balance between security and civil liberties.

The authors single out some state standards as exemplary. Washington State's standards focus on core skills and knowledge necessary for students to participate as citizens, such as being able to weigh evidence, take a position on an issue, and participate in a deliberation. Topics surrounding 9/11, such as the Patriot Act, are included as examples of contemporary issues to address in these deliberative activities.

Vermont takes a more global focus and includes human rights issues in its standard, which addresses "how different societies address issues of human interdependence." One part of the Vermont standard asks students to analyze the impact of a current or historic event, such as the invasion of Iraq, on human rights, and another asks students to evaluate the effectiveness of attempts to foster global cooperation, such as the effectiveness of the US led coalition formed to fight terrorism.

"The 10 year anniversary of 9/11 is an important teachable moment," said Prof. Hess. "However, simple memorization of what happened on that day is clearly inadequate. Some states have recognized this and added topics about 9/11 and its aftermath in the context of broader themes, important inquiry questions, and in a few cases, controversial political issues that students should deliberate."

The state social studies standards that refer to 9/11 are typically long documents that require the teaching of many events and concepts from the full sweep of American history. Many teachers report that the sheer number of topics required makes covering everything impossible. "9/11 was an event of enormous significance, but we must get away from putting everything important in state standards until they are unmanageably long lists," said CIRCLE director Peter Levine. "If we are going to list specific events that must be covered, the point should be to teach skills, concepts, or ideas rather than just requiring students to identify the event."

Available on the CIRCLE website are relevant provisions from all state standards: www.civicyouth.org/911-is-now-in-textbooks-and-standards.

###

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) conducts and promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. A part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University, CIRCLE has received funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts, Carnegie Corporation of New York and several other foundations.

The Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service is a national leader whose model and research are setting the standard for higher education's role in civic engagement education. Serving every

school of Tufts University, Tisch College creates an enduring culture that prepares students to be lifelong active citizens.

Tufts University, located on three Massachusetts campuses in Boston, Medford/Somerville and Grafton, and in Talloires, France, is recognized as one of the premier research universities in the United States. Tufts enjoys a global reputation for academic excellence and for the preparation of students as leaders in a wide range of professions. A growing number of innovative teaching and research initiatives span all Tufts campuses, and collaboration among the faculty and students in the undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs across the university's schools is widely encouraged.