

MEMORANDUM

TO: Arlington School Board
FROM: Social Studies Advisory Committee
DATE: April 6, 2015
SUBJECT: Non-Recommendation Year Report

Background

The Social Studies Advisory Committee (SSAC) trimmed down a bit this year, as a number of our wonderful new members from last year left the county for either deployment or other job opportunities. Those that remain, however, have been hard at work preparing for next year as we eagerly await the treasure-trove of information that will come from the Social Studies Program Evaluation slated to be completed this spring.

The SSAC continues its focus on looking for avenues to improve what we believe is already a very solid overall program. We are extremely grateful to Social Studies Office Supervisor, Cathy Hix, with whom we see eye-to-eye on a continued emphasis and reorientation of the program toward encouraging and enhancing the “4Cs” (collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity) as described by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (<http://www.p21.org/>). In that effort, we continue to focus on the specific higher-level thinking skills such as: creative and cooperative thinking; forming and defending fact-based opinions; understanding multiple perspectives; civic engagement, and multicultural awareness and sensitivity.

The following is an overview of our activities to date.

Updates on 2013-2014 Recommendations

Recommendation #1: All teachers in Grades 3, 4, and 5 receive training in the History Alive! teaching strategies by the end of the 2015-2016 school year.

The ongoing program evaluation allowed the Social Studies Office to get an estimate on the numbers of teachers in each grade who have been trained in History Alive!. Teachers moving in-and-out of APS makes this a somewhat fluid number to track. The Social Studies Office estimates that approximately 30-40 teachers are participating in the daylong training, while an additional 25-30 participate in the week-long summer training. These are K-12 teachers, so the vast majority of participants are secondary because of the existing requirement that all secondary social studies teachers have

History Alive! training. We are pleased to see that the Social Studies Office continues to look to find ways to give teachers the opportunity to receive HA! training. In addition to the regular summer course, the Social Studies Office has also developed a one-day training held twice, once during the summer and once during the school year. By best estimates, however, we are currently no where close to meeting the goal of this recommendation.

We encourage the School Board to continue to support and encourage the growth of this program as its cross-programmatic benefits are well established. Further to the point is that in 5th Grade, the course being taught uses History Alive! curriculum. Not having teachers trained in the pedagogy who are teaching the course is a sure fire method for minimizing the efficacy of the course for our students.

An important first step is to more accurately track teacher participation at the grade 3-5 level so that the Social Studies Office will be able to interact with school administrators more precisely, as well as an increased emphasis in this training by elementary school administrators throughout the county.

Recommendation #2: (A) Performance Assessment Tasks (PATs) should be developed for 3rd Grade by the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year, and (B) the School Board should require PATs for all 3rd Grade students if state legislation suspends or eliminates the 3rd Grade Standards of Learning (SOL) exam for Social Studies.

Legislation passed by the General Assembly in 2014 replaced the 3rd grade History and Social Sciences, the USI, and the USII Standards of Learning assessments with division level "alternate assessments". These assessments are developed by individual districts. In Arlington, performance assessment tasks are being used for these alternate assessments. The APS Social Studies Office's leadership in developing the Performance Assessment Tasks (PATs) allowed APS to move seamlessly into a leadership position in responding to the state legislation. As requested, the office developed 3rd Grade PATs and had developed previously the PATs for USI and USII. The administration of these assessments were required this school year and completion of the assessments was monitored by the Social Studies Office. We would note that other evaluation tools available in the state included some "SOL Copycat" exams such as those developed for Interactive Achievement. The fact that APS was prepared for this change with a far superior evaluative product is to be commended.

In addition to the PATs developed as alternate assessments, there are also PATs developed for grades 4 and 5 as well as 6-12. Revisions to the 3rd, 6th, and 7th Grade PATs are underway, inclusive of developing "snapshot" versions that can be integrated more easily by teachers concerned with losing instructional time. We will continue to be working with Cathy Hix to track the actual use of the PATs in elementary school as well

as look closely at the data from the Program Evaluation to help formulate recommendations for PATs in next year's report.

Update on Other Issues SSAC is Researching

SOL Revisions: VDOE is in the process of revising the Social Studies SOLs. Members of the SSAC made public comment on these revisions (see Appendix A). The new proposed standards include a reorganization of the Grade K-3 curriculum as well as an increased emphasis on skills. The timeline for implementing the standards will be determined as the new standards were just adopted in March 2015. The SSAC will be monitoring the proposed standards in the next year and discussing how to prepare teachers and students for the changes.

4th Grade Social Studies/Science Integration: The SSAC continues to be interested in better coordinating content for elementary school students on all subjects, but given the continued focus on math and reading scores, we believe it is that much more necessary for Science and Social Studies to have content that can maximize learning in both subjects. We have noted that the Social Studies Office developed a K-5 reading list based on input from teachers across multiple disciplines, but the list itself was specifically from the Social Studies Office, while other program offices offer teachers similar products. Repeated studies have shown that integrated subject learning is the most natural and productive way for children to learn, and elementary school is the most welcome space for better subject integration. We will continue to research this issue to see where the different program areas may be able to provide more integrated resources to teachers.

Expansion of Performance Assessment Tasks (PATs): The expansion in PAT use continues to be a priority for the SSAC given their ability to promote "4Cs" skill building. We await the data from the final program evaluation to get the best possible view on how the PATs are currently being used. We expect to develop specific recommendations in order to have this strategic focus become more ubiquitous within APS both for testing and as a teaching tool.

Developing Effective Digital & Online Courses for High School: SSAC members were given a thorough overview of the online and blended courses developed by the Social Studies Office. We are delighted that the Economics and Personal Finance course is evolving into a model class, offering a variety of options for students both during the regular school year and into the summer, while meeting numerous state requirements.

That said, SSAC members continue to be concerned about a race to develop online courses in "cart before the horse" fashion. Online classes should not be developed "just because we can" but should have specific goals and student needs in mind. For

example, online courses have the potential to facilitate accelerated learning and offer additional options for special needs students. In addition, we are interested in virtual courses that are of high quality and still maintain the effective pedagogy of face to face instruction.

The committee has expressed its concern to the Social Studies Office regarding student ability to take additional classes over-and-above the regular school day. As students and parents in a hyper-achieving county such as Arlington strive to differentiate themselves for college consideration, we are concerned that “optional” online courses will be seen as expected instead. We want to make sure that these classes are a benefit, not a burden to our students.

6th Grade Reading Focus on Core Subjects: SSAC hopes to spend the remainder of the year in direct consultation with the English and Language Arts Advisory Committee to discuss concrete proposals for more formal integration of Social Studies and Science into the 6th Grade Reading class. Building on both the model used in Jefferson Middle School, and the 9th Grade English/Social Studies integrated curriculum, APS is already replete with good practices and validation for this model. It can and should be expanded throughout APS middle school. We will continue to consult with the Science Advisory Committee as we believe both subjects would benefit from a model where the subjects are seen as connected rather than competing for space in this class.

Elementary School Team Teaching Curriculum Integration: We await the data from the Social Studies Program Evaluation in hope we might be able to mine better data to evaluate whether departmentalized teaching is of benefit to younger students. While the idea of allowing elementary school teachers to focus more in-depth on specific subjects is potentially beneficial, the potential downside of discommoding younger students not yet ready for a multi-class environment, and poor topical integration are still of concern.

Elementary/Middle School Online Research Training: The SSAC is very excited to learn that the Digital Learning Steering Committee is committed to the development and implementation of K-12 curriculum to address digital citizenship and internet safety. We understand that Common Sense Media will likely be used as a primary resource for this instruction to allow for alignment of content across all grade levels. We are encouraged by this as Common Sense Media has additionally developed resources to help students understand how to find academically acceptable online content while further developing critical thinking skills. The SSAC believes that online research training is a critical need currently unmet for APS students. Because we see this as a natural fit, we encourage the DLSC to ensure that online research training is incorporated in the curriculum currently addressing digital citizenship and internet safety.

We thank both the School Board and the Advisory Council on Instruction for their continued time and dedication to Arlington’s most precious resource—our kids.

Response from the Social Studies Office:

The Social Studies Office staff is thankful for the dedication and work of the SSAC members. They have participated in the Program Evaluation process and have provided valuable insight on the community perspective of issues related to social studies. I look forward to our continued progress on the items discussed above.

Committee Members:

Rob Carolla
Richard Easby
Scott Nathanson, Chair
Royce Sherlock
Pat Spann
Joe McBride, Student
Sarah Baker, ACI Vice Chair Liaison

Staff Liaisons:

Cathy Bonneville Hix, Supervisor
Diana Jordan, Specialist

APPENDIX A
Letters to VDOE

November 24, 2014

Ms. Christonya B. Brown
History and Social Science Coordinator
Virginia Department of Education

Dear Ms. Brown,

The Social Studies Advisory Committee (SSAC) for Arlington Public Schools have taken the time to closely examine the Proposed Revised History and Social Science Standards of Learning (SOL). As commissioned by the Arlington County School board, SSAC represents a diverse number of parents and stakeholders with rich experience in history, government, the military, education and educational textbook development, and, as importantly as any other factor, parenting children through Arlington Public Schools.

In that light, I would like to present a larger perspective on the revised SOLs. Members who have done specific sectional analysis will present you their feedback to the specific email addresses as per the October 24 memo from Steven R. Staples, Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Transition of language from “Know” to “Understand” a positive development: In numerous sections, SSAC members recognized and appreciated the effort of VDOE to refocus the standards on deeper, conceptual learning rather than a rote memorization of the facts that has proven so problematic for the teaching of Social Studies nationwide.

For example, the changes in the Elementary Virginia Studies unit VS1-VS10 continually replace “knowledge” for “understanding” in revisions. Also the Civics and Economics section replaces “using social science skills” for “demonstrating knowledge of.” In both these cases, the notion of deeper meaning and practical use is elevated over simple retention.

This change is the single most positive development in the revised standards, and SSAC members felt they could be strengthened further. This language should be at the core of revised SOL testing so as to not only get a better sense of how well Virginia students have inculcated the actual skills that precede the informational sections of each SOL level, but give teachers both the freedom and the responsibility to truly teach for meaning, rather than for simple retention.

What is “Historical Thinking?”—Rethinking Goals: Goals for the revised SOLs lead off the introduction of this document. It was surprising, however, that a term used in numerous occasions in the body of the revisions – “Historical Thinking” – is absent from the overarching goals.

Indeed, this term that is at the core of quality instruction in Social Studies is strangely ill-defined. VDOE should therefore define this term in its overarching goals, and restructure these goals accordingly. Members of the SSAC believe that Historical Thinking should be defined as the ability to develop, assert, defend, challenge, and revise an informed opinion on a subject based on thorough research, analysis, and understanding of the perspectives on a given issue. You will note that we did not say “Social Studies” or “Civic” or even “History” in this definition. This is because Historical Thinking is a skillset that

transcends the subject; giving the student the ability to think critically, holistically, and independently on any number of matters. It is a cross-subject academic skill, a civic skill, and a vital life skill. This portable skillset should be the foundation of Virginia's Social Studies standards. While some of this is implied in the current goals, it is neither explicit nor prioritized enough to truly permeate a set of standards that is still clearly focused more on a list of specific events and individuals rather than concepts and meaning.

Therefore, the development of Historical Thinking skills need to be placed as the top overarching priority, with the understanding and use of all the specific content areas as the method to inculcate these skills in our students. Both these standards and our kids' education would be substantially improved with this reorientation.

Members of the SSAC also expressed their concern with the inclusion of "instill in students a thoughtful pride in the history of America" within the SOL topline goals. While we all share the opinion that the history of our nation is both rich and exceptional, there was significant consternation on this subject as no member felt it should be the job of educators to "instill pride" much like it is not their job to "instill hatred" in others. Instead it is to "instill understanding"; thereby giving students the ability to evaluate America's special place in the world and join the continuing efforts of its citizens to forge "a more perfect union."

Concepts over names: The current revisions are very incongruous, in that they toggle significantly between very vague concepts and extreme specifics. You can see this right from almost the very beginning, in fact, as section 1.1 speaks of the general concept of the development of Virginia's early settlement, pivotal role in the development of our nation, and current contributions, but then takes an abrupt turn in section 1.2 toward a specific list of names that must be learned.

These specific lists, while clearly intended to provide teachers, students, and textbook writers with a common factual set to be evaluated, both limits the ability to teach content more expansively and reemphasizes simple retention over application and understanding. Simply putting the word "emphasis" on the list of names to attempt to say "you can go beyond these people" appears more a semantic "out" rather than an invitation toward focusing on real Historical Thinking.

Specific name lists should therefore be relegated to the curriculum guide, and with respect to the SOL instead be revised to "Concept Clusters." For example, the list of names in section 2.4 begins with Christopher Columbus; the only early explorer mentioned, and not even the explorer who first set foot on the North American continent.

Rather than simply listing his name, he could be part of a "Content Cluster" on early explorers. This would allow teachers the freedom to bring context to the major characters and make them more engaging in the process. In this example, teachers would be invited to bring in other figures such as Leif Ericson, the man who found the North American continent 500 years before Columbus, and Amerigo Vespucci, the man who our nation is actually named after.

Most of the name lists within the revised SOLs could be quite easily reworked into these clusters, with specific names given more as example than requirement. Testing could, and should, be then revised to

test the awareness of students on these concepts and these figures' roles rather than rote questions like "Who sailed the ocean blue in 1492?"

Cultural History: While some important cultural figures such as Jackie Robinson and Arthur Ashe are mentioned in earlier grades, there is no specific mention of cultural history until Middle School American Studies and the Harlem Renaissance other than cultural geography.

The influence of culture on the shape of events is essential to Historical Thinking, as it lends crucial perspective to see where the motivations for decisions oft come from. It also is a crucial part of making historic events come alive for students.

Each section of the SOL should therefore contain a specific cultural section to help immerse students in the society of the time period they are studying; thereby gaining real understanding of how perceptions shape events and events in turn shape perceptions.

Many thanks for your time, attention, and efforts to help bring our students the best rounded Social Studies education possible.

Sincerely,

Scott Nathanson, Chair
Arlington Public Schools Social Studies Advisory Committee
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For more information, contact:

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From: Royce Sherlock <royce.sherlock@gmail.com>

Date: November 24, 2014 at 8:51:00 AM EST

To: HSS_2015_CE_GOVT@doe.virginia.gov

Subject: Comment on new SOL Standards for Virginia and U.S. Government

I am writing to express my enthusiastic support for proposed new standard GOVT.16 (f) regarding the importance of "keeping informed about current issues." (GOVT.16 reads: "The student will apply social science skills to understand that in a democratic republic, thoughtful and effective participation in civic life is characterized by")

Students at every level of social studies should be encouraged to think about what is currently happening in their community and should be expected to broaden their scope of concern as they mature. By high school, students should be regularly exploring multiple sources of news and commentary about their local community, state affairs, and national and world affairs. Social studies teachers at all levels of middle school and high school instruction should spend some amount of time each week encouraging this habit and helping students learn how to use available sources of information, including print newspapers.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed standards.

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Parent of Arlington Public Schools Students in 6th & 10th grades
Member, APS Social Studies Advisory Committee