

# Inquiry as the Perfect Answer: C3 Teachers Speak with Beau Dickenson about Inquiry and Overcoming Obstacles

Edited by MaryBeth Yerdon, Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S.G. Grant

*Beau Dickenson's tenure in social studies education spans over 20 years. Currently, he serves as the K-12 Social Studies Supervisor for Rockingham County Public Schools in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Throughout this time Beau has seen schools in Virginia respond to a variety of educational policy shifts. In our interview, Beau described some of the shifts—from the No Child Left Behind legislation to recent standards and assessment policy in the State of Virginia.*

*Beau has been invested in inquiry since the beginning. He started using the C3 Framework and its Inquiry Arc when they were first published in 2013. He says he considers the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) the perfect tool for uniting practice-based and pedagogical threads central to his own teaching. In addition, Beau spoke with us about the “content dilemma” in social studies education and how the C3 Framework, Inquiry Arc, and the IDM interrupt that content dilemma. He says he plans to use inquiry in response to some recent restrictive education policies.*

**C3 Teachers: The state of Virginia has gone through a number of education shifts in the past five years or so. Can you summarize some of the more recent shifts and how they have impacted social studies instruction?**

BD: COVID-19 compelled social studies teachers to confront the content dilemma we face in Virginia, which is strongly reinforced by our state's Standards of Learning and the state-wide assessments. Since assessments and standards have been grounded in content knowledge, rather than skills, in the past, teachers felt compelled to march through the curriculum, often with only the support of a textbook. As many of us know, this type of content-burdened curriculum tends to produce rote instruction. Of course, good teachers have always found ways to creatively get around the content dilemma. However, this type of instruction and assessment has always been an obstacle for social studies, more so than any other discipline, at least until the development of the C3 Framework, Inquiry Arc, and Inquiry Design Model. Interestingly, the pandemic provided teachers in the state of Virginia with an opportunity to make big changes in social studies curriculum. Due to hybrid and virtual instruction, the state suspended its high-stakes testing and teachers developed performance assessments in place of the state exams.

In social studies, we naturally looked to inquiry, IDM, and the C3 Framework as a means to reframe our instruction and state assessments. What we saw from both teachers and students who were diving into inquiry during this time was powerful. Fast forward a year or two and social studies teachers in Virginia were effectively reframing our state's curriculum toward inquiry and skills-based assessments. Then, with the



Beau Dickenson coordinates a site-based, student-directed inquiry in Farmville, Va., about the 1951 student strike at R.R. Moton High School.

(Photo courtesy of Beau Dickenson)



Beau Dickenson and a team of 4th grade teachers present their inquiry about Barbara Johns, who led the 1951 student strike at R.R. Moton High School, at the 2022 Virginia Council for the Social Studies Conference in Richmond.

2021 election, the new administration rejected the work that Virginia social studies teachers had done in shifting toward inquiry, and it refocused the state's standards back to core knowledge—even more so than in the previous Standards of Learning. They added 132 new standards, which is about a 20 percent increase in required core content knowledge.

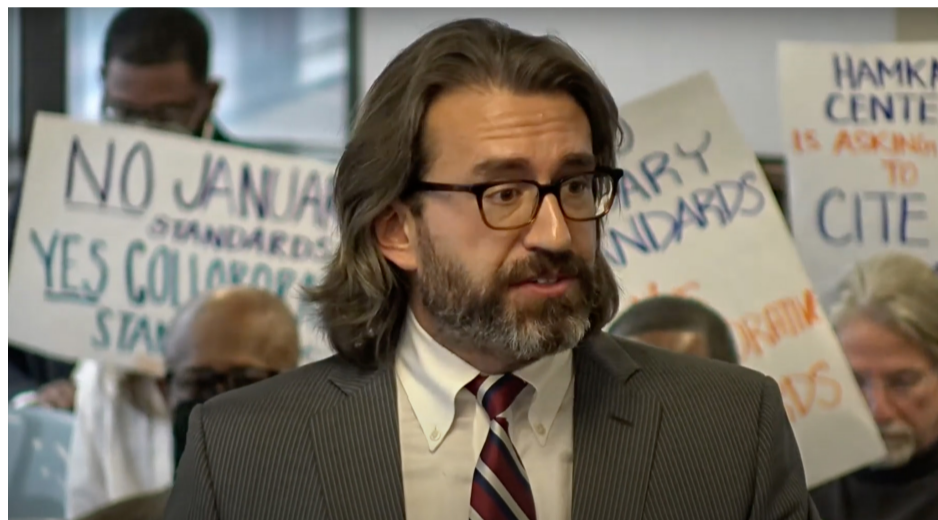
### **C3 Teachers: How have teachers responded to these shifts?**

BD: Mostly with fury, but we are still in a moment where we can take advantage of the fact that the new standards are just not viable. The amount of content knowledge embedded in the new 132 standards is just unrealistic. Since there is really no way to teach all the content top to bottom, once again Virginia educators will be compelled to look at the new standards thematically, through big ideas and application of knowledge and skills, which give us another opportunity to swing the pendulum back towards inquiry and the IDM. That is exactly what we plan to do next fall when the new standards go live.

### **C3 Teachers: How will you and other leaders and teachers in Virginia take advantage of this moment?**

BD: The biggest victory that came out of the chaos of the pandemic was shifting our state-wide assessment from multiple-choice memorization to performance-based assessments.

We used the IDM Blueprint as a basis for these performance assessments. The Virginia Social Studies Leaders Consortium was able to shift this opportunity into Virginia state code, which makes it difficult to remove. This victory might be the off-ramp for these new social studies content standards. Using the C3 Framework and IDM, we can drive the content with compelling questions, chunk core content standards according to themes, and present the new curriculum in an inquiry-based format. This effort could be the key that unlocks the door to inquiry for Virginia's social studies teachers.



Beau Dickenson provides public comment in opposition to a secret rewrite of Virginia's History and Social Science standards at a February 2, 2023, Virginia Board of Education meeting. (Source: VDOE, 2/2/23, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVBxE2edPAY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVBxE2edPAY))

### **C3 Teachers: How did you get teachers on board with the IDM-style performance-based assessments and curriculum?**

BD: It has been no small task; inquiry is challenging, but the juice is most certainly worth the squeeze. Much like the IDM itself, I think the key in getting teachers to buy in is by providing consistency and structure, but also flexibility.

In our district, we organized teachers into professional learning communities (PLCs), that are led by the teachers themselves. In those PLCs, they might utilize one inquiry and practice and reflect on implementation across a number of classrooms. This approach has been a great way for teachers to get their feet wet with inquiry because all the teachers in the PLC are having a common experience, but since the IDM lends itself to honoring teacher knowledge and creativity, teachers still have flexibility in adapting the inquiries to their classrooms.

This approach has worked for us, some teachers might pick up an inquiry and use it as is, some might pick up the same

inquiry and tweak it, still others might be ready to write their own inquiries after implementing just a few of the C3 Teachers' inquiries. Plus, from what I've observed, it seems like teachers naturally gravitate to the IDM because it provides a blueprint or perhaps even a license, for what good teachers have always believed in.

### **C3 Teachers: Do you think that providing teachers with flexibility is essential to successfully shifting towards Inquiry and the IDM?**

BD: It certainly pays dividends to have a degree of flexibility. When you allow teachers to have some choice and give them opportunities to hone their own skills and develop curriculum themselves, teachers feel validated and respected. I think that is essential because otherwise professional development is exclusively top down, and it's hard to develop ownership over something you had no hand in creating. My goal is not to have teachers implement a specific inquiry, although that might be how the development starts. I want teachers in my division (district) to understand the practice of inquiry. When teachers understand the practice and pedagogy of inquiry they become more adept at adapting and designing inquiries using the IDM.

### **C3 Teachers: What does it look like when you see a teacher and a class of students successfully using inquiry?**

BD: I see a high-level of engagement from both the students and the teacher. For students, I see a sense of agency; they are invested in the curriculum; they see their own voice and opinions coming to the forefront. For example, I observed this one inquiry during the pandemic, it was in a civics classroom, the question was "Do students have the freedom of speech in school?" The conversation was unfolding in the classroom, and one of the principals stopped by; so many classrooms at this time were silent, but you could hear this class talking from down the hall. This principal popped his head in and asked, "What's going on in here?" And the kids started telling him about the "cool" inquiry they were doing about free speech. The conversation went on for an hour and the principal stayed the whole time and engaged with the students about free speech in schools. It was cool to watch, not just the kids engaged in

the compelling question, but the principal as well. Anytime you see kids taking ownership and making connections between what they are learning and the world they live in, that is really where the magic happens.

8th grade Civics and Economics IDM

## ***Do students have the freedom of speech in school?***



### **C3 Teachers: What are the obstacles to inquiry? And what future do you see for inquiry-based social studies teaching and learning?**

BD: I think that teachers certainly feel like their agency has been taken away, and I think they feel threatened as well. As a result, many teachers are self-censoring. I mean, there was a tip line that parents could call to report teachers who were using "inherently divisive practices" and that definitely impacted morale. I actually had a teacher ask me if it was okay to teach about Rosa Parks. Imagine the shock, I mean not only should we be teaching about Rosa Parks, but it is required content.

But the current environment is one where teachers feel threatened. We repeatedly hear implications about how teachers are trying to indoctrinate students, which could not be farther from the truth. We hear across the political spectrum that students should learn *how* to think and not *what* to think.

I believe that inquiry presents the perfect response to some of the political vitriol we have recently been exposed to because it rests upon the foundations of investigation and claim-making, where students have the ability to form their own arguments based upon evidence. In my mind, inquiry is the bridge that traverses this divide because the purpose of inquiry, the IDM,

and the C3 Framework and Inquiry Arc is just that, teaching students how to think, not what to think. There can be a room full of opinions and as long as they are supported by verifiable evidence those opinions can become evidence-based claims.

Inquiry equips students with the skills to navigate the world. We are teaching them how to develop and support their own opinions with evidence and how to make reasoned arguments as young democratic citizens, not indoctrinating them. If there is one thing we can all agree on it is the importance of asking questions. ■

*\*This interview, conducted over two sessions, has been edited and condensed.*



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The C3 Teachers initiative is guided by MARYBETH YERDON (SUNY Cortland), KATHY SWAN (University of Kentucky), JOHN LEE (North Carolina State University), and S.G. GRANT (Binghamton University). Kathy, John, and S.G. have worked as leaders and writers in the C3 Framework project and know first-hand the critical role teachers play in the implementation and realization of the C3 goals. Their work extends beyond the C3 into teacher education and preparing new teachers to tackle the challenges of teaching social studies in the 21st century.

Teachers from around the world are using inquiry and the IDM in the classroom. Creating community through connecting teachers is one of C3 Teachers' primary goals. Through [inquiry development](#), [hubs](#), [blogging](#), the C3 Teachers Institute, and the [Making Inquiry Possible Project](#) C3 Teachers strive to support teachers as they implement inquiry in the classroom. [Join us!](#) We want to hear from you.

## A New book from NCSS and the C3 Teachers!

The twenty-seven published articles in this book, drawn primarily from the “Teaching the C3 Framework” columns in *Social Education*, demonstrate how the ideas of the C3 Framework have made their way into many facets of social studies: standards, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and teacher education. Looking back on a decade of inquiry, Kathy Swan, S. G. Grant, and John Lee invite you to join the celebration of the C3 Framework's impact on social studies education and to continue blazing the inquiry trail and fueling the revolution.

*¡Viva la inquiry revolución!*

**Member/List Price: \$29.95 / \$39.95**

## REVOLUTION OF IDEAS: A DECADE OF C3 INQUIRY



BY KATHY SWAN, S.G. GRANT & JOHN LEE

