

October 2019

Social studies is changing. Why are your instructional materials staying the same?

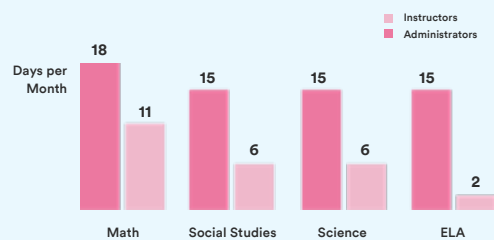
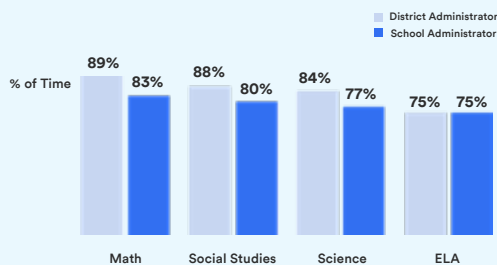
Social studies education is changing rapidly. Classes continue getting larger with more learners of different levels. Urban, suburban, and rural classrooms must represent a diverse and constantly evolving nation. And now, new frameworks and standards seek to represent these shifting currents, calling for new ways of approaching social studies instruction that break from traditional monolithic, chronological narratives.

At the same time, the climate has been tough for social studies educators - between 1993 and 2008, instructional minutes spent on social studies declined by nearly an hour per week, and at some elementary schools, students now

receive only 20 minutes of social studies per week. With educators under pressure to produce high test scores in other subjects, it can be challenging to allot the proper time and resources for social studies.

But with new frameworks and state mandates paving the way for social studies as an essential discipline, reimagined with inquiry, inclusion, and civic-mindedness at its core, cutting down on social studies minutes and resources is not an option. Standards and legislation are demanding more. Districts leaders are expecting more. The onus is falling on teachers to do more. So why aren't we asking more of our instructional materials?

Question: Do you currently use a textbook as a core content for each of the following grade levels and subjects?



Q (Instructors): How frequently do you use the core textbook that has been purchased for the primary subject you teach?

Q (Administrators): How often do you believe instructors and students use these textbooks for each of the following grade levels and subjects?

Source: EY-Parthenon K-12 Classroom Content Platform Usage Survey N=741

Current instructional materials aren't cutting it for teachers.

At its best, social studies emphasizes critical inquiry, perspective-taking, and understanding the consequences of social interactions on a personal and community level. But currently, instructional content isn't representative, dynamic, or aligned enough to drive meaningful outcomes in schools.

A survey of educators tells us that teachers believe current instructional materials aren't able to support such outcomes: teachers report using their social studies textbooks a mere 6 days each month, compared to the 15 days per month that administrators believe teachers are using their social studies textbooks.

Ashley Goldstein, the 6th-12th Humanities Curriculum Supervisor at Stoughton Public Schools recently underwent the process of a curriculum redesign, and explained some of the gaps they discovered in their instruction. "A lot of our materials really focused on the past, but lacked that bridge to present day, and lacked

THE CURRICULUM



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that bridge to what really is necessary to get our students to feel like they can see themselves in a resource.”

Such resources are especially meaningful in the context of social studies; when students discover these skills via a high-interest topic, they find them engaging and memorable. As their

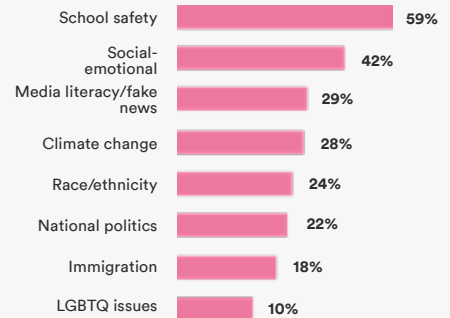
worlds expand, school-age children may begin to encounter problems like racism and gender inequality for the first time. Social studies can give them a framework to understand these experiences, especially through diversity-driven curriculum and content that supports it.

Still, social studies educators are leading the charge on teaching complex topics.

New standards, by design, are driving social studies instruction to be increasingly interdisciplinary, inclusive, and civic-minded. Moreover, many states are passing legislation that require teaching complex topics, such as race and ethnicity, gender equality, and other diversity-driven content. All of these changes have created a chasm in social studies curriculum: outdated content lacks cultural responsiveness and a diversity of perspectives, ultimately driving a need for resources that support these instructional approaches.

A recent survey confirmed that social studies teachers, more so than other content area teachers, are invested in teaching complex topics.

Teachers in my district/school are well prepared to teach about the following topics:



Source: Education Week Research Center-Newsela Complex Topics

Yet, in the same survey, both administrators and teachers, acknowledged that teachers are not well prepared to teach the same topics, especially when it came to the resources and professional learning available to them.

Given recent shifts, social studies is now more essential than ever to help students thrive in a shrinking world. Global citizens need to be independent critical thinkers who are well-versed in diverse perspectives. And because such perspectives are hardly static, the best instructional content should prove flexible enough to capture the nuance of every story. It should go beyond the page and provide narratives that are representative of students’ lived experiences, complexity notwithstanding, and seed jumping-off points for appropriate informed action. The data shows that social studies educators are leading the charge in addressing complex topics - now, instructional content needs to catch up.

COMPLEX TOPICS

Teachers don’t have the resources to teach complex topics.

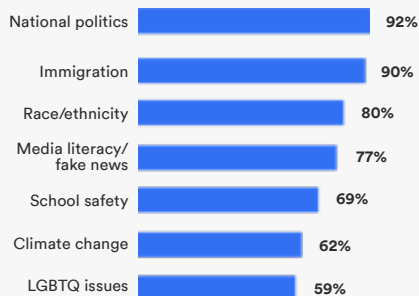
92%

of history and social studies teachers have taught national politics in the classroom.

22%

acknowledge that the teachers are not prepared to teach national politics.

Percent of high school history/ social studies teachers who have taught topic in the past year



Source: Education Week Research Center-Newsela Complex Topics

Future-proof education is contingent on stellar social studies instruction.

Social studies includes a body of knowledge and critical thinking skills that students won't get anywhere else. Depriving them of this has been shown to hurt literacy levels—a troubling outcome given that districts with “failing schools” have cut more social studies time than districts that are meeting benchmarks. All children deserve access to a curriculum with so many benefits for social development, citizenship, and interdisciplinary academic excellence.

“Ultimately, we can't prepare children for living in a rich, diverse democracy if we don't expose them to the controversial topics inherent in our democracy.”



“Without social studies, we lose the civic mission of public schools,” said Stephanie Serriere, an associate professor of social studies education quoted in a Hechinger Report analysis of the subject's importance. “Ultimately, we can't prepare children for living in a rich, diverse democracy if we don't expose them to the controversial topics inherent in our democracy.” And increasingly, such topics are non-negotiable - educators know the importance of addressing them, whether it's to meet a mandate, or more importantly, to teach students critical thinking skills, or prepare them to participate in a democratic society.

Educators invested in social studies have created the momentum to center it in the classroom. New social studies standards and frameworks have distilled social studies to the exploration and analysis processes at its heart. Now, education leaders should expect more out of their instructional content: it must be authentic and representative of students, it must be active to stay relevant to what is happening in the world today, and it must be relevant to every learner, regardless of where they come from. By setting the bar higher for what 21st century content should look like, we can set students up for success in an ever-changing world.

