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By [Betty Buginas](#) | October 20, 2010

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Tough Assignment for Teachers: Making Government and History Interesting

In the midst of local and state campaigns, it's a good time to reflect on what we want students to know about history and government.

At the beginning of every school year, I have my class fill out graphs about, among other things, their favorite subjects. Social studies always gets the fewest votes, often none. It's not surprising, though, to anyone who has read a social studies textbook.

I took a program last summer with the [UC Berkeley History-Social Science Project](#), and one thing we discussed was just how confusing the writing is in these texts.

This sentence appears in the fourth-grade social studies book used in El Cerrito schools, in the midst of a chapter titled, "The First People of California":

"We use it to make foods such as bread, pizza crusts, cookies, cakes and cold cereals." I discovered this sentence after finding several students had written that the Yokuts used acorns to make pizza. The "it" here is wheat, which the book was apparently trying to say that we use like the Yokuts used acorns. When publishers flash forward several centuries it does not help fourth-graders comprehend non-fiction text.

A big challenge to making the books interesting must surely be the [state standards](#). For fourth grade, which covers California geography and history, they say things like: "Describe the development and locations of new industries since the nineteenth century, such as the aerospace industry, electronics industry, large-scale commercial agriculture and irrigation projects, the oil and automobile industries, communications and defense industries, and important trade links with the Pacific Basin."

There are more than 30 blurbs like that for fourth grade alone. When you cover that much, it's difficult to include the kind of detail that makes a good story. And some material seems to have been deemed inappropriate for fourth graders. We never learn, for example, what the Donner Party had for dinner.

Teachers valiantly look for ways to make social studies more exciting. El Cerrito High used some clever role-playing activities even back when I was a student. Now PowerPoint and digital movies enhance student presentations in some classrooms.

Another approach is to stress primary sources such as photos and diaries, giving the students the opportunity to not only work like professional historians but also to make an end run around the rampant bias in history texts. Interestingly, new technology is

making it easier to access old stuff (As an example see [Calisphere](#), which allows free access to digitized California artifacts such as photographs, newspaper pages, diaries, and transcripts of oral histories.)

Some teachers deal with the complexity of the writing in the textbook by seeking out or creating simpler texts. The instructors in the UC program suggest instead we teach students how to read textbooks, reasoning that having to access this sort of text is unavoidable. For all the reading comprehension strategies we teach, they argue, we don't spend enough time actually deconstructing individual sentences for understanding.

This still leaves me with the larger question of what we most want students to know about government and history. I put this question to some of our local elected officials.

John Gioia, who represents El Cerrito on the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors, says it is important to encourage curiosity about current events and civic involvement. Gioia — an El Cerrito High graduate, son of a social studies teacher, and parent — says people need to understand that they have both a right and responsibility to be engaged in civic affairs.

Patricia Player, a retired high school government teacher and former school board member, who after many years in El Cerrito is moving to a nearby community, says, "I feel a good knowledge of our U.S. Constitution and why it sets up a form of government that has managed to allow the social and economic changes our nation has experienced over the 200 years of our history. Also, I think an understanding of how local/state government makes the federal system truly balanced, even though that balance shifts during different presidencies. Of course, civil rights and the courts are also important."

Glen Price, who lives and runs [a business in El Cerrito](#), and (I exaggerate only slightly) always seems to be working on one school-related campaign or another, offers these suggestions:

"As students, it is important for us to learn that our government truly needs to be created by and for the people," he says. "From history, we can learn about those people and movements that successfully changed their conditions for the better by organizing and working together. "

When Price's two daughters started school, he knew he wanted to get involved somehow. A state takeover of our school district and resulting layoffs and program cuts led him to run for school board. In addition to his nine-year stint on the board, he's a veteran of numerous campaigns that have taken him to Sacramento to lobby with people such as then-Assemblyman Tom Torlakson (who Price is now supporting for state superintendent of public instruction) as well as sending him regularly back to the streets of El Cerrito to go door to door with campaign literature. The efforts of Price and many others (including Player) led to the passage of the first bond measures passed in the district in more than 30 years, providing funds for projects such as the new El Cerrito High campus.

"All of us, adults and children," says Price, "need to keep learning about how we can come together most effectively to build the kinds of communities we can be proud of."

If you want to share your thoughts on the teaching of history and government, please add a comment. If there are issues you'd like to see tackled in future columns, please email your experiences and concerns. I'd love to establish contact with families and staff

of public and private schools serving El Cerrito. Two upcoming topics I'm particularly interested in getting input on are report cards and homework.