

Beating the Odds: The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards

Kathy Swan and Susan Griffin

When the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards project began, there really was nowhere else to go but up. The project was up against great odds—a dearth of funding, a history of incivility amongst the disciplines within social studies, a knack for ending up in media battles over what should be taught in a social studies curriculum, a lack of disciplinary and interdisciplinary coherence within previous social studies standards documents, and the list went on.¹ In the first couple of months, one of the more optimistic colleagues on the C3 project gave the work about a 30 percent chance of success. He wasn't that far off.

But fear is a great motivator. At the time this project began, the Common Core State Standards reform movement was sweeping the country.² The majority of states had formally adopted the new standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics emphasizing a “fewer, higher, clearer” approach to K-12 education.³ That action created tremors within the social studies community that we could be further squeezed out of the curriculum.

As the Common Core Standards gained momentum, the need for a framework for state social studies standards became increasingly evident. Many in the social studies community feared that the effect of the Common Core Standards on social studies would be to emphasize English Language Arts, and make the English Language Arts Standards the de facto standards for social studies. It was essential to reassert the importance of

social studies subjects, especially as the Common Core Standards acknowledge the necessary contribution of history and other social studies subjects to literacy in grades 6-12. The Common Core Standards also include a substantial emphasis on informational text, much of which is drawn from social studies disciplines, in the English Language Arts Standards for grades K-5.⁴ As state departments of education faced greater budget cuts, and in the absence of a clear consensus around the purpose and outcomes of social studies education, many in the social studies community feared that social studies would be marginalized further. Where once disciplinary quarrels and boundary disputes might have sunk any attempt at constructing social studies standards, the potential elimination of social studies as a viable school subject created a more constructive environment.

A Social Studies Alliance Forms

By January 2010, a few months before the Common Core Standards were officially published, two groups were meeting concurrently to discuss the critical state of social studies education. The Social Studies Assessment, Curriculum and Instruction (SSACI) is a state collaborative within the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) made up of state-level social studies consultants, assessment experts, and administrative personnel who are on the front lines of adoption and implementation of standards within their states. The SSACI collaborative membership structure allows the group to meet six times a year (three face-to-face meetings and three virtual meetings). These meetings provide a forum for examining the current needs and issues facing the states and allow state education agencies to draw from a greater pool of experience. After much discussion about the ways in which the Common Core standards implementation was eclipsing social studies in their respective departments, SSACI decided to work toward the creation of a resource for members to assist them in upgrading their respective social studies standards.

At the same time SSACI was meeting, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) joined with the

Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (CMS) to sponsor a summit of 15 national organizations representing civics, economics, geography, and history education. Within a half-day meeting, the organizations had agreed that social studies could not be further marginalized and they must work together to elevate the field. They cemented their partnership that day by crafting a working definition of social studies that focused social studies on the four disciplines named in the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* by recognizing the interdisciplinary focus of citizenship education, and by acknowledging the role of literacy education within and across the disciplines:

The social studies is an interdisciplinary exploration of the social sciences and humanities, including civics, economics, geography, and history in order to develop responsible, informed and engaged citizens and to foster

civic, economic, global, and historical literacy.

It was agreed that the initiative would focus on state standards on the four disciplines identified in the No Child Left Behind framework as the “core” social studies subjects—civics, economics, geography, and history.

Through the grapevine, we heard about each other’s work and after a series of phone calls and summer meetings, SSACI extended an invitation to form the Task Force of Professional Organizations (See Sidebar A) to unite with SSACI to collectively work on a common resource for social studies.

Initially, the group decided to follow in the footsteps of English Language Arts and Mathematics by creating a uniform set of standards that states could opt into. At the time, we referred to the work as the Common State Standards for Social Studies Project, and hoped that a state-led initiative would improve the chances of acceptance by state policymakers and mitigate the possibilities for corrosive political controversy. Although the ethos of the project remained intact, over the course of the project, *standards* would necessarily turn into a *framework for development of standards* as a more flexible document focusing on social studies skills and concepts had the greatest appeal to a wider range of states. For example, while some of the SSACI states were on the eve of standards creation (e.g., Kentucky), many states had either just created and adopted new social studies standards (e.g., Kansas and North Carolina). A framework would assist all states in utilizing the document as either a companion to existing standards, as a foundation for new standards, or as a mandate to initiate a conversation about the importance of social studies in their state.

Also influencing the framework decision was the enduring tension of skills versus content. While the document would focus on disciplinary processes and skills as well as vital

conceptual content, it would avoid historically divisive prescriptions of curricular content (e.g., names, dates, places, historical eras). However, it is important to note that the group did not want the work to devolve into the old debate of knowledge versus skills, forcing educators to fall into two opposing camps. Instead, the group recognized that a robust and complete social studies education includes an understanding of essential content knowledge, but the decisions around curricular content would need to be determined at the state or local level.

At first glance, the voluntary, state-led effort to develop what would become the C3 Framework faced long odds as it hinged on professional collaboration between and among a loosely arranged coalition of state departments of education and professional organizations. If the past is any kind of predictor (e.g., history wars of the 1990s), social studies educators seemed like the last content area group who should be betting on a cooperative movement. Further, while CCSSO had initially agreed to host these meetings, they were clear that their commitment to the Common Core initiative did not extend to taking a leadership role in the development of state social studies standards. At the time, Chris Minnich, now executive director of CCSSO, expressed the tacit support his organization was willing to offer:

Our board has been very clear that they’re not interested in leading the social studies work in the same way we’ve led the common core in Math and English Language Arts. We’re hopeful that states working together can write social studies standards as they would like to. Some states are interested in upgrading their standards, and that is what we are interested in helping support. We are not part of the development as we were with the common standards [in math and English Language Arts].⁵

Sidebar A: Task Force of Professional Organizations

American Bar Association
American Historical Association
Association of American Geographers
Campaign for the Civic Mission of
Schools
Center for Civic Education
Constitutional Rights Foundation/
Chicago
Constitutional Rights Foundation/USA
Council for Economic Education
National Council for Geographic
Education
National Council for History Education
National Council for the Social Studies
National Geographic Society
National History Day
Street Law, Inc.
World History Association

While our group had a “living room,” we knew the residence would be temporary,⁶ and that there was the possibility of eviction if the work became too precarious. Against this tenuous backdrop, the group forged ahead.

Building a Foundation for the C3 Framework

Work on the C3 Framework began in the fall of 2010 with the development of a conceptual guidance document written by individuals from the Social Studies Assessment, Curriculum and Instruction state collaborative and representatives from the Task Force. In the section that follows, we summarize a number of these foundational ideas that provided a common frame of reference for the group and became a guide to the writers of the C3 Framework.

- *Social studies prepares the nation's young people for college and career, and equally important, civic life.*



The ideas, concepts, skills and understandings gained in a study of the social studies disciplines prepare young people to be more effective citizens and provide students with the tools to understand, interpret, and effectively meet challenges in our ever changing

twenty-first century world.

- *Social studies should maintain disciplinary integrity but should be rooted in an interdisciplinary inquiry approach.*

Social studies is an organizational structure which brings together unique ways of knowing from the disciplines of political science or civics, economics, geography, history, and behavioral sciences. Social studies should include a strong emphasis on disciplinary knowledge and the structures of specific disciplines but, at the same time, social studies should provide students with opportunities to apply disciplinary knowledge and skills as they examine enduring questions related to human experiences. Students must develop the creative and adaptive habits of mind that come with interdisciplinary thinking so as to apply those ways of thinking to real-world problems in college, career and citizenship.

Sidebar B: C3 Writing Team

Kathy Swan, Ph.D. (Lead Writer), Associate Professor, Social Studies Education, University of Kentucky

Keith C. Barton, Ed.D., Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Adjunct Professor of History, Indiana University

Stephen Buckles, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer (formerly Professor) in Economics, Vanderbilt University

Flannery Burke, Ph.D., Associate Professor of History, Saint Louis University

Jim Charkins, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of Economics at California State University, San Bernardino; Executive Director of the California Council on Economic Education

S.G. Grant, Ph.D., Founding Dean of the Graduate School of Education, Binghamton University

Susan W. Hardwick, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of Geography at the University of Oregon

John Lee, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Social Studies Education, North Carolina State University

Peter Levine, D.Phil., Lincoln Filene Professor of Citizenship & Public Affairs and Director of the Center for Information and

Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), Tufts University's Jonathan Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service

Meira Levinson, D.Phil., Associate Professor of Education, Harvard University

Anand Marri, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Social Studies Education, Teachers College, Columbia University

Chauncey Monte-Sano, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Educational Studies, University of Michigan

Robert Morrill, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of Geography, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Karen Thomas-Brown, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Social Studies Education and Multiculturalism, University of Michigan-Dearborn

Cynthia Tyson, Ph.D., Professor of Social Studies Education, The Ohio State University

Bruce VanSledright, Ph.D., Professor of History and Social Studies Education, University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Merry Wiesner-Hanks, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor and Chair of the Department of History, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

- *Social studies should prioritize deep and enduring understandings using concepts and skills from the disciplines.*

Social studies should emphasize deep and enduring understandings over surface level learning. This represents a shift in the current status of teaching and learning in social studies. The C3 Framework focuses on inquiry skills and key concepts, and guides the choice of curricular content necessary for a rigorous social studies program. While curricular content is critically important to the disciplines within social studies, the C3 Framework illustrates the disciplinary ideas, such as political structures, economic decision-making, spatial patterns, and chronological sequencing that lead to deep and enduring understanding.

- *Social studies shares in the responsibility for literacy education.*

As a core area in the K–12 curriculum, social studies shares in the responsibility for literacy education, including the development of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language skills. Because many of the states involved in the C3 Framework project had recently adopted the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, it was imperative for the Framework to seek to define disciplinary literacy for social studies.

With consensus on this set of core ideas, SSACI and the Task Force recruited a team of writers who represented the individual disciplines as well as social studies education (see Sidebar B, p. 319). The writers built the C3 Framework around four dimensions that weave together several important threads: inquiry, disciplinary integrity, common core literacy, and civic engagement. In the articles that follow in this special issue, our writers and participants illustrate these foundations in greater detail

focusing on aspects of the document including the Inquiry Arc, Taking Informed Action, and Literacy in the C3 Framework.

The Writing Process for the C3 Framework

As important as what the document says is how it was constructed. Collaboration and community were central tenets of the work. There was a conscious effort to bring stakeholders who had never all talked together into the same room for an extended period of time. Our job was to manage the discourse within and across the individual stakeholder groups, making sure that a range of voices were heard and that the writing process moved forward.

The team of writers, hired in the summer of 2011, initially met in disciplinary teams to map out the key practices and processes of the individual disciplines. The writing team wanted the four disciplines to be represented as distinctive but complementary, with equal weight given to each. The products of these conversations, which are featured in Dimension 2 of the C3 Framework, spurred additional deliberations around the broader social studies practices that bind these unique disciplines together. Dimensions 1, 3, and 4 were built to frame the disciplinary processes and concepts, to provide an interdisciplinary structure to social studies inquiry, and to help define and elaborate approaches to disciplinary literacy in the social studies.

As the writing team worked, they received editorial guidance from a team of teachers and state education personnel (Sidebar C). These individuals on the Editorial Committee helped translate the occasionally academic prose of the writing team into language more useful for the broader social studies community. As the document moved through the editorial team, it was vetted by individuals representing 23 SSACI member states and affiliates, the directors of the 15 Task Force professional organizations, and a group of 42 elementary and secondary

teachers—the Teacher Collaborative Council—chosen by the state education department personnel. Feedback loops across these groups occurred every few months and continued for approximately a year and a half. After each round of review, the writers would look for consensus in the comments as well as individual insights that would improve each draft.

Once the C3 Framework took a more final form, additional voices representing K-12 educators, university faculty, state education personnel, professional organization representatives, educational publishers, and cultural organizations were asked to weigh in during a series of targeted reviews in the spring of 2013. By May 2013, more than 3,000 individuals had reviewed the C3 Framework draft, and the great majority of the numerous comments sent to the Writing Team found the document compelling. One of our favorite comments during the reviews said, “I hope it will be a document that will bring at least 70% positive comments.” We were happy to report back this past summer that the document received over 90% positive feedback in the last round of review. Energized by overwhelming response to the document, the writers spent the summer finalizing the document, paying close attention to suggestions that bubbled up in the spring.

One of the most prominent suggestions made during the reviews of the draft was to move beyond the original focus of the

Sidebar C: C3 Framework Editorial Committee

Fay Gore, North Carolina, Co-Chair
William Muthig, Ohio, Co-Chair
Kim Eggborn, Maryland
Maggie Herrick, Arkansas
Mitzie Higa, Hawaii
Marcie Taylor Thoma, Maryland
Jessica Vehlwald, Missouri

project on the four federally-defined “core” areas of social studies by including more social and behavioral sciences in the final publication. The American Psychological Association, the American Sociological Association, and the American Anthropological Association responded favorably to an invitation to contribute, and worked steadily in the late spring and summer months of 2013 to produce companion documents, which are Appendices B, C, and D, respectively, of the C3 Framework.

Despite great odds and retaining a collaborative model of development, the C3 Framework was published online by National Council for the Social Studies on behalf of the Task Force on Constitution Day, September 17, 2013.

The Grand Challenge of the C3 Framework

As daunting as it seems, the publication of the C3 Framework was really just the beginning. From its inception, the participants in the C3 project knew that to usher in an ambitious new era in social studies education, more than just standards were required. State-wide and classroom based assessments need to evolve to overcome current shortcomings; instructional materials and resources need to be either aligned or developed to assist teachers in promoting inquiry and facilitating students in taking action; new teacher standards need to recognize the C3 approach to teaching and learning; and, in order to move the needle, funding for professional development around the C3 Framework needs to be plentiful. Additionally, we need to continue to widen the C3 tent to include other partners and stakeholders who can provide further insight into cross-subject matter connections and special student populations.

The success of the C3 Framework will lie in its *implementation*. The Task Force and writing team do not seek *adoption* (like the Common Core Standards initiative). Successful implementation requires educators to use all their

networks, such as state social studies specialists, social studies supervisors, national and state council conferences, meetings sponsored by other Task Force members, workshops and webinars.

Our guess is that those who take up the C3 banner will face the challenge to reform social studies with the same gusto and energy as those who worked to develop the C3 Framework. The challenges awaiting social studies educators are considerable, but the stakes are high. So, what can you do right now to help implement the C3 Framework?

- Support your students as they begin to ask questions and conduct academic inquiries.
- Examine your own strengths and weaknesses around facilitating student inquiry. And then, experiment instructionally with aspects of the inquiry arc!
- Push for more rigorous and authentic assessment that measure inquiry and not just names, dates, and places—even if it's in your own classroom!
- Find ways to incorporate and support the Common Core Standards for literacy in social studies using the C3 as a companion document.
- Be a leader in your school and/or your Professional Learning Community (PLC) around the C3.
- Be creative and aggressive in locating funding for new projects in social studies.
- Meet with an administrator about using the C3 to measure good social studies instruction.
- Advocate for the C3 Framework in your state, given your unique needs.

In the end, we encourage you to find

what our colleague Walter Parker calls “wobble room,” and further the C3 project within your current context.⁷ Will it seem insurmountable at times? Yes, *but* we are social studies—we invite grand challenges! 🌟

Notes

1. Tracy C. Rock, et al., “One State Closer to a National Crisis: A Report on Elementary Social Studies Education in North Carolina Schools,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 34, no. 4 (2006): 455-483; Ronald W. Evans, *The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children?* (New York, N.Y.: Teachers College Press, 2004); S.G. Grant, “Locating Authority Over Content and Pedagogy: Cross-Current Influences on Teachers’ Thinking and Practice,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 24, no. 3 (1996): 237-272; James C. McKinley Jr., “Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change,” *The New York Times* (March 12, 2010), www.nytimes.com/2010/03/13/education/13texas.html; E. Wayne Ross, *Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2006).
2. The Common Core State Standards Initiative website (www.corestandards.org/in-the-states) has a map that shows how the Common Core State Standards have been adopted in the U.S. and its territories.
3. Stephen Sawchuck, “More Than Two-Thirds of States Adopt Common Core Standards,” *Education Week* (August 6, 2010), www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/08/06/37standards.h29.html?qs.
4. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (Washington, D.C.: NGA and CCSSO, 2010).
5. Catherine Gewertz, “Specialists Weigh Common Social Studies Standards,” *Education Week* (May 18, 2011), <http://educationweek.biz/ew/articles/2011/05/18/32socialstudies.h30.html>
6. Catherine Gewertz, “Chiefs Group Terminates Role in Social Studies Framework,” *Curriculum Matters* (blog), June 7, 2013, http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2013/06/chiefs_group_terminates_role_i.html.
7. Walter C. Parker, “Constructing Public Schooling Today: Derision, Multiculturalism, Nationalism,” *Educational Theory* 61, no. 4 (2011): 413-432.

KATHY SWAN was project director and lead writer of the C3 Framework leadership team. She is associate professor of social studies education at the University of Kentucky.

SUSAN GRIFFIN is executive director of National Council for the Social Studies. She served as chair of the C3 Framework Task Force of Professional Organizations. Much of the text of this article also appears in a chapter written by both authors, “The Development of the C3 Framework,” published in *NCSS Bulletin* 113, Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards.