

*A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies
Approved by the NCSS Board of Directors, June 2021*

Developing State and Local Social Studies Standards

Purpose of this Document

The recommendations presented here focus on the principle that standards development must maintain the intent and integrity of the social studies by engaging in processes that are scholarly, collective, and transparent.

The development and implementation of high-quality social studies standards have been primarily the responsibilities of state education agencies (SEAs) since the early 1990s. Primary goals of this work include improving instruction and increasing learning for all students regardless of school district and zip code. The realization of these goals hinges in large part on implementation efforts including, but not limited to, professional development opportunities that ensure that educators engaged in this work follow a thoughtful process for standards revision and implementation.



Introduction

The introduction of standards-based instruction ushered in a movement to clearly articulate the academic outcomes for students across the curriculum. State departments of education and local school districts across the nation have invested tremendous resources to define what students need to know and be able to do in English Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Studies, Science and other subject areas. Adopted standards have become the driving force of instructional programs by informing instructional practices in the classroom, curriculum frameworks, textbooks and other instructional materials, and assessment items and protocols.

Therefore, the development of standards should be treated as a serious matter by engaging a collective audience of educational stakeholders in a deliberate, transparent process of development, revision, and adoption. As social studies is an essential core academic subject, the process for developing social studies standards should be given the same respect and treatment as the process for developing standards in other core subject areas. The purpose of this position statement is to offer recommendations regarding the process for developing social studies standards and guidelines for determining the content, skills, and dispositions of the standards at the state or local level. The position statement is intended to inform state and/or local leaders responsible for standards revision.

Purpose of Standards

There is a great deal of variance among state social studies standards regarding their scope, length, disciplinary focus, and level of content specificity. Some standards are framed as broad, general conceptual statements, while others include more detailed lists of content topics. Some states direct local schools and districts to determine social studies outcomes for their students while others utilize state-adopted standards to drive the state instructional, assessment, and accountability plans to which school districts must align.

Regardless of the process or procedure for developing social studies standards in your state, we believe that recent advances in the social studies community should guide this important work. Both the [*National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*](#), published by National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) in 2010, and the [*College, Career, and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework for Social Studies State Standards*](#), published by NCSS in 2013, engaged social studies experts, including professional organizations, scholars, teachers, and state department of education personnel, in the development process.

Difference Between Standards and Curriculum

Oftentimes standards and curriculum are used as synonyms, but this misconception leads to problems when educators are tasked with the implementation of curriculum that is aligned to the standards. In many states, the state defines the academic standards and it is up to local districts and teachers to select the curriculum to meet those standards. Academic standards are learning goals for what students should know and be able to do either at a specific grade level, by the end of a grade band, or for a specific course. High-quality standards provide guidance for districts, communities, schools, teachers, parents, and students to ensure that what is taught will help students develop the skills and understanding necessary to be college and career ready and active participants in civic life. Although content standards provide an essential foundation for student learning, they do not specify how to teach the content and skills. Curricula provide teachers an outline of what should be taught and how it should be taught in classrooms, including the instructional materials, resources, and practices needed to achieve a learning goal. High-quality curricula are student-centered, with flexible opportunities for students to meet learning goals, and address students' individual skills or concept development.

Prepare

The work should begin by developing an advisory council or planning group. This should be made up of a variety of stakeholders, and, at a minimum, should include social studies educators, content experts, higher education partners, and others (such as representatives of state social studies councils). This group and other state social studies organizations could help shape the process, establish clear guiding principles for the standards development, determine the structure of the document based on the guiding principles and give feedback along the way. The council should have a clear timeline to work from, as well as the processes, tools, and resources necessary to best complete a standards review/writing process.

The council should have a clear understanding about whether it will revise current state standards or write new standards. In either case, it should examine state, national, and international standards and frameworks, as well as a variety of other information and research related to best

practices in the discipline of social studies. This will provide a common grounding for members of the advisory council or planning group.

The next step is to identify a writing team. The writing team should be made up of a diverse set of educators from various grades and content specialties within all social studies strands. Many states develop a process for identification of writing team members. Some states work with agencies from across the state, such as regional service agencies and/or state level content organizations, to identify writing team members. Other states develop an application process through which educators across the state can apply. No matter what the process, the writing team should include K-12 educators who are representative of various regions of the state, various types of schools (urban, rural, suburban), various sizes of schools, diverse perspectives including the federally protected classes of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, and age, various content backgrounds, and levels of expertise. Writing teams can also include representatives from local content organizations (like the state history organization) and institutes of higher education, but PK-12 educators should constitute a majority of the writing team. Examples of how to build a writing team can be found in the [Guide to Developing and Implementing State Social Studies Standards](#), published by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).

Criteria for High Quality Social Studies Standards

It is important to have a set of criteria that can ensure that the standards are of high quality. [This set of criteria](#), built using a rubric developed under the American Diploma Project by [Achieve Inc](#), can guide the social studies standards revision process. The criteria include:

- **Coherence/Progression:** Do the standards/indicators convey a unified vision of the discipline, do they establish connections among the major areas of study, and do they show a meaningful progression of content across the grade?
- **Manageability:** Have choices been made about what is most important for students to learn, and is the amount of content manageable?
- **Equity/Diversity:** Are the standards/indicators written for all students? Are students able to demonstrate performance in multiple ways?
- **Analysis:** Do the standards/indicators ask students to demonstrate advanced thinking processes such as synthesizing, interpreting, evaluating, and hypothesizing? Are these skills situated within social studies content?
- **Disciplinary Concepts:** Do the standards/indicators ask students to show understanding of the fundamental ideas relevant to the content area?
- **Connections to Other Disciplines:** Are there explicit ways in which standards/indicators connect across disciplines within social studies?
- **Rigor:** What is the intellectual demand of the standards?
- **Coherence:** Do the standards convey a unified vision of the discipline, do they establish connections among the major areas of study, and do they show a meaningful progression of content across the grades?

- **Focus:** What is most important for students to learn, and is the amount of content manageable?
- **Specificity:** Are the standards specific enough to convey the level of performance expected of students? Standards that maintain a relatively consistent level of precision (“grain size”) are easier to understand and use.
- **Clarity/Accessibility:** Are the standards clearly written and presented in an error free, legible, easy-to-use format that is accessible to the general public?
- **Depth and Breadth:** Do the standards describe sufficient and appropriate depth and breadth of concepts and skills?

Develop

This stage of work includes detailed facilitation of the development and review process. This involves the facilitation of face-to-face and/or virtual sessions with the writing committee. The work includes building a common language for standards grounded in guiding principles; clarifying the definition of high-quality social studies standards; and building interrater reliability in the writing and review process. It also includes continued engagement with the advisory council or planning group for feedback during the process.

The National Council for the Social Studies believes that the documents listed below provide powerful guidelines to inform the development of social studies standards at the state and local level. We recommend that these documents be at the center of this work.

- [National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment](#)
- [The C3 \(College, Career, and Civic Life\) Framework for Social Studies State Standards](#)
- [Educating for American Democracy \(EAD\) Roadmap](#)

A critical element of a standards revision/review process is transparency in the process. Draft standards should be shared for public comment. Some states conduct various kinds of feedback processes, such as public surveys, focus groups, etc. The feedback should then be used by the advisory council and/or writing team to improve the draft standards. After this process, the standards are generally submitted to the state board of education or legislature.

Implement

Planning for the implementation of the standards is critical to their success. Revised standards often require significant changes to all aspects of the educational system including instructional practice; these changes will take time. Preparing and supporting teachers for the conceptual shifts required for effective implementation of a new set of academic standards is essential for success.

States should develop clear implementation plans, outlining the key elements needed to support successful implementation. To ensure systemic implementation of the standards, the State Education Agency should work with key stakeholders to develop an implementation plan to

guide the work of each level of the system in supporting standards implementation. The team should identify research-based key attributes of the implementation, the highest levels of desired outcomes, and the incremental variables that lead to those levels. There is a sample implementation plan in the [Guide to Developing and Implementing State Social Studies Standards](#), published by the Council of Chief State School Officers. The Iowa Department of Education also has a [detailed example of an implementation plan](#).

Continuous Support

It is common for state education agencies to provide districts with an expected timeline for implementation of new standards. Beyond this timeline, state education agencies need to provide continuous support for the implemented standards. This could include synchronous or asynchronous professional development for educators on content and skill expectations of the standards, opportunities for groups of classroom teachers to brainstorm and share ideas for incorporating the new standards into existing curriculum, or regional support to multiple districts working together to enhance their PK-12 social studies curriculum.

State-level support to districts and educators over the course of the standards cycle provides opportunities to build strong, rigorous, quality programs across the state. As social studies educators work to promote equity, inquiry, and rigor, it is important to remember that collaboration and communication between the state and districts creates a strong foundation for student learning.

Conclusion

Active and responsible citizens identify and analyze public problems, deliberate with other people about how to define and address issues, take constructive, collaborative action, reflect on their actions, create and sustain groups, and influence institutions, both large and small. They vote, serve on juries, follow the news and current events, and participate in community groups. Teaching students to act in these ways—as citizens—significantly enhances preparation for college and career. It is incumbent upon us, the National Council for the Social Studies, to provide guidance to states and local districts to develop social studies standards to achieve this goal.

This position statement can be utilized to transform social studies education across the nation to be a powerful and essential component of every young person's education.

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Preparing Students for College, Career, and Civic Life

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