

EXPECTATIONS OF EXCELLENCE

Social studies is the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.

Social studies is taught in kindergarten through grade 12 in schools across the nation. As a field of study, social studies may be more difficult to define than is a single discipline such as history or geography, precisely because it is multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary and because it is sometimes taught in one class (perhaps called "social studies") and sometimes in separate discipline-based classes within a department of social studies.

Two main characteristics, however, distinguish social studies as a field of study: it is designed to promote civic competence; and it is integrative, incorporating many fields of endeavor. In specific and more detailed terms, these distinctions mean the following:

K-12 social studies programs integrate knowledge, skills, and attitudes within and across disciplines. Integrated social studies programs across the nation take many forms, varying in the amount and form of disciplinary integration:

At *primary levels*, children often learn social studies through learning opportunities that are highly integrated across several disciplines. These often take the form of units constructed around themes. For example, teachers using the theme "time, continuity, and change" would likely engage young learners in studies using history, science, and language arts.

As students proceed to *middle and higher levels*, social studies programs may continue to be highly integrated and in some cases planned by interdisciplinary teams of teachers (for example, social studies, science, mathematics, humanities). Alternatively, programs may be planned as interdisciplinary courses or more exclusively linked to specific disciplines (for example, a history course that also draws from geography, economics, political science).

Social studies programs help students construct a knowledge base and attitudes drawn from academic disciplines as specialized ways of viewing reality. Each discipline begins from a specific perspective and applies unique "processes for knowing" to the study of reality. History, for instance, uses the perspective of time to explore causes and effects of events in the past. Political science, on the other hand, uses the perspective of political institutions to explore structures and processes of governing.

It is important for students in social studies programs to begin to understand, appreciate, and apply knowledge, processes, and attitudes from academic disciplines. But even such discipline-based learning draws simultaneously from several disciplines in clarifying specific concepts. A study of the concept of "the common good," for example, may draw upon some or all of the following:

the discipline of *history*, to determine the concept's origin, study primary source documents that define and address the concept, and analyze the concept's development over time;

the discipline of *geography*, to locate where the concept was first developed, map its movement from one continent or nation to another, and recognize the power of the diffusion of ideas as an example of global linkage;

the discipline of *political science*, to determine the developing meaning of the concept as it is promoted or limited through existing political institutions, to study examples of actual practice related to the common good, and to acknowledge the need for citizen involvement in closing the distance between the ideal and reality;

the discipline of *sociology*, to examine the role of individuals, groups, and institutions and their relationship and responsibility to the common good, and to develop an understanding of the complexities of those relationships resulting from the diversity of beliefs, values, and structures within and among them; and

communication abilities from *language arts/English* and the *fine arts* to enable students to express their understanding of the concept in a personally meaningful way.

Social studies programs reflect the changing nature of knowledge, fostering entirely new and highly integrated approaches to resolving issues of significance to humanity. Over the last fifty years, the scholarly community has begun to rethink disciplinary boundaries and encourage more integration across disciplines

The more accurately the K-12 social studies program addresses the contemporary conditions of real life and of academic scholarship, the more likely such a program is to help students develop a deeper understanding of how to know, how to apply what they know, and how to participate in building a future.

To achieve the vision of social studies, we must ensure that students become intimately acquainted with scholarship, artisanship, leadership, and citizenship. Excellence in social studies will be achieved by programs in which students gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to understand, respect, and practice the ways of the scholar, the artisan, the leader, and the citizen in support of the common good.

Each person experiences life in an individual way, responding to the world from a very personal perspective. People also share common perspectives as members of groups, communities, societies, and nations—that is, as part of a dynamic world community. A well-designed social studies curriculum will help each learner construct a blend of personal, academic, pluralist, and global views of the human condition in the following ways:

Students should be helped to construct a *personal perspective* that enables them to explore emerging events and persistent or recurring issues, considering implications for self, family, and the whole national and world community. Social studies students need to learn to make choices after weighing their personal expectations, along with the pros, cons, responsibilities, and consequences of those choices for themselves and others. Students should be helped to construct an *academic perspective* through study and application of social studies learning experiences. The social studies disciplines provide specific points of view. Discipline-based concepts such as "democratic republic," "citizen," "common good," and others help learners construct the meaning of ideals U.S. citizens hold in common. Discipline-based concepts such as "class," "race," "equal access," and others help learners ask how to live in communities characterized by both unity and diversity and how to close the gap between ideals and reality. The informed social studies learner applies knowledge and processes from academic disciplines and from interdisciplinary means to both personal and social experiences.

Students should be helped to construct a *pluralist perspective* based on diversity. This perspective involves respect for differences of opinion and preference; of race, religion, and gender; of class and ethnicity; and of culture in general. This construction should be based on the realization that differences exist among individuals and the conviction that this diversity can be positive and socially enriching. Students need to learn that the existence of cultural and philosophical differences are not "problems" to be solved; rather, they are healthy and desirable qualities of democratic community life.

Students should be helped to construct a *global perspective* that includes knowledge, skills, and commitments needed to live wisely in a world that possesses limited resources and that is characterized by cultural diversity. A global perspective involves viewing the world and its people with understanding and concern. This perspective develops a sense of responsibility for the needs of all people and a commitment to finding just and peaceful solutions to global problems.

Applying Knowledge, Skills, and Values to Civic Action

It is important that students become able to connect knowledge, skills, and values to civic action as they engage in social inquiry.

Knowledge

Knowledge is constructed by learners as they attempt to fit new information, experiences, feelings, and relationships into their existing or emerging intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional constructs. Disciplinary or specialized knowledge is useful but not always sufficient for developing contextual understanding of the phenomena we seek to comprehend. In these instances, ideas, principles, concepts, and information from a number of fields may be relevant to the topic studied. In the social studies, therefore, educators draw widely from a number of

disciplines to construct curricular experiences enabling students to actively relate new knowledge to existing understanding.

If we want our students to be better thinkers and better decision-makers, they must have contact with those accustomed to thinking with precision, refinement, and clarity. We must encourage them to be critical and copious readers of the best media, print, audio, and video content, writers of reflective essays, and critics of social phenomena. An awareness of the relationship among social studies content, skills, and learning context can help us establish criteria for developing reflective social inquiry. This disposition toward reflective thinking is essential if we wish to foster democratic thought and action.

Skills

The skills that should be promoted in an excellent social studies program include the following:

- acquiring information and manipulating data;
- developing and presenting policies, arguments, and stories;
- constructing new knowledge; and
- participating in groups.

These skill categories should not be seen as a fragmented list of things that students and teachers should do. Rather, they should be used as an interconnected framework in which each skill is dependent upon and enriched by all other skills. All together are necessary for a program of excellence:

Acquiring information and manipulating data. To develop this skill category, the social studies program should be designed to increase the student's ability to read, study, search for information, use social science technical vocabulary and methods, and use computers and other electronic media.

Developing and presenting policies, arguments, and stories. To develop this skill category, the social studies program should be designed to increase the student's ability to use the writing process and to classify, interpret, analyze, summarize, evaluate, and present information in well-reasoned ways that support better decision-making for both individuals and society.

Constructing new knowledge. To develop this skill category, the social studies program should be designed to increase the student's ability to conceptualize unfamiliar categories of information, establish cause/effect relationships, determine the validity of information and arguments, and develop a new story, model, narrative, picture, or chart that adds to the student's understanding of an event, idea, or persons while meeting criteria of valid social studies research.

Participating in groups. To develop this skill category, the social studies program should be designed to increase the student's ability to express and advocate reasoned personal convictions within groups, recognize mutual ethical responsibility in groups, participate in negotiating conflicts and differences or maintain an individual position because of its ethical basis, work individually and in groups, and accept and fulfill responsibilities associated with citizenship in a democratic republic. (See Appendix A. Essential Skills for Social Studies for additional details on necessary skills.)

Values

Some values are so central to our way of life and view of the common good that we need to develop student commitment to them through systematic social studies experiences. These include such fundamental rights as the right to life, liberty, individual dignity, equality of opportunity, justice, privacy, security, and ownership of private property. They include as well the basic freedoms of worship, thought, conscience, expression, inquiry, assembly, and participation in the political process. In some instances, the social studies curriculum will focus on how values are formed and how they influence human behavior rather than on building commitment to specific values. In other instances, the emphasis will be placed upon helping students weigh priorities in situations in which a conflict exists between or among desirable values (i.e., those that form our common beliefs about rights, freedoms, and responsibilities of human beings in a democratic society). (See Appendix B. Democratic Beliefs and Values for the complete list.)

That document identifies and describes those principles of teaching and learning that must undergird all social studies programs of excellence. Those principles are:

1. Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are meaningful.

Students learn connected networks of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes that they will find useful both in and outside of school.

Instruction emphasizes depth of development of important ideas within appropriate breadth of topic coverage and focuses on teaching these important ideas for understanding, appreciation, and life application.

The significance and meaningfulness of the content is emphasized both in how it is presented to students and how it is developed through activities.

Classroom interaction focuses on sustained examination of a few important topics rather than superficial coverage of many.

Meaningful learning activities and assessment strategies focus students' attention on the most important ideas embedded in what they are learning.

The teacher is reflective in planning, implementing, and assessing instruction.

2. Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are integrative.

Social studies is integrative in its treatment of topics.

It is integrative across time and space.

Social studies teaching integrates knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, and attitudes to action.

Social studies teaching and learning integrate effective use of technology.

Social studies teaching and learning integrate across the curriculum.

3. Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are value-based.

Powerful social studies teaching considers the ethical dimensions of topics and addresses controversial issues, providing an arena for reflective development of concern for the common good and application of social values.

Students are made aware of potential social policy implications and taught to think critically and make value-based decisions about related social issues.

Rather than promulgating personal, sectarian, or political views, these teachers make sure that students: 1) become aware of the values, complexities, and dilemmas involved in an issue; 2) consider the costs and benefits to various groups that are embedded in potential courses of action; and 3) develop well-reasoned positions consistent with basic democratic social and political values.

Powerful social studies teaching encourages recognition of opposing points of view, respect for well-supported positions, sensitivity to cultural similarities and differences, and a commitment to social responsibility.

4. Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are challenging.

Students are expected to strive to accomplish the instructional goals, both as individuals and as group members.

Teachers model seriousness of purpose and a thoughtful approach to inquiry and use instructional strategies designed to elicit and support similar qualities from students.

Teachers show interest in and respect for students' thinking, but demand well-reasoned arguments rather than opinions voiced without adequate thought or commitment.

5. Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are active.

Active social studies teaching requires reflective thinking and decision-making as events unfold during instruction.

Students develop new understanding through a process of active construction of knowledge.

Interactive discourse facilitates the construction of meaning required to develop important social understanding.

Teachers gradually move from providing considerable guidance by modeling, explaining, or supplying information that builds student knowledge, to a less directive role that encourages students to become independent and self-regulated learners.

Powerful social studies teaching emphasizes authentic activities that call for real-life applications using the skills and content of the field.

The teaching and learning document goes on to delineate additional requirements to support an excellent social studies program which lie beyond the control of the individual teacher. These include:

continuous program assessment;

preparation of pre-service teachers that is aligned with curriculum and teaching and learning standards;

provision of in-service training to support teachers in understanding and implementing standards;

community and governmental support to

recognize the subject's vital purpose for civic education

sustain teacher education and professional development
provide adequate funding and leadership (from school districts and state and federal government).

School as a Learning Place

Successful schools are unique places, not simply spaces. When students conceive of a school as space, they focus on "getting through it" as quickly as possible. Time and destination are foremost in their minds. Rather than having learning as the main focus, their objective is to move on, to get through. Society often reinforces this concept of school by using extrinsic motivational cliches like "finish school to earn more money." Extrinsic motivation with its emphasis on time and destination tends to corrupt true learning. Only rarely do we hear, "Stay in school and learn for your sake as a learner."

Our responsibility as educators is to imagine and create places of learning. Such places foster aesthetics, civility, ethics, openness, conversation, security, stewardship/ public responsibility, craftsmanship, and individual liberty. Although all educators must take responsibility for creating a learning place, social studies educators should be leaders in this effort.

Unless this concept of school is taken seriously, with all the necessary resource and time dimensions, curriculum and instruction will remain a symbolic adventure in rhetoric and retribution. Learning is a dependent variable, relying heavily upon a deep sense of place and community within that place. A focus on school as a learning place will help students stop simply moving "through" school and instead find the satisfaction that comes from creating and working within a place that values learning. This focus on school as a place for the community of learners will in the end be advantageous to individuals as well as to society as a whole.

The elements of curriculum; public commitment, time, and resources; powerful teaching and learning; and the concept of school as a learning place are all essential if students are to achieve the social studies standards we advocate.

Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies, NCSS