

## Lesson #4:

### **The Baseline Essays: a High School Lesson Plan**

Purpose/Rationale: Students will examine whether Oregon schools have effectively promoted equal opportunities for all students regardless of ethnicity and consider how can schools better achieve this goal.

#### Lesson Objectives:

- Students will identify the reasons why PPS decided to implement a curriculum incorporating multicultural education
- Students will articulate the reasoning underlying the praises, concerns, and critiques of the Baseline Essays
- Students evaluate the value of the Baseline Essays by using text-supported reasoning.

#### Common Core Standards:

9-10. RH2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary course.  
9-10. WHST. 9 Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

#### Oregon Department of Education Standards:

HS.35 Examine the pluralistic realities of society (e.g., race, poverty, gender, and age) recognizing issues of equity, and evaluating the need for change

Time Needed: one 90 minute block

Materials Needed:

T-chart graphic organizer

#### In-class Readings:

1. The Concept of Baseline Essays  
<http://www.pps.k12.or.us/departments/curriculum/5024.htm>
2. Top 10 Problems with Baseline Essays - by Dave Reinhard, The Oregonian, April 16, 1994 (see below in Handouts)
3. An interview with Matthew Prophet :  
[http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed\\_lead/el\\_199112\\_oneil.pdf](http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_199112_oneil.pdf)
4. An actual Baseline Essay (students read introduction and possibly first section, if time permits): <http://www.pps.k12.or.us/files/curriculum/be-af-ss.pdf>

**Procedures:**

1. Students will read PPS' stated goals of the Baseline Essays. Students will pair-share their thoughts on the following question: Considering the stated purpose of these essays, and recalling the content from yesterday's lesson, what inferences can you make about the history textbooks from this era? i.e., For what problem did PPS feel that the Baseline Essays were the solution?
2. At this point, students write their initial claim to the prompt:
  - a. Would you support the implementation of the Baseline Essays at your school? Why/why not?
3. Students will then read an argument against the Baseline Essays, and an interview with PPS superintendent who makes his case in favor of the essays.
  - a. While students read these two articles they will be filling out a T-Chart with reasons for and against the Essays.
4. Students will read excerpt from a Baseline Essay. Students will look for/underline:
  - a. examples of bias
  - b. examples of information that can enhance multicultural understanding
  - c. anything the students question/wonder about
5. Students Pair-share, and then share out: what were their reactions to the Essay? How does it compare to the texts they read in school?
6. Students now return to the prompt:
  - a. Would you support the implementation of the Baseline Essays at your school?
  - b. Students answer, and then use a Support Your Position t-chart, in which on one side they provide reasons from the texts that support their position, and on the other side they provide reasons from their own experiences.
7. Share and discuss. Is this a worthwhile goal? How would you change the Baseline Essays?

**Assessment:**

- Teacher assesses student learning gains by looking at the evolution of student responses from their initial claim/hypothesis to the final claim. Is their answer better informed? Do they include evidence that supports their position?

**Modifications:**

Based on students' needs, teachers may choose to modify and/or annotate certain excerpts for select students.

**Extensions:**

For students for whom an extension would be beneficial, they are encouraged to read the introduction and first section of the following article: Zimmerman, Jonathan. Brown-ing the American Textbook: History, Psychology, and the Origins of Modern Multiculturalism.

Upon reading the noted sections, students should address the following prompts:

-- According to Zimmerman, how did the “liberal white establishment” during the 1940’s and 1950’s respond to calls for increased multicultural curriculum? Are the critiques of The Baseline essays similar or dissimilar to these arguments? How so?

-- What, do you think, is the primary purpose of multicultural curriculum? Is it for the sake of historical accuracy, or is it, as Zimmerman proposed, for benefit of the majority culture as much, or more, than it is for the minorities?

Handouts:

The Baseline Essays

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Stage 1.

Questions:

1) Considering the stated purpose of these essays, and recalling the content from yesterday's lesson, what inferences can you make about the history textbooks from this era? For what problem did PPS feel that the Baseline Essays were the solution?

Would you support the implementation of the Baseline Essays at your school? Why/why not?

Stage 2.

Fill in the chart below while reading the Oregonian article and the interview with PPS superintendent Prophet.

Reasons Against Baseline Essays	Reasons in Support of Baseline Essays

Stage 3.

Support Your Position

Answer the prompt and then use the chart to support your view with reasons and evidence

<p>Would you support the implementation of the Baseline Essays at your school?</p>
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Evidence from class readings:	Reasons based on personal experience:
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**In-class Readings:**

#1: The Concept of Baseline Essays

The concept of the “Baseline Essays” was introduced by Dr. Asa G. Hilliard III consultant to the District's desegregation plan, in 1982. The term when used by Portland Public Schools means a series of essays that gives information about the history, culture and contributions of a specific geo-cultural group in the areas of art, language arts, mathematics, science, social science and music. The purpose of the essays is to provide the reader with a holistic and thematic history of the culture and contributions of a specific geo-cultural group from ancient times to the present. This will enable the reader to get a better understanding of the group's worldview--axiology (values) and epistemology (ways of knowing).

Source: Portland Public Schools website

<http://www.pps.k12.or.us/departments/curriculum/5024.htm>

## #2: Top 10 Problems with Baseline Essays

by Dave Reinhard, The Oregonian, April 16, 1994

The Portland School District's African-American Baseline Essays have yet to become material for Jay Leno's monologues or David Letterman's top-10 lists, but not for lack of comedic potential. What's no laughing matter, however, is that some Portland School Board members -- Stephen Kafoury and Marty Howard -- still defend this contribution to feel-good, fallacy-filled history.

School boards are criticized, fairly and more often unfairly, for miss-educating children in their districts. Thanks to the African-American Baseline Essays, Portland's board has helped miss-educate kids in districts nationwide that use the essays. Quite a feat.

Yes, scholars with different perspectives can debate all kinds of things in the past. Yes, scholars have ignored the contributions of particular groups and individuals. But the African-American essays' pseudo-scholarship does little to further legitimate debate. In fact, to the extent they are equated with multicultural education, the essays undermine true multicultural education.

The essays basically make Egypt -- "The Land of the Blacks" -- the cradle of Greek and Western civilization. Thus, our culture derives from this black African land. Even Cleopatra, it turns out, was part black.

Maybe -- maybe -- all this will achieve the doubtful therapeutic aim of Afro-centric curricula and boost the African-American students' self-esteem. (Do European-American students draw their self-esteem from the Greco-Roman culture?) But it should matter just a bit that scholars -- black and white -- don't believe that ancient Egypt was black.

Indeed, Frank J. Yurco, an Egyptologist at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, holds that the ancient Egyptians varied in color and would have found our "primitive racial labels" baffling. "Land of the Blacks" is a mistranslation of an ancient Egyptian word, meaning "the black land" as in the black soil. As for Cleopatra, Yurco and Frank Snowden Jr., a black classicist at Howard University, think she was probably white.

Yurco has called the baseline's social studies essay "a melange of misinformation, inconsistencies, fallacies, half-truths and outdated information that is virtually valueless as scholarship." For a more complete critique, readers should see "The Disuniting of America" by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., an American historian not known for reactionary views on racial issues.

The science essay comes in for similar treatment by Bernard Ortiz de Montellano. In a blistering critique, this anthropology professor at Detroit's Wayne State University writes that the science baseline's author, Hunter Havelin Adams III, relies on sources of varying and questionable quality.

An example of what can result? The essay's contention that Egyptians had a theory of evolution 2,000 years before Charles Darwin came up with his. The evidence? The routine use of the word "evolve" in what Ortiz de Montellano describes as an "unremarkable cosmological text." Adams' essay also promotes the "extra-terrestrial origin of the Nile theory" and the claim that those ever-busy ancient Egyptians experimented with air flight and electricity.

Ortiz de Montellano points out that Adams fails as well to differentiate between religion and science in discussing the Egyptians. "Apart from the questionable constitutionality of teaching religion (be it Christianity or Egyptian) in public schools, it will be a great disservice to the children taught in this curriculum to give them a distorted view of . . . science," he writes. "At some point these students will enroll in a traditional science class and will be at a disadvantage because of their quaint and erroneous view of what constitutes science."

Finally, this tidbit about the science essay's author ought to interest taxpayers who paid for his work and anyone who cares about what is taught in our public schools. While Adams was listed as a "research scientist" at Argonne National Laboratory in Illinois, the lab's public-information officer reported that he did no research there. He was an "industrial-hygiene technician" who collected air and other samples from labs. His highest degree is a high school diploma.

#3: An interview with Matthew Prophet:

[http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed\\_lead/el\\_199112\\_oneil.pdf](http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_199112_oneil.pdf)

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