

The following NCSS position statements have been revised and approved by the NCSS Board of Directors.

Two additional statements—“Revised Code of Ethics for the Social Studies Community” and “Global and International Education in Social Studies” (originally “What Are Global and International Education?”)—have been reviewed and reissued with minor verbal revisions but no significant changes. These and all NCSS position statements are available at [www.socialstudies.org/positions](http://www.socialstudies.org/positions). They are all freely reproducible in any quantity for educational purposes.

## NCSS Position Statement

# A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies

*A Position Statement of the National Council for the Social Studies*

The vital task of preparing students to become citizens in a democracy is complex. The social studies disciplines are diverse, encompassing an expansive range of potential content. This content engages students in a comprehensive process of confronting multiple dilemmas, and encourages students to speculate, think critically, and make personal and civic decisions on information from multiple perspectives.

As supported by the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework, social studies prepares students for their post-secondary futures, including the disciplinary practices and literacies needed for college-level work in social studies academic courses, and the critical thinking, problem solving, and collaborative skills needed for the workplace. This framework encourages the development of social studies curriculums that support students in (1) developing questions and planning inquiries; (2) applying disciplinary concepts and tools; (3) evaluating sources and using evidence; and (4) communicating conclusions and taking informed action. Each of these components represents skills that students will use in their roles as student, employee, and most importantly as informed and engaged citizen of the world.

The National Council for the Social Studies reaffirms that an excellent education in social studies is essential to civic competence and the maintenance and enhancement of a free and democratic society. Thus, NCSS advocates that students should be provided with a social studies experience at all grade

levels PK-12. In grades PK-5, every student should receive instruction in social studies every school day, and in grades 6–8, either every school day or the equivalent thereof. At the high school level, there should be a minimum of 3.5 credit hours for every student.

A powerful and rigorous social studies curriculum provides strategies and activities that engage students with significant ideas, and encourages them to connect what they are learning to their prior knowledge and to current issues, to think critically and creatively about what they are learning, and to apply that learning to authentic situations.

### Qualities of Powerful and Authentic Social Studies

#### A. Social Studies Teaching and Learning are Powerful When They are Meaningful

Meaningful social studies builds curriculum networks of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes that are structured around enduring understandings, essential questions, important ideas, and goals.

- Skills necessary to help our students thrive in a world of continuous and accelerating change are emphasized. These include discipline-based literacy, multi-disciplinary awareness, information gathering and analysis, inquiry and critical thinking, communication, data analysis and the

prudent use of twenty-first century media and technology. Skills are embedded throughout meaningful social studies lessons, rather than added on at the end.

- Teachers are reflective in planning, implementing, and assessing meaningful curriculum. Reflective teachers are well informed about the nature and purposes of social studies, have a continually growing understanding of the disciplines they teach, and keep up with pedagogical developments in the field of social studies.
- Meaningful curriculum includes extensive and reflective study of the histories, religions, and cultures of the United States and other nations.
- Students play an integral role in the formulation of goals, the selection of activities and instructional strategies, and the assessment of curricular outcomes.
- Exploration of the social studies should focus on the social world as it is: its flaws, its strengths, its dangers, and its promise. It should include the study of human achievement, but also of human failure.
- Emphasis should be placed on pervasive and enduring social issues and connections to the lives of students. Local, regional, national, and global issues should be investigated for how these issues connect on many different levels. Such investigations of social issues should not solely focus on the issue, but also look at and analyze attempts to formulate potential resolutions of present and controversial global problems.
- Students should be provided with an intensive and recurring cross-cultural study of groups. This should include opportunities for students to interact with members of other racial, ethnic, and cultural groups.
- Social studies education must also provide a connection to the world of work through the exploration of careers and the application of essential social studies skills

### **B. Social Studies Teaching and Learning are Powerful When They are Integrative**

The subjects that comprise social studies—i.e., history, economics, geography, civics, sociology, anthropology, archaeology and psychology—are rich, interrelated disciplines, each critical to the background of thoughtful citizens.

The social studies curriculum is integrative, addressing the totality of human experience over time and space, connecting with the past, linked to the present, and looking ahead to the future.

- Powerful social studies teaching combines elements of all the disciplines as it provides opportunities for students to conduct inquiry, develop and display data, synthesize findings, and make judgments.
- Social studies teaching and learning requires effective use of technology, communication, and reading/writing skills that add important dimensions to students' learning.

- Integration of current valid social studies concepts, principles and theories of history, civics, geography, and economics is an essential component of all social studies programs.
- In promoting critical, creative, and ethical thinking on problems faced by citizens and leaders, educators must take care to balance the immediate social environment of students and the larger social world, through examining multiple viewpoints.
- The use of a variety of primary and secondary sources should encompass a wide range of reading abilities, interests, and historical viewpoints.
- Since our communities are full of countless citizens with a wide range of expertise and experiences, assistance from community resource people should be a part of any successful social studies program.
- A goal of all education, but particularly social studies education, should be encouraging and fostering lifelong learning among both students and educators.

### **C. Social Studies Teaching and Learning are Powerful When They are Value-Based**

Social studies teachers recognize that students do not become responsible, participating citizens automatically. 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 classroom practice. The social studies program should consider the ethical dimensions of topics and address controversial issues while providing an area for reflective development of concern for the common good and the application of democratic values.

- Students are made aware of potential policy implications and taught to think critically and make decisions about a variety of issues, modeling the choices they will make as adult citizens.
- Students learn to assess the merits of competing arguments, and make reasoned decisions that include consideration of the values within alternative policy recommendations.
- Through discussions, debates, the use of authentic documents, simulations, research, and other occasions for critical thinking and decision making, students learn to apply value-based reasoning when addressing problems and issues.
- Students engage in experiences that develop fair-mindedness, and encourage recognition and serious consideration of opposing points of view, respect for well-supported positions, sensitivity to cultural similarities and differences, and a commitment to individual and social responsibility.
- Students should be challenged to understand the role that values play in the decision making process and be afforded opportunities to think critically and make such value-based decisions about social issues.
- Students should be encouraged to develop a commitment

to social responsibility, justice and action, and demonstrate that in “real life” situations.

#### **D. Social Studies Teaching and Learning are Powerful When They are Challenging**

- Challenging social studies instruction makes use of regular writing and the analysis of various types of documents, such as primary and secondary sources, graphs, charts, and data banks. It includes sources from the arts, humanities, and sciences, substantive conversation, and disciplined inquiry.
- Challenging social studies includes the rigorous teaching of the core disciplines as influential and continually growing tools for inquiry.
- Students should be provided with the opportunity to engage in reflective discussion as they listen carefully and respond thoughtfully to one another’s ideas. They should be exposed to sources of information that include conflicting perspectives on controversial issues.
- Students should be challenged to formulate oral and written responses to content-based questions and issues.
- The curriculum should promote critical, creative, and ethical thinking on problems faced by citizens and leaders.
- Evaluation of data for planning curricular improvements should be used to ensure a challenging curriculum. This data should be collected through traditional and alternative assessments.

#### **E. Social Studies Teaching and Learning are Powerful When They are Active**

Active lessons require students to process and think about what they are learning. There is a profound difference between learning about the actions and conclusions of others and reasoning one’s way toward those conclusions. Active learning is not just “hands-on,” it is “minds-on.”

- Student construction of meaning is facilitated by clear explanations, modeling, and interactive discourse. Explanation and modeling from the teacher are important, as are student opportunities to ask and answer questions, discuss or debate implications, and participate in compelling projects that call for critical thinking.
- Powerful social studies teachers develop and/or expand repertoires of engaging, thoughtful teaching strategies for lessons that allow students to analyze content in a variety of learning modes.
- Social studies education programs should provide a wide and rich range of learning activities. Activities should be sufficiently varied and flexible to engage all types of learners. Students should be encouraged to participate in a variety of individual, small group, and whole class activities. Furthermore, the program should encourage students to work collaboratively as a learning community.
- Self-respect and respect for others should be a hallmark of every social studies classroom.
- Social studies educators and students alike should be perceived by one another as fellow inquirers in the exploration of social studies content.
- Students should be stimulated to investigate and respond to the human condition in the contemporary world. Encouragement of active participation in community service opportunities is an essential component of this understanding.

#### **Conclusion**

Thomas Jefferson and other founders of the republic emphasized that the vitality of a democracy depends upon the education and participation of its citizens. The need for an informed citizenry was the very impetus for the creation of free public education in the United States. If the nation is to develop fully the readiness of its citizenry to carry forward its democratic traditions, it must support progress toward attainment of the vision of powerful social studies teaching and learning. ●