

A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Effective Citizens

The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically... Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.

—Martin Luther King Jr

Rationale

The last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first have seen a marginalization of social studies curriculum, instruction, and assessment at all grade levels. In many state houses, in departments of education and in school districts across this great nation, education for citizenship has taken a back seat to education for career and college.

As Judith L. Pace wrote in *Education Week* in December 2007, "... the data point to a social studies divide, caused by the confluence of high-stakes accountability and school segregation by race and class."¹ She affirmed the view, widely held by social studies educators, that "... depth of historical, political, and cultural understanding" is essential if this democracy is to survive and thrive. Powerful social studies teaching helps students develop enduring understandings in the core content areas of civics, economics, geography, and history, and assures their readiness and willingness to assume citizenship responsibilities. Powerful social studies learning leads to a well-informed and civic-minded citizenry that can sustain and build on democratic traditions.

Purpose

This position statement presents a vision of social studies teaching and learning needed to achieve the levels of civic efficacy that the nation requires of its citizens.

It does not outline a K–12 social studies program nor does it suggest any particular curricular scope and sequence. The emphasis is on principles of teaching and learning that have enduring applicability across grade levels, social studies core content areas, and scope-and-sequence arrangements. These principles are summarized in this declaration: Teaching and learning in social studies are powerful when they are meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active.

The vital task of preparing students to become citizens in a democracy is complex. The social studies disciplines are diverse, encompassing an expansive range of potential content. This content engages students in a comprehensive process of confronting multiple dilemmas, and encourages students to speculate, think critically, and make personal and civic decisions based on information from multiple perspectives.

A powerful and rigorous social studies curriculum provides strategies and activities that engage students with significant ideas, and encourages them to connect what they are learning to their prior knowledge and to current issues, to think critically and creatively about what they are learning, and to apply that learning to authentic situations.

A Guiding Vision: The Goals of Social Studies

Teaching social studies powerfully and authentically begins with a deep knowl-

edge and understanding of the subject and its unique goals. Social studies programs prepare students to identify, understand, and work to solve the challenges facing our diverse nation in an increasingly interdependent world. Education for citizenship should help students acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives. Competent and responsible citizens are informed and thoughtful, participate in their communities, are involved politically, and exhibit moral and civic virtues.

Qualities of Powerful and Authentic Social Studies

A. Social Studies Teaching and Learning Are Powerful When They Are Meaningful

Meaningful social studies builds curriculum networks of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes that are structured around enduring understandings, essential questions, important ideas, and goals.

- Key concepts and themes are developed in depth. The most effective social studies teachers do not diffuse their efforts by covering too many topics superficially. Breadth is important, but deep and thoughtful understanding is essential to prepare students for the issues of twenty-first century citizenship.

- Skills necessary to help our students thrive in a world of continuous and accelerating change are emphasized. These include discipline-based literacy, multi-disciplinary awareness, information gathering and analysis, inquiry and critical thinking, communication, data analysis and the prudent use of twenty-first century media and technology. Skills are embedded throughout meaningful social studies lessons, rather than added on at the end.

- Teachers are reflective in planning, implementing, and assessing meaningful curriculum. Reflective teachers are well informed about the nature and purposes of social studies, have a continually growing understanding of the disciplines that they teach, and keep up with pedagogical developments in the field of social studies.
- Meaningful curriculum includes extensive and reflective study of

the United States and other nations' histories, religions, and cultures.

B. Social Studies Teaching and Learning Are Powerful When They Are Integrative

The subjects that comprise social studies—i.e., history, economics, geography, political science, sociology, anthropology, archaeology and psychology—are rich, interrelated disciplines, each critical to the background of thoughtful citizens. The social studies curriculum is integrative, addressing the totality of human experience over time and space, connecting with the past, linked to the present, and looking ahead to the future. Focusing on the core social studies disciplines, it includes materials drawn from the arts, sciences, and humanities, from current events, from local examples and from students' own lives.

- Each of the social studies disciplines themselves integrates content from the others. Units and lessons can draw on ideas from economics, geography, history, political science, and sociology to increase understanding of an event or concept. Each disciplined pursuit demands a level of sensitivity and awareness to content drawn from the arts, humanities, and sciences.
- Powerful social studies teaching combines elements of all the disciplines as it provides opportunities for students to conduct inquiry, develop and display data, synthesize findings, and make judgments.
- Social studies teaching and learning requires effective use of technology, communication, and reading/writing skills that add important dimensions to students' learning.

C. Social Studies Teaching and Learning Are Powerful When They Are Value-Based

Social studies teachers recognize that students do not become responsible,



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participating citizens automatically. The values embodied in our democratic form of government, with its commitment to justice, equality, and freedom of thought and speech, are reflected in social studies classroom practice.

Social studies teachers develop awareness of their own values and how those values influence their teaching. They assess their teaching from multiple perspectives and, when appropriate, adjust it to achieve a better balance.

- Students are made aware of potential policy implications and taught to think critically and make decisions about a variety of issues, modeling the choices they will make as adult citizens.
- Students learn to assess the merits of competing arguments, and make reasoned decisions that include consideration of the values within alternative policy recommendations.
- Through discussions, debates, the use of authentic documents, simulations, research, and other occasions for critical thinking and decision making, students learn to apply value-based reasoning when addressing problems and issues.
- Students engage in experiences that develop fair-mindedness, and encourage recognition and serious consideration of opposing points of view, respect for well-supported positions, sensitivity to cultural similarities and differences, and a commitment to individual and social responsibility.

D. Social Studies Teaching and Learning Are Powerful When They Are Challenging

Student work should reflect a balance between retrieval and recitation of content and a thoughtful examination of concepts in order to provide intellectual challenges. The teacher must explain and



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- an introductory movie framing a question of historical debate;
- a digital notebook containing ten sources;
- guided questions that promote historical thinking;
- video clips that show historians in action;
- a culminating assignment;
- directed webquests.

Student Investigations

- Spanish American War
- The Scopes Trial and American Culture
- Social Security and the New Deal
- Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights Movement

TEACHER MATERIALS

classroom strategies, examples of student work, handouts and more

A collaborative project of the History Education Group at Stanford School of Education and the Center for History and New Media (chnm.gmu.edu), with funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Carnegie Corp. of New York.

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model intellectual standards expected of students. These include, but are not limited to: clarity, precision, completeness, depth, relevance, and fairness.

- Challenging social studies instruction makes use of regular writing and the analysis of various types of documents, such as primary and secondary sources, graphs, charts, and data banks. It includes sources from the arts, humanities, and sciences, substantive conversation, and disciplined inquiry.
- Disciplined inquiry, in turn, includes the teaching of sophisticated concepts and ideas, and in-depth investigation of fewer rather than more topics, with deep processing and detailed study of each topic.
- Challenging social studies includes the rigorous teaching of the core disciplines as influential and continually growing tools for inquiry.

E. Social Studies Teaching and Learning Are Powerful When They Are Active

Active lessons require students to process and think about what they are learning. There is a profound difference between learning about the actions and conclusions of others and reasoning one's way toward those conclusions. Active learning is not just "hands-on," it is "minds-on."

- Students work individually and collaboratively, using rich and varied sources, to reach understandings, make decisions, discuss issues and solve problems.
- Student construction of meaning is facilitated by clear explanation, modeling, and interactive discourse. Explanation and modeling from the teacher are important, as are student opportunities to ask and answer questions, discuss or debate implications, and participate in compelling projects that call for critical thinking.
- Powerful social studies teachers develop and/or expand repertoires

of engaging, thoughtful teaching strategies for lessons that allow students to analyze content in a variety of learning modes.

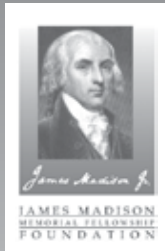
Conclusion

Thomas Jefferson and other founders of the republic emphasized that the vitality of a democracy depends upon the education and participation of its citizens. The need for an informed citizenry was the very impetus for the creation of free public education in the United States. If the nation is to develop fully the readiness of its citizenry to carry forward its democratic traditions, it must support progress toward attainment of the vision of powerful social studies teaching and learning. 🌐

Note

1. Judith L. Pace, "Why We Need to Save (and Strengthen) Social Studies," *Education Week* (December 18, 2007).

This position statement is a revision of the statement prepared by the NCSS Task Force on Standards for Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies that was approved by the NCSS Board of Directors in 1992. The revised statement was approved by the NCSS Board of Directors in May 2008.



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