

# Response to the School Board Advisory Committee Working Group:

Anjy Cramer, Chair, Social Studies Advisory Committee<sup>i</sup>

Currently, I chair the Social Studies Advisory Committee. During SY2024-25, we comprised of:

- **60% BIPOC member representation**
- **50% high school students; one is now our Vice-Chair (class of 2026)**
- **A disABLED person AND parents with children with IEPs/504 plans**
- **US born and those born/raised in the Global South**
- **A parent who was an English Learner who received free school meals as a child**

We represented both North and South Arlington, a mix of elementary and middle schools. Among upper schools, we had participants from all three comprehensive high schools and H-B Woodlawn.

This diverse group was not formed intentionally; rather we share a passion for history and social sciences, and how these subjects are taught to our children and others. **We embody the diversity, equity, and inclusion goals of the Working Group, showing how representing varied backgrounds benefits our students, schools and programs.**

This document aims to provide a historical overview of APS' Social Studies program from the 1950s to today, explaining not only WHY Social Studies is an essential core subject; but also, why our advisory subcommittee should continue to exist within any new organizational structure.

## A Short History of APS' Advisory Councils and Committees

One of the initial [steps](#) taken by our first elected School Board in 1947 was to establish a citizens' advisory committee structure. The specific purpose of these councils/committees was to [improve classroom instruction](#) in Arlington by developing a [modern school system](#) from the ground up.

At first, the council was made up of PTA members from each school. However, a few years later the Board [changed its approach](#) to recruitment by inviting civic associations, community groups and other interested individuals to join these groups. This allowed them to tap into the expertise of Arlington's well-educated community.

Originally named the Parents' Council on Instruction, the group was renamed to the [Community Council on Instruction](#) a few years later... Over the decades, it underwent several nomenclature changes before adopting its current title, the [Advisory Council on Teaching and Learning](#). Throughout its history, this Council has had several quasi-independent [subcommittees](#) operating under its umbrella. **The first elected school board created these citizen advisory committees specifically to REMOVE the power from the Superintendent and the school system, giving stakeholders a voice, thus democratizing decision-making. APS appears to be moving away from this founding principle with the current proposal.**<sup>ii</sup>

More recently, in his book *Gaining on the Gap: Changing Hearts, Minds and Practice*, former APS District Superintendent Dr. Robert Smith described how the Advisory Council on Instruction (ACI) and its subcommittees were "allies" in his effort to close APS's Achievement/Opportunity Gap (p. 56). And APS succeeded! **Between 1998 to 2009, the percentage of APS students passing the SOLs increased from 65% to 90%. For Black Students the pass rate rose from 37% to 77%, Hispanic students, 47% to 84% and despite not centering White able-bodied students, even their scores rose from 82% to 96%** (p. 34). I hope history can repeat itself through our joint work!

## APS and SSAC: A Shared History

SSAC has been operating under this Advisory Council framework for at least fifty years. The historical records start in 1975, when the first social studies recommendations were made alongside other programs (pp. 8-9). Our committee continued its work through the 1980s, 1990s, and to the present day. (Subcommittee recommendations from 2016 to the present are available [here](#) and [here](#)). Reviewing past recommendations shows that SSAC has consistently advocated for:

- **Dedicated social studies instructional time** (1989, pp. 12-13), which resembles our current Instructional Time PIPs (p. 6); also noted in 2021 (p. 10), 2022 (p. 16), and see [Recommendation #2 from 2025](#). We plan to revisit instructional time again this school year.
- A **global education** that reflects the history of our entire community (1989, pp. 2, 14, 31-32); a [2017 recommendation](#); 2020's recommendation called for an [equity audit](#) across all programs). Look out for this year's recommendation on this topic as well.
- **Integrating social studies learning across programs** (1989, pp. 12-13, 2016 recommendation, p. 8, [2025 Recommendation #2](#)); and this will also be addressed in the upcoming recommendation this year.)

SSAC remains committed to its foundational goals, its concerns lingering across decades.

## SSAC Today

We wish you had attended one of SSAC's meetings during the development of your scope of work and recommendations. You would have learned that:

- Last year, our initial recommendation: Formal [Notetaking Instruction](#) in 8<sup>th</sup> Grade World Geography was introduced by a history professor who observed that many students, including APS graduates, lacked this crucial skill. This new initiative aims to enhance not only note-taking abilities, but also the effective use of these student-created documents for studying and retaining content.
- The [second recommendation](#) involved shifting part of the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade US History I curriculum to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. A sixth-grade parent whose neurodivergent child was struggling through US History I... and had an "E" in the class... took on this task. A series of bullet points regarding how this change would benefit her child stayed in the final document.
  - **An easier transition from elementary school to middle school.** Teaching US History in both the 5th and 6th grades will provide continuity for rising middle school students, and may even improve social studies learning outcomes, as students will have been already introduced to US History, and concepts the year beforehand. Familiarity with the textbook between the two grades will help students acclimate quickly to social studies instruction in middle school.
  - **More equitable instruction.** Because 6th Grade US History II will be slower paced and sequenced to aid all students in learning and retaining social studies content, it will benefit any student who struggles with the rapid pace of the current 6<sup>th</sup> grade content including but not limited to English Learners and Students with disABILITIES.

From Spring 2025, SSAC's Recommendation #2 Final Draft

We are currently discussing which recommendations to pursue this school year. SSAC is eager to **prioritize centering English Learners (ELs) within the Social Studies curriculum**. ELs often find US and Virginia History challenging because they have limited prior knowledge and interest, having immigrated from countries with their own distinct local and national histories. Moreover, the heavy reading and writing demands required in Social Studies can be overwhelming for many ELs due to their limited English proficiency. Integrating the immigrant experience and the influence of their home regions

into the Virginia and U.S History curricula could engage these students with familiar content and potentially improve their learning outcomes. This initiative will require a multi-year effort in close collaboration with the English Learner Office.

With the possibility that our committee may dissolve next spring, we lament what we might not address this year. Our Social Studies program at Syphax remains [understaffed](#). Every year, we consider recommending enhancements to elementary school civic education.

**I question whether this new supercommittee structure will be able to center Social Studies in ways that strengthen not only the program; but demonstrate how a foundational social studies education could improve student outcomes across subject areas throughout the division. See below.**

## **Will SOCIAL STUDIES REMAIN a Priority: APS' Strategic Plan**

APS' Strategic Plan focuses on improving SOL/PBA pass rates amongst all core content areas, increasing enrollment in advanced academics programs, and boosting achievement in reading, math, and science. Meanwhile, Social Studies is mentioned minimally. Will Social Studies remain a *core priority* for an academic supercommittee tasked with implementing APS's strategic plan?

## **Social Studies Instruction Enhances Literacy Outcomes**

Social studies should have been more prominent in the strategic plan for this reason: research strongly supports that Social Studies instruction can improve ELA learning outcomes. Best exemplified by this NCSS report, [How Social Studies Improves Early Literacy](#), this study demonstrates that **when students receive an additional thirty minutes of Social Studies instruction per day, there is a statistically significant improvement in their literacy skills – the only subject to show such a clear impact.** Moreover, the study found that students from lower-income families who received extra Social Studies instruction time made greater reading progress than those with less time, with similar gains observed among students from higher-income households. This approach may be more effective than extended ELA instruction blocks often used to support struggling readers.

## **Potential Effects of State/Federal Legislation/Directives on Local Social Studies Instruction**

Even when two core subjects are addressed simultaneously to enhance learning outcomes for both, forces may still further undermine social studies. In the last legislative session, [SB855](#) was introduced, proposing changes to the state assessment system by allowing Permissive Local Alternative Assessments as an option for Virginia Studies (4<sup>th</sup>), Civics (7<sup>th</sup>), and all End-Of-Course social studies classes. This change would have eliminated state-required social studies SOL testing altogether. Although this bill failed in committee, **what will happen if similar legislation is introduced again? An established and knowledgeable SSAC would respond more quickly and efficiently than the Academic Council, even if the Council forms an ad hoc committee to handle sudden issues during the school year.**

I am also concerned about VDOE's new elevated SOL cut scores; and its new tiered system of accreditation to classify schools heavily weighted towards content mastery. This will impact the accreditation of many under-resourced APS schools while imposing unfunded mandates to address opportunity/achievement gaps. **APS's Social Studies [SOL 2024-25 test scores](#), particularly in high school are not close to APS's 90% targets, but it can be explained.** Those taking the test in high school

are a small subset of struggling learners who need one verified credit to graduate and are not representative of our overall student body. Regardless, Social Studies pass rates are concerning and SSAC, in partnership with the Social Studies Office could be an additional resource to monitor and promote student success through our recommendations centering marginalized learners.

## What is Occurring “Outside:” Social Studies needs True Advocates

Finally, the Social Studies Advisory Committee (SSAC) is essential due to the ongoing controversies surrounding the teaching of history and social sciences that have persisted for decades. Whose history is taught? Why is the concept of “controversy” often maligned? SSAC has supported APS through every debate concerning the study of our world, its diverse cultures, and the people who embody them.

Alice Sufit, a former APS Social Studies teacher, served on SSAC during the 1980s. In her 1990 oral history interview with the Arlington Public Library, she observed that at that time, there was a push to focus the social studies curriculum on memorizing facts – such as dates, events, and geography - and promoting “American Values,” while downplaying critical thinking skills and inquiry-based learning among students (p. 48). Similar discussions reemerged during the 2023 revision of the History and Social Science Standards. The debate over how history is taught in APS led the Superintendent to ask our former SSAC Chairperson if the committee could address this matter. SSAC drafted and issued a [statement supporting](#) APS’ social studies teachers, which was presented as public comment at a school board meeting, and it is available on the APS’ website.

Based on recent hard history, this trend will continue. There are efforts to rewrite our shared history to fit dominant culture narratives. [Civics education](#) is first.

**Social studies is the means by which students learn how to understand themselves fully and how to participate in society... within a democracy. Through the five “C’s” - critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication, and citizenship skills - students learn to engage with diverse peoples, cultures, and viewpoints. Through our history, civics, and (elective) sociology classes, it's where we learned how to become advocates. SSAC can strengthen your voice and be your shield as you navigate the coming years. We are prepared to fully support of our school division, its staff and every student now and in the future.**

**I respectfully ask that the Working Group vote in favor of “OPTION B”; and that SSAC continues to function as a subcommittee within any future Academic Council.**

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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<sup>i</sup> Due to time constraints, SSAC was not able to reach a quorum to endorse this statement. This statement only represents the chair’s views.

<sup>ii</sup> I would like to thank John Stanton and Heather Crocetto from the Charlie E Clark Center for Local History, Central Library for their help in locating the original source documents referenced herein.