

Minnesota Academic Standards Committee for Social Studies and History Minority Report

“As we have this debate, we want to make sure it is balanced and thoughtful. History, and the teaching of history, shouldn’t depend on whether or not the Republicans or Democrats are in power. . . . We need to find a document and a set of standards that’s going to stand the test of time.”

-- Governor Tim Pawlenty
October 31, 2003 “Midday with Gary Eichten” (MPR)

January 23, 2004

Dear Minnesota legislators:

As the legislative discussion of the Minnesota Academic Standards for social studies begins, we as members of the K-12 social studies committee feel it necessary to strongly express our dissent. Based on our professional expertise as public school teachers, citizens and parents we have grave concerns about the standards themselves and the process that has been used to create them.

We favor enacting rigorous standards and benchmarks for Minnesota elementary, middle school and high school students. However, the proposed standards threaten to defeat the very point of social studies education: to equip our children with the knowledge and the skills they need to become informed, active, and contributing citizens of our nation and members of our world. The proposed standards sell students short and Minnesota’s children deserve better.

We have expressed our concerns on numerous occasions both in subcommittee and strand committee meetings, in letters of dissent, in a minority report released October 31, 2003, and at writing team meetings. We acknowledge that the final draft is an improvement over the first draft, however, the standards are still unacceptable. In our opinion, contrary to the Commissioner’s claims, the final draft fails to sufficiently address the concerns expressed in our first minority report and by many Minnesotans during the hearings process and through comment on the MDE web site. We wish to reaffirm to the Minnesota Legislature that we believe there should be major revisions to the proposed standards or they should be rejected and the standards writing process should begin anew. Our concerns and recommendations are listed below and described in more detail on subsequent pages.

Descriptions of Our Concerns:

- 1) The proposed standards are still developmentally inappropriate.**
- 2) The proposed standards are more prescriptive than authorized by law.**
- 3) The proposed standards are politically and culturally biased.**
- 4) The proposed standards will be a financial burden for school districts.**
- 5) The process used to create them was flawed.**

Recommendations to the Legislature:

- 1) Require that the social studies standards be substantially revised or begin the process anew with committees that represent mainstream Minnesota views.**
- 2) Postpone the adoption of new social studies standards until all important issues can be resolved satisfactorily.**
- 3) Provide additional opportunities for public input on the proposed standards.**
- 4) Change the law to “band” standards and benchmarks and to permit greater local flexibility in high school graduation requirements.**
- 5) Find a permanent solution to the increased politicizing of social studies education in the state.**

Descriptions of Our Concerns:

1) The proposed standards are still developmentally inappropriate

We believe that teachers, schools and the state should have high expectations for students. Even though we favor a rigorous curriculum, teachers from around the state are loudly expressing their concern that too many of the proposed standards are developmentally inappropriate for the grade level they have been assigned. According to legislation [Sec. 3, Subd. 2b], new academic standards must be rigorous but "grade-level appropriate." Yet in the early grades, abstract concepts are introduced that many children cannot yet understand because they are still largely concrete thinkers. For example, asking fourth graders to "compare and contrast characteristics of Eurasian cultures in this era, including the Byzantine Empire, Medieval Europe, Japan, and the Middle East."

In fact, the elementary standards scope and sequence dictated by Commissioner Yecke takes a drastic departure from a well-established, research-based "expanding horizons" approach to social studies. With this approach students begin studying about family and community in early grades. They study the more abstract concepts such as time and place as they get older. Throughout Minnesota, most school districts use an expanding horizons approach with success. As the Mankato Area Public Schools pointed this out in a letter to the Commissioner (1/5/04), "For example, first graders must memorize Minnesota's governor and state symbols, even though they have no concept for why these things would be Minnesota symbols, or even what a state is or where Minnesota is located."

The bulk of current educational research does not support the Commissioner's claims that the final K-7 standards are developmentally appropriate. We are concerned that of the Commissioner's 14-member writing committee, only six are current public school teachers -- two elementary, and none were from middle schools.

2) The standards are more prescriptive than authorized by law

According to legislation repealing the Profile of Learning and establishing expectations for new academic standards in Minnesota:

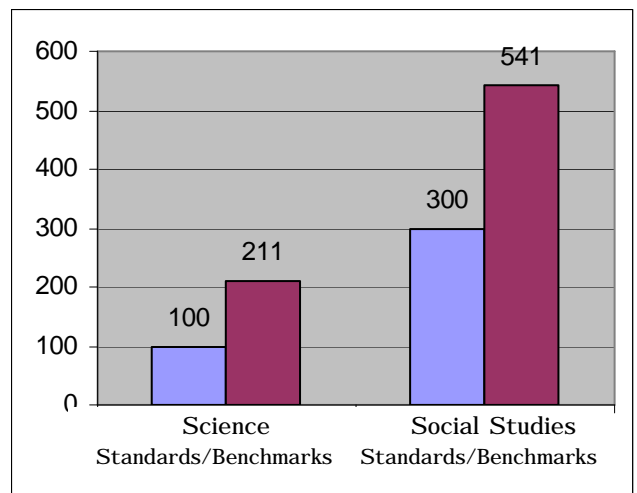
"The commissioner shall not prescribe in rule or otherwise the delivery system, classroom assessments, or form of instruction that school sites must use" [Sec.2 (a)]. Furthermore, they must "not require a specific teaching methodology or curriculum;" [Sect. 3, Subd. 2b]

The proposed standards represent a "state" curriculum that is overly prescriptive to educators; it does not provide flexibility for how and when knowledge should be taught given the unique and varied needs of students. The sheer number of required topics will force teachers at all grade levels to lecture more in order to cover this curriculum.

The number of standards and benchmarks is impractical.

Under the present proposal Minnesota students would have 300 required standards and 541 benchmarks. While this may represent a reduction from the first draft, it is nearly three times the number in the state's proposed science standards. According to the academic standards legislation, new academic standards must be "concise" [Sect. 3, Subd. 2b]. Comparing the quantity of proposed requirements for science and social studies further illustrates the point (see graph at right):

The proposed standards and benchmarks are too numerous. They will be extremely difficult for teachers to implement with quality. For example, in 9-12 US History there are 61 benchmarks including 341 topics and 221 examples (many of which must be covered in good conscience to meet the benchmarks; e.g. Louisiana Purchase). Asking a high school teacher, in a block schedule, to adequately teach and assess this volume of information in a quarter or semester is unrealistic given the number of interruptions (e.g. pep rallies, state tests) that occur during a typical school year.



While the Commissioner points out that the number of benchmarks has been reduced 36% from the first draft, it must be noted that many were combined rather than reduced. The committee ended up lumping expectations together to reduce the unreasonable number of benchmarks and examples that generated complaints in the original draft instead of working with a panel of qualified teachers to clarify the important points. Now many of the benchmarks are densely packed and cannot be examined in a short period of time. An example would be the 9th grade civics benchmark that states, "compare and contrast the American system with different philosophies and structures of socialism, communism, monarchies and parliamentary systems; in terms of their economic, social structure and human rights practices." This single benchmark will require weeks of study.

We're concerned that there are so many standards that teachers will not have the time to engage students in thoughtful discussions of past and current events, where they may help them develop problem-solving, decision-making, and discussion skills. These standards also present a special challenge to generalists in elementary schools who also must teach our children the three Rs and have not been trained with the necessary content knowledge. No consideration was given to how Minnesota public school teachers are trained at the university level.

These standards reduce local control of education.

According to legislation repealing the Profile of Learning and establishing expectations for new academic standards: "...*Any state action regarding the rule must evidence consideration of school district autonomy;*" [Sec. 2 (b)(2)]. These standards represent a radical departure from what is currently being taught in Minnesota schools and would immediately transform the scope and sequence of social studies for every school district in the state. Standards should establish broad strokes that allow teachers/school districts to make decisions about what to teach and how to teach it.

Instead, these standards will force schools on the Commissioner's own "Top 17" list to abandon what is currently working well for them. Edina High School, selected as one of Newsweek's Top 100 U.S. schools, will be forced to adopt a state-mandated curriculum even though there is no research proving that the new standards are better than what they are replacing.

Minnesota has built one of the strongest education systems in the nation based on local control of curriculum issues as compared to low-achieving states that have state mandated curriculum and state-adopted text books. Teachers and local school boards have always had the responsibility to develop the curriculum, select materials, and create lesson plans that best meet the needs of their district. However, these proposed social studies standards are nothing short of a state-mandated curriculum that infringes upon the rights of local school districts to determine what their students should learn and when. With this much of our curriculum being mandated by the state, is it fair to ask: do we really have "independent" school districts in Minnesota anymore? As Virginia's deputy secretary of education, Cheri Pierson Yecke stated the following testimony to the US House of Representatives in 1999, "*There is ample evidence that the public would prefer for educational decisions to be made at the local level*" (edworkforce.house.gov/hearings/106th/fc/esea61099/yecke.htm). We encourage her to return to this sentiment for the sake of Minnesota's public school children.

3) The proposed standards are politically and culturally biased.

According to legislation, new academic standards must be "objective" [Sect. 3, Subd. 2b]. However, many of the proposed standards reflect a certain perspective of the past and present -- particularly in Civics and History -- that does not reflect mainstream public opinion or scholarly thought.

Does not represent the views of average Minnesotans.

Several committee members inserted their own political agendas disregarding learning theory. As a result, many standards depart from any national consensus on educational theory and appear to be the product of advocates of a specific social agenda. It advances the thinking of organizations such as the Claremont Institute, Fordham Foundation, Center for the American Experiment and the Maple River Coalition that are widely known as political think tanks which exist to advance narrow agendas.

Presents a narrow viewpoint.

Since 1999, Cheri Pierson Yecke has been quoting a 1994 report from Public Agenda, a nonpartisan public policy think tank, titled *"First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools."* This study concluded that parents want their children to know that America is "a unique country that stands for something special in the world." What she fails to mention is that the same study also concludes that the vast majority of parents want their children to know both sides of issues, both the good and the bad about America's history. The respondents also said that schools should place much greater emphasis on making learning enjoyable and interesting to high school students, and that teachers should be trusted more than "education experts from throughout the country" or elected officials.

Too often these standards require insufficient examination of multiple viewpoints, or unfortunate experiences in our nation's history. The history of dissent and conflict within our nation and society is downplayed or suppressed altogether. Typically, school systems in repressive regimes (Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, Iraq under Saddam Hussein) tend to over glorify their history and not provide an honest assessment.

It's good teaching to present multiple perspectives when teaching history or any of the social sciences such as economics and political science, where a variety of interpretations and viewpoints exist. Only by exploring and analyzing multiple perspectives in social studies classes will students develop the skills to think critically regarding historical events and current issues. These standards fail in this area.

Has a narrow perspective and inexcusable gaps in the civics curriculum.

Concerned Minnesotans should know that many of the civics standards can be traced to the views of the civics strand chairperson who is also chairman of the board of the Claremont Institute (www.claremont.org). The views of this group fall far outside mainstream Minnesota values. This is visible with the emphasis on assumed God-given natural rights as opposed to civil rights as expressed in the Bill of Rights and other Amendments to the Constitution. There is an overemphasis on the Declaration of Independence (10 benchmarks) as compared to the Bill of Rights (2 benchmarks) and other amendments to the Constitution. Too often these standards ask students memorize philosophical and political concepts of the Declaration, but don't provide opportunities to develop the civic and critical thinking skills to use them.

In addition, many important concepts are missing, such as: the changing interpretation of the Constitution, the role of U.S. foreign policy, diplomacy and other global relationships of the U.S., and the study of many significant landmark U.S. Supreme Court decisions. There is nothing about individual rights as guaranteed by the 13th, 14th, 15th and 19th amendments to the Constitution

Beyond the narrow perspective that is not in line with mainstream Minnesota, we believe there are three important citizenship skills that are missing in the standards that are essential to developing an intelligent citizenry: (1) at no point are students expected to develop the skill of differentiating between fact and opinion; (2) students are never asked to develop an opinion on a current issue and support it with facts; and (3) students are not required to learn anything about Minnesota's grassroots caucus system used for determining political party platforms, delegate representation, and presidential candidate preferences. These are all essential learning if Minnesotan students are to participate effectively in a democracy. There is nothing on citizenship skills beyond emphasizing the need to vote. Civic skills are mentioned only once in 4th grade and obliquely again in 12th. The concept of service learning is totally missing. We feel the ultimate result, if the proposed civics standards are adopted, will disengage students from participatory civic life. The entire section should be scrapped.

Does not reflect the diversity of Minnesota classrooms.

In the proposed standards, what really gets covered is what is defined as "our" history, including its ancient roots, and that "we" are all European in lineage. For example, the standards require no knowledge of ancient Egypt (there are only 7 references in the optional examples category). However, ancient Greek civilization (which borrowed heavily from their Egyptian predecessors) has two required standards, seven required benchmarks, 27 required topics and 25 specific examples. On the other hand, no knowledge is required regarding Latinos in U.S. history despite the fact that this group of Americans is now the largest "minority" group in our country. This issue is especially important in Minnesota where we have rapidly growing Somali and Hmong populations.

The National Council for Social Studies believes that studying diverse cultures is an important component of every social studies curriculum. Contrary to some of the representations of the Commissioner, the NCSS position is that, *"Multicultural education supports and enhances the notion of e pluribus unum -- out of many, one. To build a successful and inclusive nation-state, the hopes, dreams and experiences of the many groups within it must be reflected in the structure and institutions of society. This is the only way to create a nation state in which all citizens will feel included, loyal, and patriotic."* (NCSS Task Force on Ethnic Studies Curriculum Guidelines, *Curriculum Guidelines for Multicultural Education*, A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies [Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1976, revised 1991], p. 3.)

We fail to see how a Eurocentric curriculum will help solve the perceived "achievement gap" in Minnesota that is often mentioned by the commissioner. It's unreasonable to believe that minority students, who are struggling in school, will suddenly become enthused about social studies with standards that largely ignore their heroes and cultural backgrounds (omitted figures like Cesar Chavez and Nelson Mandela, for example).

4) **Proposed standards will be a financial burden for school districts**

We are deeply concerned about the cost implications for new curriculum materials and professional development that will be required to implement the proposed standards. Establishing whole new "curriculums" that require school districts to spend large sums of money to purchase new materials is fiscally irresponsible when less expensive alternatives exist. Another concern is that some of this "curriculum" is so far out of the mainstream that it is not even supported by any existing commercial curriculum and therefore would require significant curriculum development expense. As the Mankato Area Public Schools point out in their letter, "Our district can't possibly implement these standards, as presented, without total redevelopment of our K-12 social studies program."

Many school districts are facing severe budget constraints, and many have to pass levies to maintain quality education programs given reductions in state funding. Rochester schools estimate the cost of implementing the new standards will be \$1.8 million. Furthermore, professional development costs will be very high because most teachers, especially at the elementary level, will need training and additional content knowledge to implement the standards. Many elementary teachers do not have strong backgrounds in social studies, and they will need educational resources to help them with the content they are to teach.

If the new standards are passed by the legislature this spring, they could become a costly, unfunded mandate to school districts throughout the state. We believe the present administration, who pledged to hold the line on spending, needs to be cognizant of the hidden costs of the proposed standards. Conrad Anderson, social studies committee member, expressed these reservations about the standards, *"With districts already financially strapped as they are, I do not see how this makes sense."*

5) **The process used to create them was flawed**

The entire process was flawed from the start for six reasons:

Full committee composition:

We believe the K-12 social studies committee lacked balance. Only a small minority of the K-12 committee came from public schools -- only two of the ten members of the 6-8 subcommittee, for example. In addition, school board members were erroneously identified as "school administrators" and a daycare provider as a "K-12 teacher." Too often non-teachers made assumptions about curriculum, resources, assessments, pedagogy and teaching strategies that were incorrect. While we acknowledge input from other stakeholders is critical, it is equally important to acknowledge the professional judgment of educators. Too often the professional judgment of educators was dismissed by ideologues on the committee.

According to the Pioneer Press (Dec. 29th, 2003) there are 56 traditional public school students for every charter school student. Private school students represent a very small percentage of Minnesota students as well. We feel teachers from charter and private schools were grossly overrepresented given the tiny percentage of the population they serve. This is especially disturbing due to the fact that private schools are not bound by the law.

Our greatest concern is that the committee lacked broad representation by teachers, parents, administrators and others committed to mainstream Minnesota values and strengthening our public K-12 school system. For example, members included the Chairman of the board of directors of the Claremont Institute; the lead writer for the web site Minnesota Education Reform News; members of the conservative Maple River Coalition and an unusually large number of supporters of E.D. Hirsch's core knowledge curriculum.

Inadequate materials:

The only materials received by the full committee were printed and digital copies of standards adopted in five states (Alabama, Arizona, California, Kansas, Virginia) that had received either an "A" or "B" grade from the Fordham Foundation, a politically biased think tank. We found it puzzling that we were being asked to emulate states who habitually score lower on SAT and ACT than Minnesota. The full committee was never provided copies of national standards, and in fact, was discouraged from using them.

At the final November 1 full committee meeting we were told to bring materials we found relevant. We were not provided copies of the 170 pages of public comment from the MDE web page. In addition, only MDE summaries were available of the testimony from the 14 public hearings that most committee members did not attend. In fact, the Commissioner's staff provided writing committee members with only a brief summary of the criticisms.

"Expert" analysis:

Of the nine so-called national experts that the MDE enlisted to evaluate the proposed standards, at least three of them are easily identified with the anti-public school movement. All but one of the reviewers was from outside Minnesota. At the same time, the commissioner was quick to dismiss criticism submitted by the University of Minnesota's history professors. She also publicly stated that many who critical of the first draft were members of the "hate America" agenda.

Writing team composition and process:

This lack of balance continued with the selection of the 14 members of the small writing team handpicked by the Commissioner. Thirteen of the 14 members were white (not a single African American, Native American, Latino, Somali or Hmong). In addition, all of the four consultants to the committee were white. To quote Joe Trepanier, a member of the final writing team and the sole minority member, *"the final draft was monopolized by a few people that appeared to be pre-selected by the Commissioner."*

Not one public school administrator (superintendent, principal, or curriculum specialist) served on the final committee. In addition, only 6 of the final 14 writing committee members selected to produce the final draft were public school teachers. There were no middle school or junior high school teachers, and no higher education professors or consultants in political science. In addition, three members of the final 14 member writing committee had little stake in seeing public schools succeed since two are home school parents and another is the headmaster of a suburban private school academy.

After the writing team was unable to complete the task within the Commissioner's strict timeline, the group was reduced to the five strand committee chairs (or substitutes of the Commissioner's choosing) and the writing committee chair for a final 10-hour marathon meeting on December 15th. Only one of these six individuals was a public school teacher. Everyone else on the writing committee was relegated by the Commissioner to play the role of public observers who could not even speak to this newly empowered final committee. While the Commissioner excluded committee members from completing their task, she brought in two new consultants for this last day of final editing. Thus, much of what got into the final document was discussed only by a handful of people and did not go through the "open" process described by the Commissioner.

Finally, neither the Commissioner nor the writing team kept the broader committee members in the loop. On November 1st when the Commissioner selected and organized the 14-member writing team, the full committee was told that they could continue monitoring the process through threaded email postings. This didn't happen. The broader 44-member committee was never asked to comment on the emerging final draft. In fact, we object to having our names associated with this document. We were never asked for our endorsement.

Inadequate timeframe:

There is no doubt that the short time frame given the full committee to complete their work rushed the product and compromised its quality. Work began in earnest on July 31st and the first draft was finished August 20th. In fact, the November 1 meeting was only the third “official” meeting of the entire K-12 committee. While it is true that many grade-level subcommittees met one or more times on their own, it is equally true that much of the work was done by a few with special interests.

The final November 1 work day was insufficient to be responsive to the overwhelming critical feedback that the first draft received (more than 150 pages). The small writing team continued to be rushed through 45 hours of meetings over six weeks. When they were unable to finish on time, the group was pared down even further to the six chair people who wrote many of the standards and benchmarks. This hurried approach was used last year for the English and math standards under the excuse that the Commissioner had just been appointed and time wasn’t available. We question why this same hurried approach was used again when time wasn’t an issue.

Curriculum framework:

The requirement to follow the Commissioner's rigid framework, including detailed course outlines by grade level, meant that much of the curriculum was set in stone even before our first meeting. When individuals attempted to draft standards and benchmarks that were closely aligned with national standards, they were rebuffed because they didn’t fit into the framework that had been provided. Throughout the process, we were either discouraged from or not allowed to change the proposed subjects taught in each grade level, including the content of “sub-strands” and even “standards” themselves. Our task focused mostly on developing “benchmarks” and “examples” in isolation from other grade levels. Thus, the full committee was never given an opportunity for a page-by-page review of all the standards that students at all grade levels would be expected to master. Consequently, the result is that the proposed standards are often disjointed rather than integrated and coherent.

Recommendations to the Legislature:

- ***Require that the social studies standards be substantially revised or begin the process anew with committees that represent mainstream Minnesota views.*** As the Duluth News Tribune said in their editorial on the first draft, *“these standards need major reworking, not just tinkering before the Legislature approves them”* (Sept. 28, 2003). Future committees must be balanced. Ideologues, from either side of the political fence, should not dictate the process. Instead, it should consist primarily of professional public educators, public school parents and others with acknowledged expertise in their field. In addition, we believe that private school teachers, who are not bound by the document, should play a much less prominent role.
- ***Postpone the adoption of new social studies standards until all important issues can be resolved satisfactorily.***
- ***Provide additional opportunities for public input on the proposed standards.*** The outcry after the first draft was released certainly warrants the solicitation of additional comments from the public before approving the proposed standards. A new MDE web site and an additional round of hearings around the state, attended by all committee members, seems prudent if the Legislature and Governor want to avoid another mess similar to the Profile of Learning.
- ***Change the law to “band” standards and benchmarks and to permit greater local flexibility in high school graduation requirements.*** We agree with the MDE that the law should be changed to allow the banding standards/benchmarks for primary (K-2), intermediate (3-5), middle (6-8) and high school (9-12), and not specifying grade levels. This essential modification provides important local flexibility over what is taught and when. The state should recommend what courses are taught, not mandate specific grade levels. In addition, we agree that the high school graduation rule should be changed to require simply 3.5 credits in U.S. and world history, geography, civics and economics.
- ***Find a permanent solution to the increased politicizing of social studies education in the state.*** The true test of excellence in educational standards is their ability to transcend administrations and politics. We can’t be reinventing the state’s curriculum every four years. As Governor Pawlenty has stated, *“We need to find a document and a set of standards that’s going to stand the test of time.”*

Conclusion

We chose to participate in the Minnesota Academic Standards Committee process because we felt more rigorous standards and benchmarks were required, as well as a need for increased accountability. However, we feel the proposed standards represent a major step backwards.

We resent the Commissioner's overall characterization of Minnesota social studies as a "failed" and "embarrassing" educational effort simply because the Fordham Foundation awarded it an "F." This same foundation also rated Minnesota's prior math standards with an "F", yet students learning under these standards recently scored number #1 nationwide on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam. The fact that Minnesota's students currently rank #2 in the nation on ACT scores speak loudly for the excellent condition of Minnesota public schools.

Minnesota public school students have a documented record of success in social studies, despite the fact that there is no national assessment tool similar to the NAEP math test. However, one can easily find successes in programs such as Mock Trial, Economics Challenge, History Day, debate, Knowledge Bowl, and others. Minnesota's public school students have had tremendous local and national successes in these academic competitions. Before accepting the radical changes these standards will bring, consider the potential harm to already successful programs. It doesn't make sense to risk destroying high functioning social studies programs in order to save a few struggling ones.

We are not alone in our protest. Our concerns are shared, reinforced, and amplified by the vast majority of over 150 pages of public commentary on the MDE web site. At the public hearings held around the state the overwhelming majority of those who spoke criticized the proposed social studies standards. Over 30 University of Minnesota historians have also taken a strong, critical position. Over 1700 Minnesotans from 190 towns signed the on-line petition opposing the first draft. Several school boards have passed resolutions rejecting the standards and the Board of Directors of the Minnesota School Boards Association have expressed their criticism. The commissioner also received a document signed by almost every Mankato social studies teacher expressing his or her reservations with the proposed standards. Finally, four parent organizations (Minnesota PTA, Parents United for Public Schools, Save Our Schools and UNITE 196) have repeatedly outlined their concerns. It's folly to believe that such a small group with inadequate time has adequately remedied these concerns.

Before they are approved, the proposed social studies standards will require substantial revision, particularly the civics section, or they should be rejected and the standards writing process begin anew. As teachers, parents, and citizens we share with you a deep commitment to serious and substantive social studies education in the state of Minnesota. We look forward to working with you in achieving that shared goal.

Respectfully,

John Brady

ISD #877 (Buffalo-Hanover-Montrose)

Paul Seeba

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