

# Using the NCSS National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment To Meet State Social Studies Standards

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*Got Standards?* Of course! According to *A Report on the State of U.S. History Education, State Policies and National Programs as of September 2008*,<sup>1</sup> “Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia have established academic standards to address academic achievement in history, the social sciences, or social studies. The sole exceptions are Iowa and Rhode Island which allow local jurisdictions to set the history/social studies curriculum.” The report also reveals tremendous divergence in the breadth, depth, purpose, and use of state standards across the nation. Some provide broad guidelines with few curriculum or assessment mandates. Some focus almost entirely on specific content with little attention to critical thinking skills and applications. And while many states use their adopted standards to drive assessment, instruction, and instructional materials, others utilize state standards as recommendations to allow for local interpretation and control.

This disparity is one of the many reasons the Common Core State Standards Initiative was established. According to the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the chief architects of the Initiative, the Common Core State Standards define the knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education careers to graduate high school fully prepared for college and careers. They are:

- Aligned with college and work expectations;
- Clear, understandable and consistent;
- Include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills;
- Build upon strengths and lessons

of current state standards;

- Informed by other top performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society; and
- Evidence- and research-based.<sup>2</sup>

On June 2, the NGA and CCSSO released the final versions of the English-Language Arts and Mathematics Standards but had no plan in place to replicate the process to create Common Core State Standards for any other subject area. For this reason, the release by the National Council for the Social Studies of *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* comes at a pivotal moment in the current era of educational reform. As other subject areas cre-

ate national standards to guide the work of the Common Core State Standards Initiative, these NCSS Standards provide a vision for the future of social studies education in our nation.

Just as the Common Core State Standards are designed to create a citizenry that has the knowledge and critical thinking and problem solving skills to “succeed in our global economy and society,” the NCSS Standards provide a framework for selecting and organizing knowledge and modes of inquiry for purposes of teaching and learning to meet these same goals. And though civic competence is the responsibility of an entire school curriculum, it is more central to social studies than other subject areas in schools and is clearly evident in the updated NCSS Standards Framework.

An important first step in this work is to define the nature and goals of social studies as an inclusive discipline driven by a common purpose. The National Council for the Social Studies 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, archaeology, econom-

ics, 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.<sup>3</sup>

This definition lays the foundation for the design and purpose of the updated NCSS Standards document. Unlike most content standards that provide a detailed description of content for history, civics, economics, geography or psychology, the NCSS Standards Framework provides a set of principles by which content can be selected and organized to build a viable, valid and defensible social studies curriculum. The *Ten Themes* described in the document 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, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions that students should exhibit in student products. The *Essential Social Studies Skills and Strategies* represent the abilities involved in the thinking, reasoning, researching, and understanding that learners engage in as they encounter new concepts, principles and issues. Student *Products* describe what and how students will demonstrate acquired learnings and provide teachers with a vehicle to assess student achievement. *Snapshots of Practice* provide educators with images of how the standards might look when enacted in classrooms.

Our current reality regarding standards and assessment, naturally, influences our work in the classroom. And whether state standards are broad and non-specific or detailed and very specific, this important resource can assist educators across the nation transform their current state standards into an educational program that will increase students' con-

tent knowledge, build critical thinking skills, and develop the dispositions to become responsible, civically engaged citizens. In essence, the NCSS standards can be used to help social studies educators, policymakers, and curriculum writers meet state standards *and* achieve the complex, important goals for students of the 21st century. Below is a plan for this work.

#### Step One: Answer this Essential

##### Question: *Why Teach Social Studies?*

Whether you call it social studies, social science, history, history-social science, civics, economics, geography or psychology, the most enduring question to discuss with colleagues and reach consensus is *Why are you teaching the subject you teach?* Since most state standards are extremely broad and may contain a multitude of facts and details to remember, it is important to identify the “big ideas” or “enduring understandings” for ourselves to be able to help students understand the important key concepts of the discipline and acquire the critical thinking and problem solving skills to apply their learning to relevant, real world scenarios. The *Ten Themes* of the *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* provides ample opportunities to facilitate this discussion:<sup>4</sup>

1. **Culture:** Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity;
2. **Time, Continuity, and Change:** Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the past and its legacy;
3. **People, Places, and Environments:** Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of people, places, and environments;
4. **Individual, Development and Identity:** Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of individual

development and identity;

5. **Individuals, Groups, and Institutions:** Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions;
6. **Power, Authority, and Governance:** Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create, interact with, and change structures of power, authority, and governance;
7. **Production, Distribution, and Consumption:** Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people organize for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services;
8. **Science, Technology, and Society:** Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of relationships among science, technology, and society;
9. **Global Connections:** Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of global connections and interdependence; and
10. **Civic Ideals and Practices:** Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic.

#### Step Two: Align Learning Expectations, Instruction and Assessment

Working with “an end in mind” helps us to clarify our goals and purposes in the content we teach and the methods we employ. As we believe that students need to be equipped with more than content knowledge, but also with the skill sets and dispositions to be critical thinkers and problem solvers, we must be intentional when aligning learning expectations with our assessment design, instructional methodology and selection of resources

in order to help every child succeed. The revised standards support these objectives through their explicit interconnection between purposes, key questions, desired knowledge, worthwhile processes, and appropriate student products.

One approach that many educators find helpful when “working with the end in mind,” is the backwards-mapping strategy of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe that begins with identifying desired results and then determining acceptable evidence for success that can be used in planning instruction.<sup>5</sup> This backwards-mapping concept is only one of a number of approaches that could be used in conjunction with the NCSS standards, which do not endorse any single approach.

By keeping our essential question, “why teach social studies?” ever present in our minds and working backwards in the context of each topic or theme of our state standards, it is easy to see how the design, content, and structure of the NCSS

Standards, unlike any other resource, redefines the *content* of the discipline as purposeful, powerful learning experiences that will prepare students for college, career, and civic life in the 21st century. The following steps will help guide you through this process.

### Step Three: **Unpack your State Standards to identify the “Big Ideas” or “Enduring Understandings” for each course of study.**

Work with colleagues in a collaborative setting to identify the knowledge and skills of your state standards. Determine what is important for students to *know and be able to do*. Formulate a “Big Idea” that will transcend time and help students understand and address issues in the future. For example:

Sample State Standard: Students will understand the political principles underlying the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights.

Sample “Big Idea”: Students will understand that the rights and responsibilities of American citizenship guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights call for continued civic action by individuals and groups to sustain and improve our democratic society.

Posing your learning objective in this way recognizes that, *yes*, students will need to “understand the political principles underlying the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights” as mandated by the state standard. But it also calls upon students to engage in collective inquiry about what *is* civic action, *how* was it utilized by individuals and groups in the past to protect and defend the political principles of the Founding documents, and *what is their responsibility* now and in the future to practice or support civic action that will sustain and improve our democratic society? Knowledge—skills —dispositions. What do you *need to know and be able to do* to make informed and



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reasoned decisions as citizens of a culturally diverse democratic society in an interdependent world?

**Step Four: Adopt the NCSS National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning and Assessment as a resource for designing instruction and assessment.**

The NCSS Standards present *purposes worth caring about, processes worth engaging in, and knowledge worth know-*

*ing* organized separately for elementary, middle and high school grades as:

- Questions for Exploration
- Knowledge – the learners will understand...
- Processes—the learners will be able to...
- Products—learners demonstrate understanding by...

Figure 1 (page 223) demonstrates how educators can align state standards to the NCSS Standards Framework in a

meaningful, relevant way to help students 1) acquire the content knowledge of the state standard, 2) acquire critical thinking and analytical processes to apply the learning to meaningful, real life scenarios, and 3) demonstrate learning in authentic ways to serve students throughout their lives in the 21st century. By mapping out the various elements of a comprehensive social studies curriculum, teachers can develop coherent plans for designing effective instruction and assessing student learning.

**Step Five: Align your state standards, instruction and assessment with the questions, knowledge, processes and products suggested by the NCSS Standards.**

Give yourself permission to “go deep” into your own state standards by applying the rich ideas and approaches of the NCSS Standards. Project-based learning provides opportunities to learn, explore and apply key concepts and understandings when utilized with deliberate attention to learning goals, differentiated needs of students, and meaningful work. Develop performance assessment with specific criteria for demonstrating knowledge of the subject as well as demonstration of skills and attitudes driven by your big ideas and enduring understandings. A template, Figure 2 (page 224), can help educators develop similar plans for each of their key state standards.

**Step Six: Reflect, Revisit, Revise**

Continue to work collaboratively with colleagues, social studies experts and scholars to engage in an ongoing culture of inquiry and action research. Examine student products and other assessment measures to determine if the instructional practices were effective. What would you do the same? What would you do differently? Are there some students who struggled more than others? What can you do to help all students succeed? Are there strategies you can utilize to help English Learners access the curriculum and develop academic



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**Figure 1:** Using the NCSS National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment To Meet State Social Studies Standards

State Standards Referenced		NCSS Standards Referenced – Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices (High School)			
Sample State Standard	Big Idea	Questions for Exploration	Knowledge – learners will understand:	Processes – learners will be able to:	Products – learners demonstrate understanding by:
Students will understand the political principles underlying the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights.	Students will understand that the rights and responsibilities of American citizenship guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights call for continued civic action by individuals and groups to sustain and improve our democratic society.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What questions are important to ask about civic ideals and practices?</li> <li>What role do individuals, groups, and institutions play in strengthening democratic ideals and practices?</li> <li>How do citizens balance personal interests, needs, and talents with civic responsibility and working for the common good?</li> <li>What is the role of the citizen in the community, nation, and as a member of the world community?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concepts and ideals such as: human dignity, social justice, liberty, equality, inalienable rights, responsibilities, civil dissent, citizenship, majority and minority rights, the common good, and the rule of law.</li> <li>Scholarly interpretations of key documents that define and support democratic ideals and practices (e.g., the U.S. Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Sentiments in Seneca Falls, New York, the Gettysburg Address, the Letter from Birmingham Jail; and international documents such as the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Children);</li> <li>That seeking multiple perspectives is required in order to effectively grasp the complexity of issues involving civic ideals and practices.</li> <li>The importance of becoming informed as the basis for thoughtful and positive contributions through civic action.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify examples of civic ideals and practices throughout history and in a variety of cultural settings.</li> <li>Research primary and secondary sources to make decisions and to propose solutions to selected civic issues in the past and present.</li> <li>Identify, seek, describe, and evaluate multiple points of view about selected issues, noting the strengths, weaknesses, and consequences associated with holding each position.</li> <li>Evaluate the degree to which public policies and citizen behaviors reflect or foster their stated ideals.</li> <li>Participate in persuading, compromising, debating, and negotiating in the resolution of conflicts and differences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Writing an informed personal position on a civic issue based on reasoned arguments developed by consulting multiple sources.</li> <li>Using a variety of media (e.g., a documentary film, PowerPoint presentation, or gallery of project posters) to report findings about an issue from surveys, debates, petitions.</li> <li>Writing a plan of action in collaboration with others to strengthen the “common good,” after weighing possible options regarding a specific issue of public concern.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Snapshot of Practice</b></p> <p>Teacher responds to a real scenario or creates one regarding musical lyrics and language in a popular song that is considered offensive to females.</p> <p>The teacher guides students through an exercise to understand the rights and responsibilities surrounding the First Amendment: “Are limits on freedom of expression appropriate in our democratic society?”</p> <p>Students examine historical Supreme Court decisions that have influenced subsequent judicial rulings in First Amendment cases and review current news articles to analyze recent examples. Working in groups, students develop presentations that identify three First Amendment issues and the pro and con arguments for allowing or limiting freedom of expression. Students organize and conduct a public community forum to illustrate the key points of the various perspectives. While no consensus may be reached at the forum, a goal is to create an informed public discussion of the various issues. To assess student learning, students are asked to create a political cartoon and written assignment explaining the pros and cons of a particular issue and why it is important for individuals and groups to continue to seek understanding and engage in civic action to protect the freedoms and rights guaranteed in the Constitution and Bill of Rights as responsible citizens.</p>					

**Figure 2:** Using the NCSS National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment To Meet State Social Studies Standards

State Standards Referenced		NCSS Standards Referenced			
Sample State Standard	Big Idea	Questions for Exploration	Knowledge – learners will understand:	Processes – learners will be able to:	Products – learners demonstrate understanding by:
		Snapshot of Practice			





# Making human rights a reality far and wide starts with education here and now

## **Why is it so important to teach human rights?**

Try this experiment. Ask five or ten students: “What are human rights?” If they can list any, it might be freedom of speech or belief and perhaps one or two others. You could conduct the same survey on the street to the same result.

**The point?** Very few people know their human rights.

Yet we all have 30 rights and freedoms, guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—rights that are ours simply because we are human.

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1. Source: Amnesty International Report 2009