

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Chapter 2—The Themes of Social Studies

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CULTURE

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity.

Human beings create, learn, share, and adapt to culture. The study of culture examines the socially transmitted beliefs, values, institutions, behaviors, traditions and way of life of a group of people; it also encompasses other cultural attributes and products, such as language, literature, music, arts and artifacts, and foods. Students come to understand that human cultures exhibit both similarities and differences, and they learn to see themselves both as individuals and as members of a particular culture that shares similarities with other cultural groups, but is also distinctive. In a multicultural, democratic society and globally connected world, students need to understand the multiple perspectives that derive from different cultural vantage points.

Cultures are dynamic and change over time. The study of culture prepares students to ask and answer questions such as: What is culture? What roles does culture play in human and societal development? What are the common characteristics across cultures? How is unity developed within and among cultures? What is the role of diversity and how is it maintained within a culture? How do various aspects of culture such as belief systems, religious faith, or political ideals, influence other parts of a culture such as its institutions or literature, music, and art? How does culture change over time to accommodate different ideas, and beliefs? How does cultural diffusion occur within and across communities, regions, and nations?

Through experience, observation, and reflection, students will identify elements of culture as well as similarities and differences among cultural groups across time and place. They will acquire knowledge and understanding of culture through multiple modes, including fiction and non-fiction, data analysis, meeting and conversing with peoples of divergent backgrounds, and completing research into the complexity of various cultural systems.

In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with geography, history, sociology, and anthropology, as well as multicultural topics across the curriculum. Young learners can explore concepts of likenesses and differences among cultural groups through school subjects such as language arts, mathematics, science, music, and art. In social studies, learners interact with class members and discover culturally-based likenesses and differences. They begin to identify the cultural basis for some celebrations and ways of life in their community and in examples from across the world. In the middle grades, students begin to explore and ask questions about the nature of various cultures, and the development of cultures across time and place. They learn to analyze specific aspects of culture, such as language and beliefs, and the influence of culture on human behavior. As students progress through high school, they can understand and use complex cultural concepts such as adaptation, assimilation, acculturation, diffusion, and dissonance that are drawn from anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines to explain how culture and cultural systems function.

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TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the past and its legacy.

Studying the past makes it possible for us to understand the human story across time. The historical experiences of societies, peoples and nations reveal patterns of continuity and change. Historical analysis enables us to identify continuities over time in core institutions, values, ideals, and traditions, as well as processes that lead to change within societies and institutions, and that result in innovation and the development of new ideas, values and ways of life.

Knowledge and understanding of the past enable us to analyze the causes and consequences of events and developments, and to place these in the context of the institutions, values and beliefs of the periods in which they took place. Study of the past makes us aware of the ways in which human beings have viewed themselves, their societies and the wider world at different periods of time.

Knowing how to read, reconstruct and interpret the past allows us to answer questions such as: How do we learn about the past? How can we evaluate the usefulness and degree of reliability of different historical sources? What are the roots of our social, political and economic systems? What are our personal roots and how can they be viewed as part of human history? Why is the past important to us today? How has the world changed and how might it change in future? How do perspectives about the past differ, and to what extent do these differences inform contemporary ideas and actions?

Children in early grades learn to locate themselves in time and space. They gain experience with sequencing to establish a sense of order and time, and begin to understand the historical concepts that give meaning to the events that they study. The use of stories about the past can help children develop their understanding of ethical and moral issues as they learn about important events and developments. Children begin to recognize that stories can be told in different ways, and that individuals may hold divergent views about events in the past. They learn to offer explanations for why views differ, and thus develop the ability to defend interpretations based on evidence from multiple sources. They begin to understand the linkages between human decisions and consequences. The foundation is laid for the further development of historical knowledge, skills, and values in the middle grades.

Through a more formal study of history, students in the middle grades continue to expand their understanding of the past and are increasingly able to apply the research methods associated with historical inquiry. They develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for differences in perspectives on historical events and developments, recognizing that interpretations are influenced by individual experiences, sources selected, societal values, and cultural traditions. They are increasingly able to use multiple sources to build interpretations of past events and eras. High school students use historical methods of inquiry to engage in the examination of more sophisticated sources. They develop the skills needed to locate and analyze multiple sources, and to evaluate the historical accounts made by others. They build and defend interpretations that reconstruct the past, and draw on their knowledge of history to make informed choices and decisions in the present.

3

PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of people, places, and environments.

The study of people, places, and environments enables us to understand the relationship between human populations and the physical world. Students learn where people and places are located and why they are there. They examine the influence of physical systems, such as climate, weather and seasons, and natural resources, such as land and water, on human populations. They study the causes, patterns and effects of human settlement and migration, learn of the roles of different kinds of population centers in a society, and investigate the impact of human activities on the environment. This enables them to acquire a useful basis of knowledge for informed decision-making on issues arising from human-environmental relationships.

During their studies, learners develop an understanding of spatial perspectives, and examine changes in the relationship between peoples, places and environments. They study the communications and transportation networks that link different population centers, the reasons for these networks, and their impact. They identify the key social, economic and cultural characteristics of populations in different locations as they expand their knowledge of diverse peoples and places. Learners develop an understanding of the growth of national and global regions, as well as the technological advances that connect students to the world beyond their personal locations.

Today's social, cultural, economic and civic issues demand that students apply knowledge, skills, and understandings as they address questions such as: Why do people decide to live where they do or move to other places? Why is location important? How do people interact with the environment and what are some of the consequences of those interactions? What physical and other characteristics lead to the creation of regions? How do maps, globes, geographic tools and geospatial technologies contribute to the understanding of people, places, and environments?

In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with geography, regional studies, and world cultures. Student experiences will encourage increasingly abstract thought as they use data and apply skills in analyzing human behavior in relation to its physical and cultural environment. In the early grades, young learners draw upon immediate personal experiences in their neighborhoods, towns and cities, and states, as well as peoples and places distant and unfamiliar, to explore geographic concepts and skills. They learn to use maps, globes, and other geographic tools. They also express interest in and concern for the use and misuse of the physical environment. During the middle grades, students explore people, places, and environments in this country and in different regions of the world. They learn to evaluate issues such as population growth and its impact, "push and pull" factors related to migration, and the causes and implications of national and global environmental change. Students in high school are able to apply an understanding of geospatial technologies and other geographic tools and systems to a broad range of themes and topics. As they analyze complex processes of change in the relationship between people, places, and environments, and the resulting issues and challenges, they develop their skills at evaluating and recommending public policies.

INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of individual development and identity.

Personal identity is shaped by an individual's culture, by groups, by institutional influences, and by lived experiences shared with people inside and outside the individual's own culture throughout her or his development. Given the nature of individual development in a social and cultural context, students need to be aware of the processes of learning, growth, and interaction at every level of their own school experiences. The examination of various forms of human behavior enhances an understanding of the relationships between social norms and emerging personal identities, the social processes that influence identity formation, and the ethical principles underlying individual action.

Questions related to identity and development, which are important in psychology, sociology, and anthropology, are central to the understanding of who we are. Such questions include: How do individuals grow and change physically, emotionally and intellectually? Why do individuals behave as they do? What influences how people learn, perceive, and grow? How do people meet their basic needs in a variety of contexts? How do individuals develop over time? How do social, political, and cultural interactions support the development of identity? How are development and identity defined at other times and in other places?

The study of individual development and identity will help students to describe factors important to the development of personal identity. They will explore the influence of peoples, places, and environments on personal development. Students will hone personal skills such as demonstrating self-direction when working towards and accomplishing personal goals, and making an effort to understand others and their beliefs, feelings, and convictions.

In the early grades, young learners develop their personal identities in the context of families, peers, schools, and communities. Central to this development are the exploration, identification, and analysis of how individuals and groups are alike and how they are unique, as well as how they relate to each other in supportive and collaborative ways. In the middle grades, issues of personal identity are refocused as the individual begins to explain his or her unique qualities in relation to others, collaborates with peers and with others, and studies how individuals develop in different societies and cultures. At the high school level, students need to encounter multiple opportunities to examine

contemporary patterns of human behavior, using methods from the behavioral sciences to apply core concepts drawn from psychology, sociology, and anthropology as they apply to individuals, societies, and cultures.

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INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions.

Institutions are the formal and informal political, economic, and social organizations that help us carry out, organize, and manage our daily affairs.

Schools, religious institutions, families, government agencies, and the courts all play an integral role in our lives. They are organizational embodiments of the core social values of those who comprise them, and play a variety of important roles in socializing individuals and meeting their needs, as well as in the promotion of societal continuity, the mediation of conflict, and the consideration of public issues.

It is important that students know how institutions are formed, what controls and influences them, how they control and influence individuals and culture, and how institutions can be maintained or changed. The study of individuals, groups, and institutions, drawing upon sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines, prepares students to ask and answer questions such as: What is the role of institutions in this and other societies? How am I influenced by institutions? How do institutions change? What is my role in institutional change?

Students identify those institutions that they encounter. They analyze how the institutions operate and find ways that will help them participate more effectively in their relationships with these institutions. Finally, students examine the foundations of the institutions that affect their lives, and determine how they can contribute to the shared goals and desires of society.

In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with sociology, anthropology, psychology, political science, and history. Young children should be given the opportunity to examine various institutions that affect their lives and influence their thinking. They should be assisted in recognizing the tensions that occur when the goals, values, and principles of two or more institutions or groups conflict—for example, the school board removing playground equipment for safety reasons vs. the same equipment being used in a city park playground (i.e., swings, monkey bars, or sliding boards). They should also have opportunities to explore ways in

which institutions (such as voluntary associations, or organizations like health care networks) are created to respond to changing individual and group needs. Middle school learners will benefit from varied experiences through which they examine the ways in which institutions change over time, promote social conformity, and influence culture. They should be encouraged to use this understanding to suggest ways to work through institutional change for the common good. High school students must understand the paradigms and traditions that undergird social and political institutions. They should be provided opportunities to examine, use, and add to the body of knowledge offered by the behavioral sciences and social theory in relation to the ways people and groups organize themselves around common needs, beliefs, and interests.

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POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create, interact with, and change structures of power, authority, and governance.

The development of civic competence requires an understanding of the foundations of political thought, and the historical development of various structures of power, authority, and governance. It also requires knowledge of the evolving functions of these structures in contemporary U.S. society, as well as in other parts of the world. Learning the basic ideals and values of a constitutional democracy is crucial to understanding our system of government. By examining the purposes and characteristics of various governance systems, learners develop an understanding of how different groups and nations attempt to resolve conflicts and seek to establish order and security.

In exploring this theme, students confront questions such as: What are the purposes and functions of government? Under what circumstances is the exercise of political power legitimate? What are the proper scope and limits of authority? How are individual rights protected and challenged within the context of majority rule? What conflicts exist among fundamental principles and values of constitutional democracy? What are the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a constitutional democracy?

Through study of the dynamic relationships between individual rights and responsibilities, the needs of social groups, and concepts of a just society, learners become more effective problem-solvers and decision-makers when addressing the persistent issues and social problems encountered in public life. By applying concepts and methods of political science and law, students learn how people work to promote positive societal change.

In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with government, politics, political science, civics, history, law, and other social sciences. Learners in the early grades explore their natural and developing sense of fairness and order as they experience relationships with others. They develop an increasingly comprehensive awareness of rights and responsibilities in specific contexts. During the middle school years, these rights and responsibilities are applied in more complex contexts with emphasis on new applications. Learners study the various systems that have been developed over the centuries to allocate and employ power and authority in the governing process. High school students develop their abilities to understand and apply abstract principles. At every level, learners should have opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills to participate in the workings of the various levels of power, authority, and governance.



PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people organize for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services.

People have wants that often exceed the limited resources available to them. The unequal distribution of resources necessitates systems of exchange, including trade, to improve the well-being of the economy, while the role of government in economic policy-making varies over time and from place to place. Increasingly, economic decisions are global in scope and require systematic study of an interdependent world economy and the role of technology in economic growth. As a result, a variety of ways have been invented to decide upon answers to four fundamental questions: What is to be produced? How is production to be organized? How are goods and services to be distributed and to whom? What is the most effective allocation of the factors of production (land, labor, capital, and entrepreneurship)?

In exploring this theme, students confront such questions as: What factors influence decision-making on issues of the production, distribution and consumption of goods? What are the best ways to deal with market failures? How does interdependence brought on by globalization impact local economies and social systems?

Students will gather and analyze data, as well as use critical thinking skills to determine how best to deal with scarcity of resources. The economic way of

thinking will also be an important tool for students as they analyze complex aspects of the economy.

In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with concepts, principles, and issues drawn from the discipline of economics. Young learners begin by prioritizing their economic wants vs. needs. They explore economic decision-making as they compare their own economic experiences with those of others and consider the wider consequences of those decisions on groups, communities, the nation, and beyond. In the middle grades, learners expand their knowledge of economic concepts and principles, and use economic reasoning processes in addressing issues related to fundamental economic questions. High school students develop economic perspectives and deeper understanding of key economic concepts and processes through systematic study of a range of economic and sociopolitical systems, with particular emphasis on the examination of domestic and global economic policy options related to matters such as trade, resource use, unemployment, and health care.



SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIETY

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of relationships among science, technology, and society.

Science, and its practical application, technology, have had a major influence on social and cultural change, and on the ways people interact with the world.

Scientific advances and technology have influenced life over the centuries, and modern life, as we know it, would be impossible without technology and the science that supports it.

There are many questions about the role that science and technology play in our lives and in our cultures. What can we learn from the past about how new technologies result in broader social change, some of which is unanticipated? Is new technology always better than that which it replaces? How can we cope with the ever-increasing pace of change, perhaps even the concern that technology might get out of control? How can we manage technology so that the greatest numbers of people benefit? How can we preserve fundamental values and beliefs in a world that is rapidly becoming one technology-linked village? How do science and technology affect our sense of self and morality? How are disparate cultures, geographically separated but impacted by global events, brought together by the technology that informs us about events, and offered hope by the science that may alleviate global problems (e.g., the spread of AIDS)? How can gaps in access to benefits of science and technology be bridged?

This theme appears in units or courses dealing with history, geography, economics, and civics and government. It draws upon several scholarly fields from the natural and physical sciences, social sciences, and the humanities for specific examples of issues as well as the knowledge base for considering responses to the societal issues related to science and technology.

Young children learn how science and technologies influence beliefs, knowledge, and their daily lives. They study how basic technologies such as telephones, ships, automobiles, and airplanes have evolved and how we have employed technology such as air conditioning, dams, and irrigation to modify our physical environment and contribute to changes in global health and economics. From history (their own and others'), they can construct examples of the effects of technologies such as the wheel, the stirrup, an understanding of DNA, and the Internet. In the middle grades, students begin to explore the complex influence of scientific findings and technology on human values, the growth of knowledge, and behavior. Students examine scientific ideas and technological changes that have surprised people and even challenged their beliefs, as in the case of discoveries about our universe and their technological applications, as well as the genetic basis of life, atomic physics, and other subjects. As they move from the middle grades to high school, students continue to think analytically about the consequences of change and how we can manage science and technology to increase benefits to all. Students gain the knowledge to analyze issues such as the protection of privacy in the age of the Internet; electronic surveillance; the opportunities and challenges of genetic engineering; test-tube life; and other findings and technologies with implications for beliefs, longevity, and the quality of life and the environment.



GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of global connections and interdependence.

Global connections have intensified and accelerated the changes faced at the local, national, and international levels. The effects are evident in rapidly changing social, economic, and political institutions and systems. World trade has expanded and technology has removed or lowered many barriers, bringing far-flung cultures, institutions, and systems together. Connections among nations and regions of the world provide opportunities as well as uncertainties. The realities of global interdependence require deeper understanding of the increasing and diverse global connections among world societies and regions.

In exploring this theme, students confront questions such as: What are the different types of global connections? What global connections have existed in the past,

exist currently, and are likely in the future? How do ideas spread between societies in today's interconnected world? How does this result in change in those societies? What are the other consequences of global connections? What are the benefits from and problems associated with global interdependence? How might people in different parts of the world have different perspectives on these benefits and problems? What influence has increasing global interdependence had on patterns of international migration? How should people and societies balance global connectedness with local needs? What is needed for life to thrive on an ever changing and increasingly interdependent planet?

Analyses of the costs and benefits of increased global connections, and evaluations of the tensions between national interests and global priorities, contribute to the development of possible solutions to persistent and emerging global issues. By interpreting the patterns and relationships of increased global interdependence, and its implications for different societies, cultures and institutions, students learn to examine policy alternatives that have both national and global implications.

This theme typically appears in units or courses dealing with geography, culture, economics, history, political science, government, and technology but may also draw upon the natural and physical sciences and the humanities, including literature, the arts, and languages. Through exposure to various media and first-hand experiences, young learners become aware of how things that happen in one part of the world impact other parts of the world. Within this context, students in early grades examine and explore various types of global connections as well as basic issues and concerns. They develop responsive action plans, such as becoming e-pals with a class in another part of the world. In the middle years, learners can initiate analyses of the consequences of interactions among states, nations, and world regions as they respond to global events and changes. At the high school level, students are able to think systematically about personal, national, and global decisions, and to analyze policies and actions, and their consequences. They also develop skills in addressing and evaluating critical issues such as peace, conflict, poverty, disease, human rights, trade, and global ecology.



CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic.

An understanding of civic ideals and practices is critical to full participation in society and is an essential component of education for citizenship, which is the central purpose of social studies. All people have a stake in examining civic ideals and practices across time and in different societies. Through an understanding of both ideals and practices, it becomes possible to identify gaps between them, and study efforts to close the gaps in our democratic republic and worldwide.

Learning how to apply civic ideals as part of citizen action is essential to the exercise of democratic freedoms and the pursuit of the common good. Through social studies programs, students acquire a historical and contemporary understanding of the basic freedoms and rights of citizens in a democracy, and learn about the institutions and practices that support and protect these freedoms and rights, as well as the important historical documents that articulate them. Students also need to become familiar with civic ideals and practices in countries other than our democratic republic.

Questions faced by students studying this theme might be: What are the democratic ideals and practices of a constitutional democracy? What is the balance between rights and responsibilities? What is civic participation? How do citizens become involved? What is the role of the citizen in the community and the nation, and as a member of the world community? Students will explore how individuals and institutions interact. They will also recognize and respect different points of view. Students learn by experience how to participate in community service and political activities and how to use democratic processes to influence public policy.

In schools, this theme typically appears in units or courses dealing with civics, history, political science, cultural anthropology, and fields such as global studies and law-related education, while also drawing upon content from the humanities.

In the early grades, students are introduced to civic ideals and practices through activities such as helping to set classroom expectations, examining experiences in relation to ideals, participating in mock elections, and determining how to balance the needs of individuals and the group. During these years, children also experience views of citizenship in other times and places through stories and drama. By the middle grades, students expand their knowledge of democratic ideals and practices, along with their ability to analyze and evaluate the relationships between these ideals and practices. They are able to see themselves taking civic roles in their communities. High school students increasingly recognize the rights and responsibilities of citizens in identifying societal needs, setting directions for public policies, and working to support both individual dignity and the common good. They become familiar with methods of analyzing important public issues and evaluating different recommendations for dealing with these issues.

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