

## Teaching Hard History: American Slavery in K-12 Education

- 1 WHEREAS,** Teaching the American institution of slavery comprehensively - its role in shaping the American economy, politics, law, culture, and its lasting effects on racial relationships – is essential to understanding American society; and
- 2 WHEREAS,** National PTA has identified the legacy of racial division as being embedded in the fabric of our nation, and experts assert that we can neither understand nor eliminate racial injustice in the present until we come to terms with the racial injustice in our past, beginning with slavery; and
- 3 WHEREAS,** Recent surveys indicate students and adults alike struggle on basic questions about American enslavement of Africans; and
- 4 WHEREAS,** Surveyed teachers are serious about teaching slavery, but there's a lack of deep coverage in the classroom; and
- 5 WHEREAS,** Commonly used textbooks in K-12 education fail to provide comprehensive coverage of slavery and enslaved peoples, and they sometimes even obfuscate and erase the realities of slavery; and
- 6 WHEREAS,** The California history-social science framework is an important resource for educators and developers of curriculum materials and covers several key concepts about American slavery, but lacks two: (1) how slavery shaped the fundamental beliefs of Americans about race, and (2) how enslaved and free people of African descent had a profound impact on American culture; and
- 7 WHEREAS,** School districts in California have significant flexibility to provide professional development and to choose instructional material aligned with the history-social science framework, and the framework is updated on a repeating cycle with community participation; now therefore be it
- 1 RESOLVED,** That the California State PTA and its units, councils and districts educate on the importance of a comprehensive and truthful understanding of the origin, evolution, abolition and legacy of American slavery; and be it further
- 2 RESOLVED,** That the California State PTA and its units, councils and districts seek and support national, statewide and local efforts and programs that support teachers' professional development in teaching slavery - to develop mastery of content, to be prepared to facilitate difficult dialogues, and to access available supports; and be it further

**3 RESOLVED,** That the California State PTA and its units, councils and districts seek and support legislation and/or regulatory processes to revise the California history-social science framework to fully integrate American slavery into U.S. History curriculum with detail, historical context and with connections to the present, including its lasting effects on racial relationships and the lasting cultural influence of enslaved and free people of African descent; and be it further

**4 RESOLVED,** That the California State PTA and its units, councils and districts seek and support legislation and/or regulatory processes, both at the state and local levels, to ensure that instructional materials include comprehensive coverage of slavery and enslaved peoples; and be it further

**5 RESOLVED,** That a copy of this resolution be sent to the National PTA and all state congresses requesting they take similar action.

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## Background Summary

In 2020, National PTA called on its members to move “beyond rhetoric” and “demand meaningful change to end institutional racism.” Crucial to such change is an understanding of the American institution of slavery and its legacy of racism – a legacy tied to the well-being of our children. As an organization that believes all students should receive a world-class education and works to secure the well-being of all youth, PTA must take action to improve the teaching of slavery in our schools.

A 2018 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that 97% of surveyed U.S. teachers agree with experts that teaching and learning about slavery is essential. Experts see knowledge of slavery as central “to any understanding of American society... [and] a necessary step in coming to terms with the legacy of race that the American past has bequeathed our students.” Yet students and adults struggle with even the most basic questions about slavery. The report called for deeper coverage in the classroom, better textbooks, and stronger curriculum to provide the detail and historical context students need to make sense of slavery’s origin, evolution, abolition and legacy. Even in recent years, some textbooks have fallen egregiously shy of the mark; 58% of teachers did not believe their textbook’s coverage of slavery was adequate, and one textbook notoriously referred to enslaved people as ‘workers.’

Armed with a solid and historically sound understanding of slavery, our students will be better positioned to understand their world and how it came to be. They will see that racial disparities in wealth, housing, health, the criminal justice system, and school discipline arose from “systems and structures that restrict choice and limit opportunity” – barriers that “were built on a foundation constructed during slavery.”

Our students will learn where the language and slurs they hear came from and why they persist.

Our students will understand why courageous movements of resistance and hope have arisen throughout American history and how students like themselves can help change the culture around them.

And they will understand not only the cruelties of slavery, but also the triumphs – the courage, resilience, resistance and creativity of enslaved peoples and their descendants, whose contributions profoundly shaped America.

With the authority of this resolution, PTA members could, for example:

- publish resources on PTA blogs and websites to raise awareness of the importance of teaching slavery;
- insist school districts provide curriculum materials and professional development that improve instruction about American slavery;

- encourage teachers to apply for PTA or other scholarships for continuing education in teaching slavery;
- write to textbook publishers urging comprehensive coverage of slavery and its legacy; and
- encourage parents, educators and community members to use the periodic revisions of California's history curriculum framework to institute higher expectations for learning about slavery.

American slavery is key to understanding the complexity of our past and who we are today. It is hard history, but history we can face boldly with the courage that comes from a nation-wide call to do so.

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Letters of Support:

ACLU (Northern & Southern California Chapters)  
Cherry Chase Elementary PTA  
Congregational Church Sunnyvale (UCC)  
Cumberland Elementary PTA  
Cupertino-Fremont-Sunnyvale Council of PTAs  
Homestead High School PTSA  
Northern California Nevada Conference UCC  
Monta Vista High School PTSA  
Regnart Elementary PTA  
San Miguel Elementary PTA  
Sixth District PTA