

The Revised Social Studies Standards

NCSS Standards Task Force

[Soon after you receive this issue of Social Education, the revised NCSS national social studies standards will be available in a book entitled National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment. The following description of the revised standards and their purposes has been derived from the book's introduction and other sections. For ordering information, see p. 208—Ed.]

National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) first published national curriculum standards in 1994. Since then, the social studies standards have been widely and successfully used as a framework for teachers, schools, districts, states, and other nations as a tool for curriculum alignment and development. However, much has changed in the world and in education since these curriculum standards were published. This revision aims to provide a framework for teaching, learning, and assessment in social studies that includes a sharper articulation of curriculum objectives, and reflects greater consistency across the different sections of the document. It incorporates current research and suggestions for improvement from many experienced practitioners. These revised standards reflect a desire to continue and build upon the expectations established in the original standards for effective social studies in the grades from pre-K through 12.

The approach originally taken in these curriculum standards has been well received in the United States and internationally; therefore, while the document has been revised and updated, it retains the same organization around major themes basic to social studies learning. As in the original document, the framework moves beyond any single approach to teaching and learning and promotes much more than the transmission of knowledge alone. These updated standards retain the central emphasis of the original document on supporting students to become active participants in the learning process.

What Is Social Studies and Why Is It Important?

The National Council for the Social Studies, the largest professional association for social studies educators in the world, defines social studies as:

...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, archae-

ology, 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 make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.¹

The purpose of social studies is the promotion of civic competence—the knowledge, intellectual processes, and dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life. Although civic competence is not the only responsibility of social studies nor is it exclusive to the field, it is more central to social studies than any other subject area in schools. By making civic competence a central aim, NCSS has long recognized the importance of educating students who are committed to the ideas and values of democracy. Civic competence rests on this commitment to democratic values, and requires the abilities to use knowledge about one's community, nation, and world; apply inquiry processes; and employ skills of data collection and analysis, collaboration, decision-making, and problem-solving. Young people who are knowledgeable, skillful, and committed to democracy are necessary to sustaining and improving our democratic way of life, and participating as members of a global community.

The civic mission of social studies demands the inclusion of all students—addressing cultural, linguistic, and learning diversity that includes similarities and differences based on race, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, exceptional learning needs, and other educationally and personally significant characteristics of learners. Diversity among learners embodies the democratic goal of embracing pluralism to make social studies classrooms laboratories of democracy.

In democratic classrooms and nations, deep understanding of civic issues—such as immigration, economic problems,

and foreign policy—involves several disciplines. How social studies marshals the disciplines to this civic task takes various forms. These important issues can be taught in one class, often designated “social studies,” that integrates two or more disciplines. On the other hand, issues can also be taught in separate discipline-based classes (e.g., history or geography). These standards are intended to be useful regardless of organizational or instructional approach (for example, a problem-solving approach, an approach centered on controversial issues, a discipline-based approach, or some combination of approaches). Decisions about curriculum organization are best made at the local level. To this end, the standards provide a framework for effective social studies within various curricular perspectives.

What is the Purpose of the National Curriculum Standards?

The NCSS curriculum standards provide a **framework for professional deliberation and planning** about what should occur in a social studies program in grades pre-K through 12. The framework provides **ten themes** that represent a way of organizing knowledge about the human experience in the world. The **learning expectations**, at early, middle, and high school levels, describe **purposes, knowledge, and intellectual processes that students should exhibit in student products** (both within and beyond classrooms) as the result of the social studies curriculum. These curriculum standards represent a holistic lens through which to view disciplinary content standards and state standards, as well as other curriculum planning

Changes in the Revised Standards

The revised standards continue to be focused on the ten themes of social studies, like the original standards. However, the revised standards offer a sharper focus on:

- Purposes
- Questions for Exploration
- Knowledge: what learners need to understand
- Processes: what learners will be capable of doing
- Products: how learners demonstrate understanding

The revised standards also include:

- Enhancements in the descriptions of the ten themes and the associated learning expectations
- The addition of new vignettes to time-tested vignettes describing standards-related class practices that were included in the original edition of the standards
- More detailed assessments
- An updated list of essential social studies skills and strategies, including literacy strategies

documents. They provide the framework needed to educate students for the challenges of citizenship in a democracy.

The Ten Themes are organizing strands for social studies programs. The ten themes are:

- 1 **Culture**
- 2 **Time, Continuity, and Change**
- 3 **People, Places, and Environments**
- 4 **Individual Development and Identity**
- 5 **Individuals, Groups, and Institutions**
- 6 **Power, Authority, and Governance**
- 7 **Production, Distribution, and Consumption**
- 8 **Science, Technology, and Society**
- 9 **Global Connections**
- 10 **Civic Ideals and Practices**

The themes represent strands that should thread through a social studies program, from grades pre-K through 12, as appropriate at each level. While at some grades and for some courses, specific themes will be more dominant than others, **all the themes are highly interrelated**. To understand culture, for example, students need to understand the theme of time, continuity, and change (Theme 2); the relationships among people, places, and environments (Theme 3); and the role of civic ideals and practices (Theme 10). To understand power, authority, and governance, students need to understand different cultures (Theme 1); the relationships among people, places, and environments (Theme 3); and the interconnections among individuals, groups, and institutions (Theme 5). History is not confined to Theme 2 (Time, Continuity, and Change) because historical knowledge contributes to the understanding of all the other themes; similarly, geographic skills and knowledge can be found in more than Theme 3.

The thematic strands draw from all the social science disciplines and other related disciplines and fields of study to provide a **framework for social studies curriculum design** and development. The themes provide a basis from which social studies educators can more fully develop their programs by consulting the details of national content standards developed for history, geography, civics, economics, psychology, and other fields,² as well as content standards developed by their states. Thus, the NCSS social studies curriculum standards serve as the organizing basis for any social studies program in grades pre-K through 12. Content standards for the disciplines, as well as other standards, such as those for instructional technology,³ provide additional detail for curriculum design and development.

The Learning Expectations provide illustrations of what students learn at each level in the social studies curriculum. The language of the Learning Expectations is aimed at teachers and seeks to capture the expectations of over-arching, long-range outcomes. At each level (early years, middle, and high school), the Learning Expectations provide

illustrations of the types of **purposes, knowledge, and intellectual processes** that students should demonstrate in **student products**. The **purposes** identify the reasons why it is important to study each theme. Learners build **knowledge** as they work to integrate new information into existing cognitive constructs, and engage in **processes** that develop their abilities to think, reason, conduct research and attain understanding as they encounter new concepts, principles, and issues. A sample of the new approach is contained in Figure 1, dealing with Civic Ideals and Practices for the early grades (grades pre-K through grade 4). An appendix highlights **Essential Social Studies Skills and Strategies** for learners. Students represent what they learn in **products** that demonstrate their ability to use information accurately, and that reflect the thinking and research skills acquired in the process of learning. As part of their social studies education, students should learn both to participate

effectively in group projects, and to conceive and implement self-directed projects. The development of the writing skills of students is an important objective of the products, which also include visual presentations. As a whole, the standards are a framework for education for citizenship in a democracy, and provide students with the **democratic dispositions, values, and attitudes** needed for civic engagement.

Snapshots of Practice provide educators with images of how the standards might look when enacted in classrooms. Figure 2 provides a sample Snapshot of Practice for Theme 2 (Time, Continuity, and Change) in the middle grades (5–8), while Figure 3 presents a sample Snapshot for Theme 7 (Production, Distribution, and Consumption) at the high school level (grades 9–12). Typically, a Snapshot illustrates a particular Theme and one or more Learning Expectations;

Figure 1: A Sample of the Standards Theme **Civic Ideals and Practices** for the Early Grades

QUESTIONS FOR EXPLORATION:

- What questions are important to ask about civic ideals and practices?
- What is civic life?
- What are civic ideals?
- What are civic practices?
- How can we apply civic ideals and practices in home, school, and the community?
- What are key democratic ideals and practices? What are civic issues?
- What are examples of situations in which civic ideals and practices need to be more closely aligned?
- How can we become informed and engage in meaningful civic action?

KNOWLEDGE

Learners will understand:

- The theme of civic ideals and practices helps us know how we can have influence on how people live and act together;
- Concepts and ideals such as: individual dignity, fairness, freedom, the common good, rule of law, civic life, rights, and responsibilities;
- Key practices in a democratic society include civic participation based on studying community issues, planning, decision-making, voting, and cooperating to promote civic ideals;
- Democratic ideals and practices are often represented in excerpts from contemporary and historical sources, quotations, and stories;
- The importance of gathering information as the basis for informed civic action.

PROCESSES

Learners will be able to:

- Ask and find answers to questions about how to plan for action with others to improve life in the school, community, and beyond;
- Identify and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizens;
- Locate, access, organize, and apply information from multiple sources reflecting multiple points of view;
- Analyze how specific policies or citizen behaviors reflect ideals and practices consistent or inconsistent with democratic ideals;
- Evaluate positions about an issue based on the evidence and arguments provided, and the pros, cons, and consequences of holding a specific position;
- Develop a position on a school or local issue, and defend it with evidence;
- Examine the influence of citizens and officials on policy decisions.

PRODUCTS

Learners demonstrate understanding by:

- Participating in civic discussion and action about a school or community issue;
- Drawing illustrations of examples of participation supportive of civic ideals and practices;
- Writing reports, letters, or brief position statements to describe an issue, actions to address it, and reasons for supporting a particular position over others;
- Developing a plan in collaboration with others to carry out a school improvement project.

Figure 2. A Sample Snapshot

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change (Middle Grades)

Jean Olson's class is studying the American Civil War as the concluding unit of the school year. She designs a lesson on the Emancipation Proclamation as an example of how events, such as the Battle of Antietam, made it possible for dramatic shifts to take place in the ideas and events that followed. Jean wants the students to learn that the conclusion of the battle, which halted a Confederate advance into Maryland, gave President Lincoln the confidence to carry out a plan he had been considering: to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. The proclamation freed the slaves in the South, behind Confederate military lines. Even though Lincoln did not have the power to enforce the proclamation, its symbolism and impact were highly significant.

Students, as part of the introduction to the topic, watch a portion of Ken Burns's Civil War series for the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), and read the Emancipation Proclamation, as well as primary sources related to responses to the Proclamation, and pages from their textbook. They learn that the Proclamation received varied reactions from different segments of American society.

The class is divided into groups, and each group is asked to research the perspective on the Proclamation of one of the following: Lincoln, a Radical Republican, a white Southerner, and a slave. Each group conducts research using a variety of additional primary and secondary sources to answer the following questions: How does the person or group react to the news? How does that reaction reflect the person's beliefs? How does the Proclamation change the person's life? How does it set the stage for the rest of the war? The groups prepare an oral presentation with an accompanying visual to show the perspective of the person or group they have researched. The presentations are to include references to sources they have used to support their responses to the research questions. The class discussion, based on the presentations and visuals created from each group's research, leads to an understanding of how Americans—both the people involved and historians who interpret history—can view the same event in different ways. The students are asked individually to write a summary of the perspective of a person or group other than the one he or she researched. The students and teacher assess these summaries by checking the accuracy of responses to the research questions explored, and the reasonableness of the interpretation of that point of view in light of the evidence.

Figure 3. A Sample Snapshot

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption (High School)

Clark Charkoudian's economics class has been discussing a recent rise in oil prices. Students are feeling the impact of the rising prices at the gas pump. One student, Renee, describes the rise in oil prices as an increase in inflation. Clark corrects her by reminding Renee that inflation represents the rise in price levels more generally, not just a rise in the price of a particular commodity. He explains that the rise in oil could cause a rise in inflation, but only if it causes other prices to rise. He uses this discussion as a way to introduce the concept of economic indicators that measure the health of an economy. He points out that unanticipated inflation could be a sign of problems in the economy. He explains that as the amount of money in the economy expands faster than the amount of goods and services produced, price levels may increase. This would indicate inflation.

Clark talks about how price levels are measured and introduces the Consumer Price Index. He is aware, however, that the students do not seem to really understand what he is talking about. He asks them if they would like to participate in collecting data in order to determine a teenager consumer price index (TCPI). They perk up, but Juan asks what that means. Clark explains that they can see how inflation is affecting other teenagers around the country. They do this by collecting the prices of products teenagers typically consume. These include fast food, movie downloads, clothes and other items.

A few weeks later, students have canvassed the local community and collected data for a one-month period. They calculate the TCPI and determine that it has changed in a way that reflects an increasing price level over the month. Clark uses this discussion and activity to help his students understand other indicators in the economy. These include the unemployment rate and changes in the Gross Domestic Product, the measure of the economy's performance in terms of all final goods and services made in the nation in a year. Clark assesses learners' understanding through an assessment that includes multiple choice and constructed response questions concerning inflation and the use of data to produce price indexes, and by asking the students to write a paragraph explaining what they learned about economics through the TCPI assignment. In assessing the paragraph, Clark looks for the accurate use of economic terms and accuracy in expressing the economic relationships observed in the assignment.

however, the Snapshot may also touch on other related Themes and Learning Expectations. For example, a lesson focused on the Theme of Time, Continuity, and Change in a world history class dealing with early river valley civilizations would certainly engage the theme of People, Places, and Environments as well as that of Time, Continuity, and Change. These Snapshots also suggest ways in which Learning Expectations shape practice, emphasize skills and strategies, and provide examples of both ongoing and culminating assessment.

Who Can Use the Social Studies Standards?

The social studies curriculum standards offer educators, parents, and policymakers the essential conceptual framework for curriculum design and development to prepare informed and active citizens. The standards represent the framework for professional deliberation and planning of the social studies curriculum for grades from pre-K through 12. They address overall curriculum development while specific discipline-based content standards serve as guides for specific content that fits within this framework. Classroom teachers, teacher educators, and state, district, and school administrators can use this document as a starting point for the systematic design and development of an effective social studies curriculum for grades from pre-K through 12.

State governments and departments of education can use the standards to:

- Review and evaluate current state curriculum guidelines or frameworks;
- Guide standards-based education by clarifying long-range goals and expectations; and
- Develop a state curriculum framework that focuses both

on short-range content goals and long-range social studies goals.

School districts and schools can use the standards to:

- Review and evaluate current social studies curriculum with a view toward long-range goals;
- Provide a framework for pre-K-12 curriculum development;
- Provide ideas for instruction and assessment; and
- Serve as the basis for professional development experiences.

Individual teachers can use the standards to:

- Evaluate current curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices;
- Provide learning expectations for units and courses that are consistent with long-range social studies goals within and across grade levels; and
- Acquire ideas and examples for alignment of learning expectations, instruction, and assessment.

Teacher educators can use the standards to:

- Guide the development of pre-service and in-service teacher education programs and courses;
- Provide professional support for the advocacy of social studies;
- Introduce pre-service and in-service teachers to the nature and purpose of social studies;
- Enable pre-service and in-service teachers to plan instruction consistent with long-range purposes of social studies; and

How To Order the Standards

Call 1-800-683-0812 to make orders for the revised standards by telephone. Alternatively, orders and purchase orders can be faxed to 301-843-0159, or mailed to: NCSS Publications, P.O. Box 2067, Waldorf, MD 20602-2067. Please quote the item number 100111 in your orders, as well as the title, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*.

List Price: \$29.95; NCSS Member Price: \$19.95. Add regular shipping and handling fee.

If you are an NCSS comprehensive member (not simply a regular member), you will automatically receive the revised standards by mail as one of your comprehensive member benefits.

You can also receive the standards automatically if you are a regular member and contact NCSS now to renew your membership at the comprehensive level. You can do this regardless of the date on which your current membership expires. For example, if your membership expires in April 2011, you can renew it now at the comprehensive level from April 2011–April 2012. You don't need to wait for the standards, and the book will be mailed to you right away. Contact membership@ncss.org or call 1-800-296-7840, ext. 110, for details.

- Assess instructional planning and supervise the teaching of pre-service and in-service teachers.

Parents and community members can use the standards to:

- Understand how social studies develops civic competence for the benefit of both the individual and society;
- Advocate for social studies teaching and learning in grades from pre-K through 12;
- Assess the quality of social studies education in local school districts; and
- Assess children’s development as social studies learners.

The publications of National Council for the Social Studies, including its journals *Social Education* and *Social Studies and the Young Learner* (for grades K-6), as well as books, regularly include lesson plans and other guidelines for implementing the social studies standards. A video library providing snapshots of the social studies standards in actual classrooms and linked to standards themes, which was produced by WGBH Educational Foundation, can be accessed at the Annenberg Media website www.learner.org/resources/series166.html

How Do Content Standards Differ from Curriculum Standards? What is the Relationship Between Them?

Content standards (e.g., standards for civics, history, economics, geography, and psychology) provide a **detailed description** of content and methodology considered central to a specific discipline by experts, including educators, in that discipline. **The NCSS curriculum standards instead provide a set of principles by which content can be selected and organized to build a viable, valid, and defensible social studies curriculum for grades from pre-K through 12. They are not a substitute for content standards, but instead provide the necessary framework for the implementation of content standards.** They address issues that are broader and deeper than the identification of content specific to a particular discipline. The ten themes and their elaboration identify the desirable range of social studies programs. The detailed descriptions of purposes, knowledge, processes, and products identify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that social studies programs should provide students as part of their education for citizenship. The social studies curriculum standards should remind curriculum developers and others of the overarching purposes of social studies programs in grades pre-K through 12: to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse democratic society in an interdependent world.

Since standards have been developed both in social studies and in many of the individual disciplines that are integral to social studies, one might ask: What is the relationship among

these various sets of standards? The answer is that the **social studies standards address overall curriculum design and comprehensive student learning expectations, while state standards and the national content standards for individual disciplines (e.g., history, civics and government, geography, economics, and psychology)⁴ provide a range of specific content through which student learning expectations can be accomplished.** For example, the use of the NCSS standards might support a plan to teach about the topic of the U.S. Civil War by drawing on three different themes: Theme 2 (Time, Continuity, and Change); Theme 3 (People, Places, and Environments), and Theme 10 (Civic Ideals and Practices). National history standards and state standards could be used to identify specific content related to the topic of the U.S. Civil War. 📖

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The civic mission of social studies requires more than the acquisition of content. Since social studies has as its primary goal the development of a democratic citizenry, the experiences students have in their social studies classrooms should enable learners to engage in civic discourse and problem-solving, and to take informed civic action. The national curriculum standards for social studies present **purposes** worth caring about, **processes** worth engaging in, and **knowledge** worth learning. They provide the essential framework needed to educate young people for the challenges of citizenship.

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Notes

1. The definition was officially adopted by National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) in 1992. See National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1994): 3.
2. For national history standards, see National Center for History in the Schools (NCHS), *National Standards for History: Basic Edition* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996); information is available at the NCHS website at nchs.ucla.edu/standards. For national geography standards, see Geography Education Standards Project, *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Research and Exploration, 1994); information is available at www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/standards. For national standards in civics and government, see Center for Civic Education, *National Standards for Civics and Government* (Calabasas, CA: Center for Civic Education, 1994); information is available at www.civiced.org/standards. For national standards in economics, see Council for Economic Education (formerly National Council on Economic Education), *Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics* (New York: National Council on Economic Education, 1997); information is available at www.councilforeconed.org/ea/program.php?pid=19. For psychology, high school psychology content standards are included in the American Psychological Association’s national standards for high school psychology curricula. See American Psychological Association, *National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2005); information is available at www.apa.org/education/k12/national-standards.aspx
3. National Educational Technology Standards have been published by the International Society for Technology in Education, Washington, D.C. These standards and regular updates can be accessed at cnets.iste.org
4. See note 2 above.