

# The State of K–12 Social Studies Education

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## Introduction

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Social studies education has increasingly been at the center of local, state, and national discourse. Since January 2021, approximately 44 states have proposed, vetoed, overturned, stalled, or signed into law bills centered on restricting critical race theory in the classroom and limiting discussions about racism and sexism (Schwartz, 2023). Comparatively, other states and districts have introduced efforts for advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion in social studies curricula. The inclusion or limitation of certain topics, driven by debate on what topics can be discussed or used in the classroom, has impacted social studies education and curricula.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2022 U.S. History and Civics results have also placed a spotlight on social studies. When viewed alongside 2014 and 2018 NAEP assessments, the average 2022 U.S. history score for eighth-grade students “decreased by 5 points compared to 2018 and by 9 points compared to 2014” (NAEP, 2022b). Eighth-grade students’ performance in NAEP Civics also decreased for the first time since 1998, by 2 points (NAEP, 2022a), sparking numerous conversations related to the marginalization of the field as well as the quality of social studies education.

Finally, in June 2021, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute released a report—[\*The State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History in 2021\*](#)—that evaluates the quality of the state standards based on their content, rigor, clarity, and organization. Results presented in the report highlight gaps in state civics and U.S. history standards, subsequently influencing the standards revision process undertaken by states.

Considering the above-mentioned factors, this report identifies key trends in social studies education and explores current gaps, needs, and opportunities for expansion in social studies education to improve conditions for students, educators, education leaders, and others invested in this field. The intent is to provide a shared understanding of what is happening in social studies education to encourage further discussions on and research in high-quality social studies practices.

The report is organized into the following main sections:

- **State of Social Studies Standards.** In this section, we examine themes across state social studies standards—including thematic focuses by grade level or band—and discuss trends across social studies standards development processes at the state level.

- **Social Studies Curriculum Landscape.** In this section, we discuss trends in social studies curriculum materials, including impacts from the curriculum market on social studies materials. In addition, we provide a snapshot of how states and districts currently evaluate social studies curriculum materials.
- **What’s Missing? Gaps in Social Studies Education.** In this final section of the report, we identify needs in the field of social studies education based on our research and project work with social studies educators and organizations.

## Background

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The American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) is one of the largest not-for-profit behavioral and social science research and evaluation institutions. AIR has extensive experience working with states and organizations on systems aligned with social studies standards. We have been a national leader in standards revision and implementation for more than 15 years—developing processes for standards revision, supporting implementation of the standards, equipping educators to teach those standards, supporting effective measurement of students’ ability to meet the standards, and conducting research to keep current on the demands of our students to support the next iteration of standards. In 2023, AIR worked with seven states and the U.S. Virgin Islands to facilitate and support their standards development and implementation processes. This work included (a) facilitation of the development of a K–12 curriculum grounded in the standards and (b) development of online professional development modules to support implementation. We also are currently working with multiple organizations to build resources for identifying high-quality instructional materials in social studies and to share with the field what we have learned from our work in social studies via conferences, webinars, and other educator-focused resources. For this report, AIR has compiled data and information from state landscape scans, evidence-based research, focus groups, and other investigations or work in partnership with various organizations to provide a comprehensive view of the state of social studies education in the United States.

## State of Social Studies Standards

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### Organization

The content, skills, and structure of state standards varies widely from state to state. Regardless of this variation, secondary education is commonly influenced by dominant social studies disciplines (i.e., history, geography, government, and economics), whereas elementary social

studies “includes the interdisciplinary study of history, geography, economics, and government/civics and is well-integrated with the study of language arts, the visual and performing arts, and STEM” (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2023). Currently, all 50 states plus Washington, DC, cover civics/political science/government, history, and geography in their standards. Approximately 48 states and Washington, DC, cover economics. Aside from the core disciplines, 33 states plus Washington, DC, fully or partially incorporate financial literacy in their standards, with 16 states also fully or partially integrating behavioral sciences (e.g., sociology, psychology, anthropology). More comprehensive information on the disciplines incorporated in social studies standards by state can be viewed using the [AIR 2023 Social Studies Standards Map](#).

For states that identify a thematic focus for each grade level, there are recognizable trends in what is taught in each grade. Exhibit 1 outlines the key trends in state social studies focuses.

**Exhibit 1. Trends in State Social Studies Thematic Focuses by Grade Level or Band**

Grade	Thematic focus
<b>Grades K–3</b>	Broad concepts such as citizenship, the community, sense of self, spaces and places, culture, or local government.
<b>Grade 4</b>	The state’s history and geography.
<b>Grade 5</b>	Early U.S. history, typically from pre-Columbian Native American societies until right after the American Revolution in the late 1700s.
<b>Grade 6</b>	More exposure to global studies through either a world history or geography course.
<b>Grade 7</b>	Continuation of world studies or, alternatively, a state-specific history course.
<b>Grade 8</b>	Typically, U.S. history until 1877, state history, or a global studies course; however, some states have started to create standards for a stand-alone civics course or have integrated civics into the U.S. history standards for middle school.
<b>Grades 9–12</b>	Many states require one credit of U.S. history, one credit of world history or world geography, a half-credit of U.S. government/civics, and a half-credit of economics.

Although many states have thematic focuses for social studies, approximately 20 states do not have a defined thematic focus for each grade level; instead, these states identify key content and skills from the different disciplines (e.g., history, civics, geography) that should be addressed in each grade or grade band.

## Trends in Social Studies Standards Development

There is a history of almost 3 decades of national and state efforts to develop and refine social studies content standards. Trends in social studies standards development focus on two major categories: content and skills (e.g., inquiry). Identification of content in social studies standards is most often guided by best practices and current research. For example, Alaska’s writing teams used relevant research, frameworks, and standards outlined in the Alaska Literature Review as a foundation for revisions to their social studies content standards across disciplines. To support their standards revisions, other states are using resources from various national content organizations such as the UCLA Public History Initiative’s [National History Standards](#), the Center for Civic Education’s [National Standards for Civics and Government](#), [Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics](#), [National Geography Standards](#), and the [National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies](#), along with the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) frameworks in [civics](#), [economics](#), [geography](#), and [U.S. history](#).

For skills, many states are shifting their focus to include components of inquiry. Washington, Michigan, and North Carolina are among the states that have incorporated inquiry into their social studies standards, using resources such as the [College, Career, and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework](#). To date, approximately 38 states have incorporated, excerpted, or cited the C3 Framework—which provides guidance to states for revising social studies standards—in their standards (Grant et al., 2023, p. 364). Washington incorporates the dimensions and indicators of the C3 Framework under the social studies skills discipline through performance standards, enduring understandings, and sample questions aligned to inquiry. For example, at the elementary level, [Washington State K–12 Learning Standards for Social Studies](#) includes the performance standard “Uses inquiry-based research” with enduring understandings and sample questions for K–5.

Michigan’s [K–12 Standards for Social Studies](#) include Process and Skills Standards that align to the C3 Framework’s Inquiry Arc. Each grade band includes a set of Social Studies Process and Skills standards—such as “Use compelling and supporting questions to investigate social studies problems”—that identify inquiry, among other skills, for students across disciplines and grade levels. Similarly, North Carolina’s standards include an inquiry strand with indicators that can be used alongside content standards for each grade band.

Aside from common frameworks, other states are emphasizing efforts that ensure standards are transparent; informed by research and grounded in evidence; focused on equity; inclusive; and oriented toward improvement. The following are examples of resources and methods states are using to address these five components in their standards:

- *Transparent.* States are actively making the process for developing high-quality standards accessible to everyone. For example, the Nebraska Department of Education

created the [Content Area Standards Reference Guide](#) to clearly articulate how Nebraska develops content area standards that align with its identified criteria for high-quality standards. The reference guide also provides process-related information for developing the standards, including relevant guiding research and information on what content area standards are, how they are developed, and why they are important for providing additional context for readers. States have also worked on developing or revising their standards revision processes so that the processes can be more clearly articulated to the public through various forms of feedback and a public comment period.

- *Informed by research and grounded in evidence.* During the standards revision process, writing teams are grounding their work in relevant research and evidence. To build its state standards in 2022, New Mexico used a variety of literature compiled in its [NM Resources for Standards Writing](#) document, a social studies national [landscape report](#), and evidence-based [Criteria for High Quality Standards](#). Resources included literature relevant to the New Mexico context (e.g., Diné Standards).
- *Focused on equity.* Various states have addressed equity in their social studies standards through different methods, such as inclusive strands and standards. Indiana created the [Indiana Academic Standards for Ethnic Studies](#) with the goal of broadening students “perspectives on historical and contemporary lived experiences and cultural practices in the United States.” The ethnic studies component is organized around four standards: cultural self-awareness; cultural histories within the United States context and abroad; contemporary lived experiences and cultural practices; and historical and contemporary contributions. Similarly, Wyoming’s social studies content and performance standards include a content standard on culture and cultural diversity, while Mississippi has a strand dedicated to Civil Rights.

In addition to state-specific efforts, the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center’s [Assessing Bias in Standards and Curricular Materials](#) is a resource that states have used and can continue to use to guide their social studies standards work. The standards-specific rubric centers on three domains for evaluating content standards. These domains emphasize that standards should build consciousness; reflect students’ cultural repertoires and view them as worth sustaining; and stimulate social improvement.

- *Inclusive.* States are bringing more voices to the table during the standards revision process and are actively making connections to local contexts in their standards. In Alaska, efforts were made to incorporate a variety of perspectives and voices throughout the standards revision process, including the creation of an Alaska History workgroup and focus groups with various state or organization representatives. The

writing team comprised diverse educators from districts that serve anywhere from 200 to 42,000 students in different regions of the state (Interior, Southwest, Southcentral, Southeast). Guidelines were developed for the educators revising the standards to ensure that Alaska Natives and Indigenous peoples are integrated into and honored in the standards. Other states have also incorporated local contexts into their standards. Kentucky’s standards include state-specific government, economics, geography, and history concepts and practices that emphasize the local context (e.g., identifying local community members). Iowa added state history to its standards, and Oklahoma’s standards include a set of Oklahoma history content standards that have students engage with, analyze, evaluate, and investigate social, political, and economic events that are unique or relevant to the state. For instance, students analyze the formation of Oklahoma’s constitutional government and events that transformed the state in various decades.

- *Oriented toward improvement.* States are continuing to build on previous social studies standards by evaluating their current standards and incorporating best practices in social studies education through the development of guiding principles and anchor standards. During the standards revision process, writing teams review the current social studies standards to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Massachusetts and Virginia developed guiding principles for their social studies standards revision process. Massachusetts’ [guiding principles](#) (pp. 13–16) emphasize various ideas around what students should know and be able to do related to concepts such as democratic government, historical thinking, cross-disciplinary understandings or skills, social and emotional skills, and current events and news/media literacy. In comparison, Virginia’s [guiding principles](#) (p. 4) focus on key ideals, such as “America is both exceptional and imperfect” that provide students with an understanding of the “good and bad” aspects in Virginia history, the United States, and the world.

States are also expanding on the core ideas of the disciplines through the development and inclusion of anchor standards in social studies. Anchor standards—also referred to as enduring understandings or knowledge—help organize content standards across grade levels. States use anchor standards or their equivalent to organize and identify the key ideas or understandings in each content area and for the progression of the standards from grades K–12. Hawaii’s social studies standards include five inquiry anchor standards and 14 content anchor standards under the civics, economics, geography, and history disciplines. These anchor standards are consistent across grades and courses, and students have the opportunity to engage with all of the anchor standards by the end of grades 5, 8, and 12. Minnesota also has anchor standards under five overarching strands (i.e., citizenship and government; economics; geography; history; and ethnic studies) that include essential concepts and skills for each discipline.



## Social Studies Curriculum Landscape

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### Trends in Social Studies Curricula

Although social studies curricula vary widely across states and districts, some common trends have emerged. The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy (2021) released a Social Studies Knowledge Map that analyzed K–12 social studies curricula across various states and districts. The Institute found that most curricula in the states and districts they analyzed provide a strong foundation in elementary grades, with instruction in civics, government, and state and local history. However, it also found that only some curricula suggested cultivating an open classroom climate or gave attention to multiple perspectives. The Social Studies Knowledge Map identified four main trends across most curricula: (a) elementary grades often lack primary sources; (b) units display topical incoherence across materials; (c) religion and philosophy are rarely incorporated; and (d) there is insufficient focus on Central American, South American, African, and Asian history.

Furthermore, trends have emerged in the usage of certain curriculum materials in social studies. In 2022, the RAND Corporation administered the [American Instructional Resources Surveys \(AIRS\)](#) to principals and teachers, gathering information on what curriculum materials educators use across grade levels in social studies. A key finding from the survey was that state-level infrastructure to support social studies instruction at the elementary level was either missing from states or varied widely (Diliberti et al., 2023, p. 1). Of the elementary-level educators who responded to the survey, 51% reported using “curriculum materials I create myself” once a week or more, on average, for their social studies curriculum (Doan et al., 2022, p. 29). Elementary educators also reported using the following once a week or more: Teachers Pay Teachers (70%), BrainPOP (60%), YouTube (48%), Scholastic News (37%), and Kahoot! (32%) (Doan et al., 2022, p. 30). Based on the AIRS findings, Diliberti et al. (2023) suggest that elementary school teachers may assemble social studies resources due to a lack of guidance from schools or states around what instructional materials to use (p. 25). Yet, their interpretation also suggests that educators may use a variety of resources for different reasons (e.g., finding engaging materials, meeting students’ needs, highlighting diverse voices) (pp. 25–26).

In middle and high school, a higher percentage of respondents selected the following social studies materials provided by their school or district: curriculum materials teachers create themselves (25%); curriculum materials my school or district created (22%); McGraw Hill for U.S. history (18%) and world history (17%) (Doan et al., 2022, p. 67). Approximately 20% of respondents also indicated that there were “no particular curriculum materials” provided as a requirement or recommendation by their school or district (Doan et al., 2022, p. 67). Diliberti et al. (2023) note that at the secondary level, social studies is taught in subject-specific courses

(e.g., U.S. history, civics) and that this may influence why there are more instructional materials and supports for secondary educators compared with elementary school educators (p. 15).

To investigate and build on the above-mentioned trends, AIR conducted an independent scan of notable social studies curriculum products, including state curricula (recommended, suggested, or adopted) and open educational resources (OER). The curriculum products were primarily characterized by usage as either core or supplementary resources; there also were a few resources that targeted English language arts with social studies embedded. Curricula varied by grade coverage, type of resource (core vs. supplementary), disciplinary focus, framework/standards alignment, and format (print vs. digital). Notable findings included the following:

- A majority of the curriculum products were categorized as supplementary rather than core resources.
- Educators teaching social studies in the lower grades (i.e., K–5) have the fewest available high-quality curriculum products. Social studies educators in the middle and high school grades have a larger range of high-quality, content-specific curriculum resources.
- Curricula products vary widely but advertise alignment with the C3 Framework, Common Core English language arts standards, or states’ social studies standards (with limitations).
- A majority of educators indicate that the social studies programs they use in the classroom are in print, but teachers ranked having programs available in both print and digital formats as the most important attribute of a program (Simba Information, 2019, p. 20).

## **Social Studies Curriculum Market**

In 2019, the estimated instructional market for social studies totaled an estimated \$464.6 million for core programs and \$242.8 million for supplementary programs and materials (Simba Information, 2019). Among the materials that educators used from publishers, the most used core social studies materials came from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, McGraw Hill Education, and Savvas Learning Company (formerly Pearson).

In addition to nationally recognized publishers, some states and districts are investing in OER to support curriculum gaps. Approximately 20 states have joined collaborations with other states, publishers, institutions of higher education, state agencies, districts, and teachers to create repositories and libraries of OER. For example, the #GoOpen initiative was launched in 2015 by leaders from 14 states and 40 districts who focused on creating openly licensed materials, including lesson plans, worksheets, and materials (Prescott et al., 2019). This movement has

now grown to more than 20 states and 116 districts that are all committed to publishing OER, implementing statewide technology strategies for adopting OER, and continuing to partner with other states and districts to share learning and professional development resources.

## Evaluation of Social Studies Curricula

Equally important to the availability of curriculum products and the market landscape is district and states' capacity to identify and use high-quality instructional materials in social studies. Currently, approximately 36 states provide guidance to districts on determining curriculum quality, with at least 20 of these states leading curriculum reviews and evaluating the quality of curricula based on state criteria (Tepe & Mooney, 2018, p. 10). Aside from state-led reviews, 13 states provide districts with external reviews, rubrics, or resources to determine curriculum quality, and at least five states employ teacher-user reviews (Tepe & Mooney, 2018, p. 11). In teacher-user reviews, individual teachers can evaluate instructional materials. Then, in some cases, the instructional materials that teachers evaluate are curated and shared with educators around the state via state websites or other systems. For some states, there are restrictions on what instructional materials districts and schools can use, or there is a lack of capacity to provide specific information and guidance on curricula (Tepe & Mooney, 2018, p. 12). Therefore, these states may provide or direct districts to external resources or other commonly used curriculum review tools and rubrics to evaluate the rigor, alignment, and quality of instructional materials.

Although more than half of all states provide guidance on determining curriculum quality, only about 17 of those states—plus Washington, DC—include curriculum review tools or guideline documents specific to social studies. However, institutions such as AIR and EdReports are working to address this gap in social studies curriculum review guidance. AIR, in partnership with EdReports, developed a comprehensive, rigorous, accessible, and flexible tool (evidence guides) to help educational professionals across the nation identify high-quality instructional materials for social studies. See more information about the status of these evidence guides [here](#).

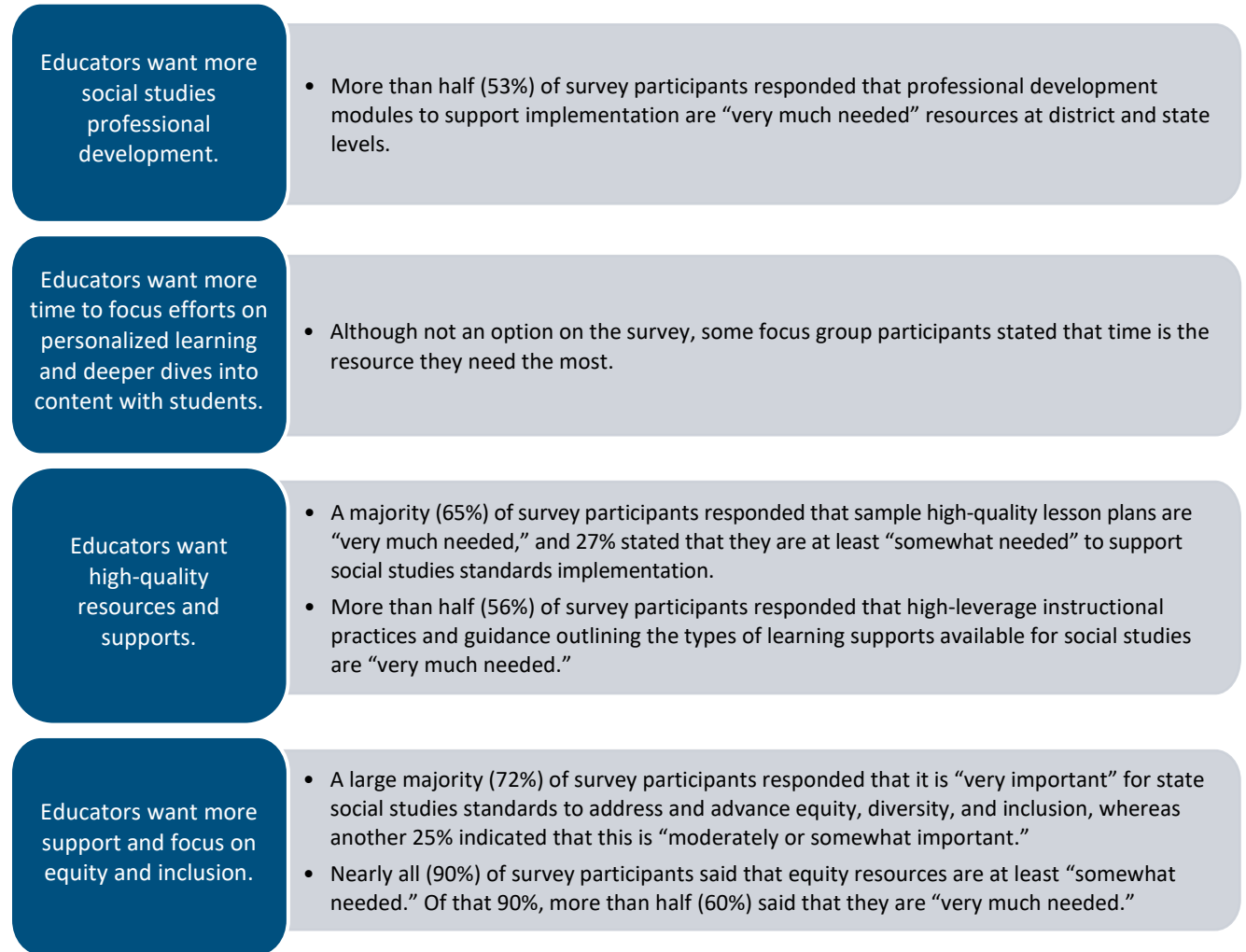
## What's Missing? Gaps in Social Studies Education

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To identify potential gaps in social studies education, AIR partnered with NCSS and iCivics to conduct focus groups and a survey with teachers, instructional leaders, district administrators, and state and national leaders in the field. Survey and focus group questions focused on three main topics: perceptions of the state of social studies standards, needs in the field for improving social studies standards revision, and needs in the field for supporting

implementation of social studies standards. Four takeaways from the survey and focus groups are identified in Exhibit 2.

### Exhibit 2. Takeaways From National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and iCivics Survey and Focus Group Participation



*Note.* Total percentages shared are highlights and may not equal 100.

In conjunction with the previously mentioned needs, responses from focus groups shed light on what research topics, yet to be examined, could inform high-quality practices to improve the field of social studies. The following are identified research needs:

- Review of high-quality practices utilized by social studies educators
- Evaluation of exemplar state standards and their implementation processes
- Measurement and assessment studies on social studies outcomes

- Impact studies on the effects of culturally relevant pedagogy on marginalized students
- Mixed methods studies on standards writing processes conducted by writing committees
- Review of easily accessible and/or low-cost curricular resources for elementary teachers to better promote deeper student learning experiences
- Accessible curriculum resources with depth for non–Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate classes
- Review of teacher education and professional development programs and systems

## Conclusion

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The trends outlined in this report serve as a starting point for understanding the state of social studies education at the standard and curriculum levels, what has impacted the field or where the field may be headed, and opportunities for further research to inform high-quality practices in social studies. It is essential that states and local districts, with support from social studies–focused organizations, continue to build on these trends to identify and leverage quality practices that address the needs of all students.

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