

From History to Headlines: 4 Ways To Make Social Studies Relevant



Social studies is having a moment. How can your district harness the momentum to **drive student outcomes**?

According to the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results, more students today score at the [lowest levels on civics](#) and [U.S. history](#) tests. When it comes to history, students are turning out the lowest performance scores in decades; civics scores declined for the first time since the NAEP began covering the subject in 1998. The data is interesting, considering social studies topics—like politics, policy, and social justice—are increasingly prevalent in discussions at dinner tables, school board meetings, and local and national media.

In 2022, the **average U.S. history score at eighth grade decreased by 5 points** compared to 2018 and by **9 points** compared to 2014.

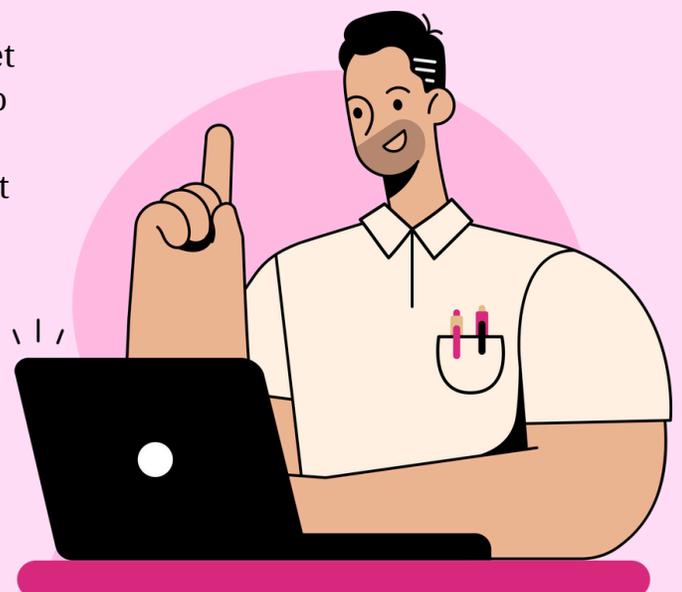
From its prevalence in everyday conversations alone, we know social studies is foundational to the skills students need for college, career, and civic life. Beyond that, it also [supports student literacy outcomes](#).

Yet, according to the data, we're missing the mark. Why aren't students building the skills and knowledge they need? Challenges with resources, competing classroom minutes, and student engagement all play a role, making it easier to deprioritize social studies and focus on tested content areas that lead to more tangible outcomes.

But despite these obstacles, we must do better to ensure students have the background knowledge and skills they need to be successful in social studies, other subjects, and life beyond the classroom.

The question is, where do we begin? We have to get our peers, teachers, parents, and students to buy into what we know is true: Social studies is just as important as other subjects like ELA and math, and it can contribute to student success at all grade levels.

Gaining buy-in starts with stressing how relevant social studies topics and skills are to our daily lives. We've identified four ways to help educators in your school or district ensure that social studies minutes are relevant and serve the strategies you have in place to drive student outcomes in every subject.



Show your district why social studies matters.



1: Make it local:

Weave in content, themes, historical figures, and other information relevant to your state, school, and students.



2: Promote engagement through student-led exploration:

Help spark curiosity through student-centered inquiry and real-world connections.



3: Ensure learning reflects, resonates with, and supports all students:

Provide content and resources that are diverse, culturally responsive, and accessible.



4: Focus on cross-curricular connections:

Emphasize how sharing knowledge and skills across subjects helps students perform better across the curriculum.

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As a society, we've acknowledged that social studies is about the human experience and the human-made world. There's nothing that our [students] want to learn more about than the world around them and what their role is within it.

Dr. Lawrence Paska,
Fmr. Executive Director at the National
Council for the Social Studies



1. Make social studies **local**

Focusing on local history, policies, needs, and civic initiatives can be a great entry point for student engagement. Helping students bridge their individual experiences and knowledge about their community to broader social studies topics is a crucial step in supporting learning. Building curriculum and finding materials that support students in making these micro-to-macro (and vice versa!) connections is challenging. Growing state-specific mandates that require coverage of local communities and history are helping prioritize some of these connection-building efforts. But these mandates and localized needs don't always align with the reality of classroom materials available to social studies teachers.

Without content that engages students in drawing connections to the present, meets state standards, and situates history within local and regional events, social studies lessons can feel irrelevant. Incorporating high-quality instructional materials that contextualize local history in the broader events covered in core social studies curriculum helps students draw past-to-present connections, making the subject more engaging and reinforcing learning.

How can districts make social studies locally relevant?

Include primary and secondary sources that add local color:

Students should be able to practice analyzing a variety of sources to help them piece together an understanding of their community through historical and current events as well as multiple perspectives. Incorporate content from local archives (newspapers, museum resources, etc.) to help students practice key social studies skills.

Create opportunities for past-to-present and micro-to-macro connections:

Bring social studies into reality with content and activities that help students understand the role past events have shaped their lives today. This can stretch beyond written and video sources to experiences at local museums, community events, and local guest speakers.

Align content to state-specific standards:

Map links from your social studies resources to your district or school's pacing guides during PLCs or summer planning, helping teachers more easily find the content they need to cover.

Newsela Social Studies Spotlight

Newsela Social Studies aligns to state standards and national frameworks. The product also offers [curriculum complements](#) for popular social studies providers and nearly 600 primary sources to help teachers add variety to the materials they're already using.





2. Promote engagement through student-led exploration

Research shows that a focus on inquiry in social studies is [more effective at driving engagement and learning](#) than other more expository approaches because it puts students at the helm. It's a way to empower students to be curious about the world, learn how to draw connections, and practice crucial social studies skills in an authentic way. For inquiry-based instruction to work, however, students and teachers need adequate support.

Not all teachers feel confident developing compelling questions and facilitating class exploration. Also, it's often [difficult or time-consuming to compile rigorous resources and curate engaging activities](#) for students as they delve into their compelling questions.

Yet, an inquiry-based approach to teaching provides students space to examine and evaluate real-world issues, ask hard questions, and still learn what's required by the standards. Paired with instructional content that's flexible enough to capture the nuance of history, teachers can help students to examine history and current events through multiple perspectives.

What does effective student-centered inquiry look like in the social studies classroom?

Accessible to teachers:

Ensure teachers are confident in building compelling questions and facilitating student-led discussions with focused resources that help structure and guide student exploration. Encourage teachers and coaches to share their favorite compelling questions and lesson plans at department or PLC meetings.

Supported by professional learning opportunities:

Professional development in inquiry-based and student-led learning can help lay the foundation teachers need to confidently build engaging lessons. Keep an eye out for newsletters and invites from edtech vendors and partners, who often host free professional development opportunities and share lesson ideas.

Woven into day-to-day instruction:

Engage students with compelling questions at the beginning, middle, or end of any lesson to spark curiosity, challenge perspectives, and foster deeper learning through student-led discussion.

Newsela Social Studies Spotlight

[Newsela Social Studies](#) gives teachers the content and implementation guidance they need to facilitate meaningful inquiry in their classrooms. Embedded lesson sparks questions help teachers facilitate multi-lesson deep dives into compelling questions while enabling every student to ask questions and draw their own conclusions.





3. Ensure learning reflects, resonates with, and supports **all students**

Both reading and learning rely on making connections to background knowledge as well as building text-to-world, text-to-text, and text-to-self connections. In order for learning to truly stick, social studies resources should both build on students' lived experiences and introduce them to new ideas and information.

Yet core programs often lack diverse, relevant materials that provide a variety of perspectives on topics and concepts. They fail to represent all students, which makes it harder to increase engagement and motivation to learn.

Social studies materials also often lack the flexibility and supports to make content accessible to all students, regardless of ability or reading proficiency. This gap can further isolate students who may already risk falling behind and puts more burden on teachers to create their own scaffolds or alternative resources.

Students of all levels, abilities, and backgrounds should be able to dive into relevant texts and media that reflect their experiences and expose them to other perspectives. Students seeing themselves and their communities represented as part of history makes social studies more relevant to their own lived experiences, deepens engagement, and ultimately fosters more meaningful learning.

How can social studies curriculum represent and support all students?

Include diverse perspectives:

Providing teachers with diverse, high-quality instructional content that includes a variety of perspectives not only helps students learn how to examine events from multiple sources, but makes learning more engaging by providing students with opportunities to see themselves in what they're learning.

Offer a variety of content types and sources:

Helping students learn how to assess information from multiple resource formats and perspectives ensures they're building the necessary skills to be successful in social studies and civic life beyond the classroom.

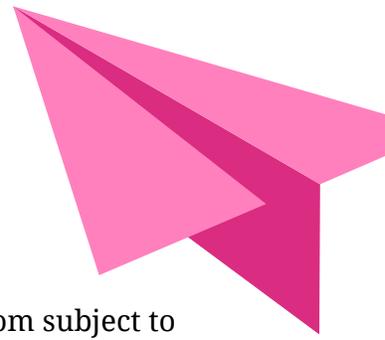
Make content accessible:

Providing flexible, dynamic materials that address a variety of accessibility needs also helps ensure that all students are supported in their learning.

Newsela Social Studies Spotlight

Choose from thousands of informational texts, primary sources, videos, maps, and infographics from [over 175 trusted publishers](#). The collections build background knowledge and incorporate diverse perspectives, including voices that have historically been left out. Share texts at five reading levels—and many in Spanish—and offer a range of accessibility features to support whole-class differentiation.





4. Focus on **cross-curricular** connections

More often than not, lesson topics are taught in silos; they don't always connect from subject to subject. Connecting the dots between lessons, across subjects, and throughout the year can be a challenge for both educators and students. It requires planning, collaboration, resources, and engagement. Building background knowledge is a crucial component of making those cross-curricular connections for students to make learning stick.

Driving connections across subject areas can help students see the value in learning social studies concepts and skills. Building bridges between their social studies lessons and other areas of study not only supports deeper learning on specific topics, but helps drive reading comprehension and literacy growth.

How can you create district-wide support for cross-curricular learning?

Share lesson plans and priority skills across departments:

Use PLCs to identify and plan for cross-curricular connections based on the district's curriculum roadmap. Dedicating time for collaboration and planning before and during units can help teachers identify opportunities to connect social studies lessons to other subjects and skills students are covering.

Assess your core materials for scope and sequence connections across subjects:

Identifying opportunities to teach units that align thematically across departments makes lessons more relevant and engaging for students. Help teachers bridge the knowledge gaps students may have by using supplemental materials to build background knowledge and reinforce connections to what they're learning.

Prioritize media literacy as a shared goal across subjects:

With the increase of misinformation and ever-evolving technology, students need guidance on how to validate information and media sources. Teachers across departments can collaborate to prepare students with the critical thinking skills needed to sift through the noise.

Use writing to practice literacy skills in context:

Social studies is a perfect subject to help students practice argumentative, evidence-based opinion, nonfiction essay, and research writing to solidify their social studies knowledge. Writing also allows students to practice literacy skills—like summarizing, making text connections, or using a main idea and key details—while building the background knowledge necessary to be successful across subjects.

Newsela Social Studies Spotlight

Students can practice valuable skills through various embedded learning activities such as quizzes, writing prompts, and checks for understanding. Students can use annotations to practice skills like identifying the main idea and key details. The Newsela Writing add-on tool also helps teachers create a district-wide, cross-curricular writing strategy.



Prioritize relevance to foster deeper learning and drive social studies outcomes for students.

Newsela Social Studies inspires students with diverse content that connects history with current events, drives cross-curricular learning, supports local needs, and promotes scaffolded, inquiry-based learning—all in one place.

Ready to drive meaningful student outcomes in your district?
[Get in touch with our team today!](#)

Newsela Social Studies is research-backed! Students who used Newsela Social Studies weekly showed the equivalent of an additional year of instruction on their state social studies exam.

