

Consistent Newsela Social Studies use linked to nearly one additional year of growth in Middle School Social Studies

A quasi-experimental evaluation of text-rich instruction





Executive summary

- This study compared the social studies achievement of middle school students with weekly Newsela Social Studies use to those with no Newsela use.
- **Eighth grade students who used Newsela Social Studies 1-2 times per week showed the equivalent of nearly an additional year of social studies achievement, or double the expected outcomes, when compared to control students.**
- Use of Newsela Social Studies allowed students to practice key comprehension skills applicable to both ELA and social studies.
- The positive impact of Newsela Social Studies use on social studies achievement was consistent regardless of student race, gender, and/or language status.
- This study meets ESSA criteria for Moderate/Tier II efficacy evidence.



Introduction

Social studies education is essential to help students develop into civically engaged citizens who can think critically and engage in complex discourse about the problems facing their communities. For example, after practicing public discussion of issues in their social studies class, students report a better ability to state their opinions as well as to understand the perspectives of others.¹ Other activities common in social studies classrooms, such as evaluating who produced a resource and engaging with primary sources, are linked to broader life skills such as critical thinking^{2,3} and the ability to decipher fake news⁴. Additionally, social studies education often helps students build general background knowledge, which has been shown to have positive impacts on broader academic achievement, reading comprehension, and literacy^{5,6,7}.

Despite its myriad benefits, social studies education in the United States has been relatively under-resourced. As a result, social

studies achievement in the United States has been declining for multiple years,⁸ with only 15% of students reaching proficiency in U.S History⁹ and 22% in civics in 2022.¹⁰ The nationwide decline in social studies achievement may reflect how social studies instruction is often neglected relative to “high-stakes” subjects.¹¹

While under specific pressure to improve scores in ELA and math, teachers have ended up spending less time on social studies instruction¹². Some report that many of the students pulled out of their classrooms for targeted reading, writing, and math interventions do so during the class’ allotted social studies time.¹³ In other words, students are spending less time engaging with social studies than other core subjects and their limited social studies time is being interrupted by intervention efforts.

Fortunately, many of the skills and baseline background knowledge needed to comprehend text in an ELA context are similar to those needed for success in social studies.¹⁴ For example, students in both classes need to be able to cite textual evidence when making claims about what they have just read. Core skills like this tend to fall under the umbrella of **reasoning**, which refers to a student’s ability to understand, interpret, and analyze concepts and ideas expressed through language.¹⁵ Skills related to reasoning must be developed alongside content knowledge, or the discipline-specific facts and information students learn and recall on demand (e.g., the date of the signing of the Declaration of Independence).

The idea that both ELA and social studies tap into overlapping reasoning and comprehension skills is supported by research. For example, one study

found that when social studies teachers spend more time reading text and supporting reading comprehension, their students end up learning more social studies content.¹⁶ Social studies teachers support reading comprehension by helping their students recognize causal relationships between historical events, cite specific textual evidence while developing a claim, evaluate the veracity of a news article, and construct meaning across primary and secondary sources. The relationship between ELA and social studies also appears to be bidirectional; spending more time on social studies instruction has been shown to promote growth in reading.¹⁷ Overall, focusing on reading comprehension and reasoning skills seems to be an effective way to support student achievement in the social studies classroom.



The purpose of the current study is to investigate whether consistent use of Newsela Social Studies would impact student social studies achievement. Newsela Social Studies is a knowledge and skill building platform with over 15,000 texts spanning more than 20 genres, including current events, primary sources, reference materials, speeches, opinions, interviews, biographies, court opinions, and narrative nonfiction, with each informational text available at five different instructional levels. Content on Newsela Social Studies is paired with formative assessment opportunities, including standards-aligned multiple-choice quizzes and customizable writing prompts. Texts and curations include teaching suggestions for bringing the content to life in lessons, like before-reading activities, recommended instructional pathways, and pacing guides. Teachers can access student performance data in a teacher-facing dashboard and use that data to inform future instruction. With its wide variety of texts, instructional content, and assessments, the Newsela platform provides teachers and students with opportunities to reinforce key comprehension skills that apply to both ELA and social studies.

This study meets the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) standards for “Moderate - Tier II” research. ESSA is America’s primary education law. It provides a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of educational programs. Tier II research evaluations are well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental studies that compare a treatment group using a target program (in this case, Newsela Social Studies) to a comparable/matched comparison group.

This study addressed the following:

- **Hypothesis: Social studies achievement will be higher for students who use Newsela Social Studies.**
- **Question: What aspects of instruction using Newsela Social Studies best support social studies achievement?**

Method

Sample

For this study, Newsela partnered with Racine Unified School District, a large (approximately 15,000 K-12 students) school district located in urban Wisconsin. The median household income for this district was approximately \$60k, which is slightly below average for the state.

A total of 264 eighth-grade students from eight different school sites were included in this study: 132 regular Newsela users and 132 control subjects. The **average student in this group used Newsela approximately once or twice a week**,¹⁸ while the minimum threshold of usage to be classified as **regular Newsela users** was at least monthly.¹⁹ Students in the control group did not use Newsela at all over the course of the school year. The groups were matched²⁰ on gender, race, ELL status, disability status, and ELA achievement (see Table 1). None of the differences between groups on these measures were statistically significant.

The social studies teachers of the students in the Regular Newsela Usage group were contacted to provide a broader understanding of their curriculum, pedagogical approaches, and use of Newsela.

Demographic Group	No Newsela Usage	Newsela Usage
% Female	44%	47%
% White	51%	53%
% Black	14%	14%
% Hispanic	23%	20%
% Other	12%	13%
English Language Learners (ELL)	14%	12%
Students with Disabilities	7%	5%
ELA Summative Percentile	37	35

Table 1: Usage Group Demographics

Social Studies Curriculum

Teachers at the school district used HMH Social Studies²¹ as their core curriculum. Newsela Social Studies was available as a supplemental resource for teachers to use at their discretion. At this district, 8th grade social studies covered the first half of American history, ranging from the exploration of the Americas through Reconstruction.²²

Achievement Measure

Social studies achievement was measured using the Wisconsin Forward Exam,²³ which is administered each spring. While the assessment is not timed, most students complete the social studies portion within 70 minutes. The social studies Forward Exam includes questions aligned to the Wisconsin Standards for Social Studies from five different disciplines (behavioral sciences, economics, geography, history, and political science). The exam emphasizes students' reasoning and comprehension skills over specific content knowledge. For example, questions might include a historical summary, primary source excerpt, or a quote, from which students are asked to extract key details.²⁴ Forward Exam results are reported as standardized scaled scores²⁵ as well as norm-referenced percentiles. See below for an example question.²⁶

Read the excerpt from the Gettysburg Address.

It is rather for us, the living, we here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that, from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here, gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that the nation, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people[,] by the people[,] for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

—President Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863

How did President Lincoln's point of view affect his writing?

- A. As president of the United States, he sought to negotiate a peace proposal.
- B. As general of the victorious army, he sought new recruits to replace the men lost in the battle.
- C. As commander in chief of the victorious army, he sought to inspire the living and honor the dead.
- D. As president of the United States, he sought to encourage lawmakers to provide more supplies for troops.

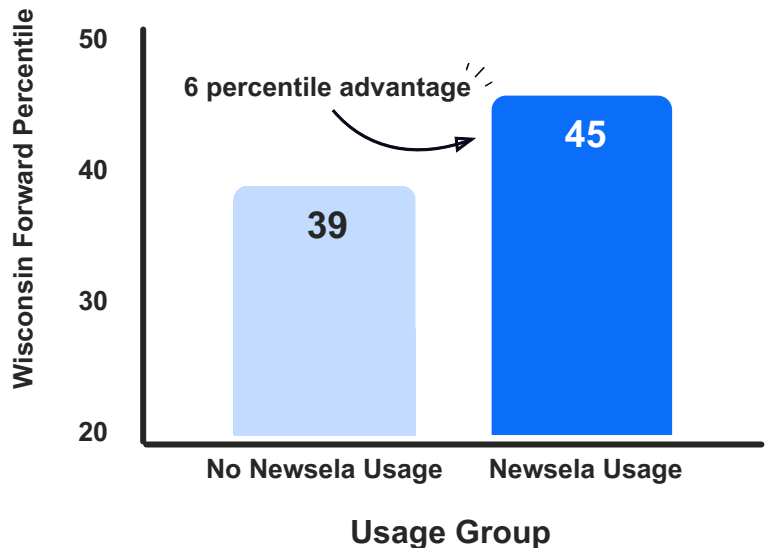
Results

Social Studies Achievement

Eighth-grade students who used Newsela at least monthly over the course of an entire school year outperformed peers not using Newsela by 6 percentiles on the Forward Social Studies exam, a statistically-significant difference.²⁷

A report published by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) found that one year's worth of social studies education was equivalent to 0.25 standard deviations of achievement for eighth

Regular use of Newsela linked to 6 percentile advantage on Wisconsin Forward Social Studies Summative



graders.²⁸ In other words, we assume that the achievement seen in the No Newsela Usage group, who received business-as-usual social studies instruction, is equivalent to 0.25 standard deviation. In this study, using Newsela on a regular basis led to a 0.23 standard deviation gain over and above the regular social studies instruction. This means that using the IES guidelines, consistent Newsela usage had an effect **equivalent to nearly an additional year of instruction**. Put differently, Newsela users saw double the expected social studies achievement over the course of the school year.

The positive effect of Newsela usage on social studies outcomes was robust across demographic subgroups. **Regardless of race, gender, and/or language status, students who used Newsela consistently showed higher social studies scores than those who did not use the platform.**²⁹

Newsela Social Studies Implementation

The results above indicate a strong effect of Newsela usage on social studies outcomes. While Newsela’s pre-created lessons were occasionally used by teachers, the platform was most often used as a supplemental resource for existing lesson plans. These lessons often included the use of instructional activities provided by Newsela. Table 2 summarizes how often students in the Newsela Usage group tended to complete reading comprehension quizzes and writing prompts.

As one teacher put it, “I like the fact that the quiz is on one side. [...] So [I’m] teaching the kids the skill of going back to, actually finding the answer instead of just trying to remember it.” This skill is necessary for the Forward Exam, where kids are asked comprehension questions about unfamiliar social studies texts. Teachers also described reviewing student performance on Newsela quizzes and writing prompts to identify struggling students for small group or individual instruction.



Conclusion

The results of this study show a positive impact of Newsela Social Studies on social studies standardized test scores in middle school. The wide variety of content available on Newsela Social Studies allows teachers considerable choice when selecting supplemental, engaging materials for their classroom. Each text's reading comprehension quiz and writing prompts give students essential practice with literacy skills needed across all subject areas, including social studies. In addition, teachers are able to use students' scores on quizzes and writing responses to monitor student achievement and understanding. Likely as a result of this focus on comprehending text, eighth-grade students who used Newsela Social Studies regularly show the equivalent of almost an additional year's worth of achievement when compared to peers not using Newsela Social Studies.

Student Activity	Average % of texts viewed with completed activity
Reading Comprehension Quiz	47%
Writing Prompt	53%

Table 2: Average Student Activity Completion Rates

While the results of this study are encouraging, it would certainly benefit from replication in a larger and more diverse sample (e.g., including students from more grades, schools, and districts). Additionally, tests of Newsela Social Studies' efficacy would be stronger if students were randomly assigned to usage conditions rather than identified after the fact.

With an ever-present instructional time famine limiting instructional time for subjects like Social Studies³⁰ and continued focus on core subjects like ELA and math, teachers are under more and more pressure to promote reading comprehension during social studies instruction. Helpfully, some literacy skills, such as determining what a text says explicitly, making inferences, and citing textual evidence, support student achievement in both subjects. Newsela's vast content library, including formative assessments and expert-created lessons, can help teachers more easily and seamlessly do more with their already limited time.

Resources

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- 2 Seixas, Peter. "Assessment of Historical Thinking." *In New Possibilities for the Past: Shaping History Education in Canada*, edited by Penney Clark, 139-53. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011.
- 3 VanSledright, B. A. (2010). *The challenge of rethinking history education: On practices, theories, and policy*. Routledge.
- 4 McGrew, S., Breakstone, J., Ortega, T., Smith, M., & Wineburg, S. (2018). Can students evaluate online sources? Learning from assessments of civic online reasoning. *Theory & research in social education*, 46(2), 165-193.
- 5 Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Lapp, D. (2012). Building and activating students' background knowledge: It's what they already know that counts. *Middle School Journal*, 43(3), 22-31.
- 6 Levstik, L. S. (2011). Learning history. *Handbook of research on learning and instruction*, 108-126.
- 7 Tyner, A., & Kabourek, S. (2021). How social studies improves elementary literacy. *Social Education*, 85(1), 32-39.
- 8 [NAEP Geography, 2018](#)
- 9 [NAEP US History, 2022](#)
- 10 [NAEP Civics, 2022](#)
- 11 Fitchett, P. G., & Heafner, T. L. (2010). A national perspective on the effects of high-stakes testing and standardization on elementary social studies marginalization. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 38(1), 114-130.
- 12 Husband, T., & Hunt, C. (2015). A review of the empirical literature on No Child Left Behind from 2001 to 2010. *Planning and Changing*, 46(1/2), 212.
- 13 Rock, Tracy C., Tina Heafner, Katherine O'Connor, Jeff Passe, Sandra Oldendorf, Amy Good, and Sandra Byrd. "One state closer to a national crisis: A report on elementary social studies education in North Carolina schools." *Theory & Research in Social Education* 34, no. 4 (2006): 455-483.
- 14 Swan, K., Barton, K. C., Buckles, S., Burke, F., Charkins, J., Grant, S. G., ... & Wiesner-Hanks, M. (2013). The college, career, and civic life [\(C3\) framework](#) for social studies state standards: Guidance for enhancing the rigor of K-12 civics, economics, geography, and history.
- 15 Goldman, S. R., Britt, M. A., Brown, W., Cribb, G., George, M., Greenleaf, C., ... & Project READi. (2016). Disciplinary literacies and learning to read for understanding: A conceptual framework for disciplinary literacy. *Educational Psychologist*, 51(2), 219-246.
- 16 Wanzek, J., Martinez, L., Fall, A. M., Roberts, G., Stillman, S., & Kent, S. C. (2018). Text reading supports in social studies content instruction and their relationship to student knowledge acquisition. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 34(4), 349-360.
- 17 Tyner, A., & Kabourek, S. (2020). Social Studies Instruction and Reading Comprehension: Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. *Thomas B. Fordham Institute*.
- 18 Students used the platform on a median of 55 unique days, or approximately 30% of a 180 day school year. Distributed over a median of 30 unique weeks, students used Newsela 1.83 times a week on average, or between once and twice a week.
- 19 This was defined as at least 9 distinct months over a 10 month school year.
- 20 We conducted propensity score matching using a generalized linear model and nearest neighbor matching. Covariates included student gender, race, disability status, English Language Learner status, and ELA achievement, as measured by Forward Exam ELA scores. After matching, all standardized mean differences were less than 0.1, indicating adequate balance.
- 21 [HMH Social Studies Curriculum \(6-12\)](#)
- 22 The 6th grade curriculum centered around the Western hemisphere (North America, South America, and Europe), while the 7th grade curriculum focused on the Eastern hemisphere (Asia, Africa, Australia, and Antarctica).
- 23 [Wisconsin Forward Assessment](#). ELA achievement was also measured using the Forward Exam to match groups on reading achievement.
- 24 The ELA portion of the exam takes the average student about two hours to complete. It consists of four parts: text-dependent writing prompt, writing/language, listening, and reading.
- 25 Social Studies range for 8th grade: 540-860

26 Sample question taken from the Social Studies Grade 8 practice test located at

<https://dpi.wi.gov/assessment/forward/sample-items>

27 The intraclass correlation (ICC) for an unconditional multilevel model including random intercepts for school was 0.12, suggesting that there was not sufficient clustering at the school level to justify a multilevel approach. A more parsimonious linear model was fit which controlled for ELA achievement, gender, language status, disability status, and race. The effect of Newsela usage group was statistically significant over and above these factors ($b = 4.55$, $t(255) = 2.3$, $p = 0.02$).

28 Lipsey, M.W., Puzio, K., Yun, C., Hebert, M.A., Steinka-Fry, K., Cole, M.W., Roberts, M., Anthony, K.S., Busick, M.D. (2012). Translating the Statistical Representation of the Effects of Education Interventions into More Readily Interpretable Forms. (NCSE 2013-3000). Washington, DC: National Center for Special Education Research, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. This report is available on the IES website at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncser/>.

29 Adding interactions between demographic variables and Newsela usage group did not improve the model predicting social studies achievement, $\chi^2(6, N = 264) = 6.1$, $p = 0.41$.

30 Merle, J. L., Larson, M. F., Cook, C. R., Brewer, S. K., Hamlin, C., Duong, M., ... & Lyon, A. R. (2022). A mixed-method study examining solutions to common barriers to teachers' adoption of evidence-based classroom practices. *Psychology in the Schools*, 59(9), 1825-1843.