



THE SOCIAL STUDIES
STANDARDS ADVISORY
COMMITTEE PRESENTS

Social Studies Standards Guiding Principles

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SBOE



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
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Table of Contents

Preamble 1

Guiding Principles 3

Structure and Content 3

 Fewer, clearer, higher: Ensure content standards are rigorous 3

 Content standards must be coherent, developmentally appropriate, and vertically aligned across grade levels Pre-K–12 3

 Ensure comprehensive coverage of human rights principles 3

 Use of active voice and precise language in revised standards 4

 Arranging skills and content standards to ensure adequate attention to both 4

Knowledge and Skills 5

 Knowledge framing: anti-racist 5

 Knowledge framing: power & bias 5

 Knowledge framing: environmental literacy 6

 Knowledge framing: democratic citizenship, civic dispositions & experiences 6

 Knowledge framing: global perspective 7

 Skill: student agency, participation, and voice 7

 Skill: digital literacy 7

 Skill: Social Studies Standards should include skills that complement the English Language Arts (ELA) Standards 8

Diversity and Inclusion 8

 Recognition of currently under-represented groups 8

 Incorporate District history throughout Pre-K–12..... 9

 Orientation towards “Hard History” in both U.S. and World History..... 9

 Creating “windows and mirrors” for District students 10

Instruction Flexibility and Equity 10

 Clarity & transparency in the “canon” included in the standards 10

 Ensure inclusion of and clear labeling of disciplinary content in the social sciences 11

SSSAC Members 12





Preamble

The D.C. Social Studies Standards must contain content that equips all students with the foundational historical knowledge—of chronology, pivotal events, leading figures, and seminal documents—that “well-educated American students” ought to know and be able to incorporate into their discourse and argument. The current D.C. standards¹ have been highly regarded for their clarity about such content and, thus, the D.C. State Board of Education (SBOE) and its Social Studies Standards Advisory Committee (SSSAC)² recommend that the current standards be revised rather than wholly re-written.

However, there is a need for significant revisions to update the standards.

The revised D.C. Social Studies Standards must recognize that the world our students are growing up in is—more than ever before—globally interconnected and culturally diverse. District students need the knowledge, skills, experiences, and mindsets that will prepare them for informed and engaged citizenship and careers in this globalized world. Students should be prepared and empowered to think of themselves as actors on a global stage.

The revised D.C. Social Studies Standards must move beyond a “heroes and holidays” treatment of history content, instead building clear threads of knowledge which grow in complexity throughout the Pre-K–12 standards. In calling for the revision of the D.C. Social Studies Standards, among the specific issues that the State Board noted was the need for revised standards to be “culturally inclusive and anti-racist, impart important social studies content in the early grades, strengthen student knowledge of democratic principles and values, and promote civic engagement.”³

It is also essential that the revised standards provide a manageable number of clear, high-level content and skills standards, as well as opportunities for teachers to use these standards in flexible ways that suit the educational approaches of their schools and courses (e.g., project-based learning, Montessori education, etc.). In making revisions, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) should ensure that skills are just as core a part of social studies as content.

The revised D.C. Social Studies Standards should facilitate the creation of standards-aligned real-world experiences as part of social studies curriculum. No District student should graduate without authentic interracial, intercultural, international exchange and experience. Additionally, as the standards are being written, OSSE should make every effort to create standards that can be used

¹ The adoption of current D.C. Social Studies Standards predates the existence of the D.C. State Board of Education. A copy is located here: https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/DCPS-horiz-soc_studies.pdf

² The work the Social Studies Standards Advisory Committee (SSSAC), as well as the process by which it was established is described here: <https://sboe.dc.gov/page/social-studies-standards>

³ From SR19-7 *Implementation of Working Group Proposals*, which was adopted on July 17, 2019. A copy is located here: <https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/publication/attachments/SR19-7%20Implementation%20of%20Working%20Group%20Proposals%20Signed.pdf>.





by teachers, schools, local education agencies (LEAs), and the state to measure student learning in social studies.

Furthermore, OSSE should seek standards writers who reflect the demographics and experiences of District students and of the communities they are writing about (e.g., seeking LGBTQ+ writers, ensuring inclusion of advocates for people with disabilities, teaching Black history through the words of Black people, giving agency to BIPOC⁴ rather than discussing only in relation to white people).

With all of the above in mind, it is essential that the revised D.C. Social Studies Standards incorporate the Guiding Principles listed below, beginning in Pre-K and developing deeper understanding through Grade 12, to focus and build student learning across grades on critical topics. The included Guiding Principles are all equally important and are not listed in any particular order of priority.

⁴ BIPOC stands for “Black, Indigenous, and people of color.”





Guiding Principles

Structure and Content

◆ ***Fewer, clearer, higher: Ensure content standards are rigorous***

All standards should be rigorous and developmentally appropriate to the students' age and grade level.

The standards should be written and organized in such a manner that promote student understanding of complex ideas and concepts rather than learning a long list of facts, individuals, etc. This is of course not to say that factual information, individuals, etc. should not be included in the standards, but their inclusion should serve to promote deep understanding of essential content rather than surface-level analysis.

OSSE should consider whether there is a place in the Social Studies Standards document for the concept of “major work of the grade”⁵—which is how the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM)⁶ and the writers of the Common Core Mathematics Standards went about focusing those voluminous standards.

◆ ***Content standards must be coherent, developmentally appropriate, and vertically aligned across grade levels Pre-K–12***

Social studies is an inquiry-based discipline. Standards should work together to create coherent courses that minimize repetition of content over multiple years and maximize learning connections across grade levels.

To this end, the content of Pre-K–5 needs to be dramatically reassessed. It is currently low-level, vague, and repetitive. We should not underestimate the ability of young children to understand complex and difficult topics. Young students deserve cognitively demanding, interesting content that lays the groundwork for self-identity and a critical awareness of the world.

◆ ***Ensure comprehensive coverage of human rights principles***

Human rights and international humanitarian law principles and institutions should be incorporated in line with the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) position statement *Human Rights Education: A Necessity for Effective Social and Civic Learning*.⁷ This should

⁵ <https://achievethecore.org/category/774/mathematics-focus-by-grade-level>

⁶ <https://www.nctm.org/Standards-and-Positions/Principles-and-Standards/Principles,-Standards,-and-Expectations/>

⁷ Form and approved in 2014 by the National Council of Social Studies (NCSS): <https://www.socialstudies.org/position-statements/human-rights-education-necessity-effective-social-and-civic-learning>





include the fact that rights also come with responsibilities, that human rights violations occur internationally and in the U.S., and can be the result of intentional actions or inaction.

The current D.C. Social Studies Standards mention "human rights" four times—all in high school standards in grades 10–12. This is valuable; however, human rights concepts should be integrated throughout Pre-K–12.

◆ ***Use of active voice and precise language in revised standards***

The revised D.C. Social Studies Standards should use active voice and precise language to ensure that actions in history are attributed to specific actors. The current standards employ passive voice in a number of places, especially around acts of white supremacy. Additionally, action verbs, including the high-level verbs of Bloom’s Taxonomy⁸, should be incorporated wherever possible. Specifically, higher level action verbs regarding creation and justification are important to include if we are to draft standards that are actively anti-racist, and that explicitly address discrimination against traditionally marginalized groups. Students need to have practice imagining and designing a more just society if social studies courses are to fulfill this mission.

◆ ***Arranging skills and content standards to ensure adequate attention to both***

In the current D.C. Social Studies Standards, the content standards are arranged by grade level and the skills standards are assigned by grade band. The separation of content and skills standards is an intelligent way of ensuring that the two do not become conflated, but both deserve adequate attention in the revised standards.

Teachers find it helpful to have grade-level bands as guidance and having skills in bands feels appropriate for developmental pathways across Pre-K–12. Organizing skills by anchor standard, like in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and C3 Framework⁹, consistently across all grade bands can help with vertical alignment and usefulness. However, formatting is essential to keep skills visible in the standards and at the forefront for curriculum planning. Skills standards might, for instance, be included at the top of each grade-level set of content standards.

The C3 Framework makes the case that “inquiry is at the heart of social studies” and the revised D.C. Social Studies Standards should support that aim. When revising the grade-banded Historical and Social Science Analysis Skills standards, writers should consider using language from the C3 Framework to push students to develop compelling questions, plan inquiries, evaluate sources, gather evidence, communication conclusions, and take informed action. Revising the skills standards in alignment to the C3 Framework could support the use of inquiry-centered curriculum approaches like the Inquiry Design Module (IDM).

⁸ The following is a resource for educators or institutions utilizing Bloom’s Taxonomy to structure the development of modification of curriculum and/or courses: <https://www.bloomstaxonomy.net>.

⁹ <https://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/c3/c3-framework-for-social-studies-rev0617.pdf>





The revised D.C. Social Studies Standards should ensure that skills content is integrated alongside content themes, and throughout the Pre-K–12 standards.

Knowledge and Skills

◆ **Knowledge framing: anti-racist**

There are few areas in the current D.C. Social Studies Standards where the intersectionality of justice movements is clearly seen. Rather, the current standards offer “this or that” framing, which is rooted in racist thinking. White supremacy has impacted all races and groups of people, even those who identify as white. With an anti-racist framing, District students would be more aware of the role of policy and history in shaping current racial and economic inequities. The revised standards should also focus on the tenets of critical race theory (CRT)¹⁰ when describing power structures and systems.

Creating more complex statements in the standards will allow for students to explore the intersections of our lives and how, as people, we can interact with our government and each other in all of those identities. Incorporating an explicit, ongoing thread on the history of African-Americans, including their treatment by society and our legal system and their role in and impact on U.S. history, including on the growth and evolution of legal equality and democratic rights and the creation of a multicultural, democratic society (e.g., substantial treatment of slavery, Jim Crow, Civil Rights movement, Reconstruction, treatment that propelled the Great Migration, how that mass migration shaped the future of American cities, redlining, discrimination in voting rights, segregation in education, resistance and collective social action, etc.) would facilitate this shift. Additional threads on these impacts on a global scale, history of indigenous peoples, the African diaspora, other communities of color, and other traditionally marginalized groups should also be incorporated in the revised standards. Standards should also highlight the values of love, respect, hope, and collaboration and the celebration of community cultural wealth.

◆ **Knowledge framing: power & bias**

Students should be grappling with the concepts of power and bias throughout Pre-K–12, especially from a historiographic standpoint. Students should be thinking about who produces the primary and secondary sources they consume to learn history, what their relationship to power is, what bias this might create, and what this means about who and what is left out or over-emphasized.

¹⁰ *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* (Glenn E. Singleton, 2015, p. 228) gives this definition: “Critical race theorists argue that gradualism or support for incremental racial change is a major reason for the permanence of systemic White supremacy. While people of color and indigenous people are urged to be patient by those in power, access to opportunity, excellence, and leadership remain the property of Whiteness, no matter how much ‘progress’ has been made.”





Incorporating an explicit, ongoing thread on the continuing tension in American history between the promise of democracy and equality in the founding documents and the reality of inequality; about how these principles and human rights have evolved in the United States over time, including an emphasis on how they have been propelled by various social movements, and, especially, by the stop-and-go efforts over time to repair the evil legacy of slavery and the subsequent unequal treatment of African-Americans; and the tension between U.S. pressure on other nations to respect human rights, while the U.S. is violating the rights of U.S. citizens at home would facilitate this shift.

◆ **Knowledge framing: environmental literacy**

Environmental literacy needs to be part of Pre-K–12 standards, should touch on every time period, and be woven into the study of history, economics, geography and civics. The standards should ensure students develop skills to investigate the causes and consequences of society's impact on the environment and resolve challenges related to equitable access to natural resources.

The standards on this topic should include discussion of: climate change; trade-offs between short-term costs and long-term benefits of sustainable practices; how geography determines how we live; the impact of geography (which includes the study of topography, links between resources, climate, and people); the impact of environmental factors on human settlement and migration; related civic responsibilities (e.g., refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle) for both individuals and corporations associated with environmental factors; global interdependence; environmental racism; roles that access to and control of land and natural resources plays in conflict; the ways that economic policies have commodified natural resources and the consequences; etc.

◆ **Knowledge framing: democratic citizenship, civic dispositions & experiences**

An effective social studies education includes knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to democratic citizenship.

Civics includes two spheres of knowledge: (1) the mechanics of democratic citizenship that includes understanding and skills related to rights, responsibilities, local and national government, democratic process, forms of civic engagement, public discourse, and concepts of equality, justice, liberty, human and civil rights; and (2) dispositions or ways of being a democratic citizen that includes understanding and developing tolerance, respect, empathy, conflict resolution, and other social-emotional skills.

The revised D.C. Social Studies Standards should incorporate an explicit, ongoing thread aimed at developing student understanding of key principles of democratic society (e.g., equality, checks and balances, first amendment, federalism, etc.), how and why this vision was so different from what had typically existed prior to the writing of the U.S. Constitution, how it is different from other countries today, the fragility of these principles, how democratic





societies have failed in the past, and the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democratic society.

Currently, some civic knowledge and values standards come too late in a District’s student education experience. Civic knowledge and values need to be scaffolded, taught, and reinforced throughout Pre-K–12. Students should also be given an opportunity to engage in civic experiences, not just learn about them in a textbook.

◆ ***Knowledge framing: global perspective***

All social studies content should be embedded within a global context. The revised D.C. Social Studies Standards should include an explicit, ongoing thread that provides students with a global perspective and global context for their own lives, their history, and their society; that equips students with the content knowledge, skills, experiences, and mindsets that will help prepare them for careers and engaged citizenship in a culturally diverse and globally interconnected world; that explores not just comparisons but connections between peoples of the United States and the rest of the world, historically and in the present.

◆ ***Skill: student agency, participation, and voice***

The revised D.C. Social Studies Standards should honor student agency and other authentic engagement opportunities centering student voice and participation. Standards should provide a framework for instructional dialogue that will provoke critical thinking. Furthermore, the standards should provide a framework from which teachers can link coursework with engagement in real-world problem-solving within local, national, and international contexts through experiential learning by “doing” through service-, project-, and community-based learning. Skills standards should foster taking informed action, perhaps using language from the C3 Framework.

◆ ***Skill: digital literacy***

Digital literacy must be explicitly included in the standards from Pre-K–12. Standards should include an understanding of the laws, rights, and responsibilities when we access and use the internet and other digital resources.

Students should be empowered to be good digital citizens—both responsible consumers of online content who can evaluate its reliability and accuracy, considerate of how technology influences behaviors, and capable of using technology and online platforms for civic engagement and driving social change.

Information on surveillance, privacy, what it means to share information on the internet, debates on disinformation/censorship, and the global movement to regulate technology





companies to protect user/consumer rights should all be included in the standards. Massachusetts has a helpful framework for digital literacy.¹¹

◆ ***Skill: Social Studies Standards should include skills that complement the English Language Arts (ELA) Standards***

In order to ensure coherence with other learning standards and a well-rounded education for students, the revised D.C. Social Studies Standards should include the following skills:

- Research
- Evaluating information sources
- Understanding context
- Historical thinking
- Critical thinking
- Evidence-supported argumenting
- Persuasive writing
- Discourse practices
- Debate

Diversity and Inclusion

◆ ***Recognition of currently under-represented groups***

The revised D.C. Social Studies Standards should include explicit attention to first-person accounts and recognition of people and groups that have been discriminated against throughout history.

Groups, especially groups that are not white cis male, need to not be treated like monoliths. We are leaving out so many stories if we only tell those of women who are white, African-Americans who are heterosexual, or Latinos who are men. Intersectionality should be a key feature of the revised standards, and should help students appreciate the reality of multifaceted identities.

The current standards emphasize the lives of presidents and other figures who held/hold power and under-represent or lack representation of the following people and groups, and their respective histories:

- Individuals with disabilities
- LGBTQ+
- Latino/a/x
- Women, particularly those of color
- “Regular people” / “Average people”
- Indigenous people, especially after 1900

¹¹ <http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html>





- Specific large immigrant groups in the D.C. metropolitan area
- Religious minorities (e.g., Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Muslims)

◆ ***Incorporate District history throughout Pre-K–12***

The revised D.C. Social Studies Standards should be “home” for the District of Columbia, reflecting our city’s realities, opportunities, communities, cultures, and history, our unique legal status among cities, and our place as the center of power. This intentional focus should be taught throughout Pre-K–12.

The District’s history should not be sequestered in a single course in high school; it should be taught throughout a student’s education.

◆ ***Orientation towards “Hard History” in both U.S. and World History***

“Hard History” is a term used by Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries to describe the elements of American history that are so difficult to comprehend that we “pretend that the most troubling parts of our past simply do not exist.”¹² Jeffries suggests that to “achieve racial justice, we the people have to come to terms with America’s long history of racial injustice.”¹³

The revised D.C. Social Studies Standards should focus on teaching “Hard History” as both content and a set of civic skills. This shift requires clearly addressing various forms of institutional and structural violence throughout American history, such as racism, white supremacy, antisemitism, classism and sexism, as well as those forms of institutional and structural violence that are intersectional (i.e., both class, race and gender).

As part of this shift, the revised standards should encourage critical analysis of the the concept of “American exceptionalism,” both as an understanding of the unique origins and nature of American society¹⁴ and as an effort to center America in teaching about global issues.

The revised D.C. Social Studies Standards should disrupt the centering of American/European/Western narratives that is currently implicit in the existing standards. Revised World History content must push away from a solely Euro-centric vision to one that is truly global. Rejecting Euro-centrism means rejecting contemporary understandings of Western culture as a normal starting point from which other cultures deviate and presenting holistic histories of different places around the world that do not begin or end with interaction with the West. This revised content might also include comparing developments in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe when covering a certain time period.

¹² From *The Courage to Teach Hard History* (2018) (<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/the-courage-to-teach-hard-history>)

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ See De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/815/815-h/815-h.htm>) or Martin Seymour Lipset (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/americanexceptionalism.htm>)





The revised standards should move towards a comparative cultures approach, ensuring students learn how different cultures and civilizations interact with and influence each other and are able to express the value of non-dominant cultures that are different from their own.

◆ **Creating “windows and mirrors” for District students**

“Windows and mirrors” is an approach to learning that focuses on the need for students to see themselves and people like them reflected in the content of standards and curriculum (mirrors), as well as having the opportunity to learn about diverse people, cultures, places, and experiences unlike themselves (windows).¹⁵

The revised D.C. Social Studies Standards should ensure that the topics, themes, and people students study provide **both** windows and mirrors in order to help students understand the world. The current standards have too many windows, and the mirrors that exist do not provide a wide enough range of experiences (or provide stereotypical or demeaning experiences).

The revised standards should help students to form a sense of self identity, community identity, national identity, and global identity while helping students understand that the identities we assume are numerous and intersectional. All students deserve to see themselves, their communities, and their heritage in the revised D.C. Social Studies Standards and as part of the “American story.”

Instructional Flexibility and Equity

◆ **Clarity & transparency in the “canon” included in the standards**

There are individuals and events that are critical for students to learn about, and the revised D.C. Social Studies Standards should require specific people, events, general movements, topics, and themes.

However, teachers (and curriculum authors) should have the flexibility to choose examples (i.e., people and events) to include within the general movements, topics, and themes. When specific people and events are listed in the new standards, it must be clear why each person and event was selected and that specific examples are not prescriptive, but illustrative (e.g., In the *Michigan K–12 Social Studies Standards, (U4.3.1)*, the content standard is about the origins of the American education system and Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, Noah Webster, and Horace Mann are just four of the many examples that could be used when teaching the standard; the language “*examples may include but are not limited to*” is used and it is clear that these individuals were selected as they address a specific standard).¹⁶

¹⁵ The concept of windows and mirrors is popularly used by Teaching Tolerance (<https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/teaching-strategies/close-and-critical-reading/window-or-mirror>), but the phrase is attributed to scholar and award-winning children’s literature author Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop. (<https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>)

¹⁶ https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Final_Social_Studies_Standards_Document_655968_7.pdf





The revised standards should recognize that different LEAs need some degree of flexibility to implement International Baccalaureate (IB) or other thematic curricula that aligns with their mission.

◆ ***Ensure inclusion of and clear labeling of disciplinary content in the social sciences***

The current D.C. Social Studies Standards are coded to indicate seven (7) areas of content. While this effort is notable, the mechanics of the coding have not necessarily supported the development of curriculum or been instructionally useful. The current parenthetical letters (e.g., geography (G)) are not helpful because there are too many codes and standards.

The revised standards should include disciplinary content in the social sciences beyond just history and geography. The revised standards should consider ways to label or identify disciplinary content like economics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and religion/spirituality.

A new system for identifying disciplinary content must be clear and should ensure that teachers and LEAs can easily use the standards in creating curriculum. The goal of any new labeling or identification system is to highlight where social science disciplines are included and to support various approaches to instruction. Any system of labeling should better recognize the current shift to content-specific courses in high school from early grades.





SSSAC Members

Name	School, Organization, or Position
Jessica Sutter (<i>co-chair</i>)	State Board of Education, Ward 6 Representative
Karen Williams (<i>co-chair</i>)	State Board of Education, Ward 7 Representative
Alexander O'Sullivan	BASIS DC PCS, Student
Alyssa Richardson	Duke Ellington School of the Arts, Student
Daniel Espinas	DCPS, Teacher
Elizabeth A. Worden	American University, Associate Professor
Emily Brimsek	National Center on Education and the Economy, Manager, Professional Learning
Fadhil Moore	Georgetown University, MPP Candidate
Jennifer DePaoli	Learning Policy Institute, Senior Researcher
Jessica A. Rucker	EL Haynes High School PCS, Teacher
Karen Hopkins	Human Rights Educators USA, D.C. Area Representative
Karen Lee	Thurgood Marshall Academy PCS, Teacher
Lamar James Bethea	Statesmen College Preparatory Academy, Teacher
Laura Fuchs	HD Woodson High School, Teacher
Lauren Grimes	The Community Enrichment Project, Founder
Maria Marable-Bunch	National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Associate Director for Museum Learning and Programs
Melanie R. Holmes	MacFarland Middle School, Teacher
Michael Stevens	Friendship PCS, Director of Social Studies
Molly France	Two Rivers PCS, Instructional Guide
Molly Sloss	Capitol Hill Montessori School, Teacher
Nicolas Ojeda	Duke Ellington School of the Arts, Instructional Coach
Rebecca Schouvieller	DC International School PCS, Teacher
Reginald L. Williams	Benjamin Banneker Academic High School, Social Studies Teacher
Sally Schwartz	Globalize DC, Executive Director
Sarah Buscher	Janney Elementary School, Teacher
Scott Abbott	DCPS, Office of Teaching and Learning, Director of Social Studies
Shelina Warren	Dunbar High School, Teacher
Shavonne Gibson (<i>observer</i>)	OSSE, Division of Teaching and Learning, Assistant Superintendent
Justin Tooley (<i>observer</i>)	OSSE, Deputy Chief of Staff

