

## Appendix F

### Best Practices in Social Studies Assessment

Social studies is comprised of several diverse disciplines: civics, economics, geography, and history. Social studies prepares students to participate in our nation’s democracy by helping them to become well-informed and civic-minded and to develop cultural, historical, and political understanding. The National Council for the Social Studies states:

*“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.”<sup>36</sup>*

In order for that purpose to be achieved, social studies instruction and assessment must be “meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active”.<sup>37</sup> Meaningful instruction engages students in rigorous curricula and helps them connect their learning with current issues and events. They learn how to apply critical thinking skills to situations beyond the classroom. Meaningful assessment for social studies goes beyond multiple-choice and short-answer tests.

Large-scale assessment in social studies has not been implemented to a great degree, in part due to its complex nature and the wide variety of social studies standards available. This make it difficult to agree upon the assessment of one

particular sequence of learning. In social studies, unlike mathematics or literacy, the order in which the knowledge and skills are gained is less critical. Provided that the depth and breadth of the content is developmentally appropriate, students don’t need to learn about the ancient world before learning about the history of their state, for example. Therefore, it is important that LEAs have a standards-based comprehensive social studies assessment system that fairly assesses student knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

#### **Social Studies Assessment**

Social studies assessment needs to be goal-oriented and standards-based to measure learner outcomes in knowledge, skills, and attitudes.<sup>38</sup> There are two main purposes of social studies assessment: to inform instruction and to measure outcomes. Social studies assessment has not included screening or identifying students for placement into particular programs or for interventions, except for course level placement.

When developing a comprehensive social studies assessment system, LEA’s must ensure that curriculum and instruction are based on rigorous social studies standards. Social studies standards generally fall into two categories: content-based, and theme-based. Content-based standards focus on the facts and particular skills within a particular discipline (e.g., era-based and chronological history standards; economics standards that focus on economics topics and skills). Theme-based standards focus on the “big ideas”, often integrating several disciplines into strands based on unifying elements and themes (e.g., the National Social Studies Standards, which

incorporate standards on geography, history, and economics into a single strand that focuses on “People, Places, and Environments”).

LEAs may adopt the National History Standards (UCLA), the Civics GSEs (RI), the National Economic Standards (NCEE), and the National Geography Standards (National Geographic) and use standards from each set as applicable within the curriculum; or an LEA may adopt the Civics GSEs and the National Social Studies Standards; or some combination thereof that addresses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes expected in Rhode Island’s Basic Education Program.

Social studies assessment may take a variety of forms in order to best fit the learning being assessed. Regardless of the form, they should adhere to several key principles:

1. Assessment is considered an integral part of the curriculum and instruction process.
2. Assessment is viewed as a thread that is woven through the curriculum, beginning before instruction and occurring at junctures throughout in an effort to monitor, assess, revise, and expand what is being taught and learned.
3. Assessment practices should be goal-oriented, appropriate in level of difficulty, feasible, and cost-effective.
4. Assessments should benefit the learner (promote self-reflection and self-regulation) and inform teaching practices.
5. Results should be documented to track responses and develop learner profiles.<sup>39</sup>

### ***In the Classroom***

Commonly-used assessments include textbook-based, program-based, and teacher-created written tests and projects. These can provide valuable data so long as they assess the standards on which the curriculum and instruction are based. Project-based learning is an essential component of social

studies as it not only introduces the content that students need to learn, but provides them with experience in finding more information and developing critical thinking, research, and action skills that are necessary within and beyond the classroom. Portfolio projects that are implemented in a thoughtful and purposeful way can also be a valid assessment of student learning.

Robust assessments include items that test students’ knowledge and understanding at a variety of cognitive levels. Many assessments focus on how much knowledge has been gained in history, government, geography, economics, or other social sciences. These assessments usually take the form of multiple-choice or short-answer questions that rely on knowledge recall skills. Textbook or large-scale assessments (without thematic elements) usually fall into this category. Other assessments focus on the overarching themes of a topic (e.g., a particular culture or region, era in history, string of events) and students’ ability to synthesize ideas and communicate their understanding of a “bigger picture.” These conceptual assessments may include multiple-choice answers, but are likely to include extended response items that require students to demonstrate their understanding of a topic and how it relates to other topics. Both conceptual and objective assessments can be used to assess student attitudes. Some areas of social studies also include an experiential component that may require the use of alternative forms of assessment such as common tasks/projects, portfolios, or reflective journals.

Formative assessment in the social studies classroom looks similar to most content area classrooms: impromptu and planned question and answer, observations of student behavior and engagement, short quizzes that may not count towards the final grade, class discussions, and

other group activities (e.g., small group discussions, brainstorming assignments). Interim and summative assessments for reporting outcomes may have similar formats but cover different scopes of learning. These assessments are commonly given in the form of examinations or written tests to determine understanding of content knowledge and students' abilities to use

that knowledge and critical thinking/analysis skills to demonstrate their understanding. The most meaningful results are generated by assessments that are cross-classroom and even cross-LEA. When a comprehensive social studies assessment system is in place, LEAs can more easily facilitate collaboration and the administration of common assessments.

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