



Principal’s Guide on Minnesota’s 2021 Social Studies Standards

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Purpose

This document supports principals in understanding [Minnesota's 2021 K–12 Academic Standards in Social Studies](#) and the [key instructional and conceptual shifts](#) required for successful implementation.

It is designed to support principals in their critical role of leading this work—supporting teachers, building coherence across grade levels, and ensuring all students experience high-quality, inquiry-based social studies learning.

Overview of Minnesota's 2021 Social Studies Standards

Minnesota's 2021 Social Studies Standards define the knowledge and skills students are expected to develop at each grade level. They empower students to become inquisitive, informed, and engaged citizens through critical thinking, inquiry, and disciplinary literacy.

The social studies standards are organized into five strands, with the contributions of Minnesota's American Indian tribes and communities integrated throughout each.

1. Citizenship & Government
2. Economics
3. Geography
4. History
5. Ethnic Studies

Shift to Centering Student Inquiry

A major difference between the 2021 and 2011 social studies standards is that inquiry is embedded across all five strands, reflecting the unique practices of each discipline. Grounded in the [College, Career, and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework](#), the new standards emphasize inquiry-based learning and civic reasoning rather than content coverage alone.

Inquiry-based social studies engages students in learning content through questions, investigation, and discussion as they develop and support evidence-based claims. Rather than focusing on memorization of facts, the standards prioritize:

- Disciplinary literacy
- Source analysis
- Evidence-based reasoning
- Perspective-taking
- Student discourse and connections to present-day civic life



How the 2021 Standards Change Social Studies Instruction



More Emphasis On:

- Learning content through inquiry
- Source work and analysis
- Disciplinary literacies specific to social studies
- Regular opportunities for discussion, writing, and revision of thinking
- Integrating ethnic studies concepts and learning through historically excluded perspectives

Less Emphasis On:

- Front loading content before engaging in critical thinking
- Treating inquiry as enrichment
- Lecture and textbook driven instruction
- One-right-answer questions and recall-heavy tasks
- Comprehension-centered literacy strategies

Key Questions for Principals to Consider

Teacher Learning and Capacity

- What social studies professional development have teachers had access to?
 - Have teachers had access to high quality content-based professional development?
 - Have teachers had access to high quality professional development on inquiry-based social studies instruction?
- What ongoing support will be provided to build teacher capacity in inquiry-based social studies?

Instructional Materials and Resources

- Do teachers have access to high-quality instructional materials aligned to Minnesota's social studies standards?
- If teachers are designing their own materials, what supports do they have for implementing high-quality materials and practices?



Ethnic Studies Integration

- How is Ethnic Studies integrated throughout social studies instruction with depth, care, and accuracy?
- How are teachers supported in teaching Ethnic Studies concepts confidently and responsibly?

Systems, Structure, and Coherence

- Who is responsible for aligning the vertical scope and sequence in social studies?
- What is being done to support consistent access to social studies at the elementary level?

Actions to Support Implementation

Effective implementation of the standards depends on principals creating conditions where inquiry-based social studies instruction can thrive.

Protect Time for Social Studies

Strong implementation requires consistent structural support, particularly given the [marginalization of social studies](#) in many school schedules. Ensure:

- Protected instructional minutes for social studies
- Shared planning time for grade-level collaboration

Support Teacher Learning and Shared Practice

Implementation strengthens when principals actively support professional learning and risk-taking. Prioritize:

- Providing dedicated social studies professional development for both content and pedagogy
- Ensuring access to [high-quality instructional materials for social studies](#)
- Elevating teacher leaders as models of practice
- Supporting lesson study, coaching, and peer observation cycles
- Encouraging experimentation and iteration
- Developing shared language and understanding



Focus Classroom Walkthroughs on Student Learning

When visiting classrooms, look for evidence of student thinking and engagement in inquiry.

Look for students:

- Asking questions about sources and content
- Using multiple sources to make evidence-based claims
- Engaging in structured discussions
- Making connections across time and place

Build Working Knowledge of the Standards

Principals don't need to be content experts, but they should know the standards well enough to give meaningful feedback. Build knowledge on:

- The structure of the C3 Inquiry Arc
- The difference between disciplinary literacy and general literacy instruction
- How social studies skills and content build across grade levels (see the [Minnesota Department of Education Learning Progressions](#))

Communicate with Families and Community

Social studies standards can raise questions. Proactive communication builds understanding and trust. Keep your community informed on:

- Inquiry-based social studies and ethnic studies integration
- How students develop critical thinking and civic skills

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- Treating the standards as a checklist of topics to cover
- Expecting immediate instructional shifts without sustained professional development, resources and support
- Confusing inquiry with unstructured or unfocused activities without clear purpose
- Avoiding complex or challenging content instead of building teacher capacity
- Failing to protect time for social studies instruction, especially in elementary
- Using materials that are engaging but not aligned to inquiry or evidence-based reasoning
- Assuming literacy curriculums replace social studies instruction



Classroom Look-Fors for Standards-Aligned Instruction

Use these categories and look-fors to build tools for identifying evidence of inquiry-based social studies instruction during walkthroughs, coaching, and team planning.

Inquiry-Based Lesson Design

Look for:

- A visible compelling question that drives the unit
- Disciplinary sources representing multiple perspectives and identities
- Students actively investigating, not just receiving and repeating information
- Tasks requiring explanation, argument, or reasoning, not simply copying or recall
- Repeated opportunities for students to revise thinking based on evidence

Source Work

Look For:

- Students regularly working with primary and secondary sources
- Students engaging with sources to investigate and build understanding
- Students citing evidence in discussion and writing
- Students evaluating sources for origin, purpose, and limitations
- Students revising thinking as they incorporate new sources

Discourse and Civic Reasoning

Look for:

- Structured discussion routines beyond teacher-led questioning
- Students doing most of the thinking and talking
- Respectful disagreement and consideration of multiple viewpoints
- Evidence of civic skills such as listening, questioning, and consensus-building
- Broad participation across students
- Student language such as: “I think... because...,” “The source suggests...,” or “I disagree because...”



Ethnic Studies Integration

Look for:

- Ethnic Studies concepts integrated into inquiry, not taught in isolation
- Attention to systems, power, identity, and agency beyond surface-level topics
- Examination of whose perspectives are centered or missing
- Thoughtful connections between past and present

Differentiation & Access

Look for:

- Scaffolds that support reasoning (e.g., sentence frames, word banks, guided notes)
- Use of visuals, chunked text, or read-alouds to increase access
- Support for multilingual learners in discussion
- Rigorous expectations for all students, with appropriate supports

Assessment for Learning

Look for:

- Checks for understanding focused on student thinking, not just correctness
- Students explaining their reasoning
- Feedback focused on evidence use, reasoning, and clarity
- Use of tools (e.g., rubrics) aligned to inquiry skills

