

3

Social Studies Standards: Time for a Decisive Change

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The purpose of state standards is to describe what students should know and be able to do as they progress in school, and to make this information available to teachers, students, testing agencies, curriculum developers, textbook publishers, and the public. To be effective in communicating this information to interested parties, standards should be clear, coherent, substantial, and sequential.

In the field of history/social studies, the need for solid standards is especially strong because of the very heterogeneous nature of the field, which spans many disciplines and studies. Absent coherent standards, teachers can choose at will from a grab-bag of subfields, and students may emerge from high school without a solid understanding of American history or civics, and what they learn will depend on where they went to school and which teachers they had. Lacking knowledge of our nation's institutions and history, they will be easily swayed by emotional appeals and visualized misrepresentations, and will be unprepared for the duties of citizenship.

Arkansas' standards in social studies (revised in 2000) are woefully inadequate. The two organizations that have reviewed state standards—the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (TBF) and the American Federation of Teachers—have both given Arkansas' social studies standards their lowest ratings. The latest TBF report—published in 2003—gave them a grade of F. The latest AFT report found them the weakest of any of Arkansas' academic standards, lacking in any of the attributes associated with good standards.

As the TBF report notes, the Arkansas standards in social studies contain no history at all in grades K–4, nor is there a well-defined and coherent core of historical studies in grades 5–12. The standards lack any specific historical content. They do not mention any people worthy of study. They have no reference to chronology, other than as a concept to learn without any connection to any specific events. They do not build knowledge sequentially from grade to grade. They offer no guidance into what is really taught in the classrooms of the state.

The Arkansas standards rely on the vacuous rhetoric of the 1994 standards of the National Council for the Social Studies, while borrowing language (but not content) from the controversial 1994 national history standards produced by the National Center for History in the Schools at the University of California at Los Angeles. The Arkansas standards appear to assume that the study of specific events and individuals is unnecessary, but without knowledge of specific events and individuals, there can be no study of meaningful concepts and no study of history. The Arkansas standards describe the importance of learning concepts (like “investigate cause and effect as a historical concept”), but concepts must be grounded in factual knowledge. Lacking any foundation in time or place, the Arkansas standards are an empty vessel that is rich only in jargon. They lack any disciplinary coher-

Social Studies Standards**71**

ence or sequential development of important ideas about American history and institutions.

The standards contain a great deal of diffuse conceptual language but no real content to guide instruction or assessment. For example, the “content standard” for grades 5–8 for “time, continuity, and change” (what others call history) says that, “Students will demonstrate an understanding of how ideas, events, and conditions bring about change.” To call this a content standard is absurd since there is no content described. Which ideas? Which events? Which conditions? What changes? No one knows. This empty “content standard” is followed by four Student Learning Expectations, such as “Demonstrate an understanding of continuity and change in the state, nation, and world.” But again the document refers to no content, no specifics, no events by which a student might actually demonstrate that he or she understands the meaning of continuity and change. To call this statement a “learning expectation” is bizarre, as it is devoid of content, coherence, and clarity. The document never explains what students are expected to know and be able to do.

In grades 9–12, the “content standard” for history is: “Students will demonstrate an understanding of the chronology and concepts of history and identify and explain historical relationships.” This vague concept is followed by other vague concepts, such as, “Explain, analyze, and show connections among patterns of change and continuity by applying key historical concepts, such as time, chronology, causality, change, conflict, complexity, and movement.” If there were any actual historical content in the standards, these concepts might have some instructional value, but without any reference to what students are expected to learn, they seem to represent nothing at all.

Using Arkansas’ standards in social studies, teachers will not know what they are expected to teach, students will not know what they are supposed to learn, and testing agencies will have

no idea what to test. The textbooks will determine what is taught. It is entirely possible that students could graduate from twelve years of schooling in Arkansas without knowing anything at all about the important individuals, conflicts, and institutions in the history of their nation. Nothing in the standards assures that students will have any knowledge of their nation's history and the state requires no history tests.

History is not the only subject that should be taught in a social studies program, but it has generally been recognized as the organizational core of the field. Through the study of history, teachers can incorporate the study of geography, economics, civics, and other social sciences. History is a rich interdisciplinary field that provides ample opportunities to gain conceptual knowledge of how social institutions work, how current society evolved, how democratic institutions function, how citizens can affect change in their government, and how civilizations progress or fall. The study of history may also be enriched by connecting it to the study of literature and biography. Like any other field, history in the schools must be organized to be appropriate to the developmental level of students.

What should good standards look like in this field? There should be identifiable and significant people referred to in every grade. Even in the earliest grades, children can learn about the founders and leaders of our country. There should be a clear and coherent chronological sequence, so that students understand the evolution of events and relations between causes and effects. Topics that were introduced in the elementary and middle school years should be revisited in high school at a higher level of conceptual understanding. The origin and growth of democratic ideas and institutions should be emphasized, along with the evolution and ending of the institution of slavery. Solid standards emphasize America's European beginnings while also teaching about major

Social Studies Standards**73**

civilizations in the world. Students should gain knowledge of political history, social history, and cultural history.

In the states that have been widely recognized as having exemplary standards for history and social studies, there is a grade-by-grade progression of what students are expected to learn. The description of each grade contains clear references to individuals and events that students should know about. Students learn about chronology, about cause and effect, and about continuity by seeing it exemplified in their studies, which are thoughtfully sequenced to show how individuals make a difference, how social institutions develop, how political crises arise and are resolved, how conflict occurs and is responded to, how geography affects cultures, and how citizens can affect their government.

Arkansas need not start from scratch in developing better standards for history and social studies. The process of developing a new curriculum framework for this field should engage the energies of experienced teachers, historians, and public-spirited citizens. Such a group should gather and review the exemplary standards adopted in such states as Alabama, Arizona, California, Indiana, and Massachusetts. They will see standards where children in the early elementary grades are learning about George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Martin Luther King Jr., and other important figures in American history. They will see careful attention to sequential and chronological development of knowledge and skills, as well as to the possibilities for teaching about geography, economics, and civics. They will see how history can be mined to awaken children's curiosity and motivate their love of learning. They will see that a conscious effort has been made to educate children about the history and ideals of this nation, the significant events in world history, and the responsibilities of citizenship in our society.

If Arkansas hopes to invest wisely in preparing its students to understand the society that they live in, if the state seeks to

diffuse knowledge widely throughout its population, if it hopes to raise the political intelligence of its citizens, then it is time to throw out the current non-standards in social studies and replace them with a strong set of standards, firmly grounded in the study of history, geography, civics, and economics.

Recommendations

1. Arkansas should develop a new curriculum framework for the field of history/social studies.
2. Arkansas should gather and review the exemplary standards of states such as Alabama, Arizona, California, Indiana, and Massachusetts.
3. Arkansas' standards should be organized around the study of history and should include civics, geography, and economics, as well as connections to the study of literature and biography.
4. Arkansas should develop grade-by-grade standards that are coherent and rich in content, even in the early elementary grades.
5. Arkansas' standards should include the study of important individuals, events, and the evolution of democratic ideas, and should emphasize the importance of chronological thinking.
6. Arkansas should include end-of-course assessment of history/social studies in recognition of the importance of this field of study.