
MEMORANDUM

TO: Minnesota Department of Education Social Studies Standards Committee Members and Staff

FROM: Danyika Leonard, Policy Director & Carly Benusa, Education Policy Intern, on behalf of Education Evolving

DATE: January 4, 2020

RE: Public Feedback on Draft 1 of Revised Social Studies Academic Standards

This memo shares feedback from critical education stakeholders, followed by a set of recommendations for the first draft of Minnesota's revised social studies academic standards, as proposed by the Minnesota Department of Education and Social Studies Standards committee in December 2020.

Following the release of the first draft, Education Evolving:

- Solicited feedback from 30 stakeholders: teachers (including licensed social studies teachers), other educators, high school students, and community members through emails, virtual listening sessions, classroom visits and in-depth one-on-one interviews; and
- Conducted a thorough analysis to inform the recommendations that follow.

Stakeholder visions for meaningful social studies education

Our meetings with stakeholders were grounded in an open discussion of their experiences, reflections, and hopes for social studies education. This memo begins with an intentional centering of the visions, hopes, and dreams EE's stakeholders hold for a better future and the role they believe social studies could play.

We asked: How might they know if students have had meaningful learning experiences in social studies?

The consistent response was that scholars would see their whole selves and their cultures in what they're learning. They would think critically around their role and duty to create a better world. These scholars would be highly engaged in the learning process, be able to apply a socio-historical understanding to everything they process, be able to articulate how power and systemic process work outside of a Eurocentric context, and even understand the Indigenous origins of democracy. Further, they would be able to better deal with multiple truths and complexities of the world. Finally, they would strengthen their sense of empathy.

One teacher shared a quote by James Baldwin to express their sentiment on the power a meaningful social studies education can hold:

The paradox of education is precisely this - that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which they are being educated.

Other responses included:

- Students would be educated holistically and learn the truth about the roots of US democracy.
- They would know how to contact a legislator and how to hold people accountable.
- Students would hold empathy of the human condition and the results of social and human interaction
- They would excitedly talk to their friends and family about what they learned.

We asked: What do you wish you had been taught in social studies?

Many reflected their experiences with Eurocentric and one-sided historical narratives. For example, one stakeholder shared that there are still teachers who teach about the Trail of Tears as if it were a choice. Others wished they could have learned more about Indigenous nations pre-European contact, and other forms of government outside of European nations. Some expressed concern that our nation has been misinformed about economics and capitalism. Some shared that they didn't learn that slavery was a foundational and integral part of building the prosperity of the US until they reached adulthood.

Other responses:

- The continent of Africa has democracies that have been interrupted by European powers.
- The democracy this country supposedly stands on has never truly been upheld.
- The joy in Black history, not just the history of trauma and oppression.

Initial stakeholder thoughts and reactions varied

Once stakeholders were grounded in their hopes and beliefs, we asked them to share their first reactions to the newly released draft of Minnesota's social studies standards. A number of stakeholders were pleased with the structural changes, especially the significantly reduced number of standards and content. Others were curious and had more questions around the shift in approach and what the new draft would offer Minnesota students. There was a high level of curiosity with the C3 framework and readiness statement, as well as concerns about MDE's authenticity and commitment to equity. We begin first with the stakeholder and EE commendations for the first draft; then discuss stakeholder concerns, followed by a brief equity analysis, and conclude with a list of recommendations for MDE and the standards committee.

Draft 1 strengths: Keeping it simple & trusting teachers

Kudos to the committee. EE and stakeholders both commend the Minnesota social studies standards committee and express gratitude for the positive strides made in their work on the first draft of the new Minnesota social studies academic standards. They are some of the state's most passionate student and education advocates. Under the traumatic conditions of a global pandemic, racial and civil unrest, and economic crisis, these individuals volunteered their time and expertise out of deep care for our state's learners and worked within an unequal and constraining process to deliver them the framework for a quality education.

Our stakeholders were especially excited about the effort to condense the standards and benchmarks. This reduction heeds the call of teachers whose most creative and effective work comes not from meticulous alignment to state-imposed standards, but from the trust and time to understand what their students need. We feel that fewer, less prescriptive standards allow for a depth of learning and demonstrates a deeper trust in teachers and students to direct education. Stakeholders commented that setting an unrealistic number of standards sends the false and damaging message to students and teachers that they are not achieving, and many realized their hopes that Draft 1 would have less content.

We recognize the committee’s commitment toward a liberatory education, made clear by their vote to incorporate Ethnic Studies and their shift toward a social justice approach. This approach was evident in the addition of the language of whiteness; the ideas of privilege and marginalization on a systemic level; and the beginnings of a critical look at capitalism, colonialism, and Christianity. More specifically, Standard 22 and its benchmarks inch closer to a liberatory study of history by uncovering the origins and tools of oppression and using history to imagine an “equitable and caring future”—complete with a call for students to take informed action as part of their learning. As one stakeholder expressed, students need a deep understanding of the nation’s history in order for any other conversations to be meaningful.

Some were also impressed by the shift from the language of the 2011 standards to the skill-based approach in Draft 1. Some noted with excitement that the standards now begin to equip all Minnesota learners with elements of the rite of passage known in the Black Community as “The Talk”: the highly nuanced and contextual learning many Black children receive outside of school around navigating racism and white supremacy.¹ This usage of an Ethnic Studies lens, as well as the committee’s decision to include Ethnic Studies in the standards, surprised and encouraged stakeholders; however, they were confused about the lack of the documentation about the decisions made in the first draft.

Despite positive gains, MDE released an incomplete first draft, a reflection of a problematic process

Stakeholders identified a number of thematic concerns and missed opportunities to release a stronger draft. First, it was noted that social studies wasn’t just about being college and career ready—it was about being ready for liberation, being a world citizen, and not about being a “good worker.” Other feedback included questions about MDE and committee procedures and how it might have impacted the first draft. Stakeholders were concerned by the absence of language fundamental to an equitable, diverse, and inclusive educational framework (for example, words like anti-Blackness, anti-racism, white supremacy, and intersectionality). A number of stakeholders, including those who attended the December MDE town hall meeting, were surprised to learn of the committee’s vote to add Ethnic Studies, and subsequently confounded by the absence of any Ethnic Studies language. Additionally, stakeholders saw the C3 statement as a missed opportunity for MDE to strongly articulate a “so what,” or a unified and moving vision for social studies education in Minnesota.

1 Whitaker, T. R., & Snell, C. L. (2016). Parenting while powerless: Consequences of “the talk”. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 26(3-4), 303-309.

The standard revision process has not been rooted in equity. The first question many asked was why the committee failed to address equity in the first draft, or even in the readiness statements, when equity should have been at the center of the work. Shortly after the release of the first draft, Education Evolving sent a memo to MDE leadership expressing concerns with the committee revision process and draft language. The memo called for MDE to reexamine how they take up ownership of their equity commitments as they move forward in the revision process, structure, and framework—and emphasizes the need for MDE to see that the revision process is just as important as the outcome.

The equity concerns surrounding the process included:

- Questioning the origin of the decision to delay issues of diversity and equity.
- The lack of evidence in the first draft of the committee’s decision to add Ethnic Studies as a fifth strand, as well as embed Ethnic Studies in the other standards, and the absence of a plan to begin developing the additional strand.
- The overuse of committee time developing a product that was supposed to provide meaningful data which has not yet provided useful or meaningful to the committee’s overall work.
- Criticism of MDE’s overly technical approach to an adaptive challenge.
- A challenge to MDE to see themselves as stakeholders in this revision process, and to examine how their positionality could have a higher impact in a different capacity.

See the full memo here: <https://www.educationevolving.org/files/blog/EE-memo-12-21-2020.pdf>.

Draft introduction & C3 readiness statement lacked soul. A number of stakeholders noted the C3 readiness statement’s lack of authentic and meaningful language and limited evidence of a stronger commitment to students. They were also concerned regarding the committee decision to delay attention to issues of diversity and equity. One social studies teacher noted that both the introduction and C3 readiness statement gave the impression that “MDE doesn’t have confidence in this product, and they were unwilling to place any bets nor make guarantees for the outcomes.” Another social studies teacher shared Massachusetts’ Social Studies Vision Statement,² and noted its simplicity and approach as opposed to the C3 Framework:

All Massachusetts students will be educated in the histories of the Commonwealth, the United States, and the world. They will be prepared to make informed civic choices and assume their responsibility for strengthening equality, justice, and liberty in and beyond the United States.

Examining democracy through the lens of whiteness ignores other methods of participation.

One teacher pointed out that the standards portray the ideal engaged citizen through the lens of whiteness. That is, as though the standard citizen is the white citizen with access to civic engagement such as free and fair voting. Another stakeholder noted that the “privileging” of citizenship could cause students who are not citizens to disengage. Stakeholders also found that the idea of democracy was written into the standards with a Eurocentric lens, excluding the democratic foundations and contributions of the Global South and Indigenous nations.

2 <https://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/hss/2018-12.pdf>

The portrait of law and government is also portrayed mostly through the lens of whiteness. While we acknowledge the significant improvements made in the citizenship and government strand, the current draft still does not fully acknowledge how laws and the notion of legality can be used as an institutionally oppressive tool. Civil disobedience is appropriately included as a method of civic engagement, but the reverence of rules (2.2.1; 3.2.1) lacks nuance and a critical lens. Stakeholders stated it seemed remiss to teach about government and laws without acknowledging the state's role in reinforcing institutional harms like the prison industrial complex, and the protection of capital at the expense of Black and Brown bodies.

The economics strand overly centers capitalism. Some teachers we interviewed were discouraged by how capitalist principles were centric to the economics standards, as if they were the only valid form of economics. The standards lack interrogation of how market-based “solutions” can create and perpetuate inequality, and they take for granted the capitalist idea of scarcity, obscuring patterns of wealth accumulation and hoarding. Staff at Education Evolving have concerns that the standards are also missing an examination/consideration of generational poverty and historically-looted communities. The language conceals the systems that contribute to widespread poverty by simplistically laying out strategies to gain financial security and reducing poverty to a condition resulting from an individual's lack of planning or decision-making.

Social Studies Academic Standards Equity Audit

In addition to gathering stakeholder feedback, Dr. Courtney Bell-Duncan, who is a licensed high school social studies teacher, an assistant principal, as well as a 2020 EE Equity Fellow, conducted an equity audit of the 22 social studies standards based on a critical curriculum checklist tool. Dr. Bell-Duncan found that of the 22 standards:

- 14 were successful in meeting some or all of the critical curriculum criteria.
- 8 failed to meet any of the critical curriculum criteria.

Dr. Bell-Duncan noted that the 14 passing standards were in the areas of history and human geography, and added that the passing standards did a great job of centering marginalized narratives, calling for student perspective, and calling for the examination of the status quo through qualitative analysis. She also noted that the government, economics, and physical geography strands focused heavily on quantitative and abstract skill development. It is especially evident in the 8 failed standards, which Dr. Bell-Duncan believed “promoted the maintenance of the status quo and did nothing to call it (status quo) into question.”

Lastly, Dr. Bell-Duncan recommended the inclusion of qualitative elements to the standards for economics, government, and physical geography, and adding student voice in writing the standards.

See the complete report which includes the list of equity questions, standards audit, and recommended strategies, here: <https://www.educationevolving.org/files/blog/EE-SS-Standards-Audit.pdf>.

Process recommendations for the next round of revisions

EE and its stakeholders were in wide agreement that the new set of standards point in the right direction and created a set of recommendations to support MDE and the committee's work. We first call on MDE to recenter and deepen their equity roots to create a solid second draft.

MDE must see themselves as important and participatory stakeholders. They could accomplish this by:

- Shifting the standards team away from a facilitative role and repositioning them (or selected MDE staff) into a participant/stakeholder role. This would provide MDE staff an opportunity to partner alongside the committee members and other stakeholders, and build a sense of shared power and duty.
- Assigning at least four culturally responsive master-level facilitators to guide the remainder of this process in support of the MDE standards team transition to stakeholder/participants.
- Leveraging MDE staff capacity to provide committee members with meaningful data, instead of using committee time.
- Considering extending the draft timeline to allow for capacity and time needed to include more community and student voices.

MDE must strengthen the meeting process and documentation to be more transparent, supportive and with oversight. They could accomplish this by:

- Addressing how MDE plans to adhere to their equity commitments throughout the revision, including the decision to establish Ethnic Studies as a fifth strand, the plans to address what happened to that work, and as well as embed Ethnic Studies in the other standards, and how the committee addressed the items that were voted on to delay.
- Releasing a clear and detailed explanation of Draft 2 with transparent and direct language, including how the committee specifically address the listed items that were voted on to delay.
- Allowing committee access to documentation which tracks committee decisions and votes, subcommittee member lists (i.e. writing teams).
- Setting consistent virtual meeting settings that allow group and individual communication between all committee members.
- Maintaining a continuous feedback loop for committee members to share how best to improve the review process, and make adjustments in response to feedback.
- Providing public access to recordings of all full committee meetings, including written chat comments.

Student voice must be central to the process. A stakeholder wisely pointed out that the students whose voices are most crucial to shaping standards are the very students who lack the luxury of volunteering their time. Sharing power with students means limiting “guiding assumptions” so that students have the freedom to create structures that make sense for their learning. One social studies teacher noted she would know students had meaningful experiences in social studies if they were engaged in the material, and conversely that if a student was not engaged, that student was not learning. To create content that students want to learn, MDE and the committee must center their voices in the process. They could accomplish this by:

- Creating a student-centered space to allow and support Minnesota learners to participate in the revision process.
- Establishing a paid advisory council made up of students of diverse backgrounds from across Minnesota, providing them access to all committee documents, and trusting them with the resources to authentically contribute to Drafts 2 and 3.

MDE must improve the feedback process. The evaluative survey was not accessible or meaningful to students or the broader community. At its core, this work is about serving students. Their feedback is essential. It is equally critical that MDE uplift the knowledge and skills that matter to everyday communities. They could accomplish this by:

- Reaching out to the students with the greatest barriers to engaging with this process.
- Implementing a public plan for gathering student feedback outside of the paid advisory council, with a targeted outreach to Minnesota students.
- Writing a detailed and clear explanation of how the first draft informed the second draft, including documentation of committee procedure and decisions.
- Revamping the town hall process in a way that demonstrates trust and confidence in the community’s understanding of the standards, and cultivates an effective space for community discussion.
- Creating an evaluative survey that is meaningful and accessible to the general public.

Recommended survey questions:

- How do you see yourself represented, if at all, in the standards and the revision process?
- Are there important people, events, and narratives missing from the standards and their benchmarks? What are those missing pieces?
- Do the standards, benchmarks, and revision process fairly represent ideologies that are outside the dominant culture?
- Do the standards, benchmarks, and revision process appear to tolerate various forms of oppression?
- Where should the committee focus its efforts in the next draft?
- Did you feel it was easy to meaningfully contribute to the standards revision process? Why or why not? What barriers, if any, were there to your ability to engage in the process?

Draft recommendations for the next round of revisions

If there was a time to make a statement about and stand for equity, justice, and liberation, the time is now. This esteemed committee has an opportunity to create and scaffold the way in which Minnesota learners become acquainted with the world for the next ten years. This is a chance to put our commitment to learners and our values into action. We encourage the committee to continue fearlessly confronting any real or perceived limitations with their compass due north and continually check in with themselves to ask: “Am I creating the kind of learning experience our scholars deserve? Am I striving to ensure that my work is centered in equity and supportive of a transformational shift in the way Minnesota students learn social studies?”

We believe in the committee's power to affect this change and have devised the following list of recommendations to support MDE and the committee in strengthening the next draft:

1. Reimagine the Career, College, and Civic Life Readiness Statement to convey the committee's strong stance against white supremacy and supports a decolonized education and state a broadened, collective, and liberatory vision for social studies education in Minnesota.
2. Include the voices, perspectives, and histories of the following high population of foreign-born first, second, and third-and-higher generation immigrant groups and communities in Minnesota which were missing from Draft 1: LGBTQ+; Hmong³, Karen, Somali⁴, Vietnamese, Laotian, Liberian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Indian, Mexican, Chinese, and other ethnic communities in Minnesota, i.e. the Jewish community. This can be accomplished in a standard or in benchmarks.
3. Incorporate knowledge from the Holocaust and the Holodomor.
4. Include the history and voices of people with disabilities and the LGBTQ+ community. This can be accomplished in a standard or in benchmarks.
5. Add Sikhism to the list of religions.
6. Include voices and perspectives from the labor movement, especially within the history and economics strands.
7. Include the language and framework of intersectionality throughout studies of privilege and oppression.
8. Continue to thoroughly implement the study of race theory across grade levels, beginning in Kindergarten, and add language such as anti-Blackness, anti-racism, and white supremacy. Bravely push back against any evasive language that maintains white comfort.
9. Decenter capitalism in the economics strand and push back against simplistic myths of poverty embedded in the standards and benchmarks. Include ideas such as interdependence, abundance, reciprocity, and mutual aid.⁵
10. Diversify the study of civic engagement with the practices of communities without historical or contemporary access to voting, citizenship, and other privileges.
11. Continue to deepen the building of critical analysis skills throughout all strands. For example, students should learn to critique policies (in the classroom, workplace, and at the state or national level) for who and what they might protect or harm.
12. Further condense the standards and benchmarks where possible and appropriate.
13. Honor the committee's vote to add Ethnic Studies as a fifth strand and embed an Ethnic Studies lens throughout the other strands.

3 Minnesota has the largest Hmong diaspora in the United States. See <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1999-12-27-9912270079-story.html>.

4 Minnesota has the largest Somali diaspora in the world. See <https://www.mnopedia.org/immigrants-and-refugees-minnesota-connecting-past-and-present>.

5 Our gratitude goes to Nicolás Díaz de León and Adele Welch for brilliantly reimagining the economics strand.