

## What is Powerful and Authentic Social Studies

<http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerful>

### 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.

- Key concepts and themes are developed in depth. The most effective social studies teachers do not diffuse their efforts by covering too many topics superficially. Breadth is important, but deep and thoughtful understanding is essential to prepare students for the issues of twenty-first century citizenship.
- 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 that they teach, and keep up with pedagogical developments in the field of social studies.
- Meaningful curriculum includes extensive and reflective study of the United States and other nations' histories, religions, and cultures.

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

The subjects that comprise social studies--i.e., history, economics, geography, political science, 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. Focusing on the core social studies disciplines, it includes materials drawn from the arts, sciences, and humanities, from current events, from local examples and from students' own lives.

- Each of the social studies disciplines themselves integrates content from the others. Units and lessons can draw on ideas from economics, geography, history, political science, and sociology to increase understanding of an event or concept. Each disciplined pursuit demands a level of sensitivity and awareness to content drawn from the arts, humanities, and sciences.
- 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.

### **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.

Social studies teachers develop awareness of their own values and how those values influence their teaching. They assess their teaching from multiple perspectives and, when appropriate, adjust it to achieve a better balance.

- 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.

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

Student work should reflect a balance between retrieval and recitation of content and a thoughtful examination of concepts in order to provide intellectual challenges. The teacher must explain and model intellectual standards expected of students. These include, but are not limited to: clarity, precision, completeness, depth, relevance, and fairness.

- 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.
- Disciplined inquiry, in turn, includes the teaching of sophisticated concepts and ideas, and in-depth investigation of fewer rather than more topics, with deep processing and detailed study of each topic.
- Challenging social studies includes the rigorous teaching of the core disciplines as influential and continually growing tools for inquiry.

### **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."

- Students work individually and collaboratively, using rich and varied sources, to reach understandings, make decisions, discuss issues and solve problems.
- Student construction of meaning is facilitated by clear explanation, 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.

## 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.

## Note

1. Judith L. Pace, "Why We Need to Save (and Strengthen) Social Studies," Education Week (December 18, 2007).

\*\*This position statement is a revision of the statement prepared by the NCSS Task Force on Standards for Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies that, was approved by the NCSS Board of 1992. The revised statement was approved by the NCSS Board in May 2008. \*\*

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