



Teaching and Learning Social Studies in the Elementary Grades in Georgia

A Position Statement from the Georgia Council for the Social Studies (GCSS)

Prepared by the GCSS Task Force for Teaching and Learning
Social Studies in the Elementary Grades in Georgia

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This position statement sets forth the opinion of the GCSS as to the critical role of social studies in the curriculum and how it should be viewed and implemented in Georgia to produce the levels of social understanding and civic efficacy that our state and nation require of their citizens. It is offered for those who make decisions about and have concern for social studies instruction, including, but not limited to, legislators, administrators at all levels, teachers, parents, and other concerned citizens.

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Rationale

Systematic social studies instruction in the early childhood/elementary years is the essential foundation for students to become active, responsible citizens in a diverse, interdependent, democratic society. It is unlikely that teachers in middle and senior high schools will be successful in preparing effective citizens if social studies instruction is neglected in the earlier years. If such early learning does not occur, the optimum time for teaching important concepts may be lost.

Basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics are necessary but they alone do not prepare students to participate effectively in a world demanding independent and cooperative problem solving to address complex social, economic, ethical, and personal issues. Knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for civic efficacy require a systematically developed program focusing on concepts from history and the social sciences.

Goals of effective social studies instruction at the elementary level

- Equip students with the knowledge and understanding of the past necessary for coping with the present and planning for the future
- Enable students to understand and participate effectively in their world
- Help students acknowledge different points of view and explain their relationship to other people and to social, economic, and political institutions
- Provide students with the skills for productive problem solving and decision making, for coping with change, for assessing issues critically, and for making thoughtful value judgments
- Help students to integrate these skills and understandings into a framework for responsible citizen participation, whether in their play group, the school, the community, or the world

Implementing Effective Social Studies Instruction in the 21st Century

Recent trends in education have influenced administrators and teachers to reduce or eliminate social studies instruction time in order to devote more time to reading instruction. A recent study published by Hirsch *et al* contends that

knowledge of content and of the vocabulary acquired through learning about content are fundamental to successful reading comprehension; without broad knowledge, children's reading comprehension will not improve and their scores on reading comprehension tests will not budge upwards either.¹

In other words, the content acquired in social studies and other disciplines provides the contextual base for students to make sense of and develop comprehension of what they are reading. Instead of "teaching social studies through reading" teachers should "teach reading through social studies."

¹ Hirsch, E.D, Jr., Building Knowledge: The Case for Bringing Content into the Language Arts Block and for a Knowledge-Rich Curriculum Core for all Children. 2006

Social studies can be taught effectively and systematically in the elementary setting using strategies that develop reading and comprehension skills. Effective pedagogical strategies* for teaching social studies include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Literature Circles using books that develop social studies concepts
- Guided reading using leveled readers that develop social studies concepts
- Read alouds using a variety of genre, as well as primary sources, current events, etc.
- Reader's Theatre/plays/role-taking based on historical events or other social studies concepts
- Visual Interpretations (maps, charts, graphs, tables, timelines, political cartoons, photographs, artifacts, graphic organizers, schedules, etc.)
- Storytelling (teacher-led or student-developed) to personalize content
- Interviews/oral histories (student-conducted, providing social studies concepts in a meaningful context)
- Writing: journals, prompts, research reports, essays, news articles, advertisements, etc.
- Inquiry-Based/Problem-Based/Research-Based Learning focused on social studies issues
- Teacher-posed provocative questions or statements to motivate critical thinking/perspective taking/discussion
- Student debates
- Interdisciplinary unit planning using social studies concepts, topics, themes, and big ideas
- Community connections (field studies, resource speakers, case studies, and other experiential learning)
- School as a Social Studies Learning Lab – to develop citizen participation skills through group interactions such as cooperative problem-solving and learning, investigations, elections, class constitutions, and other simulations
- Learning Stations (self-directed, structured exploration of social studies topics)

*The integration of technology is assumed in many of these strategies.

Summary

Social studies instruction in the elementary years is the essential foundation for the entire social studies program, and it provides for students a beginning sense of efficacy as emerging citizens of the world. Educators must be accountable for providing learning opportunities to build this foundation.

It becomes obvious that social studies must be an essential part of the elementary curriculum to provide the essential elements for continuing the democratic way of life. There may not be a more urgent need in the elementary school.²

² Social Studies for Early Childhood and Elementary School Children: Preparing for the 21st Century, A Report from NCSS Task Force on Early Childhood/Elementary Social Studies
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