

“Repeat after us, say no to the mission project.”

by Tuyen Tran, CHSSP Assistant Director



You may have caught it the first time around when Nancy McTygue, our executive director, said [enough with mission projects already](#) in a 2012 edition of *The Source*. Or, you may have read it in the newly adopted [History-Social Science Framework](#), in which we were lead authors and explained, “Building missions from sugar cubes or popsicle sticks does not help students understand the period and is offensive to many.” Nancy reiterates this point on [Capital Public Radio](#). So, if three times is not a charm, let’s try this again.

Repeat after us, say no to the mission project.

In fourth grade, California’s students learn state history. Integral to this is a study of the people who first inhabited the state. This includes Spanish missionaries and native peoples who changed their local environment and one another through their religious and social co-existence, and political and economic exchanges. Unfortunately, an opportunity to teach the complexity of this period is often squandered by mission projects that do not reflect the experiences of the people who lived it. Although the activity has been popular in a number of communities around the state, some American Indians have likened the mission projects to projects that require students to recreate plantations in the American South or concentration camps in Germany.* We recommend teachers frame their instruction around Spanish and native perspectives, their ambitions and world views, and the legacy they left behind from their interactions. The following are resources to get teachers started:

Resources

1. Grade 4, California History-Social Science Content Standards and Framework Text
2. Classroom Instruction
3. Links for Teachers
4. Annotated Bibliography

1. Grade 4 California History-Social Science Content Standards and Framework Text

An excerpt from the Framework: In selecting sources and directing students’ investigations, attention should focus on the daily experience of missions rather than the building structures themselves. Building missions from sugar cubes or popsicle sticks does not help students understand the period and is offensive to many. Instead, students should have access to multiple sources that identify and help children understand the lives of different groups of people who lived in and around missions, so that students can place them in a comparative context. Missions were sites of conflict, conquest, and forced labor. Students should consider cultural differences, such as gender roles and religious beliefs, in order to better understand the dynamics of Native and Spanish interaction. Students should analyze the impact of European diseases upon the

indigenous population. And as much as possible, students should be encouraged to view sources that represent how missionaries viewed missions and how natives lived there, and the role of the Spanish/Mexican settler population in facilitating the system. In addition to examining the missions’ impact on individuals, students should consider its impact on the natural environment.

2. Classroom Instruction

- [California Education and the Environment Initiative](#) (EEI) 4th Grade Unit, [Cultivating California](#), that examines the impact of the missions on California's natural systems and by extension, on the Indians who lived in and near the missions. It includes primary sources and helps students consider the change in daily lives for Indians as a result of the mission system. (*Register for tons of free lessons!)
- The Dominguez Hills History Project lesson -- [California Indians and the Mission System](#)
- The History Project at UC Davis lesson -- [Impact of the California Missions on Native Americans](#)
- Promoted by the [National Indian Education Association](#), learn to Map Your Indigenous Community through this tutorial: <https://vimeo.com/116772603>. See it in action in Los Angeles, <https://mila.ss.ucla.edu/>.
- [Montana Office of Public Instruction's Indian Educator for All K-12 Curriculum Guide](#)

3. Links for Teachers

- [National Museum of the American Indian](#)
- [California's Native American Heritage Commission](#)
- [Facts and Questions from California's Inter-Tribal Council](#)
- [Calisphere's Mission Collection](#)
- [Native American Heritage Month](#)
- [Library of Congress](#)
- [Smithsonian Education](#)
- [National Archives](#)
- [PBS : Native American Heritage Collection](#)
- [National Endowment for the Humanities](#)
- [Mission Dolores Murals Now a Piece of Art History](#)
- [American Indians in Children's Literature](#) -- Book recommendations!

4. Annotated bibliography on California's missions

- Ramon Gutierrez and Richard Orsi, *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Chapters 5 & 6 examine the experiences and interactions among Indians, missionaries, and Spanish colonists in colonial California.
- Steven W. Hackel, *Children of Coyote, Missionaries of Saint Francis: Indian-Spanish Relations in Colonial California, 1769-1850* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). This book covers a broad number of topics related to the mission system, including an analysis of the role of religion, labor, marriage and sexuality, rebellion and justice in the missions, and the era of secularization.
- Robert H. Jackson and Edward Castillo, *Indians, Franciscans, and Spanish Colonization: The Impact of the Mission System on California Indians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995). This book analyzes the California mission system as an example of a Spanish acculturation program that attempted to modify Indian society and religion. The book also examines Indian responses to the Spanish efforts.
- Kent G. Lightfoot, *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). This book analyzes the dimensions and consequences of colonial encounters, with an emphasis on the northern portion of the state and interactions with Russian merchants.
- George Harwood Phillips, *Chiefs and Challengers: Indian Resistance and Cooperation in Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975). A pioneering book that considers the perspectives of both the Indians and the Europeans in California during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

* Deborah A. Miranda, Native American awarding-winning writer and poet and professor of English at Washington and Lee University, forwards this idea in her blog, "When Turtles Fly."