

Comments on the Draft Social Studies Standards
Sally Schwartz, Globalize DC
February 2023

I am Executive Director of Globalize DC, a nonprofit that works to increase access for DC public school students (both DCPS and charter) to global education, language learning, and study abroad, in particular for those students most underserved in these areas. We work to leverage the unique wealth of global assets in this city to promote a systemic, strategic, and equitable approach to global education, and to move beyond “one off” opportunities to create pipelines for interested students to college and careers. Prior to my work with Globalize DC, I served as DCPS Director of International Programs, and in that role was involved in the drafting of the last set of social studies standards in 2006. Earlier in my career, I was a social studies teacher at Duke Ellington School of the Arts as part of its original faculty.

Globalize DC does most of its work with students in the out-of-school space, but there is no denying that what gets taught during the school day every day has the greatest impact on what students across the city learn. This is why we are very interested in the revision of these social studies standards and why we are extremely concerned about what currently appears to be a huge missed opportunity and failure to follow the Guiding Principles document approved by the DC State Board of Education (SBOE) in 2020.

I was pleased to serve on the SBOE’s Social Studies Standards Advisory Committee (SSSAC). While I supported the changes recommended by fellow committee members, my own primary interest was in ensuring that DC create a new set of standards that adopt a clear global approach, in line with the widely accepted *Educating for Global Competence* Framework first published in 2011 by the Asia Society and Council of Chief State School Officers. We were thrilled that the SSSAC and State Board agreed on the importance of this approach, and adopted the following Guiding Principle on global perspectives:

*All social studies content should be embedded within a global context. The revised D.C. Social Studies Standards should **include an explicit, ongoing thread** [my emphasis] that provides students with a global perspective and global context for their own lives, their history, and their society; that equips students with the content knowledge, skills, experiences, and mindsets that will help prepare them for careers and engaged citizenship in a culturally diverse and globally interconnected world; that explores not just comparisons but connections between peoples of the United States and the rest of the world, historically and in the present.*

So it has been with a huge sense of frustration to find that these draft standards have failed, intentionally or not, to follow this guidance and truly embed a global perspective across all grade levels. The document continues an outdated paradigm of studying the rest of the world as “other” or separate – and primarily confined to World History and Geography. I have heard Dr. Christina Grant, the State Superintendent, speak about her desire to develop the nation’s premier social studies standards document. I know how complex and difficult the task of rewriting social studies standards is, especially in our current political environment, but I can guarantee that as currently written, these draft standards do not meet that goal in regard to its treatment of global education or in laying a solid foundation for our students for informed global engagement and confident participation in the culturally diverse, globally interconnected, and frankly perilous world they will inherit.

There is much to like in these new draft standards, in particular to advance other guiding principles adopted by the State Board. The comments below focus specifically on serious deficits we have identified related to the draft standards’ approach to global content and skills.

PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED IN NEW DRAFT SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

1. The draft standards do not have an identifiable global perspective as recommended in the Board’s Guiding Principles. There is no explicit ongoing global thread.

Around the year 2000 the field of global education experienced a fundamental shift. Before that time K-12 students certainly learned about the world – primarily in world history and geography classes, or by discussing current events. But at the turn of the century, with increasing globalization, growing diversity in our communities and workplaces, and rapid technological advances (like the internet), a new model emerged – one designed to infuse global content and perspectives across disciplines, across grade levels, and for all students in all schools. It is no longer about “us” and “the rest of the world” -- “us” and “them.” We’re too interconnected. We’re all “us.” As Martin Luther King, Jr said, we live in a “World House.” We can’t understand our own history, our current predicament, or solve the world’s biggest problems unless we think and act globally. This new framework gained widespread currency in the decade following the release of the Asia Society and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) publication *Educating for Global Competence* (2011). This approach has been embraced and adapted by the US Department of Education; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which has developed an internationally administered global competence assessment; and most national organizations that work with educators and students in the global education space. This is the forward facing approach that the State Board of Education adopted when it called for an **explicit, ongoing thread** around global content and perspectives in its 2020 Guiding Principles resolution on the Social Studies Standards. It is extremely disappointing that OSSE chose not to do this, despite the fact that there are many standards with global content included.

Instead, the standards adopt an older paradigm. It includes global Anchor standards **within** the different disciplines – Geography (Global Interconnections), Government (World Government), Economics (The Global Economy). But this doesn’t do the job, and in fact complicates the structure by creating artificial divisions. How is the global economy really separate from the US economy? Is “World Government” the only prism through which students can look at government, democracy, human rights, and political systems? This approach is too confining and misses the need to apply a global lens through all grade bands K-12.

On the other hand, the draft’s Inquiry Arc Anchor Standards align neatly with the four domains of the *Educating for Global Competence* Framework:

- Developing Questions and Designing Inquiry/*Investigate the World*
- Gathering Diverse Perspectives and Evaluating Evidence/*Recognize Perspectives*
- Developing Claims and Using Evidence to Engage in Civil Discourse/*Communicate Ideas*
- Engaging in Civil Discourse and Taking Informed Action/*Take Action*

But as currently written there is no embedded global strand and no imperative to adopt a global perspective or apply skills in global and culturally diverse contexts.

In its recent update to the State Board, dated Jan 27, 2023, OSSE identifies eleven (11) “major shifts in the standards,” listed on page 15 – adding an explicit, ongoing global thread is not among these. And there is no explanation offered regarding why this guideline has not been followed.

We recommend Global Perspectives be added as another Inquiry Arc Anchor Standard to address this deficit. Or perhaps OSSE has different thoughts about how to do this – perhaps as an essential question (which some state standards include).

Please also reference comments from Prof. Laura Engel, submitted to OSSE separately.

2. The draft suffers from serious inconsistency across grade levels and courses in terms of the specificity of content.

Some standards are very specific and narrowly drawn; others (particularly in world history and geography) are overly broad and generic. In these cases, in an attempt to have fewer and higher standards, clarity has been sacrificed. If the standards were equally general across grade bands or subjects that would be one issue, but the fact that some content is treated with tremendous specificity and others in overly general terms appears to be a reflection of their relative importance to the standards writers, and we argue that global themes and content knowledge needs to be as thoughtfully and specifically written as US-focused standards. Look at examples (among many) of specific standards – for 5th grade:

- 5.Inq.ID.44 Using primary sources from the perspective of American citizens of Japanese descent, analyze the struggles and resistance of those who were incarcerated during World War II.
- 5.HSC.HC.49 Evaluate the reasons for and resistance to segregation in the North, including the impact of redlining and uprisings in the North and West.
- 5.Econ.US.50 Evaluate the impact of key moments and figures in the fight for Black equality and voting rights including, but not limited to, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Freedom Rides, sit-in protests, the Little Rock Nine, and the March on Washington.

And then these, that are more general, vague, and unrealistic (among many) – for 6th graders:

- 6.Geo.HP.33 Assess the political, economic, and social impact of migration of people within, from, and to regions of Asia over time.
- 6.Geo.HE.35 Assess how the environmental characteristics of Asia influenced the economic development of different regions within Asia and the region's role in global trade patterns over time.
- 6.Geo.HP.35 Analyze Asian cultural contributions to global culture, including art, literature, music, dance, cuisine, philosophy, religious or political thought.

Another way to look at the problem: Here are some of the terms that receive no explicit mention in the standards: China (except in ancient history), Israel and Palestine, South African apartheid, jihadism, the Vietnam War, genocide in Rwanda and in Cambodia, the partition of India, 9-11, Iraq (except in ancient history), Afghanistan, the EU, COVID, mention of any specific South American, Central American, or African countries (except in reference to ancient history).

We know that a good teacher with a global orientation, or a modern understanding of education for global competence, can find ways to teach about the world using these (or really almost any) standards. But standards are created to make the hard decisions about what content needs to be taught, and we believe that there is content related to world affairs and world history that is important enough to receive explicit mention (just as we find to a much greater extent in the draft US history and civics courses).

3. Culture is not adequately addressed.

Learning about culture – what it is; the diversity of world cultures, world views, and ways of being in the world; the importance of recognizing and respecting cultural differences; how to communicate and work collaboratively across cultures; how to resolve cross-cultural conflict; the ways in which culture is transmitted, transformed, and connected to our history, our political and economic systems; and the

idea that cultures are not fixed, but fluid and change over time. Cultural competence is essential to educating for global competence. Yet a serious approach to the understanding of culture, even as it relates to “identity,” one of the inquiry standards, is missing. The removal of “culture” from the title and contents of the 6th grade standards, formerly “World Geography and Culture” and now simply “World Geography,” is perplexing. Perhaps the writers think of culture as food, festivals, and fashion, and have dismissed it as superficial. Without an opportunity to engage with OSSE, it’s difficult to understand the rationale.

With more attention to culture, students could explore more deeply the variation of African cultures in the Americas and the diaspora more broadly; could likewise examine the diversity of Asian and Latin American cultures; intergenerational culture and culture conflict within immigrant families; frontier cultures; culture as a form of social and political control, as well as resistance and resilience; and so on.

4. We appear to devote much greater attention (and standards) to ancient history as compared to recent history.

I think this needs another look and some recalibration. Contemporary history and current global issues too often get short shrift in social studies classrooms. In the case of these draft standards, with the addition of significant new and sometimes repetitious content on indigenous societies and ancient civilizations, attention to more current history and global issues is extremely weak and only addressed in the most generic ways.

Grade 2 – Ancient history

Grade 3 – Expanded Indigenous history in DC history

Grade 4 – Expanded Indigenous history in US history

Grade 6 – Geography (modern)

Grade 7 – Indigenous history in US history

Grade 8 – Only minimal incorporation of global content in Action Civics

World History I – Focus on ancient and early modern empires

World History II – From 1450-present

Government and Civics – Almost no global content

The two courses that deal specifically with civic engagement pay only marginal attention to global themes and issues. If the OSSE writing team had in fact adopted an ongoing global thread across the grade bands, inquiry, and anchor standards, then teaching global content and global competencies can more easily and appropriately be addressed. It’s clear that time to examine contemporary world issues and recent history is seriously shortchanged at a time when the imperative for students to understand the world and develop global competencies is high.

In its January 27 update, OSSE explains that its focus on ancient history in 2nd grade is “so students encounter powerful, robust histories of people of color before encountering people of color through lenses of slavery, colonization, and oppression.” At the same time we want to be sure our students’ understanding of Mexico is not confined to the Aztecs or Africa to ancient Mali or ancient Egypt. Too often students, as a result of this kind of teaching, identify countries in other parts of the world with the past. Realistic and positive contemporary views of these parts of the world – their leaders, activists, artists, their economies, social challenges and innovations, their everyday people – are also part of the solution and essential to providing powerful and fully human portrayals of people previously seen only through these negative dehumanizing lenses.

5. Violence, peace, and conflict resolution.

As a member of the SSSAC, I don't recall any significant discussion about the importance of including content and skills in the social studies standards related to war and peace, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, peer mediation, truth and reconciliation. We recommend finding a way of incorporating some standards along these lines, which have relevance at the personal, local, national, and international levels. Students must understand the fault lines of race, ethnicity, culture, caste, religion, gender, politics, etc., and how divisions are created, exploited, manipulated, through stereotyping, scapegoating, dehumanization, etc, leading to conflict, exploitation, violence, genocide, and war. Much of this content and skills development would be appropriate for a reimagined World Geography and Cultures course at Grade 6, discussed in #7 below.

Please also reference comments from Tarek Maassarani to OSSE, submitted separately.

6. A global lens could and should be incorporated in the earliest grades.

Integrating a global perspective would ensure that elementary students think and act globally from an early age. From the earliest age, students should see themselves as members of a large global community. At present, this is not the case. For example, look at the K-2 Arc. In grades K-1, students learn about their "community" – Kindergarten (Myself and My Community) and Grade 1 (Working and Building Together). Grade 2 (This Wide World) focuses entirely on ancient history, not the contemporary world, with the exception of consideration of environmental change. Rather than setting up this unfortunate duality seeing ourselves in the present and the rest of the world through a historic lens, the standards should apply a global lens from the beginning.

For example, in Kindergarten, the standards should explicitly call on teachers to draw on examples from the global community in standards like these:

- K.Civ.CE.4. Identify examples of fictional characters, historical or living individuals whose actions showed the principles of justice and respect for diverse members of a community . . .
- K.Hist.HC.6. Identify individuals (historical or present-day) whose actions made the community more just . . .

7. The Grade 6 standards are extremely problematic, and in my view require a complete rewrite.

"Culture" has been removed from the title of this course and it should be restored. Beyond this, both the structure and content are not well developed and try to cover far too much material. Long lists of generic standards are applied to each geographic region separately (much appears to be cut and pasted), supplemented by a list of equally broad geography standards and a deep dive into the Sustainable Developments Goals. What is a teacher expected to do here?

The current World Geography and Cultures course was conceived in the 2006 standards as a year for students to apply physical and cultural geography skills and perspectives to investigate the world. The wealth of grade-appropriate educational materials from National Geographic, Peace Corps, educational and cultural institutions, along with partnership with global entities based in DC, made this a fun year for teachers and students, with ample opportunity for direct exposure and project-based learning. DCPS's Embassy Adoption Program and Model UN were also open to 6th grade classes at that time. Now virtual exchanges allow students to not only learn **about** the world, but **with** the world (the tagline for one such organization, iEARN). Students can engage online with their peers in countries around the world. This is also a place where cross-cultural conflict resolution and peacebuilding work can be done (as discussed in #5 above). This could be such a wonderful year for students, with deep exposure to the world and skills development for global competence. At present the standards are overly broad and unrealistic.

8. Africa is missing from American History

Across multiple grade bands that focus on early American history, there still seems to be only minimal attention devoted to learning about those African societies and cultures from which enslaved Africans were kidnapped during the transatlantic trade. I only found:

- In Grade 4: 4.Inq.ID.33. Examine the diverse histories of people who were kidnapped from Western Africa (i.e., enslaved people were not a monolith, they represented a diverse group of people who spoke numerous languages, embodied various belief systems, etc.).
- In Grade 7: 7.Inq.ID.20 Investigate the experience, perspectives, and identities of Africans who were enslaved from the start of the transatlantic trade through bondage, including the codification of race as a tool of oppression and resistance to enslavement.

With so many standards devoted to a deep dive into indigenous societies (and appropriately so), it is imperative that the story of Black Americans not start with enslavement, but with an understanding of what was happening in Africa in the 16th-18th centuries, and what Africans brought with them to the Americas. Standards focused on the countries of origin of the European colonists is almost as thin, beyond examining the imperialist/colonizing impulse, but not as urgent as the need to add more content for a fuller story of Africans who came to the Americas.

I also have a question about the undefined “identity” inquiry standard. Why is an identity inquiry applied to some history – and a history or other anchor standard applied in others?

9. World History II adopts a very constraining Eurocentric approach.

I realize the intent is to de-center Europe and the West in world history, while more fully and honestly exploring the negative impacts of Western expansionism, imperialism, colonialism, and exploitation. But this course ends up being extremely Eurocentric in its design. I know others have noticed and pointed this out as well. There appears to be so much history left out or left to the discretion of the teacher or curriculum writer. I wonder what students will actually learn about South America, Africa, Asia, Europe (for that matter) beyond the Western expansionist, imperialist framing of the course. This is important content but it is also vital for students to understand that other countries have their own histories, complexities, and agency.

10. Grade 8 Action Civics should be global. It is not now.

The standards for this grade band are probably the clearest evidence of what is wrong with this draft, and the ways in which it does not apply the explicit ongoing global lens to the content that the Board recommended, with a focus on interconnections as well as comparisons. Rather, the standards adopt in my view a 20th century framing of global education. For each Driving Concept, one standard, identified as a “Civics: World Governments” Anchor Standard, is included – calling on students to compare a topic across three different nations, i.e., comparing ideas for the purpose of government and the role of the people; government structures; and rights of citizens. There are a few additional standards that require students to look at international alliances (I believe this is the only place in the standards where the UN, NATO, the IMF are mentioned), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and citizen protest globally. Then there are a few standards that call on students to construct an action proposal around a local, national, OR international issue. As Professor Laura Engel, who separately submitted her comments, has earlier pointed out, it is more appropriate to address the interconnectedness of an issue in its local, national, AND international contexts – as opposed to one or the other.

11. US Government should be global. It is not now.

These standards have no global content – either in the narrative at the front of the standards or in the standards themselves, except for these two standards:

- GC.Inq.TA.26. Use research from national and international sources to analyze the impact of media and social media on democracy and develop a public policy proposal to strengthen democratic expression and participation in American civil life.
- GC.Civ.LP.38. Evaluate the extent to which different groups of Americans impact domestic and foreign policy, and identify the reasons and consequences of the disparity in influence.

There is no discussion of the US government’s foreign policy apparatus or how foreign policy, embassies, foreign aid and investment, international monetary and trade policy, human rights, peacebuilding and diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, immigration policy, etc. work. There is no discussion of the military, national security, defense alliances and international treaties. There really is very little on the Executive Branch in general. There is nothing here on the tremendous influence of American democratic ideals on the rest of the world, and the many global connections around democracy, protests, and civil society (amplified through technology and social media). Likewise, there isn’t much attention to transnational linkages, based on historical connections (especially immigrants) and identity, and the ways they can be exercised to influence foreign policy or weaponized to suspect citizens of dual allegiances (as with Muslim Americans, American Jews, and Asian Americans).

Once again, this appears to be a very parochial approach to American government and inadequate in terms of helping students “develop the foundation of skills and dispositions to enable students to participate effectively and strategically in civic life.”

12. DC’s cultural diversity, global resources, and our local career landscape

This is Washington, DC and our standards should reflect the particularities of this city, and take advantage of its unique assets. We should be mindful of the resources at hand that can provide curriculum, professional development, field trip and enrichment activities for students. DC also is rich with career opportunities in government, cultural studies, and global fields of all kinds. Our social studies standards should be written in recognition of this fact. We alone in the US have the ability to directly expose our students to the levers of power on the local, state, national, and international stage, as well as to policymakers, activists, influence makers, and creatives from all over the world. Our standards should not look like any other state standards.

Even in writing the standards, we need to think hard about how our many students who do not attend school with diverse student populations can gain knowledge, experience, and cultural competencies through direct interaction, discussion, and collaboration with students with different backgrounds and identities. At present, students who attend culturally and linguistically diverse schools are privileged in this regard. We need to be sure that even those who don’t have such diversity within their school communities and neighborhoods still have the ability to benefit from deep interactions with peers and adults from a variety of national and cultural backgrounds.

13. Some concepts need further definition.

“**Identity**” needs to be defined. It does not appear to be analogous to other inquiry arc standards.

“**Indigenous**” applied globally is problematic and confusing. As in:

- 6.Hist.DHC.15 Use primary and secondary sources to evaluate the role of Indigenous people in the historic and contemporary development of Africa.
- 6.Hist.CCC.28 Use primary and secondary sources to evaluate the historic and contemporary role of Indigenous people in the development of Asia.

I believe this is asking for students to understand the role of Africans or Asians, as opposed to settlers or colonizers, in the development of Africa and Asia respectively. If so, the standard is way too broad to be meaningful. If “indigenous” has some other meaning, it should be explained. Likewise other terms used which come out of the US context (BIPOC and people of color) don’t have the same meaning in an a different global context.

The term “**contributions to global culture,**” or “**global culture**” needs to be explained. Our students should be able to learn about and appreciate the variety of world cultures for their own sakes, rather than as contributions to some unified global culture (if in fact this is what this term is supposed to mean).

References:

<https://asiasociety.org/education/educating-global-competence-preparing-our-youth-engage-world-1st-edition>

<https://www.oecd.org/education/Global-competency-for-an-inclusive-world.pdf>