

Social Studies Program Review Executive Summary and Final Recommendations

Introduction

An active, responsible, and well-informed citizenry is an essential component and foundation of a well-functioning democratic society. Effective Social Studies instruction plays a pivotal part in preparing youngsters to assume such roles and responsibilities in our society. In the 21st century these challenges and opportunities have become more accelerated and complex as the amount and transmission of information increases at an unprecedented pace. In order for students to attain and experience success in such an interconnected, complex, and fast-paced environment, it is essential that they develop and continually enhance core 21st Century Competencies and skills as “flexible and self-directed learners,” “effective communicators,” “information literate researchers,” “innovative and practical problem solvers,” “collaborative team members,” and “globally aware, active, and responsible citizens.” More than ever, it is crucial that Social Studies education provide students with opportunities to strengthen their interpretative, reasoning, speaking, and writing skills as well as develop capacity for creative and critical thinking.

These objectives have been recently reiterated and highlighted in the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (2009), published by the New Jersey Department of Education in its mission and vision statements: *“Social studies education provides learners with the knowledge, skills, and perspectives needed to become active, informed citizens and contributing members of local, state, national, and global communities in the digital age.”* Accordingly, an effective Social Studies education envisions that students be provided with experiences, opportunities, and support to:

- Become more civic minded, globally aware, and socially responsible.
- Exemplify fundamental values of American citizenship through active participation in local and global communities.
- Make informed decisions about local, state, national, and global events based on inquiry and analysis.
- Consider multiple perspectives, value diversity, and promote cultural understanding.
- Recognize the implications of an interconnected global economy.
- Appreciate the global dynamics between people, places, and resources.
- Utilize emerging technologies to communicate and collaborate on career and personal matters with citizens of other world regions.

As the West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District has reviewed its Social Studies K-12 Program, the 21st Century Competencies and NJ Department of Education vision and objectives for effective Social Studies education have served as lenses to analyze and assess its strengths and propose recommendations for its improvement and enhancement in the future. Indeed, wise words from the past can enlighten a path to pursue academic excellence in Social Studies in the 21st Century.

“Learning is not attained by chance; it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence.”
(Abigail Adams)

“If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be Our liberty can never be safe but in the hands of the people . . . with a high degree of instruction.” (Thomas Jefferson)

Commendations

According to the external program reviewers, the WW-P Social Studies K-12 “Program has many strengths,” including the following:

- Students are generally active learners interested in a challenging program. Teachers and administrators are dedicated and committed to creating a high quality program.
- There are many documents that outline the goals, philosophy, vision, scope and sequence, special aspects of the program, and course and unit designs. Understanding by Design has been an important focus, leading to the creation of essential questions [for student analysis and assessment], some performance tasks, and engaging activities at many levels in many classrooms.
- Teachers and administrators at all grade levels are dedicated and committed to implementing high quality Social Studies programs in their classrooms and schools as well as have shown a high level of care and concern for their students and make special efforts to build nurturing and personal relationships with them.
- Many enrichment activities and opportunities are provided to students to supplement Social Studies instruction and engage the youngsters “beyond the classroom,” such as Model Congress, Model United Nations, Current Events Plus, History Bowl, the Fed Challenge, Mock Trial, We the People Competition, and Future Problem Solvers.
- As a regular instructional practice, Social Studies lessons are designed with “essential questions” as an instructional framework and focus to promote students’ critical analysis and assessments and source materials with thought-provoking questions are provided to actively engage pupils in learning.
- Students at all levels appear to be highly motivated and interested in taking courses that they know will provide academic challenges, and many also seek out [co-curricular] and extra-curricular activities and competitions related to Social Studies topics and courses.” Evidence of this fact is cited above as well as supported by the large student enrollment in Advanced Placement courses in Social Studies subjects at both high schools.
- Teachers and administrators are eager and “open to revising and updating the Social Studies Program “ to improve and enhance its K-12 curricular and instructional alignment, articulation, coherence, and interdisciplinary quality as well as provide students with greater opportunities for more authentic and performance-based learning and assessments, individual and collaborative research and problem-solving initiatives, and learning activities to strengthen students’ critical thinking and writing skills.
- Middle and high school Social Studies teachers have worked collaboratively and diligently on instructional teams during the last eighteen months to collaborate across schools, grade-levels, and courses to develop at least four common assessments (in each Social Studies course) to more authentically analyze and assess the quality of student learning as well as enhance their

21st Century Competencies and skills. These common assessments have been “works in progress” as they are being regularly revised and improved by teachers.

- Concurrent with these collaborations on common assessments, teachers have benefited from many conversations and sharing of ideas and resources for the preparation and presentation of classroom lessons which are the pedagogical “partners” to the development of these assessments.

Recommendations

Based on the input of the external reviewers and the internal review team, the following recommendations have been proposed:

- 1. The K-12 scope and sequence of courses with accompanying curricula should be reviewed for more purposeful alignment, articulation, and coherence.**
 - **K-3 level** needs greater definition and clarity of the content and specific skills that are emphasized in instruction with additional interdisciplinary connections with Language Arts and the Common Core Standards.
 - **4-5 level** needs a more selective (“less is more”) approach with fewer instructional topics in United States History but taught in greater depth. Concepts, understandings, and skills need to be more clearly specified and sequenced along the K-12 Social Studies continuum with additional interdisciplinary connections with Language Arts and the Common Core Standards.
 - **6-8 level** needs greater clarity of skill specification and sequence across grade levels. The scope and sequence of World History in grades 6, 8, and 9 should also be re-examined for greater alignment, articulation, and coherence. The scope and sequence of the 7th grade instruction should be re-examined to promote greater instructional consistency across both middle schools as well as avoid possible areas of repetition with grades 4 and 5 below and grades 10 and 11.
 - **9-12 level** needs greater clarity of skill specification and sequence across grade levels. A more selective (“less is more”) approach is needed in the scope and sequence of courses to reduce the number of instructional topics but pursue greater depth of critical analysis and assessment of thought-provoking economic, historical, and social issues with relevant applications.
- 2. At all levels of instruction there should be a more purposeful, coherent, and consistent approach to enhance students’ critical thinking and writing skills that are aligned to the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (including Standard 6.3 for Active Citizenship), the 21st Century Competencies, and the ELA Core Content History/Social Studies Literacy Standards.**
 - As benchmarks for effective Social Studies instruction, instructional approaches and assessments should enhance students’ 21st Century Competencies in problem-solving, collaboration and effective communication with greater opportunities for research, persuasive writing, and developing knowledgeable viewpoints, with relevant applications of learning to contemporary society.

3. **After any needed scope and sequence revisions to Social Studies courses and a sequence of skills have been delineated (“mapped”) along the K-12 continuum, it is recommended that funds be allocated to revise curricula to adjust to the newly-clarified instructional priorities and additional time for greater articulation, collaboration, and professional development be allocated for teachers , both horizontally and vertically, for collegial intervisitations and interactions on instructional practice.**
4. **It is recommended that additional training be provided in the use of technology (web literacy) and questioning techniques specifically designed and focused to teach Social Studies more effectively. The greater availability and integration of technology into Social Studies instruction have been recommended with increased access to classroom computers, Smart Boards, multimedia projectors, lap-top and/or I-Pad carts, electronic resources, etc..**
 - On-line versions of textbook resources and supplemental electronic document/primary source materials and visual resources would enable teachers to design more interactive lessons that would engage students as 21st Century learners.
 - The development of leveled libraries in specific Social Studies content areas would enhance opportunities to reach learners through more differentiated instruction and the greater integration of reading and writing into interdisciplinary instructional activities.
 - Textbooks that are utilized in some courses and grade-levels are showing “signs of age.” Discussions need to be held regarding replacement of these traditional printed copies or whether or not the WW-P School District should pursue electronic versions and other on-line resources.
5. **It is recommended that Social Studies teachers continue their collaborative work on common assessments across grade-levels, schools, and courses to develop evaluative instruments that are more skill-oriented, performance-based, and feature applications of learning and “transfer tasks.”**

Action Plans for Implementation

1. **A committee of K-12 Social Studies teachers and representatives should be created to re-examine and revise, where needed, the existing scope and sequence of Social Studies courses as well as the sequence of skills, major concepts, and enduring understandings that are emphasized in each course along the K-12 Social Studies continuum. This committee could begin its work as early as this summer, 2012.**
 - This committee would review the sequence of World History courses in grades 6, 8, and 9 and the sequence of United States History courses in grade 4, 5, 7, 10, and 11 for proper alignment, articulation, and coherence and appropriately map the sequence and reinforcement of Social Studies skills along the K-12 Social Studies continuum.
2. **Once this work has been completed, it is recommended that funds be allocated to revise curricula to adjust to the newly-clarified instructional priorities regarding scope and sequence, skill mapping, major course concepts, and essential questions.**
 - Revision of curricula, where needed, could begin during the 2012-2013 school year or during the summer, 2013, depending on the extent of changes and revisions that were recommended by the K-12 committee of Social Studies educators that met during the summer, 2012 and the availability of funding.

3. Concurrently, the updating and revision of common assessments by middle and high school Social Studies teachers would continue during the 2012-2013 school year.

- Monthly department meetings and instructional team meetings across both middle schools and high schools as well as the use of professional half-days by teachers would be utilized for this work. These revisions would feature more skill-based, performance-based, and applications of learning common assessments.

As the Social Studies educators proceed with this work to strengthen classroom instruction and student learning in Social Studies, the advice of Abigail Adams will enlighten our path of progress: “Learning is not attained by chance; it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence.”

Submitted April 24, 2012 by:

Social Studies Internal Review Committee