

# Toward Responsibility: Social Studies Education that Respects and Affirms Indigenous Peoples and Nations

*A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies—Approved March 2018.*

## Introduction

Given that all education in the United States takes place on Indigenous lands,<sup>1</sup> National Council for the Social Studies recognizes the responsibility of social studies education to respect and affirm Indigenous peoples, nations, and sovereignty. NCSS supports the creation and implementation of social studies curricula that explicitly present and emphasize accurate narratives of the lives, experiences, and histories of Indigenous Peoples, their sovereign Nations, and their interactions—past, present, and future—with Euro-American settlers and the government of the United States of America. NCSS further supports communities, teachers, teacher educators, curriculum writers, district administrators, departments of education, and Tribal Education Departments/Agencies (TEDs/TEAs) working to provide more accurate learning opportunities for students at all grade levels that emphasize the sovereignty and self-determination of Indigenous Peoples and Nations, past, present, and future.

NCSS recognizes that the United States and the educational institutions within were built on the traditional homelands of Indigenous peoples, nations who have been here since time immemorial. NCSS recognizes the diversity of Indigenous lands, languages, cultures, governments, and religions and takes seriously the responsibility of social studies education to respect and affirm Indigenous lives and sovereignty. Further, social studies education has a responsibility to oppose colonialism and systemic racism that impact Indigenous Peoples. According to Brayboy and Castagno, “Educators must pay more attention to the ways colonization, racism, and power matter in educational settings and work towards more effective and longer-term pre-service and in-service training that helps educators understand and strategize about their role as agents for social change and greater educational equity.”<sup>2</sup>

## Intended Audiences

The final report of the White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education recommended PK-12 and higher education work toward changes that “promote the accurate instruction of Native American history and culture to all school staffs and create initiatives for parents and tribal leaders to engage with students. States and districts should analyze resources, strategies, and professional development opportunities to ensure that tribal histories are included accurately.” The report further concluded that “excluding Native cultures and history from classrooms harms the identities of AI/AN (American Indian and Alaska Native) students.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this position statement is intended for a broad

audience of Indigenous Nations, community leaders, PK-12 educators, social studies supervisors and directors, state- and federal-level curriculum working groups, departments of education, higher education faculty, and tribal education departments and agencies.

## Background

Social studies education often perpetuates a false understanding of history and trivializes the past and current experiences of Indigenous Peoples and Nations. For example, in two studies of state-level U.S. history standards, researchers found Indigenous Peoples and Nations largely excluded in the telling of American history after 1900.<sup>4</sup> In a third related study, the research found that state-level standards promoted Eurocentric narratives of Indigenous Peoples and Nations rather than centering the voices of Indigenous Peoples to tell their own histories.<sup>5</sup> Other studies highlight inaccurate and insufficient representations of Indigenous Peoples and their experiences within student textbooks, supplemental curricular resources, and teacher guides.<sup>6</sup> These patterns demonstrate how social studies education is complicit in the erasure of Indigenous peoples. Further, these narrow Eurocentric narratives presented in American textbooks, state standards, and teacher resources have a real impact on the way people understand and interact with Indigenous Peoples.

Additional research supports the argument that social studies regularly presents Indigenous Peoples as lacking complexity and a voice in contemporary America.<sup>7</sup> This includes

excluding teaching Indigenous citizenship and voting rights in the United States.<sup>8</sup> As more educators begin to recognize how curricula prompt students and teachers to narrowly frame Indigenous Peoples as exotic and warlike people of the past,<sup>9</sup> there is a corresponding need to critically analyze how our education systems, and the professionals within them, prepare students for life in a diverse and globalizing world. Specifically, there is a need for educators to look for more productive ways to disrupt these narrow stereotypes, and help their students develop a more appropriate, accurate, and complex understanding of Indigenous Peoples and Nations.

These challenges for social studies education should be understood within an international context that affirms the rights of Indigenous Peoples. The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes the right of

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Indigenous Peoples “to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information,” and places an obligation on states to “take effective measures, in consultation and cooperation with the Indigenous peoples concerned, to combat prejudice and eliminate discrimination and to promote tolerance, understanding and good relations among Indigenous peoples and all other segments of society.”<sup>10</sup> In the spirit of the UN declaration, which was ratified in 2007, and eventually endorsed by the U.S. in 2010,<sup>11</sup> NCSS recognizes that Indigenous Peoples have the right to dignity in education, and to see and experience their cultures, traditions, histories, and ongoing sovereignty movements affirmed in social studies curriculum and classrooms.

### **Rationale for Recommendation**

Critically examining representations of Indigenous Peoples throughout our education systems is part of a larger emphasis on preparing students for life in an increasingly diverse world. This focus on rethinking how Indigenous Peoples, Nations, and issues are treated in social studies education is necessary to support Indigenous students in public schools, but is also beneficial to *all* students. Moreover, this emphasis is necessary to ensure that NCSS can uphold its own core values and mission. As part of our core values, NCSS is taking steps in

its Strategic Plan to collaborate and engage with stakeholders to prepare students for civic life (Priority #1), improve and increase the variety, accessibility and quality of print and digital resources (Priority #2a), and encourage, promote, and ensure inclusiveness (Priority #4) in social studies education. Additionally, NCSS encourages states, cities, and districts to create curricula that emphasize and celebrate cultural diversity so that “[S]tudents come to understand that human cultures exhibit both similarities and differences,” and that “in a multicultural, democratic, and globally connected world, students need to understand the multiple perspectives that derive from different cultural vantage points.”<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, there are a variety of ways that the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework* (2013) can be used for inclusion of this content and practice. For example, Dimension Two calls on students to “evaluate social and political systems in different contexts, times, and places, that promote civic virtues and enact democratic principles” (D2.Civ.8.9-12, NCSS, 2013, p. 33). Utilizing this dimension, including D2.Civ.1.9-12 (p. 32) that explicitly includes “tribal civic and political institutions,” students and teachers can engage learning about the Iroquois Confederacy as a democratic political system, distinct from the U.S. system and operating well before the establishment of the U.S. Constitution. From another angle, students could examine the *Indian Citizenship Act of 1924* and discuss how dual citizenship and tribal sovereignty are inherent in this Act.<sup>13</sup> Within the history section in Dimension Two, students are called on to analyze “how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people’s perspectives” (D2.His.5.9-12, NCSS, 2013, p. 47). The application of this dimension provides space for students and teachers to discuss treaties at their signing and the implications for treaty enforcement today, whether it be in regards to Indian Health Services, the Violence Against Women’s Act establishing Tribal Courts’ Special Domestic Violence Criminal Jurisdiction, or illegal exploitation of treaty lands by private corporations (e.g., Dakota Access Pipeline, Enbridge Line 3).

Dimension Four calls for “options for individual and collective action to address local, regional, and global problems by engaging in self-reflection, strategy identification and complex causal reasoning” (NCSS, 2013, p.61). The examples of current local and regional problems: access to clean water, climate change, voting rights, and sovereignty/treaty issues are complex and can help students to develop a better understanding of the connections between a variety of policy issues and how to address them. These are just a few specific examples of how social studies can take responsibility for providing learning opportunities that recognize and affirm Indigenous Peoples. The recommendations expressed below are intended to better prepare all students for life in a globalizing world fraught with complex sociocultural entanglements.

While these recommendations will help all students prepare for life in a diverse world, it is still important to examine spe-

cific impacts on Indigenous students, and our ethical responsibilities as educators to address these issues. As leaders in the social studies, we reflect on our nation's past as people in the present and we acknowledge that our school systems were at one time organized with the intent to assimilate Indigenous Peoples, and strip them of their unique tribal identities.<sup>14</sup> In the present, we fear this assimilationist trajectory is still in motion, since over 90% of Indigenous students attend general public schools where they study narrow, inaccurate, and incomplete curricula about their own people.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the diversity of American teachers fails to reflect the students they serve or to keep up with the growing diversity of American classrooms.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, if educators and teacher educators take no action to disrupt the existing curricular norms and the narrow understandings they communicate, address the lack of Indigenous teachers in our classrooms, or provide support for Indigenous in-service and pre-service teachers' needs, education as a whole runs the risk of unintentionally continuing the antiquated and dangerous narrative of "Kill the Indian, Save the Man" that centers assimilationist policies of the past.<sup>17</sup> This becomes further exacerbated by the fact that our students and teachers also rely on various media (e.g., films, cartoons, mascots) to help them supplement their understanding of Indigenous Peoples, and these resources often present the same narrow representations found throughout our textbooks and state standards.<sup>18</sup> In an era where the authenticity of information is in question, educators have an ethical responsibility to modify our practices, and critically examine our curricula, so that we might interrupt these destructive practices as we move to a more culturally responsive chapter in our nation's history.

Therefore, we suggest taking a critical look at the following topics in a nationwide effort to improve the way people learn about, understand, and engage with Indigenous populations and the authenticity of the information conveyed in PK-12 curriculum. Our hope is that these recommendations can inspire teachers and leaders to explore how they might better prepare students for citizenship in a country that was built upon the dispossession of the lands of Indigenous peoples, and continues to live collectively with hundreds of Indigenous Nations in a complex social, cultural, economic, and political landscape.

### Recommendations

Too often, Indigenous Peoples are included in curricula such as "Native American Units" or discussed during the month of November.<sup>19</sup> Yet Indigenous Peoples, Nations, and histories are foundational to the story of America, and thus, should be *foundational*, not peripheral, to social studies curriculum.<sup>20</sup> Rather than including Indigenous Peoples in isolated units of study, multicultural activities, or the month of November, Indigenous perspectives, knowledges, and analyses should be meaningfully integrated into social studies. Social studies

education must move from learning only *about* Indigenous peoples, to learning *from* Indigenous analyses.<sup>21</sup> Taking this approach means including Indigenous perspectives, knowledges, and analyses, but also drawing from them to challenge Eurocentrism in social studies education.

To do this, NCSS recommends the following principles to guide social studies education. While necessary, these recommendations are not exhaustive, but are the first steps in transforming social studies education to respect and affirm Indigenous peoples and nations.

1. **Commit to responsible representations.** The rampant misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples in the media and popular culture contributes to continued settler colonization and racism toward Indigenous Peoples.<sup>22</sup> Social studies education specifically needs to address how the presence of stereotypes in school settings (e.g., Native mascots), teaching materials (e.g., Hollywood movies), and the wearing of costumes during the school day (e.g., Halloween parties, Thanksgiving lessons) reinforce overgeneralizations and false understandings of Indigenous peoples. Such misrepresentations harm Indigenous students, negatively impacting their self-esteem, while at the same time giving non-Indigenous students a "psychological boost" and false sense of superiority.<sup>23</sup> Responsible representation first requires that educators counter racist stereotypes, misrepresentations, and caricatures of Indigenous life (e.g., that all Indigenous peoples live in tipis or go to pow wows, that Native communities were "savage/uncivilized" or "lazy"). Following this, educators must also emphasize the diversity of Indigenous peoples and nations, utilize diverse representations of Indigenous life (e.g., Indigenous leaders, athletes, authors, artists), use specific names of Indigenous Peoples and Nations (e.g., Navajo or Diné; Iroquois or Haudenosaunee Confederacy; Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi), and focus on contemporary people and issues.
2. **Teach current events and movements.** The growing movement by the Standing Rock Sioux Nation and hundreds of other Indigenous Nations to protect their homelands and resources from destruction presents teachers an opportunity to introduce students to lessons based on the environment, government, history, economics, cultural studies, and civics (digital citizenship and activism) that center the experiences and voices of Indigenous peoples as sovereign on their own lands. Additionally, several school districts, cities, states, and the National Education Association have started including and/or are currently advocating the study of Indigenous Peoples' Day as part of social studies curriculum in order to provide greater emphasis on Indigenous Peoples as these lands'

First Peoples and their continued efforts toward sovereignty and self-determination. Teaching current events and movements not only affirms the presence of contemporary Indigenous Peoples, but also provides teachers and students the opportunities to learn from the ways Indigenous Peoples, Nations, and movements support and strengthen broader movements toward environmental and social justice.

3. **Teach tribal governance and sovereignty as civics education.** Although typically framed as racial/ethnic minorities, Indigenous peoples are citizens and descendants of tribal nations.<sup>24</sup> Indigenous peoples not only have protected civil rights, but also treaty rights. Teaching about dual citizenship, governance, self-determination, and sovereignty should be core to civics education.<sup>25</sup> This not only educates Indigenous students about their multiple roles and obligations as citizens, but educates all students about the nature of tribal citizenship and governance, the relationships between local, state, tribal, and federal governments, and the responsibilities democratic citizens have to these various sovereigns. This education is necessary as non-Indigenous peoples are often in positions—as lawyers, judges, natural resource managers, social workers, etc.—to uphold or deny Indigenous rights and sovereignty. Infusing tribal governance and sovereignty in civics education entails: teaching about tribal sovereignty as “preconstitutional” as well as a recognized constitutional right (Article I, Section 8); teaching about treaties as foundational documents; and teaching about legislation that has affirmed/negated tribal sovereignty (e.g., Marshall Trilogy).

4. **Challenge Eurocentrism.** Social studies curricula often encode Eurocentric norms, values, and knowledges.<sup>26</sup> Whether through units of study (e.g., “Westward Expansion” or “Lewis and Clark”), holidays (e.g., Columbus Day, Thanksgiving), literature (e.g., the *Little House on the Prairie* series), or simulations (e.g., reenacting the Oklahoma Land Run), among other examples, curricula often reinforce Eurocentric perspectives as neutral or universal truths. Beyond including Indigenous perspectives, educators must also challenge dominant narratives and Eurocentric logics in curricula. This entails questioning the perspectives and interests that underlie curricula so that words like “discovery,” “exploration,” or “expansion” are no longer viewed as normalized ways to organize curricula, and incorporating critical thinking and multiple perspectives.

5. **Affirm Indigenous Knowledges.** Indigenous Knowledges are diverse, complex, localized systems that are inherently tied to various place-based worldviews.<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, the nuance and complexity of Indigenous Knowledge Systems are often misrepresented and/or narrowly discussed in mainstream curricula. This misrepresentation denies Indigenous students the opportunity to see the value of their knowledges. Further, this misrepresentation discounts the many ways Indigenous Knowledges continue to contribute to contemporary experiences, problems, and solutions in society. For example, climatologists are recognizing the importance of Indigenous histories and ecological understandings as we seek ways to address climate change.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Indigenous Knowledges have recently been at the forefront of developing sustainable energy and development. While educators should take care in how they incorporate Indigenous Knowledges in curriculum, prioritizing the perspectives of local tribal leaders, elders, and communities, and framing lessons and curricula around localized tribal knowledges can counter the pattern of generic lessons on Indigenous Peoples, disrupt the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge in education,<sup>29</sup> and provide a rich knowledge base that fosters “new perceptions” and “new possibilities” in education.<sup>30</sup>

6. **Learn from long standing Indigenous advocacy for curriculum reform.** There is a long history of Indigenous and allied advocacy to improve curriculum. “Since Time Immemorial” in Washington, “Indian Education for All” in Montana, “He ‘Upena o ke A’o” in Hawaii, “Indian Education for All Act (HB76)” in Wyoming, and the recently approved Oregon SB13 are among several examples of state level social studies legislation and curricula that can serve as models for recognizing and affirming the need for greater responsibility toward Indigenous Peoples and Nations in PK-12 classrooms, especially social studies. Further, both the National Indian Education Association (NIEA) and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) have developed resources and essential understandings that provide educators with key concepts and lesson ideas that deepen students’ learning in a number of areas, including history, geography, civics, and economics. Educators should learn from such advocacy and figure out how such initiatives may be relevant to and developed within their own educational contexts. This requires developing relationships with Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous educators.

7. **Foster relationships and engage in meaningful consultation.** Building relationships with Indigenous communities is an important part of these efforts toward responsibility for improved social studies education. Educators at all levels have the opportunity to reach out to local tribal leaders, and districts and states can hire liaisons and reach out to TEDs/TEAs in order to foster

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relationships and consultations for improved social studies curriculum. These relationships not only recognize and affirm localized teaching and learning about and for Indigenous Peoples, but also provide students a more expansive understanding of the roles Indigenous Peoples and Nations have in the United States. Central to this process is the concept of sharing power—this means moving beyond inviting Indigenous Peoples as guest speakers, to including Indigenous Peoples as decision-makers. It is also important to respect that Indigenous Nations vary in their resources and abilities to readily support these efforts, which is why building relationships and trust are essential for consultations and collaborations.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

NCSS takes seriously its responsibility for supporting social studies education that recognizes and affirms Indigenous

Peoples and Nations. As this position statement is just the beginning of a long-term commitment to improved curriculum and teaching, NCSS will work to provide the social studies community with additional resources and professional development opportunities via the organization’s website, practitioner and research journals, and annual conference. Additionally, NCSS will work to build relationships with and open spaces for Indigenous educators, scholars, and communities to share their experiences and expertise with the organization and its members. 🌍

## Notes

1. Indigenous sovereignty is upheld by the U.S. Constitution in Article I, Section 8. Furthermore, Indigenous sovereignty was upheld in *United States v. Winans* (1905), which articulated that treaty negotiations represented a granting of rights to the United States from Indigenous Nations, not from the United States to Indigenous Nations.
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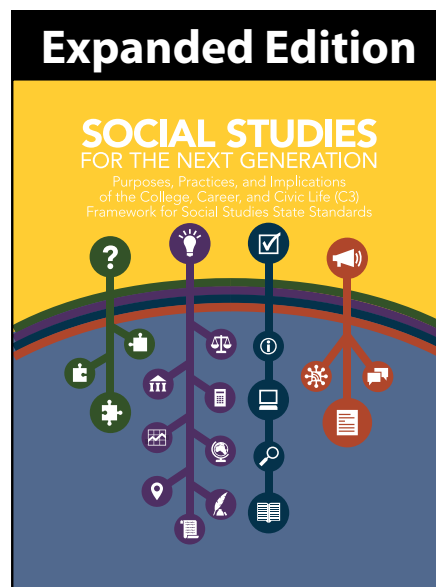
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  11. It should be noted that the United States, along with Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, initially opposed the Declaration. The U.S. did not support the Declaration until 2010, after tribal consultation and receiving 3,000 written comments from tribal leaders and others advocating for U.S. support.
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