Introduction

Powerful social studies teaching and learning are essential to a well-educated populace in a democratic society and global system. Our social studies classrooms must be “laboratories for democracy” where learners analyze historical and contemporary public issues that impact their lives and engage in their local community, state, nation, and world. How one teaches is inseparable from what one teaches. Powerful and rigorous social studies teaching that is rooted in standards, supported by professional development that reflects best practices, and utilizes high-quality educational materials is crucial to realizing the NCSS vision: *A world in which all students are educated and inspired for lifelong inquiry and informed civic action.*

The principles of teaching and learning consider the processes through which knowledge is constructed, produced, and critiqued. Teaching social studies powerfully and authentically begins with a deep knowledge and understanding of the subject and its unique goals. Teachers must pursue ongoing professional development to develop a deep understanding of their subject and best practices in social studies education in order to effectively build on the pillars that support powerful teaching and learning in social studies classrooms. These pillars are as follows:

**Pillar 1:** Powerful social studies places learners at the center of the learning endeavor.

- **Learner identity:** The diversity of learners’ identities and cultural assets is woven into lessons and units of study to engender personal connections to social studies content, skills, and dispositions. Thus, social studies instruction is delivered with inclusive, culturally relevant activities to spark personal connection and motivation to learn.
- **Multiple ways of learning:** Instruction includes a wide array of student-centered learning activities. Multiple and varied instructional experiences address the range of learning needs to reach, motivate, and engage learners in ways that build on their individual strengths and needs.
- **Learner collaboration:** Instructional collaborative strategies support learning and develop social interaction skills and positive interdependence. Collaborative learning promotes engaging and meaningful discourse to deepen learner understanding of social studies content and to navigate differing points of view and perspectives.
- **Classroom environment:** Teachers and learners create classroom environments where the exploration of ideas, opposing viewpoints, and perspective-taking expand learner agency and engender a sense of belonging and interdependence. Examination of social, cultural, political,
religious, and regional values, biases, and beliefs develops understanding of differing perspectives necessary for civic life and global citizenship. NCSS acknowledges social, economic, political, and cultural complexities found in American classrooms and challenges social studies educators to continually examine their own values and perspectives as they present materials that privilege multiple perspectives.

- **Classroom discourse:** Sustained classroom conversations structured around powerful ideas allow learners to engage in cognitive processing and construction of social studies understandings, skills, and dispositions. Focusing on developmentally appropriate complex ideas extends learners’ thinking; constructs social studies understandings, skills, and dispositions; and develops effective speaking, listening, debate, and persuasion skills. Teachers use best practices to promote civil discourse in ways that encourage the sharing of ideas and perspectives from all students.

**Pillar 2: Powerful social studies is grounded in intellectual quality that allows learners to see the relevance of social studies topics to their daily lives.**

- **Inquiry arc:** The social studies is grounded in the Inquiry Arc of the C3 Framework. Learners construct investigations structured around enduring understandings and guided by compelling questions. The inquiry approach supports content and skill development that prepares learners to think independently and critically while exploring complex ideas and sometimes unresolved questions. It also promotes curiosity and civic engagement and invites students to address local, national, and global issues strategically and creatively.

- **Inclusive and complex content:** Teachers create units and classroom activities that help students learn about diverse histories and multiple narratives of the past and present. Learners identify aspects of the social studies that allow them to celebrate the achievements and accomplishments found in multiple narratives while also learning that history is complicated and that not all people have experienced the world in the same ways as others. Social studies classrooms allow space for students to ask whose stories are not reflected in narratives and then to investigate why. Learners build an understanding of the complexities of narratives, both past and present, and that to privilege one over the other limits inclusivity.

- **Depth of learning:** Social studies lessons and units of study prioritize depth over breadth to develop deep understanding, higher-order thinking, and interdisciplinary literacy skills. Planning learning opportunities that delve deeply into a topic enables learners to make deeper connections, increases their retention, and promotes their transfer of learning.

- **Integrated learning:** Social studies effectively integrates with a wide variety of disciplines addressing the totality of human experience over time and space, connecting with the past, linking to the present, and looking to the future. Teachers not only expose students to historical primary sources and the skills necessary to help students learn to read, write, and think like historians, but they also leverage concepts found in psychology, geography, political science, economics, and other social sciences to help students learn to read, write, and think like social scientists. Learners leverage social science concepts and skills to build data literacy so that they can better understand statistics and motivations that impact government and economic policies and social behavior.
• **Critical media literacy**: Critical media literacy requires rigorous evaluation of information. Given the preponderance of information in the media and young people’s disposition toward accessing media for all kinds of information, media analysis coupled with data inquiry prepare learners to be knowledgeable and astute consumers of information necessary for a well-educated contemporary society.

• **Primary and secondary sources**: Powerful social studies lessons make use of primary and secondary sources to develop disciplinary literacy skills and encourage students to think critically about significant events both past and present. The effective use of primary and secondary documents allows learners to examine sources from diverse perspectives, including those from historically marginalized communities, and sets the stage for questioning how the past is remembered, how to wrestle with contradictions, and how to compare and contrast multiple sources representing differing points of view.

• **Constructing understanding**: Learners are active participants in constructing their understanding of and solutions to issues. Engaging in problem-solving activities develops reasoning and critical thinking, and by being actively involved with all steps of the learning process, learners are constructing their agency and civic identities with the ways they perceive and construct solutions to public issues.

• **Developing literacies**: Social studies education builds crucial background knowledge needed for students to grow as readers and reduces opportunity gaps among students who arrive in classrooms with different levels of experiences on which to draw when making meaning of texts. Teachers teach students thinking routines that are necessary to make sense of images and other non-text sources. Students use the knowledge they learn from texts and other sources to develop claims that are supported by evidence and to communicate their ideas in written, oral, and digital presentations which build reading, writing, speaking, and technology literacies.

Pillar 3: Powerful social studies fosters civic engagement necessary for a well-functioning democratic society and global community.

• **Civic virtues**: In the social studies classroom, learners are supported in developing civic virtues to contribute to the common good and engage in political and civil society.

• **Civic literacy**: Learners develop an understanding of the structures, functions, and responsibilities within different levels of government. Learners with this knowledge can effectively participate in a democratic society, taking informed action.

• **Civic engagement**: As defined by the C3 Framework, “civic engagement is both a means of learning and applying social studies knowledge,” and “people demonstrate civic engagement when they address public problems individually and collaboratively and when they maintain, strengthen, and improve communities and societies.” The values embodied in our democratic form of government, with its commitment to justice, equality, and freedom of thought and speech, are reflected in social studies teaching and learning in preparation for civic action within and beyond the classroom.

• **Community involvement**: Social studies lessons are organized to partner with families, local community entities, and beyond to foster authentic and meaningful learning and civic discourse and action.
Conclusion
Powerful social studies instruction strengthens community relations, offers students latitude to conduct inquiry and investigate essential questions independently, and engenders curiosity about the world and our connections with others. Through rigorous, hands-on pedagogy, students strengthen the skills and vision needed to create the world they want to grow old in. Learners engage with and develop active citizenship skills and dispositions that are foundational for a lifetime of civic involvement, civic action, and building local and global communities. Democracies depend on educated populations to monitor, participate, and shape our institutions to support the common good.