



# NCSS Themes

## Executive Summary

Thomas Jefferson, among others, emphasized that the vitality of a democracy depends upon the education and participation of its citizens. While such active civic participation includes becoming informed about issues and voting in elections, it can take many other diverse forms relating to the United States government, its history, its people, and its neighbors around the world. For example:

- \* Fannie Lou Hamer was an active citizen when she organized voter registration for Mississippi's black citizens during the civil rights movement of the 1960s.
- \* Ken Burns was an active citizen when he created the PBS series on the Civil War to demonstrate the dynamism and relevance of that period of U.S. history.
- \* High school students were active citizens when they convinced their school to switch from styrofoam to paper cups after conducting an environmental and cost analysis.
- \* And Senator Nancy Landon Kassebaum is an active citizen every day as she participates in committee discussions, votes on the Senate floor, speaks to community and school groups, listens to her constituents, and generally works within the political process to achieve her goals for this country.

All of these active citizens fulfill Jefferson's vision. But the United States and its democracy are constantly evolving and in continuous need of citizens who can adapt its enduring traditions and values to meet changing circumstances. Meeting that need is the mission of the social studies. In social studies, students develop a core of basic knowledge and ways of thinking drawn from many academic disciplines, learn how to analyze their own and others' opinions on important issues, and become motivated to participate in civic and community life as active, informed citizens.

The primary membership organization in the field, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), has adopted this formal definition:

Social studies is 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, economics, 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 develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.

In essence, social studies promotes knowledge of and involvement in civic affairs. And because civic issues—such as health care, crime, and foreign policy—are multidisciplinary in nature, understanding these issues and developing resolutions to them require multidisciplinary education. These characteristics are the key defining aspects of social studies.

## The Standards Process

The importance of social studies ensures that policymakers, educators, parents, and citizens of all kinds will want to know what students should be taught, how they will be taught, and how student achievement will be evaluated. The national curriculum standards in the social studies are designed to answer those

questions. These standards, published in this book, define what students should be learning in social studies programs in the early grades, middle grades, and high school. To paraphrase a famous question, these standards specify what students should know and when they should know it.

The development of social studies standards has occurred concurrently with the development of standards in other areas of education (the arts, civics and government, economics, English, foreign language, geography, history, mathematics, physical education, science, and vocational education). The emphasis on education reform in the 1980s led to the National Governors Association's articulation of national educational goals in 1990 and the subsequent endorsement of those goals by the Bush administration. Congress then passed, in 1992, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, codifying educational goals and sanctioning the development of national educational standards as a means of encouraging and evaluating student achievement. While that act included the disciplines named above, it omitted social studies. However, social studies educators, under the aegis of the NCSS, successfully annexed social studies to the national agenda and named a task force to develop curriculum standards.

The task force, chaired by Professor Don Schneider of the University of Georgia, a past president of NCSS, consisted of teachers from elementary, middle, and high school levels; university and college teacher educators; and state and school district social studies supervisors. The task force worked during 1993 and 1994 to develop the standards, review drafts, consider feedback from review panels, and revise and prepare the final document. The NCSS board of directors officially approved the standards document in April 1994. With the publishing of the standards in book form in fall 1994, NCSS begins dissemination of the standards to social studies educators around the country and launches a series of discussion and training workshops at conventions and in other venues at national, state, and district levels.

## Organization and Use of the Standards

Because educational standards are being developed both in social studies and in many of the individual disciplines that contribute to social studies, one might ask: what is the relationship among these various sets of standards? The answer is that the social studies standards address overall curriculum design and comprehensive student performance expectations, while the individual discipline standards (civics and government, economics, geography, and history) provide focused and enhanced content detail. Teachers and curriculum designers are encouraged first to establish their program frameworks using the social studies standards as a guide, and then to use the standards from history, geography, civics, economics, and others to guide the development of grade level strands and courses. Using all of these standards in concert with one another allows educators to give adequate attention to both integrated and single discipline configurations.

A metaphor helps to illustrate the relationship between social studies and specific individual disciplines. Consider a musical ensemble such as an orchestra (the social studies program) as it performs a specific musical composition (a grade level or specific course within the curriculum). At certain times, one instrument (a discipline such as history) takes the lead while others (such as geography and economics) play supporting roles. At other times, several instruments (history, geography, economics) play together on an equal basis to explore the composer's thematic aims. The quality of the performance is the result of the composer's writing of the music (design of the social studies curriculum), the unique qualities of individual instruments (the contribution of individual disciplines), the acoustics of the setting (expertise of curriculum planners and teachers, school site facilities, and instructional resources), and the skills of musicians and the conductor (the abilities of students, teachers, and program planners).

These social studies standards are thus organized to incorporate learning experiences from many disciplines. This book presenting the social studies standards is designed to serve three purposes:

1. to serve as a framework for social studies program design from kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12);
2. to function as a guide for curriculum decisions by providing student performance expectations in the areas of knowledge, processes, and attitudes; and
3. to provide examples of classroom activities that will guide teachers as they design instruction to help their students meet performance expectations. The framework of the standards consists of ten

themes incorporating fields of study that roughly correspond with one or more relevant disciplines. The first theme, “Culture,” for instance, includes elements of anthropology, geography, history, and sociology. These ten themes span the educational levels from early to middle grades to high school. The standards are expressed in statements that begin “Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of”—for instance, Culture. Student performance expectations within that theme are then specified, and examples of classroom activities are provided as illustrations of how to design learning experiences to help students meet the performance expectations.

## The Ten Themes

The ten themes that form the framework of the social studies standards are:

**I. Culture** The study of culture prepares students to answer questions such as: What are the common characteristics of different cultures? How do belief systems, such as religion or political ideals, influence other parts of the culture? How does the culture change to accommodate different ideas and beliefs? What does language tell us about the culture? In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with geography, history, sociology, and anthropology, as well as multicultural topics across the curriculum.

**II. Time, Continuity, and Change.** Human beings seek to understand their historical roots and to locate themselves in time. Knowing how to read and reconstruct the past allows one to develop a historical perspective and to answer questions such as: Who am I? What happened in the past? How am I connected to those in the past? How has the world changed and how might it change in the future? Why does our personal sense of relatedness to the past change? This theme typically appears in courses in history and others that draw upon historical knowledge and habits.

**III. People, Places, and Environments.** The study of people, places, and human-environment interactions assists students as they create their spatial views and geographic perspectives of the world beyond their personal locations. Students need the knowledge, skills, and understanding to answer questions such as: Where are things located? Why are they located where they are? What do we mean by “region”? How do landforms change? What implications do these changes have for people? In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with area studies and geography.

**IV. Individual Development and Identity.** Personal identity is shaped by one’s culture, by groups, and by institutional influences. Students should consider such questions as: How do people learn? Why do people behave as they do? What influences how people learn, perceive, and grow? How do people meet their basic needs in a variety of contexts? How do individuals develop from youth to adulthood? In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with psychology and anthropology.

**V. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions.** Institutions such as schools, churches, families, government agencies, and the courts play an integral role in people’s lives. It is important that students learn how institutions are formed, what controls and influences them, how they influence individuals and culture, and how they are maintained or changed. Students may address questions such as: What is the role of institutions in this and other societies? How am I influenced by institutions? How do institutions change? What is my role in institutional change? In schools this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with sociology, anthropology, psychology, political science, and history.

**VI. Power, authority, and Governance.** Understanding the historical development of structures of power, authority, and governance and their evolving functions in contemporary U.S. society and other parts of the world is essential for developing civic competence. In exploring this theme, students confront questions such as: What is power? What forms does it take? Who holds it? How is it gained, used, and justified? What is legitimate authority? How are governments created, structured, maintained, and changed? How can individual rights be protected within the context of majority rule? In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with government, politics, political science, history, law, and other social sciences.

**VII. Production, Distribution, and Consumption.** Because people have wants that often exceed the resources available to them, a variety of ways have evolved to answer such questions as: What is to be produced? How is production to be organized? How are goods and services to be distributed? What is the most effective allocation of the factors of production (land, labor, capital, and management)? In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with economic concepts and issues.

**VIII. Science, Technology, and Society.** Modern life as we know it would be impossible without technology and the science that supports it. But technology brings with it many questions: Is new technology always better than old? What can we learn from the past about how new technologies result in broader social change, some of which is unanticipated? How can we cope with the ever-increasing pace of change? How can we manage technology so that the greatest number of people benefit from it? How can we preserve our fundamental values and beliefs in the midst of technological change? This theme draws upon the natural and physical sciences, social sciences, and the humanities, and appears in a variety of social studies courses, including history, geography, economics, civics, and government.

**IX. Global Connections.** The realities of global interdependence require understanding the increasingly important and diverse global connections among world societies and the frequent tension between national interests and global priorities. Students will need to be able to address such international issues as health care, the environment, human rights, economic competition and interdependence, age-old ethnic enmities, and political and military alliances. This theme typically appears in units or courses dealing with geography, culture, and economics, but may also draw upon the natural and physical sciences and the humanities.

**X. Civic Ideals and Practices.** An understanding of civic ideals and practices of citizenship is critical to full participation in society and is a central purpose of the social studies. Students confront such questions as: What is civic participation and how can I be involved? How has the meaning of citizenship evolved? What is the balance between rights and responsibilities? What is the role of the citizen in the community and the nation, and as a member of the world community? How can I make a positive difference? In schools, this theme typically appears in units or courses dealing with history, political science, cultural anthropology, and fields such as global studies, law-related education, and the humanities.

This book includes one chapter each for the early grades, the middle grades, and the high school level. Within those chapters, each theme is followed by a list of student performance expectations and classroom activities. To illustrate how the standards are applied using the themes and performance expectations, the following three sections provide examples from the early grades, middle grades, and high school.

### **An Example from the Early Grades**

For instance, take the theme “Culture.” For the early grades, the standard (stated first, in a sentence) and its performance expectations (listed in alphabetical order) are as follows:

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of *culture and cultural diversity*, so that the learner can:

- a. explore and describe similarities and differences in the ways groups, societies, and cultures address similar human needs and concerns;
- b. give examples of how experiences may be interpreted differently by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference;
- c. describe ways in which language, stories, folktales, music, and artistic creations serve as expressions of culture and influence behavior of people living in a particular culture;
- d. compare ways in which people from different cultures think about and deal with their physical environment and social conditions;
- e. give examples and describe the importance of cultural unity and diversity within and across groups.

One of the classroom activities describes the experiences of a teacher, Carlene Jackson, who uses a new program to develop geographic understanding in her first grade class. Before the first day of school, Jackson looks over her class list, inferring that she will have students of Mexican, Vietnamese, and Korean ancestry, as well as of African-American and European-American backgrounds. Jackson and her students decide to study how families meet their basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter in five places: their community; Juarez, Mexico; Hanoi, Vietnam; Lagos, Nigeria; and Frankfurt, Germany. The class reads books and stories, looks at photos and slides, watches videos, and talks to speakers from their cities. Students sharpen their reading, writing, and speaking skills and learn new geography skills such as map reading. For each city, they read and discuss something about its location, climate, region, and people. This activity is designed to address performance expectations a, b, and d.

### **Conclusion: Meeting the Challenge**

The United States and its democratic system of government are constantly evolving. No one can predict with certainty what may be needed from its citizens to preserve and protect it fifty years from now. For social studies to perform its mission of promoting civic competence, students must learn not only a body of knowledge but how to think and how to be flexible in using many resources to resolve civic issues. It is not overstating the case to say that America's future depends on it.

These national curriculum standards for social studies represent educators' best thinking about what is needed to educate future citizens to meet that challenge.

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