



Teaching and Learning Social Studies 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 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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Our ‘we the people’ republic is built upon the principle that the people occupy an important position in government—the office of citizen; thus, it is necessary that attention be paid to the education of those who assume this office.

—Michael Hartoonian, preface to 1994 National Social Studies Standards



Background and Rationale

Because of the broad nature of its content, social studies has always been a challenging discipline to teach and learn. Social studies includes the diverse subjects of geography, history, political science (civics and government), economics, anthropology, archaeology, law, philosophy, psychology, religion, and sociology. Deciding the most critical topics—and concepts within those topics—and the appropriate place to teach the topics has been an ongoing struggle for educators from the inception of social studies as a discipline.

The federal 2002 No Child Left Behind Act did not specifically mention social studies (except in its requirements for highly qualified teachers), and it did not call for a regular assessment of social studies. With increased pressure to show improvement in reading and mathematics scores, social studies is being perceived as a less important subject.¹ This perception was confirmed by a 2005 study² of Georgia elementary teachers.

Preparing students to be effective, involved citizens has always been a challenge. It is even more of a challenge in the twenty-first century with its increased diversity and technology. A Kettering Foundation³ report found the following:

- In many forums, people saw themselves as part of the audience, bystanders in the democracy instead of active members with a sense of ownership.
- Citing their involvement with community organizations, some felt like citizens in their community, but not in the democracy.
- Participants felt that Americans today focus far too much on their rights and not enough on their responsibilities.

Given current world affairs, the Georgia Council for the Social Studies asserts that the need for social studies instruction is greater than ever before—rather than less.

Primary Purpose of Social Studies

The primary purpose of the social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.⁴

Goals of Social Studies

The GCSS supports these broad goals of a strong social studies program:

- To develop knowledge and dispositions to become effective citizens.
- To foster individual, cultural, and national identity along with understanding of the forces that hold societies together or pull them apart.
- To include observation of and participation in civic life of the school and community.
- To address critical local, state, national, and world issues.
- To prepare students to make reasoned, informed decisions based on democratic principles.
- To develop the ability and motivation for citizen participation in public affairs. Such participation would include, but not be limited to,
 - staying informed about public actions by elected officials,
 - voting,
 - volunteering/community service,
 - serving on juries,
 - serving in the military, and
 - running for political office.

Assumptions about Social Studies as a School Subject

The GCSS holds these basic assumptions about the nature of social studies and its place in the Georgia curriculum:

- Social studies as a school subject is diverse, encompassing the many disciplines outlined earlier in this paper.
- Following the guidelines set forth by the Georgia Performance Standards, local districts and teachers must have the flexibility to address their perceived needs in terms of scope and sequence.
- Teaching methods must be tailored to the local needs of the district and its students.
- Both content and methods of instruction must be selected as means to accomplish major social understanding and civic efficacy goals.
- *All* students at *all* grade levels must have access to *systematic* social studies learning experiences. The lack of social studies instruction at lower grade levels results in failing to lay the foundation for critical thinking and deeper understanding that are needed for effective performance in upper levels.
- Teachers need adequate time and resources to teach social studies well at every grade level.
- Social understanding and civic efficacy goals of social studies will not be accomplished if it is treated as a collection of disconnected content to be covered only when time allows.



Assessment of Social Studies Teaching and Learning

The GCSS holds the following assumptions regarding such assessment:

- Social studies must be treated as an important core discipline and should be assessed by prevailing state guidelines to ensure accountability.
- In addition to state and/or federally mandated tests, teachers should be encouraged to use varied assessment strategies that address varied types of learning.
- Teachers should use testing data as tools for improving their instruction.

Preparing Pre-Service Teachers

The GCSS believes that accrediting agencies should require teacher education programs to ensure adequate content preparation for teachers *at all grade levels*, so that they are prepared to teach adequately the social studies disciplines for their respective grade levels. Such preparation would include instruction in content-appropriate pedagogical methods.

Supporting In-Service Teachers

The GCSS believes that teachers should be supported in their efforts to teach social studies effectively in the following ways:

- Time in the daily schedule dedicated to social studies instruction
- Financial support for equipment and materials dedicated to social studies instruction
- Financial support and release time for teachers to participate in staff development and professional conferences devoted to social studies
- Designation of a social studies curriculum coordinator at the district level if such a coordinator is available for other core disciplines

External Support from Communities and Government

Several forms of community and governmental support are required to sustain effective social studies programs. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Recognition of social studies' vital purpose for citizen education
- Support for the accomplishment of social understanding and civic competence goals
- Support for sustaining teacher education and professional development programs dedicated to social studies
- Funding and leadership support from local school districts and state governments
- Partnerships with appropriate institutions, such as archival institutions, museums, historic sites, etc.



Summary

Social studies is a vital discipline and is of critical importance to the development of citizens who can participate effectively in a democratic society and who have the disposition to do so. The Georgia Council for the Social Studies advocates these tenets for effective social studies teaching and learning:

- Treat social studies in all respects as an important core discipline.
- Devote time each day to social studies instruction.
- Teach social studies to *all* students at *all* grade levels.
- Give adequate support to teachers to provide effective social studies instruction.
- Prepare teachers adequately both in sufficient content and appropriate pedagogical practices to teach social studies.

When the social studies are taught and taught well, our students will be prepared to participate actively and effectively as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.

Notes

1. Checkley, K. "Social Studies Jockeys for Position in a Narrowing Curriculum." *Education Update* (May 2006). Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
2. Hoge, J., P. Klein, and M. Stakes. "Are Georgia's K-5 Children Being Taught Social Studies?" Unpublished study, 2005.
3. Kettering Foundation. *Democracy's Challenge: Reclaiming the Public's Role*. Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation, 2006.
4. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). *A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy*. Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1992.



Fact Sheet

The following statistics are provided as evidence of both the recent decline in social studies instruction and the need for systematic social studies instruction.

Elementary Social Studies

In a 2005 survey of Georgia K–5 teachers, respondents reported that

- only 38 percent felt that administrators place a high value on social studies instruction.
- 62 percent spent less than 2 hours per *week* on social studies instruction.
- 53 percent taught social studies by integrating it in other parts of the curriculum.
- even those primarily responsible for teaching social studies ranked it behind reading and mathematics in perceived importance.
- they perceived the student enjoyment level of social studies to be last (6th) behind (1) health/physical education, (2) art/music, (3) science, (4) mathematics, and (5) reading/language arts.
- 42 percent never discussed the Georgia Constitution, and 17 percent never discussed the U.S. Constitution.
- less than one-half used maps and globes for social studies instruction more than 2–3 times per month.

[Source: Hoge, J., P. Klein, and M. Stakes. “Are Georgia’s K–5 Children Being Taught Social Studies?” Unpublished study, 2005.]

Geography

In a 2006 geographic literacy study of 18 to 24 year olds, respondents reported that

- 63 percent could not find Iraq on a map.
- 75 percent could not find Indonesia on the map, even after the news coverage of the tsunami in late 2004.
- 75 percent did not know that Indonesia was a majority Muslim country.
- 50 percent could not identify the state of New York on a map.
- 57 percent could not identify the state of Ohio on a map.
- 88 percent could not find Afghanistan on a map of Asia.
- 54 percent did not know that Sudan is in Africa.
- 70 percent could not find North Korea on a map; 63 percent did not know that the North Korea-South Korea border is the most heavily fortified in the world.
- after Katrina coverage, 33 percent still could not locate Louisiana on a U.S. map.

[Source: National Geographic’s Roper Public Affairs 2006 Geographic Literacy Study (www.nationalgeographic.com/roper2006/findings.html).]



Civics/Government

Georgia voter statistics in 2002 and 2004 showed the following:

2002 Mid-Term Election		2004 Presidential Election	
Age Range	Percent of Eligible Voters Who Voted	Age Range	Percent of Eligible Voters Who Voted
18–24	19.6*	18–24	42.2*
25–44	35.5	25–44	49.3
45–64	56.7	45–64	47.5
65–74	69.4	65–74	59.6

*Less than one-half of the eligible young voters are involved in major elections.

[Source: U.S. Census Bureau]

Economics

- People in the 18 to 24 age bracket spend nearly 30 percent of their monthly income just on debt repayment—double the percentage spent in 1992 (10 percent of net income is a recommended amount for debt obligation). [Source: Draut, T., and J. Silva. “Generation Broke: The Growth of Debt among Young Americans.” *Demos*, briefing paper no. 2 (October 2004).]
- University administrators state that they lose more students to credit card debt than to academic failure. [Source: Utah State Board of Regents. *Utah Mentor: Utah’s Premier Guide for College, Career, and Financial Aid Planning*, 2003.]
- In 2002 more people filed for bankruptcy than graduated from college. [Source: U.S. Department of the Treasury. *Integrating Financial Education into School Curricula*. White paper (October 2002).]
- More than 9 in 10 adults and students believe it is important for the people of the United States to have a good understanding of economics. However, only half of high school students say they have ever been taught economics in school. [Source: Markow, D., and K. Bagnaschi, “What American Teens and Adults Know about Economics.” Harris Poll Results, National Council of Economic Education, 2005.]

History

The National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) believes that *all* students should be at the “proficient” level. However a 2001 study assessing educational progress in history found the following:

- Only 18 percent of fourth-grade students were proficient or above.
- Only 17 percent of eighth-grade students were proficient or above.
- Only 11 percent of twelfth-grade students were proficient or above.

[Source: The 2001 National Assessment of Educational Progress in History (NAEP)—The Nation’s Report Card (<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>).]

