

Accelerating Learning & Best Practices

Guidance for Social Studies

Vision

While social studies' content and skills are less rigidly bound to a sequential development process than other content areas, many students may begin the year with unfinished learning as a result of instructional and curricular choices and priorities from distance learning the previous year. The benefit to social studies in this situation is its flexibility. Within its domains (history, geography, culture, civics, and economics), content generally starts in the elementary grades through an understanding of ourselves, and how we interact with the world, which then expands to a broader worldview throughout the secondary grades into the community and wider world – topics varying by district choice, and skills introduced and generally building in similar sequence to literacy and science.

Although domain content can be integrated with other subject areas, the concern is that social studies may again be the least prioritized of the core content areas, particularly in the elementary grades, as a result of accelerating learning in other content areas. This document describes various strategies to engage students in social studies disciplines through topics, concepts, and skills during the upcoming school year so that, regardless of the mode of instruction, there is continuity of students' progress in the content and skills of that grade.

Specific Considerations

- Social studies standards and yearlong scopes and sequences should guide what standards and topics will be covered when and how students will apply their knowledge of the standards.
- Educators must be critical consumers of text-based and online resources for both in-person and remote instruction since social studies has no nationally recognized standards for high quality curriculum materials. In other words, there needs to be a balance when prioritizing content so that availability of resources (high quality or not) is not the determining factor for whether content is taught.
- Students making age-appropriate connections between the self, community, and world are integral to the study of history, geography, culture, civics, economics, and current events in the social studies.
- Student agency and engagement should be supported through age-appropriate learning opportunities that integrate text-based and virtual materials and instructional activities.

Best Practices

1. Collaborate to ensure social studies has sufficient/equitable time.



- The risk of condensing core content into literacy and math is the loss of discipline specific skills and knowledge that are not a direct focus through literacy and math instruction.
 - Avoid the urge to address deep and broad content in a shorter period of instructional time.
 - Discuss with educators the content to prioritize for this year. Take into consideration unfinished content from the prior year if it was prerequisite to this year’s necessary knowledge and skills.
 - Grade spans may approach this by:
 - K-5: Deliberate integration of social studies with other content areas when lesson or unit planning, particularly through project-based learning.
 - 6-12: Deliberate partnership with teachers from other content areas when lesson or unit planning (e.g., common tasks, project-based learning) to support students’ ability to learn and apply knowledge and skills across content areas.
2. Prioritize age-appropriate development of historical thinking skills, civic dispositions, and student agency.
- Focus on key themes or essential questions (both current and throughout history) to tap into students’ curiosity and support making connections.
 - Increase student agency in learning (e.g., ‘acting like a historian’, media literacy skills, synthesizing learning to solve real-world scenarios) in age-appropriate ways.
 - Grade spans may approach this by:
 - K-5: Exploring how and why people in different places built and/or changed their communities (e.g., geography for transportation and materials, civics for rules and customs and getting along, history for comparing different ways to get to the ‘same’ goal, economics for interactions and trade between things people valued).
 - 6-12: Students choose a topic from a particular era, event, or decision, and find information from a list of reputable and current sources in order to answer a set of essential questions. Alternatively, students choose an issue in their community, research its origins and other actions taken to address it, and then create and follow their own plan to resolve it.
3. Plan an approach that utilizes instructional strategies centered in engagement with (rather than dissemination of) information, and which can seamlessly transition from classroom to distance learning if necessary.
- Social studies content and skills are reinforced by instructional strategies utilizing hands-on engagement (e.g., project-based learning, group work, community engagement, field trips, classroom guests) – which may be more difficult in distance learning or during times of transition.
 - Build students’ content knowledge through engagement with primary or secondary sources that cover multiple perspectives on the same era, topic, event, or issue.
 - Grade spans may approach this by:



- K-2: Reading and discussing books as a class that share stories about children from different perspectives and cultures; students make connections between events or characters in that book and other books read, as well as connections to themselves.
 - 3-5: Discussing historical scenarios with students and having students consider the context, problem, and create their own solutions to resolve it – regardless how feasible their answers actually are, the point is to problem solve – then share what happened and explore the reasons behind that outcome or decision. Alternatively, students choose a person from a diverse list in a particular time period or with a particular theme and then create a report (presentation, other) about that person’s life, experiences, and contributions.
 - 6-12: Engaging students in making connections from learning to life by thoughtfully using the current context in age-appropriate ways (need for thoughtful and age-appropriate curation of materials to prevent topics from being overwhelming to students), or researching past world-impacting events (or eras) and different historical experiences or responses: what are current/past experiences like, how do/did events and decisions affect individuals and groups, how are/were those decisions made and implemented, and how do/did people balance rights and responsibilities.
4. Review current materials when planning in order to reflect on how engaging the materials are for students, how easily materials can be adapted for virtual use, and how sensitive the contents are to students’ social emotional learning needs during this time/context.
- Finding and using materials that engage students is critical to ensuring learning continues regardless of location of instruction. Since approximately half of all social studies educators supplement or replace district-provided textbook materials with materials they find themselves, careful attention needs to be paid to the sources.
 - Social studies materials vary widely, and some may not be easily adaptable for use while distance learning, so before introducing that content in the classroom, map as many resources as possible to age-appropriate virtual or online sources (e.g., interactive apps, modules, museum exhibits, virtual field trips, videoconferencing guests) and plan how to scaffold appropriately for vocabulary or other considerations.
 - In addition to being culturally responsive, materials chosen may need to be reviewed with a lens toward students’ social emotional learning needs and their experiences and hardships faced since the pandemic began – in particular for current events, given the media’s focus on emotionally draining topics. This also provokes the need to target critical literacy skills in a cultural time period where media are influenced by ideological positions.
 - Grade spans may approach this by:
 - K-5: Interactive lessons with physical or online manipulatives (e.g., learning about money, puzzles for geography, trivia with a purpose).
 - 6-8: By topic, source from online museum or historical site exhibits for information as well as interactive tasks or videos, or even virtual guests.



- 9-12: Curate a list of non-profit websites that focus on a particular historical topic, event, era, or person (e.g., legislative commissions, humanities grant-funded projects) as both source material and as models for projects in the types of questions asked and answered, and in the presentation of information.
5. Make available and train teachers to use tools that support teachers' effective instructional strategies for teaching social studies content.
 - Be particularly mindful in keeping resources or materials from driving instruction or choices of content coverage. Avoid sole utilization of asynchronous assignments or reliance upon third-party apps or videos to “teach” students. Social studies content requires contextualization and educator- and student-to-student engagement (especially at younger grades). Scaffolding may be necessary for resources that include unfamiliar vocabulary (particularly for differently abled students or multi-lingual learners) or that reference topics not part of students' prior knowledge.
 - Test whether certain familiar technology tools used in the classroom can be used outside the classroom before introducing them to students (e.g., GIS mapping applications, economic or other simulations, high-resolution media). Some tools may not be usable due to licensing or installation requirements, or else may burden students using low internet bandwidth and/or older computers or devices. Consider equitable alternatives when planning those units.
 6. Monitor students' progress on grade-appropriate assignments, and adjust strategies and supports based on student results.
 - Resist the temptation to prioritize “fast results” when selecting or creating an assessment, instead of student demonstration of understanding of content.
 - Consider both traditional and creative means for students to demonstrate learning (e.g., quizzes, tests, graded activities, writing tasks or essays, artwork, poems, presentations, newspaper articles, web pages, podcasts, films, news briefings, documentaries, video testimonials, film reviews).

Resources and References

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