

New Social Studies Framework Aims to Guide Standards

By [Catherine Gewertz](#)

A coalition of states and professional organizations has released a new social studies framework designed to offer states guidance when they revise their own academic standards.

The [College, Career, and Civic Life Framework](#), dubbed “C3,” marks a major effort to represent the priorities of four of the social studies disciplines: geography, civics, economics, and history. The three-year project brought teachers and subject-matter specialists from 22 states together with college faculty members and representatives of 15 professional organizations in the social studies to craft an overarching set of guidelines that states can use as they write more detailed expectations for students.

Mindful of the political delicacy of specifying social studies content, the framework’s authors steer clear of subject-matter content, instead laying out an “inquiry arc” with four “dimensions” that span the disciplines: developing questions and planning inquiries; applying disciplinary concepts and tools; evaluating sources and using evidence; and communicating conclusions and taking informed action.

“The C3 framework focuses on inquiry skills and key concepts, and guides—not prescribes—the choice of curricular content necessary for a rigorous social studies program,” the document says. “Content is critically important to the disciplines within social studies and individual state leadership will be required to select appropriate and relevant content.”

The Silver Spring, Md.-based [National Council for the Social Studies](#), which led the effort along with University of Kentucky associate professor Kathy Swan, published the document online last week.

Where's Abe?

Leaders of the initiative emphasized that the framework is not a set of standards or a curriculum. Those are better left to states and districts, which vary in what content they want to emphasize in the classroom, they said. Montana, for instance, requires instruction about the culture and history of Native Americans, while North Carolina teachers might spend more time discussing the Civil War, since key events unfolded there, said Susan Griffin, the executive director of the NCSS.

“It’s a framework for states to use when they are revising their social studies standards,” Ms. Griffin said. “It was designed at the conceptual level, so we didn’t get into curricular details. That’s up to states and districts.”

That choice came in for some sharp criticism.

“Nowhere in its 108 pages will you find Abraham Lincoln, the Declaration of Independence, Martin Luther King (or Martin Luther), a map of the United States, or the concept of supply and demand. You won’t find anything that you might think children should actually learn,” wrote Chester E. Finn Jr., the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a Washington-based think tank, in a blog post.

Mr. Finn said he thought it unlikely that the framework would drive the field to build a solid core of social studies content.

“Sure, one could build good stuff on this framework,” he wrote, “But one could also build trash. Or nothing.”

Three years ago, when the project began, it included the distinct possibility of creating standards. But it didn’t take long for the participants to decide that it was best to restrict the project to a high-level guide because states’ needs—and the level of detail in their standards—varied so much, Ms. Griffin said.

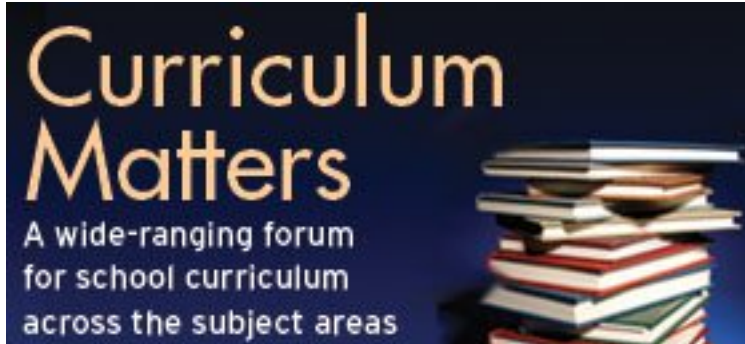
Structuring the guidance around the four dimensions of an inquiry arc is meant to encourage teachers and students to look at important questions in social studies through the lens of four of its key content areas: civics, history, geography, and economics. The document notes that other social studies areas such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology would be useful additions, as well, but are not included in the C3 framework.

Some states, such as Kentucky, are already using the framework to write or update their own social studies standards.

Kentucky Using Document

Karen Kidwell, the director of the Kentucky Department of Education’s division of program standards, said teams of teacher leaders, district administrators, and higher education faculty members started discussions in February to update the state’s 2006 social studies standards. They’re drawing on ideas in the C3 framework, in addition to sets of standards from the national organizations in the social studies content areas.

Related Blog



[Visit this blog.](#)

The teams are beginning to draft standards, she said, and hope to have a set to present to the state board of education next year. But right now, they’re still hunkered down with stacks of materials, drawing ideas and guidance from all of them, she said. The standards will also incorporate the cross-disciplinary literacy expectations of the Common Core State Standards in English/language arts, she said.

The C3 framework itself describes the connections between its concepts and those common standards, which expect teachers of social studies and science to instruct students in literacy skills unique to their disciplines.

In 2010, the Council of Chief State School Officers, which co-led the common-standards initiative in math and English/language arts, hosted discussions that led to plans to devise a social studies framework. But the CCSSO pulled out of that role last year, citing a desire to focus its energy on helping states implement the math and English standards and to avoid the perception that it was involved in writing the social studies framework.

