



National Council for the
Social Studies

Powerful Teaching and Learning

How Do We Meet the social Studies Standards?

No single ingredient can guarantee student achievement of the social studies standards as set forth in this document. In general terms, public commitment, ideal learning conditions, and excellent instruction are equally important and must receive equal attention in educational settings.

Needed: Public Commitment, Time, and Resources

To provide a social studies program of excellence, the ingredient that is most often ignored, yet upon which all others depend, is public commitment. Public commitment requires that the public receive information that clearly demonstrates the importance of social studies programs for the education of all children. Public commitment also requires that the public recognize all that it takes to support excellence in social studies programs.

What does it take? Many things. But when asked to name their most critical need in implementing these standards, teachers, without exception, listed “time.” Adequate facilities to foster active learning and house the multitude of materials required to maintain a high-interest laboratory setting are also frequently named by teachers, as are high-quality technology, resources, and opportunities for students to engage in meaningful learning. All of this requires more adequate funding for social studies programs.

Principles of Teaching and Learning

The curriculum standards presented in this document describe major themes and outcome expectations to assure excellence in social studies. The delivery of such a program at the level of classroom teaching is equally important and is discussed at length in the NCSS position statement, “A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy,” *Social Education* 57, no. 5 (September 1993): 213–223, reprinted at the end of this volume.

That document identifies and describes those principles of teaching and learning that must undergird all social studies programs of excellence. Those principles are:

1. *Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are meaningful.*

- * Students learn connected networks of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes that they will find useful both in and outside of school.
- * Instruction emphasizes depth of development of important ideas within appropriate breadth of topic coverage and focuses on teaching these important ideas for understanding, appreciation, and life application.
- * The significance and meaningfulness of the content is emphasized both in how it is presented to students and how it is developed through activities.
- * Classroom interaction focuses on sustained examination of a few important topics rather than superficial coverage of many.
- * Meaningful learning activities and assessment strategies focus students’ attention on the most important ideas embedded in what they are learning.

- * The teacher is reflective in planning, implementing, and assessing instruction.
2. *Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are integrative.*
- * Social studies is integrative in its treatment of topics.
 - * It is integrative across time and space.
 - * Social studies teaching integrates knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, and attitudes to action.
 - * Social studies teaching and learning integrate effective use of technology.
 - * Social studies teaching and learning integrate across the curriculum.
3. *Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are value-based.*
- * Powerful social studies teaching considers the ethical dimensions of topics and addresses controversial issues, providing an arena for reflective development of concern for the common good and application of social values.
 - * Students are made aware of potential social policy implications and taught to think critically and make value-based decisions about related social issues.
 - * Rather than promulgating personal, sectarian, or political views, these teachers make sure that students: 1) become aware of the values, complexities, and dilemmas involved in an issue; 2) consider the costs and benefits to various groups that are embedded in potential courses of action; and 3) develop well-reasoned positions consistent with basic democratic social and political values.
 - * Powerful social studies teaching encourages recognition of opposing points of view, respect for well-supported positions, sensitivity to cultural similarities and differences, and a commitment to social responsibility.
4. *Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are challenging.*
- * Students are expected to strive to accomplish the instructional goals, both as individuals and as group members.
 - * Teachers model seriousness of purpose and a thoughtful approach to inquiry and use instructional strategies designed to elicit and support similar qualities from students.
 - * Teachers show interest in and respect for students' thinking, but demand well-reasoned arguments rather than opinions voiced without adequate thought or commitment.
5. *Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are active.*
- * Active social studies teaching requires reflective thinking and decision-making as events unfold during instruction.
 - * Students develop new understanding through a process of active construction of knowledge.
 - * Interactive discourse facilitates the construction of meaning required to

develop important social understanding.

- * Teachers gradually move from providing considerable guidance by modeling, explaining, or supplying information that builds student knowledge, to a less directive role that encourages students to become independent and self-regulated learners.
- * Powerful social studies teaching emphasizes authentic activities that call for real-life applications using the skills and content of the field.

The teaching and learning document goes on to delineate additional requirements to support an excellent social studies program which lie beyond the control of the individual teacher. These include:

- * continuous program assessment;
- * preparation of pre-service teachers that is aligned with curriculum and teaching and learning standards;
- * provision of in-service training to support teachers in understanding and implementing standards;
- * community and governmental support to
 - * recognize the subject's vital purpose for civic education
 - * sustain teacher education and professional development
 - * provide adequate funding and leadership (from school districts and state and federal government).

School as a Learning Place

Successful schools are unique places, not simply spaces. When students conceive of a school as space, they focus on “getting through it” as quickly as possible. Time and destination are foremost in their minds. Rather than having learning as the main focus, their objective is to move on, to get through. Society often reinforces this concept of school by using extrinsic motivational cliches like “finish school to earn more money.” Extrinsic motivation with its emphasis on time and destination tends to corrupt true learning. Only rarely do we hear, “Stay in school and learn for your sake as a learner.”

Our responsibility as educators is to imagine and create places of learning. Such places foster aesthetics, civility, ethics, openness, conversation, security, stewardship/public responsibility, craftsmanship, and individual liberty. Although all educators must take responsibility for creating a learning place, social studies educators should be leaders in this effort.

Unless this concept of school is taken seriously, with all the necessary resource and time dimensions, curriculum and instruction will remain a symbolic adventure in rhetoric and retribution. Learning is a dependent variable, relying heavily upon a deep sense of place and community within that place. A focus on school as a learning place will help students stop simply moving “through” school and instead find the satisfaction that comes from creating and working within a place that values learning. This focus on school as a place for the community of learners will in the end be advantageous to individuals as well as to society as a whole.

The elements of curriculum; public commitment, time, and resources; powerful teaching and learning; and the concept of school as a learning place are all essential if students are to achieve the social studies standards we advocate.