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Dictating sanitized history in the classroom a very slippery slope

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During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, romantic novels of ranching life in California were a popular form of fiction that gave other Americans an image of the still-remote state. Helen Hunt Jackson's "Ramona" and Harold Bell Wright's "The Winning of Barbara Worth" typified the genre. Last week, colorfully dressed actors from the Ramona Pageant, a play adapted from Jackson's novel and staged in Hemet for the past 83 years, visited the Capitol to promote this year's version. And since politicians of all stripes love feel-good events, the actors were received warmly. As it happened, as the Ramona Pageant actors were visiting the Capitol, a bill was pending on the Senate floor that raises this question: Should California schoolchildren be indoctrinated with one-sided, feel-good versions of the state's extremely complex history?

One by one, California's many ethnic and cultural communities have sought legislation that requires schoolchildren to be taught about their "role and contributions" in the state's history, and also bans instruction that depicts them negatively. To date the list singled out for mandatory attention are "men and women, black Americans, American Indians, Mexicans, Asians, Pacific Island people and other ethnic groups" while another section of state school law bans instruction "which reflects adversely upon persons because of their race, sex, color, creed, handicap, national origin or ancestry" and still another prohibits textbooks or other ! materials "reflecting adversely" on the same grounds.

Essentially, therefore, students must be told about certain groups, but cannot receive any instruction deemed to be negative, which is why, for instance, the Hindu American Foundation is now suing the state to block printing and distribution of new sixth-grade textbooks that are, the group maintains, demeaning to Hindus. Specifically, the foundation doesn't like the textbooks' depiction of women's historically inferior status, the treatment of "untouchables" in the Indian caste system and the theory that Aryan migration played a major role in Indian cultural development.

Implicitly, the suit is telling state officials that the textbooks must be altered to reflect the Hindu American Foundation's version of the ethnic group's history - regardless of what that history may truly be. It's certainly not the first time that the classroom depiction of ethnic or cultural subgroups has become controversial, and it will not be the last, especially if a bill pending on the Senate floor, Senate Bill 1437, becomes law. The measure, carried by Sen. Sheila Kuehl, D-Santa Monica, would add "people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender" to the list of cultural subgroups about which California's school children must be instructed and also add "sexual orientation" to the

lists of those about which nothing that "reflects adversely" will be tolerated.

Not surprisingly, the measure has touched off still another front in the never-ending war between gay rights advocates and the self-named "pro-family" organizations - a diversion, of sorts, from their battle over gay marriage. Stripped to its essentials, the legislation would require homosexuality to be depicted positively in the classroom, and that grates on those who see it as an aberrant lifestyle. The Legislature's dictating cultural propaganda of any kind to be distributed in the classroom is troubling. It's troubling when the cultural identification is homosexuality, and it's troubling when - as another legislative bill this year would require - the group singled out for special attention is Italian American.

History is history. Some of it is positive and some of it is negative, human imperfection being what it is. But the negative aspects are just as important as the positive ones. Together, they comprise the entire story of how a society develops. We should want our children to emerge from the classroom with the full story written by fair-minded and authoritative historians, not one that has been officially sanitized and litigated to please those with enough political pull to get the law changed in their favor.

It's a slippery slope, down which California probably has slid too far already.