

February 2, 2023

Madam Chair Murphy, Vice Chair Mitchell, Representative Anderson and members of this State and Local Government and Veterans Conference Committee:

My name is Mark J. Westpfahl and I am a social studies teacher at South Saint Paul Middle School in South Saint Paul, Minnesota. I was named the Minnesota 2020 Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History Teacher of the Year and a finalist for National Teacher of the Year. I am a five-time nominee for Minnesota Teacher of the year and three-time semifinalist. I currently serve as the Vice President on the Board of Directors for the Minnesota Council for the Social Studies and I am a former Board of Education Member in Inver Grove Heights.

I write today to show my support for the passage of S.F. 386 and the creation of a new flag for the state of Minnesota.

I have been following the discussions and debates over the years as to whether the state should redesign our flag. Some elected officials, as well as many throughout the state, have expressed their concern that a redesign of the state flag would be nothing short of “revisionist history” that threatens to erase events that shaped the creation of our state and thus, diminish their significance. As a historian and social studies teacher, I would argue just the opposite.

For nearly 12 years, my 6th grade Minnesota Studies studies have studied the history of Minnesota, which begins far before statehood day in 1858, or even the establishment of Minnesota Territory in 1849. They have engaged in historical inquiry and study events and issues significant to Minnesota history, beginning with the early indigenous people of the upper Mississippi River region to the present day.

Roughly around our state’s birthday every year, my students learn about the symbolism of our state flag and the factors that led to its creation. Most Minnesotans don’t realize that our state went without a flag for the first 35 years. Minnesota sought to design a banner that could be displayed during the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago. A contest was held which featured more than 200 designs. The Women’s Auxiliary would receive \$15 for its winning entry. At the time, the flag’s design - which should be pointed out, was square - might have been seen as cutting edge as it had a white field, or simply put, a white background, on one side and a blue background on the other. Minnesota was the only state in the country to do this. It would be revised 64 years later, in 1957, when the state seal received minor modifications, and as a cost-cutting measure, eliminated the white background on one side in favor of an all blue background on both sides.

Throughout the unit, my students learn about vexillology, the study of flags, and the five basic principles of good flag design:

1. Keep it simple (that a kid could draw)
2. No words or seals
3. 2-3 colors
4. Have symbolism
5. Be distinct

In order to better understand flag design and why it matters, we start by trying to understand investigate the 2001 North American Vexillological Association's study of what makes a good and bad flag. We also read and analyzed the 2004 American City Flag Survey before we analyze one of the most interesting city flags in the country, Milwaukee, Wisconsin's. We would investigate the process their city undertook to redesign a what many have dubbed to be one of the five worst flag designs in the country and look at many of the hundreds of designs that were proposed, better understand how symbolism plays a role in flag design.

From there, we start to investigate other state flags. This is when students quickly realize there are more than 20 state flags that look strikingly similar to ours - blue backgrounds with the state seal in the middle. Eleven and twelve year olds can quickly ascertain that our flag does not stand out amongst the others and can easily be mistaken for any number of other flags, especially at a distance or when a flag is hanging stubbornly clumped together with no breeze waving it. To learn how the process can lead to a new flag, my students then turn to the controversy that surrounded the former Mississippi state flag and the process that was undertaken to redesign a flag. They learn about the historical significance of that flag and why many people objected to the symbolism and why many stood to defend it.

This is when my students truly started to understand that a flag, although merely a banner that often sits on flag polls or on walls in buildings, truly is more than a piece of cloth. Rather, it is a symbol that portrays the ideals of a state and often formulates the opinions and impressions of our society.

With that said, my students came to quickly understand that most Minnesotans can not tell you what is actually on our state flag, what the meaning of the symbolism indicates, how many colors our flag has, etc. If asked to redraw our state flag from memory, we quickly realized students, and adults could not do it. This is problematic. I challenge you to try to quickly draw the flag from memory... even though it may be tempting to look around the room for our flag to help guide you.

If you will allow me, I wanted to provide a quick pop quiz about our state flag, and I hope you will honestly take the time to be vulnerable, and share your own results with your fellow colleagues;

- Only ten states have dates on their flags. Minnesota, however, is the only state to have 3 dates on the flag. (IL, UT & NC have 2 dates on their flag & MO's 1 date is in roman numerals.) What are the dates on the MN flag & what do they represent?
- 25 states have at least one star on their state flag. MO has the most with 48. GA, IL, ND and RI have 13 stars. 10 states have 1 star. Wyoming has the smallest, as it appears in the state seal inside the buffalo. How many does Minnesota have, and why?
- Minnesota is 1 of 15 states to have a foreign language on their flag. (CT, GA, ID, KA, ME, MA, MI, MO, MT, NY, ND, VA, WV, WI) What language does Minnesota's have, how many words and what does it mean translated into English?
- Minnesota is one of 18 states to have people on their state flag. Wyoming has the most. How many people does Minnesota have and what are they doing on the flag?
- Only 6 state flags (MS, UT, LA, OK, GA, NV) have been redesigned more recently than Minnesota's, with Mississippi's being redone in Jan. 2021. When did Minnesota's flag last get a redesign? (Hopefully you know the answer from earlier in my testimony!)
- For what appears to be no reason at all (none that I have been able to find, at least), Minnesota's flag has an over abundance of yellow circles outlining the state seal. How many circles are there.
- How many colors are featured on the Minnesota state flag?

Redesigning a state flag is not an easy venture. In fact, it is incredibly hard to design something that will be the symbol of the state, while at the same time, trying to be all encompassing, inclusive and representative of our state's history. My Minnesota Studies students have been attempting to redesign the state flag for nearly 12 years. They understand that it is challenging to utilize the vexillological principles of quality flag design. With that said, my 11 and 12 year old history students have come up with tremendous designs over the years that would simplify our state flag design in order to make it more recognizable and distinct. They have done this while still providing historic context and symbolism.

For those who argue that the creation of a new state flag would result in the the erasure of our history, I would remind you that state statute provides that Minnesota history is still taught in 6th grade. I would further argue that the redesign of our state flag provides us with the opportunity to study our state's history, better understand what has taken place over the past 165+ years, and re-envision how we want others to view us as a society and a community.

History is an interpretation of events, objects, people, etc., told from a certain perspective, which shapes the way we view things. I would be more than happy to invite any of you into my middle school social studies classroom in South Saint Paul to talk more about how we investigate, analyze and discuss history.

My students would be more than excited to tell you about the history of our flag, what it represented when it was created, how that representation and understanding has shifted over time, and of course to showcase some of their designs for what they believe would an ideal flag for the state of Minnesota.

Thank you for your willingness to allow me to testify, and I welcome any questions you may have. If you want to see the answers to the quiz I gave, you can find them attached to this testimony.

Respectfully,

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2020 Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

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- Only ten states have dates on their flags. Minnesota, however, is the only state to have 3 dates on the flag. (IL, UT & NC have 2 dates on their flag & MO's 1 date is in roman numerals.) What are the dates on the MN flag & what do they represent?
* *1858, the statehood year; 1819, the year Fort Snelling was established; and 1893, the year the original flag was adopted*
- 25 states have at least one star on their state flag. MO has the most with 48. GA, IL, ND and RI have 13 stars. 10 states have 1 star. Wyoming has the smallest, as it appears in the state seal inside the buffalo. How many does Minnesota have, and why?
* *Nineteen stars ring the wreath, symbolizing the fact that Minnesota was the 19th state to enter the Union after the original 13.*
- Minnesota is 1 of 15 states to have a foreign language on their flag. (CT, GA, ID, KA, ME, MA, MI, MO, MT, NY, ND, VA, WV, WI) What language does Minnesota's have, how many words and what does it mean translated into English?
* *Besides the three dates and the word MINNESOTA, the flag features the phrase, L'Étoile du Nord, which is **French** for "The Star of the North".*
- Minnesota is one of 18 states to have people on their state flag. Wyoming has the most. How many people does Minnesota have and what are they doing on the flag?
* *An American indian is riding horseback in the background while a pioneer is plowing a field and looking back at him.*
- Only 6 state flags (MS, UT, LA, OK, GA, NV) have been redesigned more recently than Minnesota's, with Mississippi's being redone in Jan. 2021. When did Minnesota's flag last get a redesign? (Hopefully you know the answer from earlier in my testimony!)
* *Minnesota's flag was last redesigned in 1957. The state seal was modified slightly, and the state also officially removed white from the background color of the obverse side of the flag.*
- For what appears to be no reason at all (none that we have been able to find while researching the historic record, at least), Minnesota's flag has an over abundance of yellow circles outlining the state seal. How many circles are there?
* *There are 66 small yellow circles adorning the state seal on the Minnesota State Flag.*
- How many colors are featured on the Minnesota state flag?
* *The Minnesota state flag features 7 different colors - blue white, green, red, yellow, black and brown. Purple can often be seen outlining part of the lady slippers on some state flags,, but it is not recognized as an official color.*