September 12, 2022

James Monroe Building
101 N. 14th Street
Richmond, VA 23219
Sent via email: emily.webb@doe.virginia.gov and boe@doe.virginia.gov

Re: History and Social Science Standards of Learning

We, the undersigned Sikh gurdwaras (houses of worship) of Virginia, write to provide our feedback for Virginia’s History and Social Science Standards of Learning for entry into the official record.

As proud Virginians, we deem the inclusivity and accuracy of new education standards critical for the future wellbeing of our public school students and the communities we serve. For that reason, we write to encourage the Virginia Board of Education to proceed by accepting the 2022 History and Social Science Standards of Learning draft as submitted to the Board of Education on August 17th, 2022 with a continued eye and intention on inquiry-based learning and incorporating diverse perspectives.

Despite being the world’s fifth largest religion with over 25 million followers, Sikhism was unfortunately omitted from Virginia’s previous History and Social Science Standards. We appreciate you working with the Sikh community of Virginia and the Sikh Coalition to include teaching about Sikhism in the History and Social Science Standards of Learning draft.

With that said, we applaud the Virginia State Board of Education on including Sikhism in the following World History & Geography standard, 1500 CE to the Present:

WHII.2a, Knowledge and Learning Experiences: Summarize the major beliefs and tenets of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism.

WHII.6b, Understandings: Sikhism grew in northern India and challenged Mughal authority.

WHII.6b, Supporting Questions: How did the emergence of Sikhism impact India?

WHII.6b, Knowledge & Learning Experiences: Use information sources to analyze how the growth of Sikhism challenged the Mughal Empire.

At the same time, we request that the VDOE incorporate the following recommendation to deepen understanding of the Sikh community in America:

Current Standard: VUS.15a, Knowledge & Learning Experiences: Contextualize various information sources and data to understand the perspectives, lived experiences of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders to explain significant work, legislation and Supreme Court rulings such as United States vs. Wong Kim Ark (1898), The Yellow Power Movement, the Japanese American Citizens' League and Lau v. Nichols.
Suggested Edit: VUS.15a, Knowledge & Learning Experiences: Contextualize various information sources and data to understand the perspectives, lived experiences of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders to explain significant work, legislation and Supreme Court rulings such as United States vs. Wong Kim Ark (1898), United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind (1923), The Yellow Power Movement, the Japanese American Citizens’ League and Lau v. Nichols.

Rationale: Bhagat Singh Thind, a Sikh American, enlisted in the U.S. Army during World War I. After the war, following a legal ruling that Caucasians had access to citizenship rights, he sought to become a naturalized citizen. At this time, anthropologists categorized Indians as Caucasian. Thind took the citizenship oath and received his citizenship certificate in the state of Washington on December 9, 1918.

Only a few days later, his citizenship was revoked on the grounds that he was not a white man. Thind applied for citizenship again in the neighboring state of Oregon in 1919. A federal judge heard testimony from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) but this time ruled in favor of Thind. He became a citizen in November of 1920.

INS appealed the decision to grant citizenship in the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals which sent the case to the Supreme Court. In 1923, in the case United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind, the Court decided in favor of the United States, retroactively denying all Indian Americans citizenship for not being Caucasian in “the common man’s understanding of the term.”

Finally in 1935, the 74th congress passed a law allowing citizenship to U.S. veterans of World War I, even those from the barred zones. Dr. Thind received his U.S. citizenship through the state of New York in 1936, taking the oath for the third time to become an American citizen. This is a landmark case which should be studied and understood by Virginia’s students.

A report by the Sikh Coalition found that Sikh children are bullied at twice the national average. It is of utmost importance to secure safe and inclusive classrooms for all, starting with accurate representation when teaching about world religions. With eight gurdwaras (Sikh houses of worship) and an ever-growing Sikh population in Virginia, thousands of Sikh children attend Virginia Public Schools.

Examples of the Sikh Coalition’s teacher resources can be found in the Chapter entitled Teaching About Sikhism from the National Council for the Social Studies publication on Teaching About Religion in the Social Studies Classroom; on the Educators Page of our website; and on the C3 Teachers Sikh Coalition hub.

Given our shared commitment to create safe, healthy, inclusive classrooms where students learn to engage civically and become effective leaders, we hope that we can continue working together on the standards, content, and professional development for educators.

We trust that Virginia will join the growing list of states (including New Jersey, Texas, New York, California, Idaho, Tennessee, Colorado, Arizona, Oklahoma, Michigan, North Dakota, Nebraska, Indiana, Kansas and North Carolina) who have made similar changes over the past decade.
We are grateful for your time and collaboration during this process.

Sincerely,

Gurdwara Singh Sabha - Fairfax, VA
Sukhdev Singh Bhatti, President

Sikh Foundation of Virginia - Fairfax Station, VA
Manjit Singh Taneja, Chairman

Sikh Center of Virginia - Manassas, VA
Ranjit Singh, Secretary

Gurdwara Singh Sabha Richmond - Richmond, VA
Gurinder Singh, Secretary

Sikh Association of Central Virginia - Richmond, VA
Baljit S. Sidhu, Trustee

Roanoke Gurdwara - Salem, VA
Satnam Singh Aujla, President

Raj Khalsa Gurdwara - Sterling, VA
Guru Sangat Singh Khalsa, Chairman