

The State of the C3 Framework: An Inquiry Revolution in the Making

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When leading professional development, we sometimes joke that the C3 Framework launched a “revolution” in social studies.¹ But if one element of a successful revolution is widespread support, we may not be joking much longer.

In 2020, with our colleague Ryan New, we published “The State of Social Studies Standards: What Is the Impact of the C3 Framework.”² In that report, we detailed evidence that the C3 Framework was having a profound effect on the substance of state-level social studies standards. We revealed that of 50 states (and the District of Columbia), 32 made use of the C3 Framework in one way or another. With the 10-year-anniversary of the C3 Framework, we were delighted to see that six more states have joined the inquiry fold. In effect, that means that approximately 35 million, or nearly 70 percent of American students have the opportunity to engage in more ambitious social studies teaching and learning than ever before.

In this article, we update our 2020 analysis and contend that the potential for an inquiry revolution is growing. We begin, however, with a bit of history.

The Birth of the C3 Framework

In the decades before the *College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* was launched in 2013, social studies standards and curriculum efforts tended to privilege content over skills and failed to capture any notice on a national scale.³ Larger concerns further eclipsed those efforts, and the United

States began a sustained focus on literacy and mathematics. Two waves of reform that promoted those school subjects—No Child Left Behind and the Common Core curricula—cemented public and teachers’ attention. The low point was when the Common Core English-Language Arts curriculum reduced social studies to an appendix.

With little left to lose, a small group of state-level social studies specialists and leaders of cultural institutions held a series of meetings to discuss the fate of social studies. In a pivotal moment, the group decided to avoid the pitfalls of developing one more set of content standards. Instead, sponsored by the National Council for the Social Studies and led by Kathy Swan and then-NCSS executive director Susan Griffin, the group chose to (a) privilege state-developed standards over a national effort and (b) focus on the broad concepts and tools of social studies in each of four disciplinary areas—civics, economics, geography, and history. To affect these ideas, the group decided to construct a framework or guidance document social studies leaders could use when their states developed new standards and curriculum.

The *College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards*, or C3 Framework, went live on Constitution Day 2013. The document has four sections. The introduction lays out the process by which the document was produced and the nearly 100 writers and reviewers who produced it, as well as the 15 organizations that participated and the 25 organizations invited to review it. The second section

offers a reader's guide to the framework including links to the Common Core English Language Arts standards. The bulk of the C3 Framework is presented in the third section. Here, the Inquiry Arc is described and the four Dimensions of the framework are delineated. Those four dimensions are (1) Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries, (2) Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools (i.e., civics, economics, geography, and history), (3) Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence, and (4) Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action. The final section of the framework offers a disciplinary matrix, a scholarly rationale for the effort, and three companion documents featuring the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

Methodology of the Survey

In the original study,⁴ we conducted a content analysis on the extent to which each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia used the C3 Framework in their social studies standards. This seemingly simple task soon became complicated due to the considerable variation in how states define standards and surround them with supporting materials. As a result, in order to compare roughly equivalent documents, we decided to focus on whatever each state labeled as its standards document; we did not include ancillary documents.⁵

As our analysis developed, we saw the states' efforts falling into nine categories that could be described on four levels:

- Level N/A: States that have not undergone (n=5) or are currently undergoing (n=6) comprehensive social studies standards revision;
- Level 1: States that did not cite (n=8) the C3 Framework as part of their social studies standards document;
- Level 2: States that cited (n=2), endorsed (n=2), or excerpted (n=12) the C3 Framework in their social studies standards document;
- Level 3: States that framed (n=4), modeled (n=11), or adopted (n=1) the C3 Framework in their social studies standards document.⁶

The level that proved most challenging to categorize was Level 3. In our earlier paper, we noted that:

In this analysis, we stayed focused on several major factors: (1) the treatment of the four dimensions of the Inquiry Arc (e.g., where it appears in the document, whether it stayed intact, and renaming of the dimensions); (2) the inclusion of specific indicators and the extent to which they were differentiated for grade level; and (3) any innovations to the presentation of the standards document (e.g., modifications in language, addition of skills).

For this follow-up study, we began by looking at the 19 states that fell into Level N/A and Level 1 as these were the cases most likely to represent any change toward the C3 Framework. With that review complete, we spot-checked the Level 2 and Level 3 states to see if there was any significant movement toward or away from the C3 Framework in any revised documents.

Findings

Whereas the shelf life of most curriculum reforms is only a few years, at most, we found that time has not diminished interest in the C3 Framework. In fact, it continues to be the go-to source when states revise their standards.

Our updated survey of state standards and the C3 Framework support two trends: (a) states that employed the C3 Framework continue to use it, and (b) states that have revised their standards since 2020 have used the C3 Framework to a significant degree.

Continuing with the C3 Framework

Of the 32 states that incorporated the C3 Framework in our 2020 survey at Levels 2 or 3, all have continued their use of the document with one exception. In some ways, this result

is no particular surprise as 28 of these states have not revised their standards in the last three years. But, of the four states that did undergo a standards revision effort, three (Arkansas, Iowa, and Mississippi) retained their use of the C3 Framework as an important influence on their standards.

The one exception to the trend of continuing use of the C3 Framework is South Dakota. In the 2015 social studies standards, the drafting committee “used C3 Framework skills ... to inform standards and outcomes.”⁷ Inquiry was also listed as one of the four dimensions of the South Dakota standards along with communication, problem solving, and critical thinking. In the 2023 revision, all mention of these dimensions is gone as is any reference to the C3 Framework. Based on the Trump administration-supported *1776* curriculum, the new standards are heavily centered around content with only lower-level skills (e.g., identifying, telling stories, and explaining) listed. (To learn more about South Dakota’s standards controversy, see Stephen Jackson’s article on page 355 of this issue.)

Given the turbulent times, we were surprised that nearly all states that used the C3 Framework in 2020, with its commitment to inquiry-based teaching and learning, continue to endorse that document.

Growth and Strength of the C3 Framework

The continued influence of the C3 Framework is heartening. We were surprised and gladdened by the fact that of the states that did revise their social studies standards since our 2020 survey, nearly 70 percent did so in ways that reflect attention to the C3 Framework.

In total, 16 states have adopted new standards since 2020; 11 did so by incorporating elements of the C3 Framework. As noted above, four of those states used the C3 Framework according to our initial survey; three of the four continue to do so. Six states (Virginia, New Mexico, Louisiana, Washington DC, Rhode Island, and Utah) built the Framework into their new standards at one of the Level 2 categories. In the Level 2 categories, states alternatively cited, endorsed, or excerpted elements from the C3 Framework. The other four states (Minnesota, Montana, Arkansas, and Iowa)

embraced the Framework at Level 3A or 3B. Reflecting greater attention to the C3 Framework, these Level 3 states framed or modeled their standards after the Framework.

Five states (Florida, Georgia, Indiana, South Dakota, and Texas) revised their standards after 2020, but show no influence of the inquiry-based principles of the C3 Framework. As noted in the South Dakota example, the new standards in these states tilt heavily toward content specifications; any attention given to social studies skills typically reflects lower-level thinking.

Thus, when given the opportunity to develop new standards for social studies, the vast majority of states opted to incorporate the C3 Framework. Even more important, those states went beyond simply citing the framework as an influence or endorsing it as a complementary resource. In short, virtually all of the revised state standards reflect a more ambitious use of the C3 Framework.

One example is the new Rhode Island social studies standards.⁸ Consisting of 12 anchor standards and dozens of content standards, Rhode Island teachers and students will see the C3 Framework baked into the mix. The anchor standards, which are intended for use across the K-12 curriculum, are built around three key constructs in each of four academic disciplines: civics/government, economics, geography and history. Each construct represents a range of interrelated concepts many of which are directly related to the C3 Framework. (See Figure 2 on p. 365.)

Figure 1. State Social Studies Standards Categorized by Use of the C3 Standards

Level (# of states in level)	Category Description	Number of States	States in Each Category*
N/A (n=4)	A. States that have not undergone comprehensive social studies standards revision since the publication of the C3 Framework.	3	Pennsylvania (2009), Alabama (2010), New Hampshire (2006)
	B. States that are currently undergoing social studies standards revision and have not formally adopted new standards as of June 1, 2021/2023	1	Alaska (2016)
Level 1 (n=9)	A. States that do not cite the C3 Framework in social studies standards or in any accompanying documents, including works cited/references.	9	Delaware (2018), Florida (2014, 2023), Georgia (2016, 2023), Idaho (2016), Indiana (2020, 2023), Ohio (2018), South Dakota (2015, 2023), Texas (2018, 2023), Wyoming (2018)
Level 2 (n=20)	A. States that cited the C3 Framework as one of the documents consulted in a standards writing and adoption process.	2	Mississippi (2018, 2022), Maine (2019)
	B. States that endorsed the use of the C3 Framework by presenting it as a complementary resource for implementing their social studies standards.	2	California (2016), New York (2016),
	C. States that excerpted one or more ideas (e.g., questions, taking informed actions) from the C3 Framework.	16	Virginia (2015, 2023), New Mexico (2009, 2022), Louisiana (2011, 2022), Washington, DC (2006, 2023), Rhode Island (2012, 2023), Missouri (2016), Utah (2016, 2023), Tennessee (2017), Oregon (2018), Nebraska (2019), North Dakota (2019), Oklahoma (2019), Washington (2019), Colorado (2020), Kansas (2020), South Carolina (2020)
Level 3 (n=18)	A. States that framed their social studies standards with the C3 Framework's Inquiry Arc.	5	Minnesota (2011, 2022), West Virginia (2016), Massachusetts (2018), Maryland (2020), New Jersey (2020)
	B. States that modeled their social studies standards on the C3 Framework.	12	Montana (2017, 2021), Arkansas (2014, 2022), Connecticut (2015), Illinois (2016), Iowa (2017, 2023), Hawaii (2018), Nevada (2018), Wisconsin (2018), Arizona (2019), Kentucky (2019), Michigan (2019), North Carolina (2021)
	C. States that adopted the C3 Framework as their social studies standards.	1	Vermont (2017)

* Note: The first year listed after each state reflects the latest version when its state social studies standards were surveyed in 2020. States with a second year listed have subsequently revised their standards.

Figure 2. The Rhode Island Anchor Standard Constructs and Concepts for Social Studies K-12

<p>Civics & Government</p> <p>1. Rules and Laws Authority & Equity; Participation & Equality</p> <p>2. Power Political Processes & Structures; Positionality & Privilege; Decision-Making & Consequences</p> <p>3. Rights and Responsibilities Freedom & Control; Individuals & Society; Belonging & Citizenship</p>	<p>History</p> <p>4. Interpretation Facts, perspectives, and biases; Sources & representation</p> <p>5. Change/Continuity Past & Present; Causation; Social Action & reactions</p> <p>6. Individuals/Groups Identity & Social Roles; Class; Gender, Ethnicity, Race, Religion; Community & Culture</p>
<p>Geography</p> <p>7. Human and Physical Interactions Modification & Adaptation; Naming Environments; Resources (Distribution and Access)</p> <p>8. Populations Movement; Density & Distribution; Cultures</p> <p>9. Spatial Considerations Landforms; Locations; Climate & Weather</p>	<p>Economics</p> <p>10. Scarcity/Abundance Choices & Consequences; Trade-offs; Economic Systems & Opportunities</p> <p>11. Producers/Consumers Goods & Services; Means of Exchange; Technology</p> <p>12. Economics/Government Roles; Interdependence; Influence</p>

Each of those constructs and concepts are then expressed through a four-part hierarchy of inquiry-rooted skills: Identify, Explain, Analyze, and Argue. For example, the Individuals and Groups construct under history looks like this:

Individuals / Groups (H.IG)

Students act as historians as they...

1. *Identify* peoples, events, technologies, and ideas involved in historical and social change in various geographical and temporal locations.
2. *Explain* how historical and social change have been and continue to be accomplished in relation to systems of power, identity, and resistance.
3. *Analyze* historical change through the intersectional identities and lived experiences of people who have accomplished social change throughout history in relation to systems of power, identity, and resistance.
4. *Argue* how all individuals can act as local, national, and/or global agents of social change by using lessons learned from history.

In this example, we can see how K-12 teachers in Rhode Island can use the same standard to explore the content relevant to each grade level at a much higher level of rigor than in most content-only standards. And, in doing so, they push through to the level of evidence-based argumentation, a key feature of the C3 Framework.

Conclusion

Uncertain times can breed a revolution. By 2013, the No Child Left Behind legislation, the Race to the Top funding priorities, and the Common Core for English-Language Arts had created all kinds of uncertainty for the future of social studies in schools. But that uncertainty spurred a new vision for the field, one that embraced the central elements of an inquiry-based C3 Framework—compelling questions, robust sources, evidence-based arguments, taking informed action. That the document has remained viable for the past 10 years is notable; that it is growing in influence may well prove revolutionary. ■

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies, 2013).
2. Ryan New, Kathy Swan, S.G. Grant, John Lee, “The State of Social Studies Standards: What is the Impact of the C3 Framework,” *Social Education* 86, no. 4 (2021), 239–246.
3. The exception to this claim was the uproar over the National History Standards developed in 1994. See Gary B.

Nash, Charlotte Antoinette Crabtree, Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (Vintage Books, 2000).

4. New, Swan, Grant, and Lee, “The State of Social Studies Standards.”
5. Readers interested in a more detailed description of our methodology, should refer to New et al., 2021.
6. New, Swan, Grant, and Lee, “The State of Social Studies Standards,” 240.
7. See <https://doe.sd.gov/contentstandards/documents/SS-Standards-2015.pdf>.
8. See https://ride.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur806/files/2023-03/RhodeIsland_SocialStudiesStandards_FULL.pdf



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