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## Social Studies Instruction in Nebraska


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# Social Studies Instruction in Nebraska

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## Executive Summary

In the 1980s standardized testing began to emerge as a major component of P-12 education reform and by the late 1980s state standards, benchmarks and curriculum frameworks started to become more widely used in states (Vogler and Virtue 2007). Both elementary and secondary social studies classes have changed to adapt to the new standards and mandated standardized testing. With increasing focus on reading, mathematics, and science, many began to be concerned that social studies instruction may be limited. Social studies instruction is vital to educate civically engaged individuals. However, at the high school level, teachers emphasize memorization and recollection of facts and devote less time to the integration of social studies with other content areas or into daily life (Vogler and Virtue 2007). Also, studies have found that due to the influence of mandated testing at the elementary level, time allotments for social studies instruction have been reduced to allocate additional instructional time to content areas, such as mathematics, which are subjected to high-stakes testing. (Vogler and Virtue 2007; Lintner 2006; and VanFossen 2005).

The goal of this survey was to gather information and examine Nebraska teachers' perceptions related to the current status of social studies instruction in Nebraska. This report will describe how Nebraska teachers teach social studies—what methods of instruction they use and with what frequency, how confident they are with the Nebraska Social Studies Standards, and how often they are offered and utilize professional development opportunities. Results from the survey may be used to advocate and plan for social studies professional development by individual school districts, Education Service Units (ESUs), and/or the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE).

The survey was conducted in spring 2017 with 796 complete surveys submitted. Teachers completing the survey represent all Nebraska-ESUs, grade levels (elementary, middle, and high school), and all district sizes. Some notable findings from each report section include:

### *Social Studies Instruction and Standards*

- Social studies instruction in Nebraska is often, but not always aligned with the Nebraska Social Studies Standards. Only about 10 percent of elementary teachers said their content in social studies is “in complete alignment” to the Nebraska Social Studies Standards. This could be related to findings suggesting the standards may be vague.
- Teachers feel the standards are more effective in preparing students to be civically engaged. However, regardless of grade level, Nebraska teachers who responded to the survey, view Nebraska Social Studies Standards to be more ineffective than effective in preparing students for college or a career. Less than 5 percent of teachers in all three grade levels said the Nebraska Social Studies Standards are “extremely effective” in preparing students for college, career, and civic life and citizenship.
- Many teachers, across grade levels, use primary source documents, simulations, and group projects less frequently than class discussions, lectures, and note-taking in their instruction.



- While many teachers report familiarity with the Nebraska Social Studies Standards, some social studies teachers are so unfamiliar with the standards they are unable to identify strengths or weaknesses of the standards.

#### *Professional Development in Social Studies*

- Opportunities for Nebraska teachers to participate in professional development specific to social studies instruction may be lacking, and teachers may struggle to access adequate resources to support social studies instruction. This seems to be particularly true for elementary teachers who also feel less prepared to teach social studies compared to their middle and high school counterparts. Less than 16 percent of elementary teachers reported having social studies professional development (PD) made available to them within the past three years with only 9 percent of the elementary teachers reported participating in social studies PD within the last three years.
- When Nebraska teachers participate in professional development specific to social studies, the training is often related to general methods or geography.

#### *Civics Assessment*

- Teachers are concerned about accountability in social studies, and over one third of the teachers (about 37 percent) who responded to the survey support efforts to adopt a civics assessment as a graduation requirement. Given a choice of assessment methods, teachers were most supportive of a service project.



## Survey Background and Design

Researchers at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Dr. Jamie Wagner (Department of Economics and Director, Center for Economic Education) and Dr. Connie Schaffer (Teacher Education Department) conducted a survey together with NDE to examine social studies instruction. The project-assessed social studies instruction in Nebraska including the development and understanding of the Nebraska State Social Studies Standards. Results and responses from the survey may be used to advocate and plan social studies professional development by individual school districts, ESUs, and/or NDE. Responses may be used as the Nebraska Social Studies Standards are revised from the 2012 edition. Finally, responses may aid Nebraska policy-makers as they continue to debate adding a civics assessment as a requirement for high school graduation.

### Survey Design

The Nebraska survey was developed based on a 2015 Iowa Department of Education survey and publication produced with researchers from The University of Northern Iowa's Center for Social and Behavioral Research (CSBR).

Key questions included:

- What instructional strategies do Nebraska teachers use to teach social studies?
- How confident are teachers integrating curricula with the Nebraska Social Studies Standards?
- What social studies professional development (PD) opportunities are available to Nebraska teachers?
- How often are Nebraska teachers taking advantage of social studies PD?
- Are there any barriers associated with social studies PD? If so, what are those barriers?
- Do Nebraska teachers support a statewide civics assessment as a graduation requirement? If so, what type of assessment would they prefer?

NDE distributed the survey to Nebraska teachers who teach social studies<sup>1</sup>—all elementary teachers and secondary teachers with a social studies endorsement who are currently teaching. The survey link was emailed to administrators and principals; they were instructed not to fill out the survey but to forward it to appropriate teachers and encourage them to complete it. The survey was active from March 8, 2017 through April 8, 2017. A total of 11,981 teachers and 1,192 principals or administrators were sent the survey with 796 complete surveys submitted. While this is less than ideal, the input and responses from teachers are still valuable as Nebraska examines social studies practices at the elementary and secondary levels.

### Social Studies Description

For the purposes of this survey, social studies is defined as *the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence*. Within PK-12 education, social studies curricula provides

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<sup>1</sup> There is no state-wide data base for teachers. NDE sent the email to as many teachers as they have in their email database. Due to teachers changing schools/emails we cannot guarantee that every teacher in Nebraska was sent the survey. Based on descriptive statistics and demographic characteristics of the responses we do know that all ESU's were represented making the survey generalizable across the state.

coordinated, systematic study drawing from such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology.

### Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Iowa Department of Education and researchers at the University of North Iowa Center for Social and Behavioral Research for sharing their survey and offering help with the report.

Thank you to NDE, specifically Dr. Corey Epler, Harris Payne, Matt Hastings, and Justine Yeo, for distributing the survey several times so data could be compiled in this report.

Thank you to Ellen Lincoln, Director of Communications for the Nebraska Business Development Center at UNO for adding the finishing touches and graphics for this report.

## Sample Characteristics

### Grade Level

More than 50 percent of the sample (56%) teach at the elementary level while 13 and 17 percent reported teaching at the middle and high school levels. Teachers were allowed to select multiple levels. Note that “Other” includes those who only responded to “Other” in the survey and who also reported teaching Elementary, Middle, or High School in combination with “Other.” Thirty-two respondents reported only that they taught “Other” while 27 respondents taught a combination of grade levels that included “Other.”

Grade Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Elementary School	448	56.28%
Middle School	104	13.07%
High School	133	16.71%
Elementary and Middle School	13	1.63%
Middle and High School	34	4.27%
Elementary, Middle, and High School	5	.01%
Other*	59	7.41%
Total	796	



### Educational Service Units Representation

All seventeen ESUs in Nebraska are represented in the survey. ESU 3 is the most heavily represented in the survey (67 teachers), which also represents the largest concentration of teachers in the state. A large proportion of teacher respondents, 499 or almost 63 percent, said they did not know which ESU they were a part of or did not respond to the question.

ESU	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
1	29	3.64%
2	17	2.14%
3	67	8.42%
4	12	1.51%
5	3	.38%
6	20	2.51%
7	15	1.88%
8	26	3.27%
9	5	.63%
10	31	3.89%
11	3	.38%
12	1	.13%
13	21	2.64
15	6	.75%
16	18	2.26%
17	6	.75%
18	6	.75%
19	11	1.38
Do not know/Did not respond	499	62.69%
Total	796	100%

### Public or Private School Representation

Overall, 332 or 92.74 percent of the teacher respondents, out of 358 total who answered the question, reported that they taught in a public school. The remaining 7.26 percent reported that they taught in a parochial, private (both religious affiliated and non-religious affiliated), or other type of school.





## District Size

Teachers from varied district sizes responded to the survey. About 15 percent of respondents teach in Nebraska’s largest districts, and slightly over 9 percent teach in the state’s smallest districts. The table below shows the breakdown of the district sizes as identified by the teachers who completed the survey.

District Size	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Less than 300 students	74	9.30%
300-599 students	44	5.53%
600-999 students	21	2.64%
1000-2,499 students	60	7.54%
2,500-7,499 students	43	5.40%
Greater than 7,500 students	116	14.57%
Do not know/Did not respond	438	55.03%
Total	796	

## Social Studies Instruction Results

Teachers were not required to respond to every question, which is why there are a large number of responses categorized as “Do not know/Did not respond”. It is beyond the scope of the survey and report to speculate why a teacher may have skipped a question; we do not believe that this negatively affects the results presented. Because teachers were able to respond that they taught any combination of grade levels, the following questions were asked to anyone who responded to teaching the specific grade level. For example, anyone who responded teaching at the elementary level was asked questions related to elementary social studies instruction.

Across all levels of instruction (elementary, middle, and high school), over 50 percent of teachers responded that their school or district has a specific pacing guide for social studies instruction. Almost 30 percent of elementary and middle school teachers and 15 percent of high school teachers said their school or district does not have a pacing guide. The remaining 13-16 percent did not know or were unsure if their school or district has a social studies pacing guide.

Pacing Guide	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
<b>Elementary School (n=285)</b>		
Yes	156	54.74%
No	85	29.82%
Do not know/did not respond	44	15.44%
<b>Middle School (n=117)</b>		
Yes	67	57.26%
No	35	29.91%
Do not know/did not respond	15	12.83%
<b>High School (n=130)</b>		
Yes	91	70.00%
No	20	15.38%
Do not know/did not respond	19	14.62%

Across all levels, most teachers reported using whole class discussions on a frequent or daily basis. A majority of teachers reported using role-play and the examination of primary sources only occasionally or less.

Just over 30 percent of elementary teachers reported they either *rarely* or *never* use primary source documents while almost 19 percent reported they *occasionally* use primary source documents during social studies instruction. Use of primary source documents occurs more frequently at the middle and high school level, but only a fourth of middle school teachers and slightly more than a third of high school teacher reported using these frequently or daily.

During social studies instruction how often do your students engage in the following?			
Cooperative learning assignments	Elementary School (n=467)	Middle School (n=159)	High School (n=173)
Almost daily	6.42%	14.47%	10.98%
Frequently (1-2 times per week)	23.34%	28.30%	32.95%
Occasionally (2-3 times per month)	15.63%	18.87%	19.65%
Rarely (2-3 times per year)	8.35%	5.66%	5.20%
Never	3.00%	0.00%	1.73%
Do not know/did not respond	43.26%	32.70%	29.49%



<b>Whole class discussions</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=467)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=159)</b>	<b>High School (n=173)</b>
Almost daily	32.55%	44.65%	42.77%
Frequently (1-2 times per week)	20.56%	18.87%	19.65%
Occasionally (2-3 times per month)	2.14%	3.14%	4.05%
Rarely (2-3 times per year)	0.64%	0.63%	2.31%
Never	0.86%	0.00%	1.73%
Do not know/did not respond	43.25%	32.71%	29.49%
<b>Completion of textbook-based worksheets</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=467)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=159)</b>	<b>High School (n=173)</b>
Almost daily	5.35%	6.92%	5.78%
Frequently (1-2 times per week)	14.56%	16.98%	24.86%
Occasionally (2-3 times per month)	14.56%	16.35%	10.40%
Rarely (2-3 times per year)	10.92%	19.50%	16.18%
Never	11.35%	7.55%	13.29%
Do not know/did not respond	43.26%	32.70%	29.49%
<b>Lecture and notetaking on social studies related content</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=467)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=159)</b>	<b>High School (n=173)</b>
Almost daily	7.07%	24.53%	30.64%
Frequently (1-2 times per week)	11.35%	27.04%	31.21%
Occasionally (2-3 times per month)	14.13%	11.95%	5.20%
Rarely (2-3 times per year)	7.49%	3.14%	1.16%
Never	16.70%	0.63%	2.31%
Do not know/did not respond	43.26%	32.71%	29.48%
<b>Group projects</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=467)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=159)</b>	<b>High School (n=173)</b>
Almost daily	0.86%	1.89%	2.89%
Frequently (1-2 times per week)	10.92%	13.84%	15.61%
Occasionally (2-3 times per month)	23.77%	31.45%	30.64%
Rarely (2-3 times per year)	15.63%	16.89%	19.65%
Never	5.57%	3.14%	1.73%
Do not know/did not respond	43.25%	32.79%	29.48%



<b>Activities using maps, atlases, or globes</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=467)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=159)</b>	<b>High School (n=173)</b>
Almost daily	3.64%	8.18%	6.94%
Frequently (1-2 times per week)	15.42%	28.93%	32.37%
Occasionally (2-3 times per month)	24.41%	22.01%	19.08%
Rarely (2-3 times per year)	11.78%	6.92%	8.09%
Never	1.50%	1.26%	4.05%
Do not know/did not respond	43.25%	32.70%	29.47%
<b>Computer-based social studies applications</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=467)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=159)</b>	<b>High School (n=173)</b>
Almost daily	1.28%	11.95%	13.29%
Frequently (1-2 times per week)	7.07%	16.35%	17.34%
Occasionally (2-3 times per month)	13.06%	15.72%	19.08%
Rarely (2-3 times per year)	16.92%	18.24%	13.87%
Never	18.42%	5.03%	6.94%
Do not know/did not respond	43.25%	32.71%	29.48%
<b>Watching videos or films</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=467)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=159)</b>	<b>High School (n=173)</b>
Almost daily	1.71%	5.03%	4.62%
Frequently (1-2 times per week)	13.92%	19.50%	26.59%
Occasionally (2-3 times per month)	21.41%	27.67%	24.28%
Rarely (2-3 times per year)	14.56%	13.84%	12.14%
Never	5.14%	1.26%	2.89%
Do not know/did not respond	43.26%	32.70%	29.48%
<b>Textbook-based assignments</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=467)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=159)</b>	<b>High School (n=173)</b>
Almost daily	5.14%	8.81%	8.09%
Frequently (1-2 times per week)	13.92%	24.53%	19.65%
Occasionally (2-3 times per month)	13.71%	18.24%	19.65%
Rarely (2-3 times per year)	8.99%	9.43%	11.56%
Never	14.99%	6.29%	11.56%
Do not know/did not respond	43.25%	32.70%	29.49%



<b>Role plays/Simulations</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=467)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=159)</b>	<b>High School (n=173)</b>
Almost daily	0.86%	1.26%	1.16%
Frequently (1-2 times per week)	6.21%	6.92%	6.36%
Occasionally (2-3 times per month)	16.71%	28.30%	24.28%
Rarely (2-3 times per year)	15.20%	20.75%	26.59%
Never	17.77%	10.06%	12.14%
Do not know/did not respond	43.25%	32.71%	29.47%
<b>Examination of primary source documents</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=467)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=159)</b>	<b>High School (n=173)</b>
Almost daily	1.71%	6.92%	4.05%
Frequently (1-2 times per week)	5.57%	15.72%	30.06%
Occasionally (2-3 times per month)	18.84%	31.45%	27.75%
Rarely (2-3 times per year)	15.42%	9.43%	6.94%
Never	15.20%	3.77%	1.73%
Do not know/did not respond	43.26%	32.71%	29.47%
<b>Written assignments such as essays and reflections</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=467)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=159)</b>	<b>High School (n=173)</b>
Almost daily	0.21%	5.66%	4.05%
Frequently (1-2 times per week)	6.21%	20.78%	27.75%
Occasionally (2-3 times per month)	16.06%	27.67%	30.64%
Rarely (2-3 times per year)	15.42%	11.32%	6.94%
Never	18.84%	1.89%	1.16%
Do not know/did not respond	43.26%	32.68%	29.46%
<b>Technology applications to enhance learning</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=467)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=159)</b>	<b>High School (n=173)</b>
Almost daily	1.71%	13.21%	16.18%
Frequently (1-2 times per week)	12.85%	22.01%	20.23%
Occasionally (2-3 times per month)	16.27%	20.13%	19.65%
Rarely (2-3 times per year)	15.63%	10.60%	10.40%
Never	10.28%	1.89%	4.05%
Do not know/did not respond	43.26%	32.16%	29.49%

## Nebraska Social Studies Standards

Approximately 20 to 30 percent of teachers were *very familiar* with the Nebraska Social Studies Standards and similarly, about 21 to 30 percent of the teachers felt they were *very prepared* to teach the Nebraska Social Studies Standards. In general, fewer elementary than middle and high school teachers felt familiar or prepared to teach Nebraska Social Studies Standards.

How familiar would you say you are with the Nebraska Social Studies Standards?	Elementary School (n=467)	Middle School (n=159)	High School (n=173)
Extremely familiar	5.14%	5.66%	11.56%
Very familiar	20.34%	30.19%	27.17%
Slightly familiar	19.27%	13.21%	9.83%
Not familiar at all	4.07%	.63%	1.16%
Do not know/did not respond	51.18%	50.31%	50.28%
In your opinion, how prepared are you to teach the Nebraska Social Studies Standards?	Elementary School (n=467)	Middle School (n=159)	High School (n=173)
Extremely prepared	5.14%	8.18%	14.45%
Very prepared	21.41%	29.56%	24.28%
Slightly prepared	19.06%	11.32%	8.67%
Not prepared at all	3.21%	.63%	2.31%
Do not know/did not respond	51.18%	50.31%	50.29%

Few teachers in all grade levels reported that their current social studies content is aligned to the Nebraska Social Studies Standards. Only about 10 percent of elementary teachers, 17 percent of middle school teachers, and 20 percent of high school teachers said their content was *in complete alignment* with the standards. Across the three grade levels, more teachers reported the content of their social studies class is somewhat aligned to the Nebraska Social Studies Standards.

Overall, how aligned would you say the current content of your social studies classes is compared with the Nebraska Social Studies Standards?	Elementary School (n=467)	Middle School (n=159)	High School (n=173)
In complete alignment	10.06%	16.98%	19.65%
Somewhat aligned	22.91%	28.60%	26.59%
Need some realignment	12.63%	3.77%	2.89%
Need significant alignment	3.21%	.63%	.58%
Do not know/did not respond	51.19%	50.02%	50.29%

Across the three grade levels, almost a third (34%, 32%, and 29% elementary, middle, and high school respectively) of the teachers reported they were *somewhat satisfied* with the standards.



How satisfied are you with the Nebraska Social Studies Standards?	Elementary School (n=467)	Middle School (n=159)	High School (n=173)
Extremely satisfied	4.50%	3.77%	5.20%
Somewhat satisfied	34.05%	32.08%	29.48%
Somewhat dissatisfied	7.71%	11.95%	12.14%
Extremely dissatisfied	2.57%	1.89%	2.89%
Do not know/did not respond	51.17%	50.31%	50.29%

One goal of PK-12 education is to prepare students for life after high school whether that is attending college or beginning a career. Additionally, a goal of social studies instruction is to prepare students to be active and engaged citizens who participate in civic duties, which includes voting. Roughly the same amount of teachers, regardless of grade level, think the Nebraska Social Studies Standards are only *somewhat effective* or *somewhat ineffective* in preparing students for college, career, and civic life and citizenship. While it may make sense that elementary teachers would report that the standards are *somewhat effective* or *somewhat ineffective* for preparing students for college and career, the results are similar for preparing students for civic life and citizenship. It is concerning so many high school teachers feel the standards are limited in their effectiveness for preparing students for life outside of high school that is only a few short years away.

How effective do you think the Nebraska Social Studies Standards are in preparing students for:			
College	Elementary School (n=467)	Middle School (n=159)	High School (n=173)
Extremely effective	1.93%	3.14%	2.89%
Somewhat effective	17.99%	18.87%	21.39%
Somewhat ineffective	24.84%	25.79%	20.81%
Extremely ineffective	3.64%	1.26%	4.62%
Do not know/did not respond	51.60%	50.94%	50.29%
Career	Elementary School (n=467)	Middle School (n=159)	High School (n=173)
Extremely effective	1.93%	3.14%	3.47%
Somewhat effective	15.63%	13.21%	15.61%
Somewhat ineffective	27.19%	29.56%	21.39%
Extremely ineffective	3.64%	3.14%	9.25%
Do not know/did not respond	51.61%	50.95%	50.28%



Civic Life and Citizenship	Elementary School (n=467)	Middle School (n=159)	High School (n=173)
Extremely effective	4.50%	7.55%	5.79%
Somewhat effective	22.48%	25.16%	21.97%
Somewhat ineffective	19.70%	15.72%	19.65%
Extremely ineffective	1.71%	.63%	2.31%
Do not know/did not respond	51.61%	50.94%	50.28%

Teachers responded to two open-ended questions about the strengths and weaknesses of the Nebraska Social Studies Standards. There were 295 specific responses (excluding comments such as N/A or “No Opinion”) about the strengths of the Nebraska Social Studies Standards. Of these, 278 responses identified a specific strength, and 17 responses (almost 6%) indicated teachers did not know enough about the standards to comment. Researchers identified several themes or common answers regarding the strengths. The themes and representative responses of those themes are provided below.

*In your opinion, what are the primary strengths of the Nebraska Social Studies Standards?*

#### Flexibility

- “They are general enough that teachers are able to cover the information necessary in a variety of ways.”
- “Provide teachers with some autonomy.”

#### Grade-level progression

- “They are well-aligned vertically. I think they do a great job of building upon the previous year, particularly at the elementary level.”
- “Speaking for geography, we do a good job of building a solid foundation that can be used in the upper levels. As they continue with school it adds upon each grade level as they progress.”

#### Address critical thinking


- “I love the use of primary sources. Students love learning about history when you make it exciting and thought provoking.”
- “The primary strength of the Nebraska Social Studies Standards are [sic] primary and secondary resource analysis at all grade levels.”

#### Address citizenship

- “I only work with kindergarten, but I feel they are all very attainable and easy to incorporate in other subjects (reading). They focus on teaching kids how to be good citizens.”
- “I think they are preparing kids to be civic minded.”

#### Specifically support Nebraska history



- 
- “I am focused on the 4th grade standards, and I believe strongly that we should continue making our students aware of Nebraska’s history in order that they may positively impact Nebraska’s future.”
  - “They give kids a good base on Nebraska’s history.”

#### Did not know about the standards

- “I am a first-year teacher; I do not know the standards well.”
- “We actually have standards?”
- “I am not familiar enough with them to give them a strength or weakness.”
- “I have not read them.”
- “I have not looked at the standards in depth.”
- “Don’t know enough about them to say.”

Compared to the strengths, there were fewer comments about the weaknesses of the Nebraska Social Studies Standards. There were 154 total comments after excluding comments like “N/A” or “no opinion.” Nine of the 154 comments were about inadequate knowledge of the standards—which is again, 6 percent. Researchers identified several themes or common answers regarding the weaknesses of the Nebraska Social Studies Standards. The themes and representative responses of those themes, are provided below.

#### *In your opinion, what are the primary weaknesses of the Nebraska Social Studies Standards?*

##### Too many

- “I feel like there are a lot of standards and I struggle to cover all the standards in a school year.”
- “It is impossible to cover all the standards to the levels listed. The standards force a simple skimming of material without the ability of in-depth learning because of the pace necessary to cover (touch on) all the material.”

##### Too vague

- “Some of the standards are, I feel, vague in their wording. How I instruct on these standards might be vastly different from another educator.”
- “Need to be more simplified, easily defined for teachers. Teachers should not have to interpret the standards on their own.”

##### Limited perspective

- “The World History standards need to be expanded beyond a European-centered point of view.”
- “Western/Eurocentric point of view. I think multiple perspectives are needed.”

The above represent about half of all the comments. The “too many” and “too vague” were very strong themes. Two additional themes, “too few resources” and “too little accountability” are not necessarily criticisms about the standards specifically, but ancillary issues represented in the responses.

##### Too little accountability

- “There is no assessment of social studies, so teachers teach whatever they want.”

- “Because there is not testing for social studies my district and other districts focus on NESAs – R, NESAs – M, NESAs – W, NESAs –S. Therefore, social studies gets cut, and we get less time to instruct on a subject that I feel is more important in a lot of areas. We have students that don’t know how our government works or understand economics because we, as a state, keep cutting social studies.”

Too few resources to implement standards

- “Standards are great, but district resources are outdated. I pull in up-to-date information off the internet and create my own information to meet standards quite frequently.”
- “Teachers are given poor curriculum materials to use. Current resources could be better to effectively teach the standards.”
- “Lack of training on the standards, and a lack of correlating material/curriculum.”

## Professional Development in Social Studies

Professional development (PD) is an important aspect for teachers to improve instruction, learn about new topics, and receive support from other teachers and the community. Alarming, almost 41 percent of elementary teachers reported they have not had social studies PD available to them. About 47 percent and 60 percent of middle and high school teachers reported PD has been made available to them. This suggests more effort may be needed to provide social studies PD to teachers of all grade levels but especially to elementary teachers.

Has social studies professional development been made available to you within the past 3 years?	Elementary School (n=467)	Middle School (n=159)	High School (n=173)
Yes	15.63%	46.54%	60.12%
No	40.90%	20.75%	10.40%
Do not know/did not respond	43.47%	32.71%	29.48%

Of the teachers that responded that PD had been made available within the last 3 years, an additional question asked whether they participated in any PD. Most teachers responded that they participated in the PD. About 60 percent of elementary teachers, 74 percent of middle school teachers, and almost 80 percent of high school teachers participated in PD.

Within the past 3 years, have you participated in any social studies professional development opportunities in Nebraska?	Elementary School (n=73)	Middle School (n=74)	High School (n=104)
Yes	60.27%	74.32%	79.81%
No	39.73%	22.97%	20.19%
Do not know/did not respond	0.00%	2.71%	0.00%

For those who responded they had participated in social studies PD in the last three years, the next question asked what topic was covered in the PD. The most commonly addressed topic varied by level.



Teachers from all three grade levels reported general social studies methods and geography as common topics. Common areas unique to the levels included: Nebraska history for elementary school, world history for middle school, and government/civics for high school.

Teachers were able to respond with *other* and then given the opportunity to write in the subjects. Law, technology in social studies, Omaha history, reading and thinking like a historian, Nebraska’s sesquicentennial, and Geographic Information System (GIS) were among the additional topics listed by teachers.

What social studies subjects were covered at this professional development opportunity? Select all that apply.	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Total
General social studies methods	10	16	23	49
Government/Civics	4	9	21	34
Geography	9	17	23	49
Economics	3	7	13	23
Nebraska history	9	4	5	18
US history	4	13	18	35
World history	5	15	12	32
Behavioral sciences (e.g. psychology or sociology)	3	8	3	14
Other (please specify)	3	4	3	10

In response to a question about the number of opportunities for social studies PD, no elementary teacher said there were *too many* opportunities and only two teachers (one middle school and one high school) reported that there were *too many*. Across the grade levels, 32 to 46 percent of teachers said there were *too few* opportunities for social studies PD. Results from this question can be used to advocate for increasing social studies PD opportunities for teachers—especially for elementary teachers, where slightly less than half of the teachers said there were *too few* social studies PD opportunities.

Thinking about the number of opportunities available within your district for social studies professional development, do you think there are too few, too many, or about the right number of opportunities available?	Elementary School (n=467)	Middle School (n=159)	High School (n=173)
Too few	45.61%	35.22%	31.79%
About right	7.71%	18.24%	19.65%
Too many	0%	.63%	.58%
Do not know/did not respond	46.68%	45.91%	47.98%

For more than half of middle and high school teachers and for approximately 38 percent of elementary teachers, a lack of time is a *major factor* in deciding whether to participate in social studies PD. A large percentage of teachers across all grade levels indicated scheduling was a *major factor* in deciding whether to participate in social studies PD. About 47 percent of elementary teachers and 36 percent of

middle school teachers said that a limited amount of social studies PD was a *major factor* related to participation.

<b>To what degree have each of the following been factors in deciding whether or not to participate in a social studies professional development opportunity?</b>			
<b>Lack of time</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=73)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=74)</b>	<b>High School (n=104)</b>
Not a factor	16.44%	9.46%	7.69%
Minor factor	30.14%	20.27%	26.92%
Major factor	28.77%	37.84%	35.58%
Do not know/did not respond	24.66%	32.43%	29.81%
<b>Cost of registration</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=73)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=74)</b>	<b>High School (n=104)</b>
Not a factor	35.62%	31.08%	28.85%
Minor factor	19.18%	25.68%	27.88%
Major factor	20.55%	10.81%	13.46%
Do not know/did not respond	24.66%	32.43%	29.81%
<b>Travel constraints (e.g., distance)</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=73)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=74)</b>	<b>High School (n=104)</b>
Not a factor	28.77%	14.86%	19.23%
Minor factor	19.18%	31.08%	27.88%
Major factor	27.40%	21.62%	23.08%
Do not know/did not respond	24.665%	32.43%	29.81%
<b>Inconvenient scheduling</b>	<b>Elementary School (n=73)</b>	<b>Middle School (n=74)</b>	<b>High School (n=104)</b>
Not a factor	24.66%	9.46%	8.65%
Minor factor	16.44%	27.03%	30.77%
Major factor	34.25%	31.08%	30.77%
Do not know/did not respond	24.66%	32.43%	29.81%



Limited opportunities specific to social studies	Elementary School (n=73)	Middle School (n=74)	High School (n=104)
Not a factor	12.33%	16.22%	17.31%
Minor factor	27.40%	27.03%	37.50%
Major factor	35.62%	24.32%	15.38%
Do not know/did not respond	24.66%	32.43%	29.81%
Lack of district support or school support	Elementary School (n=73)	Middle School (n=74)	High School (n=104)
Not a factor	45.21%	39.19%	41.35%
Minor factor	19.18%	20.27%	20.91%
Major factor	10.96%	8.11%	8.65%
Do not know/did not respond	24.66%	32.43%	29.81%

Teachers responded to several open-ended questions including one asking what the Nebraska Department of Education could do to better support social studies education. The responses are provided below.

- “Modify the standards.”
- “I think giving a few lessons during summer time for teachers would be great...”
- “...a list of suggested websites or online videos would be helpful.”
- “Collaborate in the schools.”
- “Support more efforts to teach critical thinking rather than nationalism.”
- “Give it more attention rather than focusing only on tested subjects.”
- “Make the information readily available.”
- “Less emphasis on tests and ‘correct’ answers, and more on how to be a good citizen.”
- “Provide more professional development opportunities.”

## Civics Assessment in Nebraska

Legislation was introduced in January 2016, which would require all students to take a civics exam with questions from the United States’ naturalization test as a graduation requirement. This idea was re-introduced in January 2017 and as of March 2017, was still pending. The goal of both bills was to measure Nebraska students’ civic literacy about topics in history, government, geography, and economic systems.

While much of the Nebraska social studies survey was based on the Iowa survey, Nebraska teachers answered an additional question regarding the proposed civic assessment. Substantially more (294) teachers support a civics assessment as a graduation requirement than do not support (64) such a requirement.

More elementary teachers (40%) than both middle (37%) and high school teachers (35%) supported the civics assessment as a graduation requirement. However, almost half of the respondents chose not to answer the question.


Civics assessment	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Yes	294	36.93%
No	64	8.04%
Do not know/did not respond	438	55.03%

Civics assessment	Elementary School (n=467)	Middle School (n=159)	High School (n=173)
Yes	40.04%	37.11%	35.26%
No	7.49%	10.06%	9.25%
Do not know/did not respond	52.47%	52.83%	55.49%

The 294 teachers who supported a civics assessment were then asked which assessment they most support as a state social studies requirement. About 42 percent support a service learning project, almost 30 percent support passing the naturalization test with a score of at least a 60 percent, 21 percent of teachers want students to take a summative assessment based on the Nebraska State Social Studies Standards, and 7 percent said “other” and were then asked to give feedback. The following list is a sample of the responses from teachers. Several responses state that a combination of assessments should be used—possibly a test together with a project. Others suggest a different test—a National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test, a Nebraska Department of Education assessment similar to other NeSA tests, or district-created test. Other teachers favored the naturalization test but propose a higher or lower the pass rate.

Civics assessment type	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Each student must correctly answer 60 of the 100 question US Naturalization test as a requirement for graduation	87	29.59%
Each student take a statewide, summative social studies assessment based on the Nebraska State Social Studies Standards	61	20.75%
Each student completes a service project	124	42.17%
Other (please list)	22	7.48%

- “Test and capstone”
- “Each student takes part in meaningful activities that requires community engagement and service as well as provides meaningful leadership opportunities for students to participate in.”

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- “I like the naturalization test; however, there needs to be some leeway. I'm not sure how the 60% was decided upon.”
  - “I like both the US Naturalization test and the service project.”
  - “Answer 80 of the 100 questions on the US Naturalization test”
  - “Authentic assessment--e.g. vote (for those old enough); write a state senator; service project”
  - “Service project & naturalization test”
  - “District created assessment based on standards taught as interpreted by individual districts”
  - “I would like to create a summative assessment, whether that is the naturalization test or one created based on the standards; perhaps included in the NeSA style testing (even though that is out). And I would like to combine that with the service project.”
  - “How about the choice of a service project or summative test?”
  - “I believe in local control of assessment.”
  - “Passing score on the NAEP (civics/US history)”
  - “Each student completes a test where they are asked to analyze primary and secondary source documents to draw conclusions and answer open-ended and short answer questions.”
  - “Each student should complete a set amount of social studies based content area classes in order to graduation. Allow for choice.”
  - “A student passes the courses determined to be vital by his or her school.”
  - “Combination of summative [assessment] and service project.”
  - “A mixture of requirements and assessments”

## Closing Statement

The survey is a snapshot of current social studies practices in Nebraska. Results from the survey suggest there are opportunities to improve social studies instruction in Nebraska. Opportunities include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Increasing social studies PD, particularly at the elementary level
- Providing resources to encourage teachers to expand the types of instructional strategies they use when teaching social studies
- Enhancing communication and understanding of the Nebraska Social Studies Standards
- Making explicit connections to college and career readiness in future revisions of the Nebraska Social Studies Standards or creating a companion document to the existing standards to specifically address college and career readiness
- Including teachers’ perspective in the adoption or creation of any potential civics assessment that may be used as a graduation requirement



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