

Education campaign in California

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The “comfort women” issue has garnered a wide public interest in the US, starting with the passage of the US House Resolution 121 in 2007, and remained a hot topic due to the subsequent controversies surrounding the “comfort women” memorials. The media/public interest exploded when two Japanese Americans filed a lawsuit against the City of Glendale to remove the Peace Monument in 2014. However, none of the states in the US implemented the “comfort women” issue as a separate topic in the curriculum and most of the history teachers in the US have not heard of it in relation to the Pacific War or WWII.

California Department of Education revises its History/Social Science curriculum approximately every 8 years, and public input is reflected in the process. In 2014, CARE (formerly KAFC) lodged its request to include the “comfort women” issue in the curriculum and encouraged the “comfort women” supporters to provide their input to urge the Department of Education to include the “comfort women” issue in the 2016 revision. Some supporters in Northern California attended local hearings where such input was provided.

The revision draft, including the “comfort women” issue in 10th Grade History/Social Science framework, was published in December 2015 for public input. In January 2016, CARE created a website (comfortwomenpetition.org) in 6 languages (English, Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Japanese and Tagalog) to lead a campaign to urge California DoE to include the “comfort women” issue, along with other local organizations in Southern and Northern California (CWJC). Soon after, the history revisionists in the US who support Abe’s denialism created a Change.org petition to oppose the inclusion of the “comfort women” issue in California’s textbook. At the end of the two-month public input period, 20,000 signatures were collected and 6 boxes of petition were delivered to the Department of Education in Sacramento.

CARE and CWJC attended the public hearing in July 2016 to voice our support for the inclusion of the “comfort women” in the 10th Grade History/Social Science Framework. A team of Japanese opponents also attended it, headed by the late Koichi Mera, the plaintiff of the unsuccessful lawsuit against the City of Glendale to remove the Peace Monument.

At the hearing, after all public comments were completed, the director of the curriculum frameworks unit addressed some of the hotly debated issues among the revision draft before the Board. He said one of them was the “comfort women” issue and the Committee received great pressures from both sides of for and against the inclusion of the “comfort women” issue. “As a compromise,” he proposed an insertion of a sentence about the 2015 Agreement in the Framework language. The revised version was approved by the Board unanimously as follows:

“Comfort Women” is a euphemism that describes women who were forced into sexual service by the Japanese Army in occupied territories before and during the war. Comfort Women can be taught as an example of institutionalized sexual slavery; estimates on the total number of Comfort Women vary, but most argue that hundreds of thousands of women were forced into these situations during Japanese occupation. On December 28, 2015, the governments of Japan and the Republic of Korea entered into an agreement regarding the issues of Comfort Women. Two translations of this document can be found at http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page4e_000364.html (accessed June 29, 2017) and http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page4e_000364.html (accessed June 29, 2017) and http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page4e_000364.html (accessed June 29, 2017).

go.kr/ENG/press/ministrynews/20151228/1_71575.jsp?menu=m_10_10 (accessed June 29, 2017).

CARE and CWJC vehemently protested the insertion of the language about the 2015 Agreement, based on the facts that the insertion of the passage at the last minute was procedurally wrong because the public was not made aware of it in advance, nor was it given a chance to comment on it; the Agreement was being heavily criticized by the victims and their supporters; the Agreement was made behind the closed doors, without knowledge or participation by the victims; the Agreement does not address the victims outside South Korea; and the Agreement is designed to remove the “comfort women” statues and to silence the victims, instead of promoting education and remembrance of this painful history.

The objections raised by CWJC and the supporters were rejected based on the procedural difficulties to revisit the language that would require the Committee to go through the entire process of getting public review/comments and voting by the Board. Instead of spending enormous time and energy to deal with these procedural difficulties, the CARE and CWJC decided to focus on the education itself.

CARE and CWJC formed an education committee to create teaching materials for teachers in California. An extensive lesson plan according to the California History/Social Science Content Standard was created in 2018. CARE and CWJC created a One-Stop online solution for the “comfort women” issue at <http://comfortwomeneducation.org>, as well as hard copies of the Teachers’ Resource Guide for the “comfort women” issue. 1,500 copies of this Teachers’ Resource Guide were printed and widely distributed to educators in California and beyond for free at teachers’ workshops, seminars and conferences throughout the US.

In 2018, California Department of Education commissioned The History Project at UC Davis to create Source Sets for the new topics included in the revised History/Social Science Framework. CARE and CWJC have been in communications with The History Project since early 2019 to help them create the best possible Source Set for the “comfort women” issue. CARE and CWJC have recommended to include the revised version of the Map of the “comfort stations” created by WAM in Japan. When shown to the teachers, this map could convey the scale and extent of the “comfort women” system and all teachers found the map very helpful to understand and explain the “comfort women” system to the students.

However, according to the Source Set requirements, in order for an image source to be included in the Source Set, the image must come from an archive of an American university or a museum in the US or UK. Therefore, CARE is now working with UCLA Center for Korean Studies to create an Online Resource Center for the “comfort women” issue that will include the map of the “comfort stations” created by WAM and many other useful sources. The Online Resource Center is scheduled to be completed and open to the public in the Spring of 2021.