



## Newton Public Schools

100 Walnut Street  
Newton, MA 02460

Telephone  
(617) 559-6100

Fax  
(617) 559-6101

### **Overview of Newton's High School Curriculum From David Fleishman, Superintendent of Schools**

The Newton Public Schools value openness and critical thinking. One of the gifts we give our students is the opportunity to carefully listen to and debate different perspectives. Our children hear opinions and, especially now in the internet age, they are exposed to a multitude of viewpoints. As a result, teaching critical thinking is an increasingly important skill. We can present a range of perspectives, including those that are not widely accepted, and challenge students to examine evidence, debate the issues, and articulate their thoughts. In this way, students gain skills to assess the quality of an argument and the claims that are made.

With regard to the history curriculum in particular, our mission statement calls for students to “appreciate the historical and cultural influences that shape their individual identities, our national identity, and the cultures and countries that share our planet,” and to “learn to assess and interpret evidence, to understand change over time, to think logically and express themselves clearly.” While much of our material is factual, we also present a range of opinions and perspectives. Our educators work to ensure that students understand when they are receiving a point of view, as opposed to a proven fact. We do not teach students that they should agree with every perspective and point of view they encounter in our classrooms; we are focused on teaching students *how* to think, rather than *what* to think.

The high school curriculum begins with a two-year world history sequence—ninth grade is a survey of World History, covering 300 C.E. to 1775 followed by tenth grade World History, 1775-Present. In eleventh grade the focus is on United States history, pre-civil war to contemporary times with particular attention to the changing role of American political institutions. Grade twelve offers a variety of courses and electives on topics ranging from AP European History, to Comparative Governments, Psychology, Race, Class and Gender, and more.

The ninth grade history curriculum includes a survey of world history in which students begin their studies with the golden ages of empires in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas and continue on to the dawning of the Industrial Age. The ninth grade history curriculum covers the historical origins and basic beliefs of major world religions, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. We strive to teach majority and mainstream interpretations of all the religions covered in the ninth grade course, recognizing that all religions have sects and adherents who differ in their interpretations of the faith. Our students learn the origins of each religion and the development of that religion over time; we teach religion from a historical rather than a theological point of view.



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Several questions have been asked recently about our high schools' History curriculum. The following includes these questions and answers.

### **How do teachers in Newton decide what topics to teach and what materials to use?**

The topics of most classes in the Newton Public Schools are determined by the State curriculum frameworks and Newton's own curriculum documents, which are publically available. Course textbooks are chosen and purchased citywide, after a rigorous selection process involving teachers, students, and administrators. Supplemental teaching materials are gathered by teachers working in collaboration with their colleagues and supervisors.

### **What happens if parents or citizens have concerns about the curriculum?**

Questions or concerns about specific elements of the curriculum should be brought to appropriate administrators at the building level. These administrators review the concern, and investigate the issue. The administrator(s) then take whatever actions they consider necessary to ensure quality education for Newton students.

### **Is this sequence of events typical?**

Parents concerns are not frequent, but they do arise. Over the past few years, administrators have reviewed questions about curriculum in all major academic subjects. Sometimes the review results in changes, and sometimes it does not. In all cases, administrators are guided by their professional judgment along with the mission and values of the Newton Public Schools.

### **What is the "Arab World Studies Notebook" (AWSN), and how was it used in Newton's high schools?**

The *Arab World Studies Notebook* is a binder of supplementary teaching resources on Islam, the Islamic Empires of the middle ages and Arab society and culture. It was purchased by the Newton Public Schools in the mid-1990s, at a time when there were very few teaching resources on Islam available. The AWSN included both primary and secondary resources. Some teachers used some of the resources, and others used none.

### **What happened with the "Arab World Studies Notebook" in Newton's High Schools?**

In the fall of 2011, a parent at Newton South raised concerns about one of the readings from a secondary source in the AWSN. The reading was used by a 9<sup>th</sup> grade teacher during a lesson on women in Islam. The teacher highlighted a controversial statement in the reading and noted that it was a biased perspective. The teacher acted in a manner that is consistent with the way in which faculty teach perspective. After reviewing the reading with the 9<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, the History Department head decided to remove the reading. As far as we know, this article was not used by any faculty member at Newton North. During the winter, there was a further review of the AWSN and it was decided that it would no longer be used at Newton South. While it included primary sources that were of value to some faculty, there was a general sense that the materials were outdated. By the end of the 2011-2012 school year, a similar decision was made to remove the AWSN at Newton North High School.