

The K12 Virtual Primary School History Curriculum:

A Participant's-eye View

Report

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Introduction

Imagine a first grade classroom: Anywhere, USA, circa 2004. The teacher has explained that ancient Egyptians believed that amulets would fight off evil spirits, and so these amulets or charms were tucked inside the wrapping of the embalmed body to protect the mummy in the next life. The teacher tells the first graders that one type of amulet, a certain beetle called a scarab, represented a person's soul and was a symbol of life after death in ancient Egypt. She tells them about some other charms: that the eye was the symbol of protection and that the lotus flower kept evil spirits away. The teacher then gives the 6-year-old students a coloring sheet with these different symbols, and she invites them to make their own scarabs out of clay—to create objects to keep themselves safe from danger.¹

Plenty of adults would be very disturbed by this type of a lesson; after all, the American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom reports that the Harry Potter series has topped the list of books most challenged for the past four years—because they depict wizardry and magic.

Yet the above lesson was not from a progressive classroom but from a “back-to-basics curriculum” marketed to home-schooling families by K12 Inc., a company headed by former US Education Secretary William J. Bennett. There is an irony here: while families who choose to home school their children do so out of diverse motives, a

significant percentage are driven by the desire to inject a more openly religious and values-based education into the curriculum. Bennett himself has, since leaving office in 1992, championed a return to “virtue” and “values” in the education of American children. To the extent that religiously conservative homeschoolers choose Bennett’s K12 curriculum (and no data are available to show the ideological makeup of the curriculum’s users), however, this group would appear to be disregarding the fact that it introduces the occult, superstition, and magic. That is the least of the curriculum’s problems, however. As we will see, it includes much sex and gore.

The lack of moral compass is a curious phenomenon. As the *Washington Monthly* noted, for more than 20 years, as a writer, speaker, government official, and political operative, William J. Bennett, who heads K12 and directs the curriculum, “has been a commanding general in the culture wars,” making a cottage industry of merchandise tie-ins and a PBS cartoon series out of bully pulpit on virtue.² Besides his grants from conservative foundations, Bennett collects \$50,000 per appearance on the lecture circuit.

In “Seizing This Teachable Moment,”³ posted on the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation Website as part of a response to September 11, 2001, Bennett writes, “children ought to learn about right and wrong. For too long, so-called sophisticates have said that right and wrong are matters of opinion, of personal preference, of one’s own taste.” Bennett goes on to denounce the “intellectually dishonest” who argue “that there is no such thing as evil.”⁴

Yet the K12 curriculum, relentless in its presentation of map skills, warriors, and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, rarely provides a moral message about some of the appalling historical events it includes. Kindergartners get Andrew Carnegie as an ethical

model; first and second graders get warriors. Second graders are instructed to trace Hannibal's route on a map rather than consider the implications of his use of elephants. First graders get the Trojan War, with the objectives of the lesson being: *Find Greece on the map of ancient Greece. Find Troy. Identify Priam as the King of Troy. Identify Odysseus as a Greek hero.* That's it. Greek and Roman myths provide the "story" in "history": tales of incest, rape, and murder. No moral comment is provided, other than to remind children that this is fiction, not fact. Throughout the curriculum, history is stripped of moral import and objectified as discrete facts to be memorized.

Background

Go to K12.com and you will read:

William J. Bennett, along with other leaders who are passionate about education, founded K12 in 1999. The goal was to create an excellent, traditional program in education—one that would empower parents to be effective teachers and empower students to explore the world around them thoughtfully.⁵

The Website informs parents that K12 "provides everything you need to give your child an excellent education at home, from lessons and materials to planning tools and assessments."⁶

Bennett has written skeptically of technology's educational value. In *The Educated Child*, published in 2000, he asserted: "When you hear the next pitch about cyber-enriching your child's education, keep one thing in mind: so far, there is no good evidence that most uses of computers significantly improve learning."⁷ Bennett's own critique, however, didn't discourage him from launching K12 Inc. with \$10 million in

seed money from Knowledge Universe, Inc., the education conglomerate based in Menlo Park, California, and owned by former junk-bond king and convicted felon Michael Milken.⁸

William Bennett

In examining K12, one must start with William Bennett. Bennett is a Distinguished Fellow at The Heritage Foundation, supported by grants from the Olin Foundation.⁹ On the Empower America Website, Bennett is characterized as “one of our nation’s most informed, well-respected, and tenacious advocates of bold education reform. . . .”¹⁰

Bennett is the author or editor of: *The Book of Virtues for Young People: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, *The Children’s Book of Heroes*, *Our Sacred Honor: Words of Advice from the Founders in Stories, Letters, Poems, and Speeches*, *The Children’s Book of Faith*, *The Children’s Book of America*, *Our Country’s Founders: A Book of Advice for Young People*, and *The Children’s Book of Home and Family*. As the *Wall Street Journal* noted, “Give him 10 old books and behold, he returns with five new ones.” Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post* called William Bennett “The Martha Stewart of Morality.”

K12: The Media Gives a Pass on the Unexamined Curriculum

In August 2001, Eleanor Chute, Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* Education Writer, credited Bennett with taking “a hands-on role in the program.”¹¹ Bennett told the newspaper: “I am now convinced with the program we developed we are using technology in the right way.” Bennett insisted that “students in the early grades will

spend 75 to 80 percent of the time off-line, with books and hands-on activities. Lessons will be adapted to the needs of each student.”

No mention is made of how much time Mom must spend online to print out all the material. Furthermore, the claim that lessons are adapted to the needs of each student is not borne out by the facts. If a student misses more than 20 percent of a lesson assessment, the parent is told the student must repeat the lesson. If the student again misses more than 20 percent, the instruction is to repeat the lesson again. And again. The so-called “needs of each student” is an endless loop of repetition of the same material. There are no suggestions as to what a parent might do if children don’t understand a concept; instead, a *Teacher Tips* section presents quirky bits of arcane additional information—such as the meat curing practices of the Huns.

Writing in *Education Week*,¹² Michelle Galley notes that a student enrolled in an online school managed by K12 receives, according to Bror Saxberg, the senior vice president for learning and content for K12, “a computer, a printer, and four to six boxes—or 90 pounds—of materials, including workbooks, textbooks, and ‘manipulatives’ to study language arts, mathematics, science, history, art, and music.” Despite the emphasis on quantity, it appears no reporter has examined the quality of the goods. While public schools are rated by standards and assessments, K12 is rated by the *weight* of goods received.

The Home-schooling Disconnection

A casual spectator is likely to assume that K12’s obvious sales targets are the parents of the 1.5 to 2 million homeschoolers; in the spring of 2003, K12 did make a big push to target this group in certain states as potential users. Homeschoolers in Ohio, for

example, were bombarded with slick mailings announcing an April K12 Innovation in Education Expo in Columbus. Nonetheless, all evidence suggests that homeschoolers are far from the primary customers K12 seeks. Rather, the company is after public money:

K12 is not a school; it is a company that provides a research-based curriculum, innovative instructional tools, and top-quality school management services to schools across America. K12 also serves home-schooling families by making a portion of its curriculum available for direct purchase by consumers.¹³

K12 is mainly interested in offering management services to schools; home-schooling families interested in the curriculum but not willing to sign up with these schools appear to be of secondary interest. After I purchased K12 curriculum materials, messages from K12 told me that, as an individual subscriber, I was part of the K12 Online School (OLS). Indeed, speaking in August 2003 to the *St. Petersburg Times*, Bennett said of K12: “This isn’t home schooling...Florida Virtual Academy is a public school.”¹⁴ K12 receives \$4,800 for each student from Florida taxpayers. Students are required to log 900 hours of academic work. To receive reimbursement from the state, K12 must demonstrate that the children enrolled showed one year’s academic growth: Students will be expected to take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) at the end of the year.

In seeking public reimbursement, K12 has in fact alienated itself from some homeschoolers, with some home-schooling associations waving warning flags about getting involved with the company. The Ohio Home Education Coalition (OHEC), for one, is concerned about the way K12 links home schooling with the company’s publicly

funded charter schools. ¹⁵ Bennett denies any such linkage,¹⁶ but as OHEC observes, the first sentence in the pamphlet for K12’s publicly funded Ohio virtual charter school is that attendees to the Education Expo will “Meet other Ohio Virtual Academy (OHVA) families, staff, interested parents, and K12 home-schooling families.” In short, the skeptics suggest, homeschoolers who join a Virtual Academy should be advised that once they accept their 90 pounds of goods from K12, they and their children will be under the thumb of the state. As the Wisconsin Parents Association (WPA), a support organization for homeschoolers in the state, points out, people who enroll in public e-schools must:

- “Keep extensive records and report on the hours of study each day for each child.
- Comply with state standards in education.
- Take state-mandated tests, which determine their curriculum, since students have to study what will be on the tests.
- Work individually with each child, since subject matter is different for each grade.¹⁷

The WPA has taken a position that so-called virtual charter schools should instead be labeled “public e-schools” and has issued a report charging that Bennett’s involvement with them “undermines home schooling.”¹⁸

K12-linked Virtual Academies in other states actively define themselves as public schools and acknowledge they are operating under regulations applying to public schools. The Ohio Virtual Academy Website, for example, includes a legal notice:

The Ohio Virtual Academy is a community school established under Chapter 3314 of the Revised Code. The school is a public school and students enrolled in

and attending the school are required to take proficiency tests and other examinations prescribed by law. In addition, there may be other requirements for students at the school that are prescribed by law. Students who have been excused from the compulsory attendance law for the purpose of home education as defined by the Administrative Code shall no longer be excused for that purpose upon their enrollment in a community school.¹⁹

Most parents who choose to teach their children at home do so in order to avoid this very kind of bureaucracy and government intrusion into their lives.

Getting Started with the K12 Curriculum

The acknowledgments page of K12's history curriculum indicates that "Portions of K12's history program for Grades 1 and 2 were written by Susan Wise Bauer." Bauer is the Creative Director of Peace Hill Press, which publishes her series *The Story of the World, Vol 1 and 2*. In 2003, W. W. Norton published Bauer's *The Well-Educated Mind: A Guide to the Classical Education You Never Had*.

Apparently, Bauer doesn't always use her own curriculum. In a diary entry titled *Home School Day*, she gives a breathless account of her day with her four children, ages 9, 7, 4, and infant. The narrative is amusing, with whiny kids and chocolate smears. The history lesson reveals plenty:

11:30 [The baby] is happy, so I put everyone on the sofa and start history. Today we're working on our Presidents Memorization Project—we color pictures of two presidents from the Bellerophon coloring book, Christopher looks them up in the encyclopedia and writes down two interesting facts about each president, and we

all chant the presidents in order. We're up to Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren. I tell Christopher and Ben to STOP TALKING UNTIL THEIR PICTURES ARE COLORED.²⁰

Bauer mentions later that her husband is reading Jean Fritz's *Can't You Make Them Behave, King George* with the children. I want to call up Bauer and ask, "Hey, where does this *Presidents Memorization Project* fit in with the K12 history curriculum?" Answer: it doesn't. K12 Students get Shamshi-Adad, Lei Zu, Amenhotep, and the Library of Nineveh, for starters. Her own kids get Jean Fritz and we get the Code of Hammurabi.

The reliance on coloring books, though, carries over to the K12 curriculum. The hapless K12 parent waits for an activity to download in a PDF file—only to find yet another quite dreadful coloring book page to print out. These pages are dull, lifeless, and pedantic. They detract from the lessons.

Technology Overview

Although one of K12's selling points is its use of technology, a huge technology problem is that periodically the user cannot get into the K12 site. On May 23, 2003, K12 explained it thusly:

The K12 Online School (OLS) relies on a number of free software packages, or "plugins," to display information to our home-schooling families. Since most online computer applications are constantly being upgraded, users sometimes discover that they are unable to view certain files. This is usually due to the fact that they have not updated their computers with the latest version of the software.

This was the first I heard that I was part of a school. In desperation, I phoned K12—and was told that to enter their site I had to remove all cookies from my computer (a major annoyance to anyone who regularly orders books from Amazon.com or visits the *New York Times*). And the people giving advice at K12 insist that it is my computer that’s causing the problem, not their system. (They must receive many such complaints, judging from the fact that they have form letters to respond to them.) In August 2003, I complained about not being able to log on—to which the automatic reply was:

There is a dangerous computer virus traveling over the Internet that is impacting many homes and businesses throughout the world, including some of you, our K12 PC users. . . . If you are unable to log onto our K12 Online School, that may be a symptom that your PC is already infected with this virus. . . .

In early November, 2003, the K12 site was down for a few days with what were termed “systems issues.” The “issues” included losing student work. KU kept sending out messages asking parents to be patient. Then came this message:

From: “OLS-Errors” <ols_errors@k12.com>

To: “OLS-Down-110603-2” <ols_errors@k12.com>; “OLS-Down-110603-2” <ols_errors@k12.com>; “OLS-Down-110603-2” <ols_errors@k12.com>; “OLS-Down-110603-2” <ols_errors@k12.com>; “OLS-Down-110603-2” <ols_errors@k12.com>; “OLS-Down-110603-2”

This went on and on—filling three pages. Another glitch: K12 Virtual Academies are named in the Fujitsu Class Action suit for failure of hard drives on the computers they lend participants in the Virtual Academies.²¹

Of greater technological concern is K12's failure to use computers for anything other than a delivery system of workbook-style pages resembling the old filmstrips from the 1950s. The graphic presentations couldn't be duller or uglier.

The pictures resemble static old filmstrips, and the program is cheap about the use of even these paltry illustrations. Typically, a "reading room" presentation repeats one picture on three screens—no matter what is going on in the text. A case in point is in the story of Cincinnatus (a Roman farmer briefly appointed dictator about 450 years before the birth of Jesus). The text tells readers that Cincinnatus was a poor working man; the picture shows him behind two oxen pulling a plow. On the next screen the picture is repeated, although the text is about fierce men plundering the countryside. Page 3 repeats the same image of Cincinnatus and the oxen, yet the text tells us: "But one morning, five Roman horsemen came riding down the road from the mountains. They rode with great speed, and both men and horses were covered with dust and blood. The guard at the gate shouted to them as they galloped in: 'Why are you riding like this? What has happened to the Roman army?'"

The picture finally changes on screen 4. Cincinnatus is moving away from the plow and someone is bringing him a robe. Soldiers are rushing up to him. But the text is all about the soldiers' experience near Rome; Cincinnatus isn't mentioned. Screen 5 shows the same picture, while the text tells of soldiers telling their tale to senators, who are worried. Someone says, "Send for Cincinnatus." The picture finally becomes relevant to the text with the last sentence on the page, when we learn that Cincinnatus was in the field plowing when his aid was sought. Screen 6 repeats the picture, and here we finally learn that it is his wife bringing him a cloak.

Screen 7 shows Cincinnatus sitting on his horse (oddly, the cloak is not in sight), with soldiers on horseback following. Screen 8 repeats the same image, yet the text reports he saved Rome and then returned home to plow.

One might reasonably suppose that someone seeking to hold the interest of children so young would at least strive to illustrate many more of the story development points, and choose more dynamic images.

On the rare occasions when K12 does recommend that a student view Internet sites, the results can be bizarre. Here's a sample from the kindergarten Language Arts curriculum. While reading the story "Lion at School," the student is directed to the Lion Research Center (<http://www.lionresearch.org/main.html>). Visit the site and you can read a study on lion manes that examines the question of whether longer or darker manes attract female lions. The material, however, is clearly written for a scientifically literate, adult audience—people for whom *Scientific American* is bedtime reading—not primary-age children and their parents. There are, however, features at the site arguably more accessible to the curriculum's target audience, such as the recorded sound of a lion roaring. The K12 directions give no hint of this, and it's doubtful that many parents and 5-year-olds will plow through the research to find the roar.

History Curriculum for Grades K, 1, and 2

The K12 history curriculum is a pumped-up version of the curriculum E. D. Hirsch, Jr. outlined in his *What Your __ Grader Needs to Know* series. The series is based on the premise that children can and should be taught the origins of classical Western Culture starting in the earliest years in school. Hirsch's critics contend that his proposals stand in stubborn opposition to what is known as *developmentally appropriate practice*

(DAP) —the philosophy that children learn more effectively in environments that allow them to work independently and with each other to construct their own knowledge, rather than in settings in which teachers “strictly define what students need to learn and how they will learn it.”²² Despite research supporting DAP,²³ Hirsch regards it with disdain.²⁴ And so, we get the Code of Hammurabi for first graders:

An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. If a man puts out the eye of another man, put his own eye out. If he knocks out another man’s tooth, knock out his own tooth. If he breaks another man’s bone, break his own bone.

These concrete images may give first graders nightmares.

In her denunciation of developmentally appropriate curriculum, Diane Ravitch lamented the absence of mythology, legends, biographies, hero tales, and stories from the social studies curriculum.²⁵ K12 fills this perceived gap, delivering myths filled with incest and infanticide, endless accounts of wars, biographies of Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan, and the story of Caesar being killed by 23 of his friends. (In the Hirsch version, it was 23 enemies, but K12 insists they were friends.)

K12 History for Kindergartners: An Overview

The entire first half of the kindergarten course is geography. Right off, the lesson objective is to “recognize a globe as a model of the Earth and a world map as a flat model of the globe.” The small inflatable globe that is shipped out from K12 is woefully inadequate for such an enterprise; but, the real question is: What have you got when you’ve got a 5-year-old who can recite that a globe is a model of the earth? K12 ignores such issues, which have to do with the nature of childhood, cognitive development, and

the purpose of schooling; instead, the curriculum relentlessly pushes ahead with eliciting memorized replies to adult questions.

Objective: Recognize a globe as a model of the Earth.

Assessment: What is a globe?

Answer required for mastery: A globe is a model of the Earth.

Here's a typical K12 lesson activity. In the "Continent Echo Song," the adult names a continent, and the child repeats it:

Adult: North America

Child: North America

Adult: South America

Child: South America

Adult: Antarctica

Child: Antarctica

And so on. "Show Joe how to find the North Pole and the South Pole. Have him put his finger on each and say its name." This is a have-your-dog-heel approach to primary education.

While studying China, Joe is invited to find the year of his birth and his animal sign on the zodiac: *Discuss Joe's animal sign. Talk about the positive attributes of the*

animal. The directions indicate: “*Don’t take the zodiac signs too seriously—just have fun!*” Yet the lesson seems dubious on various grounds. For starters, how does a 5 - year-old feel about having the rat as his sign? Just what *are* the positive attributes of the rat? The snake? The boar? Does anyone at K12 care about the misery of the little kid who finds out he was born in the year of the rat? Or the snake?

Hirsch and K12 both admit that the story of George Washington and the cherry tree is a legend, and both suggest it nonetheless provides a moral lesson, but K12’s account is filled with colorful detail. The lesson here is that history can be distorted—and lied about—if it suits a moral-political agenda.

I complain incessantly about the tiny pictures Joe is asked to color. Finally, with Eleanor Roosevelt, we get a big picture: two bare feet covering the entire page. Joe is told that people often said Eleanor left behind golden footprints. As Joe’s teacher, I am supposed to help him figure out what this means. Then he can glue gold glitter onto the big bare feet on the page. Kindergartners may well find the glitter fun, but I wonder about the metaphor: will they remember Eleanor as a committed leader, or as a woman with huge feet?²⁶

Technology

On occasion, rare occasion, a computer resource is mentioned in a lesson—a URL that takes the student out of K12 and into the World Wide Web. For example, for the lesson on directions and compass rose study, the U.S. Naval Observatory site *Complete Sun and Moon Data for One Day* is recommended.²⁷ I’ve never known a kindergartner who’d want to know about “times of sunrise, sunset, moonrise, moonset, transits of the Sun and Moon, and the beginning and end of civil twilight, along with information on the

Moon's phase." Not knowing the term "civil twilight," I went in search of its meaning: *The period of twilight beginning (or ending) when the center of the (refracted) Sun is more than 6° below the horizon (as distinguished from Astronomical Twilight, Nautical Twilight, and Twilight).*

Call me chicken, but I decided to pass on sharing this information with Joe.

The Internet recommendation for the unit on Junipero Serra (a Spanish Franciscan who founded California's first Catholic missions) is *California Mission History*, where one can visit the gift shop and buy a recording of *A Choir of Angels II: Mission Music* by Zephyr (<http://www.californiamissions.com/cahistory/index.html>).

Here's some sample text from the Website: "Between the two dates [1493 and 1769], there is an interval of almost 300 years during which the mission system grew to be a philosophy of human rights, put forward and defended by the religious orders, and bitterly opposed by the secular elements among the colonists."²⁸

K12 First Grade History

The first three lessons in the K12 history curriculum review geographic content from the kindergarten curriculum: name the continents and major oceans, review directions on a map, and so on. Then begins a rather mind-boggling curriculum for a 6-year-old: History from the Stone Age to Alexander the Great (Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, China, India).

Technology

If technology was ill-used in the kindergarten unit, it's barely used at all in first grade; the first grader is supposed to get all necessary information from the stagnant

words and pictures on the K12 site. In one of its very few Internet offerings, the lesson introducing Canaan and Ancient Israel recommends the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology site, which includes activities for children 8 to 12 (http://www.museum.upenn.edu/new/edu/kids/kids_main.shtml).

Getting Started

For parents who may not feel confident to teach a curriculum that extends from the Stone Age in 5000 B.C. to ancient India in 200 B.C., including the Egyptians, the Israelites, Mesopotamia, ancient Greece, India, and China, K12 says: “Don’t worry. The K12 program does not assume that you have extensive preparation in either world or American history. Rather, lessons are designed to provide background knowledge as you proceed.” K12 provides a script to make this happen:

- Have Mary Beth locate the Fertile Crescent on the map you printed (from a PDF file).
- Ask Mary Beth to point to the Mediterranean (med-ih-terr-AY-nee-an) Sea, the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea, and the Red Sea.
- Have Mary Beth practice saying the names aloud with you.
- Identify the Nile River. Tell Mary Beth that the Nile River flows into the Mediterranean Sea.

After more of this type of adult-directed lesson with parroted student answers, Mary Beth takes an assessment:

- Did Mary Beth find the Nile River on the map?
- Did Mary Beth locate the Egyptian Empire along the Nile?

- Did Mary Beth answer the question: What does the flooding of the Nile leave behind?

If Mary Beth misses one question, the parent receives this message: *The lesson should be redone to ensure mastery of this lesson's objectives.* If she repeats the assessment and still misses one, the instructions are to repeat again—to ensure mastery. In a classroom, an experienced teacher will give children who didn't understand the material *alternatives*—giving children a variety of activities that would come at the material from other modes of learning, so they might better comprehend the concepts covered in the materials. Such strategies would reflect multiple intelligence theory pioneered by Howard Gardner.²⁹ With K12, if one insists on mastery, the only option is to repeat the same lesson again and again.

The Story in History: Infanticide and the Killing Fields

In its promotional material, K12 emphasizes that it is putting the “story” back in “history.” And what story do they tell? Isis and Osiris. Call me conservative, but I'm not going to read my 6-year-old a story about a guy tricked into trying out a coffin for size, being thrown into the river, and drowning. I don't care if he does come back to life; the story is too scary for first graders. The K12 story writer explains, “And that's why the Nile overflows every year—because it remembers that Osiris came back to life from the dead.” Most 6-year-olds won't get this grand symbolism or the idea that this is myth rather than natural history; what they'll get is that a guy climbed into a coffin and drowned. Such developmentally inappropriate subject matter is characteristic of the K12 history curricula. In their relentless devotion and determination to present history

chronologically, the authors of the curricula ignore the student's level of understanding. Chronology trumps common sense.

Because this is history as chronology, Mary Beth learns that Sargon, a trusted servant to the king of Mesopotamia, schemed to make friends with powerful people, especially the commander of the army. Sargon then persuaded the army to kill the king and make him, Sargon, the ruler. Mary Beth then learns that Sargon fought more than 50 wars, conquering all of Sumer, the southern part of Mesopotamia. Then he conquered the northern part. Mary Beth is told that when an army makes the people do what they say, it's called a military dictatorship, "and that is a bad thing."

Mary Beth gets a coloring sheet to fill in details showing what she thinks Sargon might have looked like. On the assessment for the unit, Mary Beth is asked to point to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers on a map and to define military dictatorship. On an outline map activity, she is to label the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and color the ancient land of Mesopotamia green. She is to write, "Sargon unites Mesopotamia" somewhere on the map.

Next come the biblical begats:

In Canaan, Abraham had a son named Isaac, and Isaac had a son named Jacob. Jacob didn't have just one son. He had 12! Each one of those 12 sons had a big family, too. Altogether, Jacob's sons and their families made up a whole new nation, called Israel. Today, the Israelites are called Jews, and their religion is called Judaism.

Here's the Teacher Tip: "You can find the 11 names of Jacob's other sons in the Book of Genesis." No chapter and verse provided.

K12 provides a puzzling coloring sheet of a family tree: all these Israelites are pictured standing in a tree.

The parent is told that this lesson discusses the development of religion as a part of world history. The objectives are to identify Judaism as the religion of Abraham and to know that the followers of Judaism believe in one God. This "one god" concept is important. Over and over it is emphasized that other peoples believed in multiple gods. The materials don't explain what the first grader is to make of a pharaoh killing all the male babies or of a baby's mother putting it in a basket and setting it adrift on the Nile River. Can anyone deny that this is very alarming information for a 6-year-old?

Then we move on to the story of Solomon, the wise king, who only threatened to slit a baby in half; and Perseus, whose grandfather put him and his mother into a chest and tossed it into the sea.

Is It History or Jerry Springer?

K12 provides a 13-minute CD recording of the legend of Perseus and Medusa that is straight out of Jerry Springer. Here's a recap: wanting to get rid of his daughter Danae and infant grandson Perseus (because he'd heard from the oracle that he'd be slain by a grandson), Acrisius put them in a chest and threw it into the sea. Danae and Perseus were rescued by a fisherman, who fell in love with Danae and married her,³⁰ raising Perseus (the result of Danae's seduction by Zeus) as his own son. When Perseus reached manhood, Polydectes, the local king, noticed that Danae, still married, was a fine looking

woman. To get Perseus out of the way, Polydectes sent him on an adventure, telling Perseus if he killed Medusa he would be “the most famous in all the world.”

Cold, cruel, uncaring Medusa lived with her two sisters, the Gorgons. Instead of hair, twisting, writhing snakes grew from her head. To make a very long story short, Perseus prayed to the gods for help, cut off Medusa’s head, and carried it back to Polydectes in a bag. Along the way he killed a horrible sea monster that was going to eat Andromeda, a maiden who was chained to a rock and left to die because her mother had angered Poseidon. Back at Polydectes’ palace, Perseus took Medusa’s head out of the bag, and held it high. Looking at the hideous head caused Polydectes and his army to turn to stone. And Perseus and Andromeda lived happily ever after.

What a story for a 6-year-old! And I left out the more gruesome details read with dramatic emphasis on the CD: boy born with no father, infanticide, adultery, magic, and multiple slaughters.

Then there’s the Trojan War. Think about the adultery and mayhem there. After studying Athens and the creation of democracy, first graders move on to the Greeks defeating the Persians at Marathon—seven pages of battle in the K12 online Reading Room! And on to the battle at Thermopylae in 480B.C. Mary Beth gets a coloring sheet of fierce warriors to color—two on horseback, two on foot.

But the study of Greece is not all perversions and war; first graders learn about Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. They are asked to ponder: *Suppose one of the Greek philosophers visited the world today. What new questions do you think he would ask?*

After the brief philosophical respite, it's back to wars: Peloponnesian Wars—with lots of warriors to color. Then we move on to India: Hinduism, Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, Asoka, Mohenjo-Daro, the Ramayana.

How is a parent to transmit to a 6-year-old Eastern religious concepts about the great spirit that lives in all things, including gentle cows, biting insects, silent rocks, rushing rivers, and twinkling stars? K12 doesn't offer any suggestions, but instead moves right along: *Locate the Ganges River on a map*. K12 seems to think it important that Mary Beth distinguish whether Siddhartha Gautama was a king or a prince. This is a pedagogical ploy used throughout: when the curriculum threatens to drown both student and parent, give them some definitions to memorize. The success of the curriculum is judged by how many definitions are parroted back.

K12 Second Grade History

History for second graders starts out with a review of geography basics: Name the seven continents, define ocean, and state that there is much more water than land on Earth. Then Annie defines: *What is history?* and *What is archeology?* Inappropriate as such an exercise is (how many adults could answer those questions?), it may be the only sane part of the second grade curriculum. The relentless chronological approach begun in Grade 1 continues. Here is a partial list of material for which children are supposed to “demonstrate mastery”: Romulus and Remus, Cincinnatus, Roman Gods and Goddesses, Rome's War with Carthage, Hannibal and his War Elephants, from Caesar to Augustus, the Birth of Jesus, Nero, Mount Vesuvius, Constantine and the Christian Emperor, Attila the Hun, Constantinople, Justinian, Theodora, Hagia Sophia, the Barbarians, Angles and Saxons in Britain, King Arthur, Life in a Monastery, Charlemagne, Muhammad and the

Beginning of Islam, Ibn Sina: The Boy Who Loved to Learn, Viking Warriors on the Move, The Normans Invade England, the Feudal World, Building a Cathedral, Eleanor of Aquitaine, the Crusades, Richard the Lion-Heart and Saladin, The Legend of Robin Hood, King John and the Magna Carta, The Hundred Years War, Joan of Arc, The Black Death, Medieval African Empires, Medieval China, Buddhism, Genghis Khan, Marco Polo, Feudal Japan, Shinto, Kublai Khan.

And there you have it: What a 7-year-old needs to know about the history of the ancient world in 108 lessons. It's not for the faint of heart.

Technology

Other than having parents log on to the K12 Website, technology is very rarely employed in Annie's second grade curriculum. K12 offers static pages that would be easier to use in book form.

For a unit on the Birth of Jesus, the Website for the National Gallery of Art is provided. Annie is invited to look at ten pages of paintings of the Madonna and Child. (<http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/ptheme>) K12 doesn't point out something that a home-schooling parent might actually find useful: the National Gallery has an extensive, interactive children's section.

History as Murder and Mayhem

A coloring sheet accompanying the story of Horatius at the Bridge depicts fierce, armed warriors grimly advancing toward the viewer.³¹ It seems inconsistent in a home-schooling curriculum for 7-year-olds, considering that public schools operate under zero-tolerance policies under which a child who points a finger at a peer and says "bang" risks suspension. I found it so upsetting I wrote an angry note to K12.³² No one replied. By

the way, Horatius lost an eye in battle—but kept on fighting. Hoorah for war. And pestilence too. Later Annie gets to study the Black Death.

Annie is supposed to save all these coloring sheets in her History Record Book, so at a later date she can look at her studies with pride.

The Roman Gods and Goddesses are introduced mostly for just matching them up with their Greek counterparts, but Annie is supposed to read the Myth of Ceres and Proserpina.

The parent is advised: *“Take a walk. As you are walking talk about the current weather and the current season. Have Annie tell you where she thinks Proserpina is. Is she on earth with Ceres? Or is she in the Underworld with Pluto?”*

The parent would be well-advised to take this walk on a nice, sunny spring day. Unless, of course, she wants her child to think about Proserpina weeping in the Underworld. Annie is told: *“We know that these myths aren’t true, but we still enjoy them because they are such good stories.”*

Even if a 7-year-old is able to differentiate “true stories” from harmful, contrived, or made up stories, this still won’t stop her from getting nightmares about a made-up story of abduction and rape.

Parents want their children to feel safe. Most won’t want to read a story to their 7-year-olds that shows how a mother was unable to protect her child, a story showing that not even the most powerful god could protect this child. Maybe parents will present the tale as an object lesson: never take candy (or pomegranate seeds) from strangers. And what do parents holding conservative values make of the fact that Ceres is one of the best-known deities among modern pagans?

Moving right along, Annie reads about the Punic Wars and a famous general named Regulus, followed by a story about another military man, Hannibal. In the Reading Room, Annie learns about Hannibal's life as a young boy. He puts his hand on the altar and takes a vow: "Day and night I will study how to bring ruin to Rome. I will never pause nor give up until the proud city of Rome is in ashes." Later in the story, Annie learns that on his way to capture Rome, Hannibal led an army and dozens of elephants "specially trained for war" through the Alps. A picture shows elephants walking narrow paths long "the edge of a seemingly bottomless pit." Annie reads:

From the cliffs above the paths, the people who lived in the mountains hurled stones down on the heads of the soldiers. Hundreds of men and many elephants died—some by falling from the rocky ledges, some from falling stones, and some from weariness and cold.

Public school gives children moral lessons from *Babar* and *George and Martha*; William Bennett brings them "elephants specially trained for war." Homeschoolers get the story of Hannibal presented in the spirit of an American can-do exploit—the sensibilities of 7-year-olds be damned. Second graders under Dr. Bennett's tutelage get a coloring sheet to commemorate the elephants: elephants as beasts of burden and soldiers carrying spears. Annie is told that, although she is coloring just one elephant, she should remember that Hannibal brought dozens.³³

Annie is then instructed: "*Hannibal has asked you to write a letter describing his battle plan to conquer Rome.*" So do it, Annie. Can a second grader put tears for elephants in a battle plan? In any case, the letter goes into her History Record Book.

Crossing the Rubicon

Moving right along to Julius Caesar, who is covered in five lessons, Annie reads a seven-page story in the online Reading Room about the murder of Caesar. She reads about the Ides of March and sees a picture of Caesar being killed by 23 of his “friends.” This detail is even more distressing when you consider that in the lesson before this one, Annie was asked to play act at *being* Julius Caesar—invited to dress up in a toga and pretend that she is returning from a successful military campaign. The costume party was a device for helping Annie to feel close to an important historical figure. Then, in the next lesson he is murdered. What’s a 7-year-old to make of this? E.D. Hirsch’s *What Your 3rd Grader Needs to Know* at least presented Caesar’s murderers as his *enemies*.³⁴ What’s a second grader to make of friends killing a friend?

But there’s no time to worry, because here comes another piece of the cultural literacy that is so important in the K12 universe. The text tells Annie that the dying Caesar “could scarcely believe” that his old friend Brutus had plotted against him:

“Et tu, Brute?” (ay-TOO broot-AY) Caesar gasped. (Those are Latin words that mean “You, too, Brutus?”)

For a 7-year-old! Surely this is cultural literacy run amok. And there’s more. Annie is told:

The great writer, William Shakespeare, wrote a famous play called Julius Caesar. In that play, after Caesar is killed and about to be buried, his friend Mark Antony gives a famous speech.

Mark Antony says to the Roman people, “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears! I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.”

But then he goes on to praise him! He tells the Romans why Caesar was noble and great.

Annie is then supposed to prepare her own short speech, presenting her ideas about what people today should remember about Caesar . . . and she’s told to begin with the words, *Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears!* In a public school curriculum, second graders are enjoying Amelia Bedelia’s and Fred Gwynne’s malapropisms. With phrases like the one above, we’d see the ears offered on a plate. In years past, Marc Antony’s speech was standard fare in the 10th grade curriculum. Whether its inclusion in Grade 2 History is evidence of high standards or delusion is in the eye of the beholder.

The command to pencil an entry into the History Record Book for every lesson can be problematic. Annie was invited to draw a picture about Caesar’s murder. For the Visigoth lesson, Annie learns that the Visigoth commander told his men:

“Rome’s treasures belong to us now! Gather all the gold and silver you can!” His men were happy to obey. They toppled Rome’s beautiful golden statues and melted them into 5,000 pounds of gold Then they tramped through the city and stole coins and jewelry.

For her History Record Book entry, Annie is asked to “draw a picture of the part of the lesson that interested her most.” What a choice: Which does she want to draw—

looting or melting the beautiful statues? This is what you get when you impose a boiler-plate assignment on every lesson.

As they study history as a chronicle of never-ending war, second graders must learn the significance of the date 476 A. D.—the year in which the last Roman emperor was overthrown. The parent is told, “Historians regard 476 A.D. as a convenient date because it helps students organize time conceptually.” This is *second grade*.

The lesson writer is relentless. Here are the instructions: “Let’s say that date: ‘476.’ Now let’s say it one more time—and louder: ‘476.’” Then Annie is given a rhyme to help her remember this important date:

476,

Rome was in a fix!

Little Romulus bid farewell,

And mighty Rome fell.

Annie is given a Roman Sequence Sheet: Cut out story events, reassemble them in correct order, and glue them onto a blank piece of paper. A 7-year-old might be worrying that 6-year-old Romulus Augustus’ father was killed and the boy captured. But never mind: History isn’t about childish fears and emotions; history is about organizing time conceptually.

When historical details are given, they show no concern for a second grader’s sensibilities. Here’s a sample from the lesson on Attila the Hun:

As the Huns drove more deeply into the Roman Empire, terrible stories were told about them. It was said that they scarred the faces of infant males so they would look ferocious when they grew up. . . . The most terrifying Hun of all was named Attila. . . so savage that people called him the “Scourge of God,” which means they saw him as a punishment from God.

It’s up to the parent to figure out how to explain this information—and deal with the consequences of its delivery. Here’s the Teacher Tip—the whole thing: *The Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus recorded the Hun method of curing meat.* We can be grateful that the show-off tip writer refrained from pointing out that after victory parades, the Romans strangled all prisoners of war.

To further intellectualize Annie’s encounter with historical horrors, she is directed to mark the advancement of the Huns on her map:

The Huns then marched down into Italy, burning cities in their path toward Rome. Write the number 4 to mark the spot just south of the Alps.

Once Attila is dead and buried in his gold coffin inside a silver coffin inside an iron coffin, Annie is told to connect all the numbers she marked on her map, which show where Attila traveled. Then she colors a picture of Attila. There you have it: war as numbers on a map.

Throughout the curriculum, the lessons have had the same structure: learning presented as stimulus and response; training children to parrot phrases they do not understand; offering rote responses to horrific events.

Conclusion

K12.com uses software to provide bookkeeping, not to facilitate learning: it corrects and grades assessments, and it keeps track of what lessons have been completed. Otherwise, the computer, with its slow PDF files and freeze-up screens, gets in the way of presenting lessons rather than enhancing them. Why would K12 refuse to take advantage of computer virtuosity as it sticks to the tired old format of ancient filmstrips? The answer is probably profits. K12's Virtual Academies are paid for with public tax dollars. That K12 doesn't then invest the funds it receives in better tapping the powers of the computer must be attributed to greed.

If only individual home-schooling families were buying this curriculum for their private use, then the curriculum presentation and content would be of marginal interest. But as the curriculum moves into public schools, parents might start asking questions. They might question all those coloring sheets. They might question why their children are crying over Hannibal's elephants. They might question why their second graders are studying the organizational hierarchy of the Catholic Church—cutting out colored construction paper to represent the relative authority of the pope, bishops, and archbishops. If parents reflect and begin questioning all this, then maybe the press and the politicians will follow.

Notes and References

¹ Throughout this article, quotations are taken directly from the K12 Inc. K through Grade 2 History curriculum. A complete list of the K12, Inc. history curricula is included in the Appendix.

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³ <http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/publication/publication.cfm?id=65#744> Retrieved March 15, 2004. Other contributors include: John Agresto, Lynne Cheney, William Damon, Lucien Ellington, Chester E. Finn, Jr., William Galston, Victor Davis Hanson, Kay Hymowitz, Craig Kennedy, Katherine Kersten, Mary Beth Klee, Erich Martel, Walter Russell Mead, Jeffrey Mirel, Mitchell B. Pearlstein, John Pyne, Theodore Rabb, Richard Rodriguez, Andrew J. Rotherham, Gloria Sesso, Sheldon M. Stern, Sandra Stotsky, Kenneth R. Weinstein, and James Q. Wilson

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⁹ Retrieved March 15, 2004, from <http://www.heritage.org/About/Staff/WilliamBennett.cfm>

¹⁰ Retrieved March 15, 2004, from [http://www.empoweramerica.org/stories/storyReader\\$120](http://www.empoweramerica.org/stories/storyReader$120)

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- ³⁰ Mention of their marriage is a relief. A whole lot of these Greek gods cavorted without benefit of wedlock.

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³² Because the note was on the company's web-based feedback form, I did not retain a copy. My sentiments, however, were similar sentiments to those that I scribbled on my copy of the picture itself. "What makes you think a 7-year-old girl would want to color such a picture? I don't want her 5-year-old brother to color it either. I think you're offering a misguided sense of history. And why doesn't the king even have a name?"

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