

Content Advisor Feedback on Social Studies Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills

INTRODUCTION

The social studies TEKS, when viewed from the K-12 perspective, are extremely broad in scope. As a result, understanding exactly what students are expected to know and do is a challenge. Social studies instruction is frequently not prioritized in Texas schools; the focus on math and reading combined with overarching standards in social studies have created a situation where teachers sometimes teach key standards in a superficial way. Because of the way the standards are written in the Texas Education Code, teachers frequently find other sources where the TEKS are reorganized and sorted around the ways that concepts are usually taught. Reworking the standards in two key ways – focusing on a narrow number of topics and improving the flow from year to year – will provide clarity for teachers and students. In measuring the amount of time most teachers have to teach the standards, 45 minutes each on 180 days of instruction equals 8100 minutes, or 135 hours of instruction. Recognizing that some time must be given for assessment and other activities, a conservative 90% gives teachers 121.5 hours of instruction. This reality should be acknowledged as the standards are rewritten with the goal of making it possible for teachers to teach all of them.

Question #1: Strand Framework

Using eight separate strands of the social studies TEKS framework creates redundancies. For example, most of the technology concepts could be included within economics or society and culture. There are two changes that would help address this. Currently, teachers are required to pull concepts from several different strands to create a unit understanding.

A. PEGS Structure

Use the structure of PEGS (political, economic, geographic, and social) as the guiding framework for courses that are not history-based. These four key themes would then provide four “lenses” through which to view social studies instruction, beginning in kindergarten.

B. Organization by Era

For the history-based courses (fourth grade, fifth grade, seventh grade Texas History, eighth grade US History, World History, and eleventh grade US History), organize the standards by era. Then, within each era, use the structure of PEGS. For example, the first era in eighth grade history would be “Exploration and Colonization,” with the political, economic, geographic, and social lenses used to identify key ideas within the era. By organizing the history courses this way, it is less likely that concepts will be missed. Additionally, the four lenses do not necessarily require equal weight within each era, and therefore an era structure would accommodate those differences.

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Question #2: Common Social Studies Themes

The common themes of social studies are perhaps addressed *too* well in the standards. There are several standards that are described broadly and therefore could be interpreted several different ways by teachers. For example, 6.15.B states “compare characteristics of institutions in various contemporary societies.” The teacher is required to identify which institutions should be included as well as which characteristics are common and should be compared. As a result, teachers could easily spend substantially too much or too little time on the topic.

Again, using PEGS (political, economic, geographic, and social) as the framework to address common social studies themes would improve the standards. Additionally, specific examples that must be taught should also be identified. Finally, these examples should flow from year to year to build students’ knowledge.

Question #3: Development Within Courses

Generally, the content of courses follows a complete and logical sequence. However, the way that most of the standards are written do not follow a logical sequence. In order to teach a unit, teachers must “hunt” across the standards to find all of the topics that must be addressed.

Eighth grade serves as an example. In teaching the unit on Andrew Jackson, teachers would pull standards from 8.5 (A – G), 8.6B, and 8.7A for history concepts, from 8.11A and 8.12A for economics, 8.17B for government, 8.21A for citizenship, 8.23 (A – E) for culture. The unit on Andrew Jackson is relatively short, and yet teachers are required to find student expectations from multiple places in the TEKS. Students would be better able to see connections between concepts by narrowing the framework to PEGS.

Question #4: Development Across Courses

The kindergarten through third grade standards build well upon each other. For example, the idea that rules are important in kindergarten (K.8.B) flows into the first grade standard about elected officials (1.11.B), the second grade standard about the functions of government (2.8A), and the third grade standards on the basic structure of government (3.7A) and elected officials (3.7B).

Beginning with the fourth grade standards, the flow from year to year is weak. Fourth and seventh grades both deal with Texas history. Fifth, eighth, and high school US history cover United States history. Sixth grade, world geography, and world history cover world studies. Government and economics are addressed throughout the standards, and then have their own course in high school. As a result, students frequently get the message “learn this now, but it doesn’t connect with what you learned last year.”

Using PEGS in the courses mentioned above as a simpler guiding framework would allow for better connections between the courses, even when the content varies. For example, greater clarity around economic concepts in Texas history would provide better alignment to economic

concepts in eighth grade US history. Strong teachers currently do this on their own, but the standards do not clearly specify connections.

One possible solution to alignment between courses would be a reordering and reprioritizing of subjects. An example of resequencing is as follows:

- kindergarten through third grade topics would remain mostly as they are,
- fourth and fifth grades would include United States history,
- sixth and seventh grades would include a combination of world geography and world history,
- eighth grade would include Texas history,
- ninth and tenth grade would include United States history
- eleventh grade would include world history
- twelfth grade would include government and economics

By aligning courses together, especially United States history, students would be better able to see connections between contents.

The social studies skills do align from course to course. However, because of the amount of content, time to focus on reading and writing in social studies is limited.

Question #5: Preparation for Future Courses

A. High school for post-secondary success

In terms of content, high school courses prepare students for post-secondary success. However, students need more exposure to and practice with the process skills – reading and writing in social studies courses – in order to be successful at the college level. Because of the amount of content that must be covered, it is difficult for teachers to spend sufficient time directly teaching students how to analyze sources, make arguments, and express their ideas in writing. These skills are highly valued in college social science courses, and are important for all students, regardless of their post-secondary plans.

B. Elementary and middle for high school success

At the elementary level, there is frequently a gap between the way the standards are written and the way they are taught. Elementary students heading into middle school frequently come missing major concepts because of the limited time spent on social studies instruction. In order to address this gap, a smaller number of important standards, along with key social studies skills, such as map reading, should be emphasized. With the broad nature of the TEKS, it is difficult for teachers to narrow their focus and to know exactly what to teach.

Additionally, the sequence of courses presents a readiness issue. For example, United States history is taught in fifth grade (colonization to the present), again in eighth grade (colonization through Reconstruction) and finally in eleventh grade (post-Reconstruction to the present). The two- and three-year gaps between subjects means that most students do not retain a deep

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Question #8: Fordham Report

In general, this analysis agrees with the Fordham report. Specifically, the idea that history courses should be organized by era is a solid one and is addressed earlier in this document. Additionally, there is an opportunity to get more leverage from Celebrate Freedom Week by integrating it more completely into the standards at each individual grade level. Because the language is the same across grade levels, it loses some of its significance. For example, in fourth grade (Texas History), the idea of celebrating freedom could be more tightly aligned to concepts in Texas history, including Texas heroes and the Texas Constitution.

Question #9: Additional Suggestions

The social studies skills were addressed briefly in this document. While the continuity between grade levels is helpful, a more thoughtful progression – along with perhaps an alignment to reading language arts standards, especially at the elementary level – might increase the impact they have on social studies instruction.

The second suggestion I have relates to the guiding questions mentioned in Question #6. Texas social studies teachers simply are required to teach too much content. By defining key outcomes, both overall and at each grade level, the revision committees have the chance to improve social studies instruction across the state. Less is more. By requiring so many things to be taught, teachers end up teaching very little of it well; if we reduce the amount, then students are much more likely to receive quality instruction. Additionally, social studies instruction in terms of content will have much less variance from school to school and from district to district. History is complicated, and therefore instruction should include both the good things humans have done as well as the bad; by understanding our past we can help build a better future. Choosing these key outcomes will not be easy, but an open, honest dialogue about what we want students to know will be a good start.

Finally, the revision of the standards is an opportunity to bring the required TEKS in line with what most teachers actually teach. Instructional decisions are made on a daily basis by classroom teachers, and in social studies, those decisions are much harder than they need to be. When comparing these standards to those in reading language arts, math, and science, those in social studies provide far less guidance. By providing clear standards in social studies, teachers will no longer need to “guess” what was intended, and social studies instruction will be much more consistent across the state.