The College Board shouldn't monopolize how US history is taught

In Colorado's AP history battle, the democratic control of schools is at stake
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For the past few weeks, teachers and students in Colorado have demanded a say in how history is taught in the state’s public schools. The protests have been in response to a proposal last month by the Jefferson County school board to revise the Advanced Placement U.S. history (APUSH) curriculum framework to emphasize patriotism, the free market and respect for authority. The teachers and students replied that this account of history whitewashes injustice and the importance of civil disobedience.

But the Colorado protesters and their sympathizers across the country may be doing more harm than good by cementing the College Board’s virtual monopoly on how U.S. history is taught to college-bound students.

The controversy started when the College Board, which administers the Advanced Placement exams that high school students nationwide take at the end of each school year, released a draft of its new APUSH framework. This provoked a backlash among conservatives unhappy about what they saw as a too-negative assessment of the founding of the United States, among other things. This fall the College Board released the final draft, and the Jefferson County school board responded with its proposal, which sparked the student-teacher protests.

The national media have by and large presented this story as a clash between the forces of reaction and the forces of progress, between provincial
conservatives and scholars who acknowledge the role of women and minorities in U.S. history. While this narrative contains a grain of truth, it overlooks the question of who should decide what version of history should be taught in schools.

My concern is with the College Board’s attempt to foreclose debate about how communities teach history to college-bound high school students. It is not the details of the APUSH curricular framework that worry me but a private company’s push to usurp curricular decisions from locally elected school boards. What the fight is really about, then, is democratic control of schools.

No one person or group should hold a monopoly on something as valuable as how a community remembers its past or envisions its future.

In “The Human Condition,” the German political philosopher Hannah Arendt argues that storytellers, or historians, play a vital role in the community by determining what is remembered or forgotten about political events. Historians not only recount what happened; they also signal to the community what kinds of events are worth celebrating or not. For Arendt, one of the central tasks of politics — what she calls the vita activa — is fostering debate about the stories a community tells about itself.

A statement that the College Board released last month read, “The College Board’s Advanced Placement program supports the actions taken by students in Jefferson County, Colorado, to protest a school board member’s request to censor aspects of the AP U.S. history course.” One of the unfortunate consequences of recent Supreme Court jurisprudence (see Citizens United) is that private groups have taken to using First Amendment language to defend their economic interests. The College Board owns APUSH and wants to prohibit local school boards from revising its product.

Ironically, the College Board wants to inhibit people from questioning or protesting its version of U.S. history.
Of course, there are elements in the APUSH curriculum framework that may be as good as or better than what the Jefferson County school board would choose. But that is not a reason to prohibit school boards from having a say in the U.S. history curriculum. In “Federalist No. 51,” James Madison wrote, “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition.” If men were angels, there would be no need for checks and balances, but because humans tend to favor people who agree with them, it is necessary to distribute power widely throughout society. In this case, the ambition of the Jefferson County school board counteracts the ambition of the College Board. No one person or group should hold a monopoly on something as valuable as how a community remembers its past or envisions its future.

Here is a thought experiment for people who still favor the revised APUSH curriculum framework over the Jefferson County school board’s alternative: If Julie Williams, the outspoken member of the Jefferson County school board behind the revision proposal, became president of the College Board, how much power would you want her to have? This consideration may help us gain appreciation for Arendt’s and Madison's arguments for why communities should have the ongoing power to determine what history they will teach their young people.

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