

Review of Minnesota Academic Standards Final Draft History and Social Studies by Joseph Onosko

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Thank you, again, for inviting me to participate in your review process. As you will see, I'm concerned about the direction social studies is taking in the great state of Minnesota. (I'm from Wisconsin originally and have very fond memories of fishing for walleye and pike in northern Minnesota.) If you'd like clarification on any points, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-3495 or jonosko@comcast.net.

As stated in my reaction to the first draft back in November, I was quite concerned about the sheer volume of information and ideas listed in the document. (I also stated that probably not a single person living in Minnesota possesses the knowledge required by the standards). I should also have mentioned in November that I couldn't think of another state framework that demanded of students and teachers as much content coverage. Unfortunately, a review of the latest draft standards leaves me with the same impression, so I now feel compelled to explain more fully why these standards are detrimental to the children and educational system of Minnesota.

To what extent did teachers and school administrators participate in the construction of this document? I have worked closely with teachers--either as a researcher, consultant or teacher--in eight states that range from Maine to California, and I'm convinced that all of them would say the coverage demands of the Minnesota standards would prevent the creation of meaningful and effective learning experiences for students. I strongly recommend that the committee attempt to map out how 6th grade teachers, for example, could effectively cover Minnesota history (from Paleo-Indian pre-history to the present), all of world history (1450 to the present), the geography of Minnesota, the U.S. and links to the world, and a number of "essential skills" in less than 180 hours of instruction?

The Minnesota Department of Education's web link to public reaction, "Social studies standards with public comment" (at: http://education.state.mn.us/stellent/groups/public/documents/translatedcontent/pub_038364.jsp), seems to suggest very little teacher support for the standards given the hundreds of criticisms by teachers about the problem of too much coverage (as well as the concern that many concepts are developmentally inappropriate). Implementation will be sporadic at best if teachers' concerns are ignored.

I might add that history teachers at your colleges and universities do not require this kind of broad and comprehensive coverage of their undergraduate majors! I reviewed the requirements of history majors at three of your most prestigious schools, the University of Minnesota, St. Olaf's and Macalester, and all three institutions emphasize in-depth study over broad content coverage. In addition, each program seems quite lax about the particular history their students learn as 70-80% of the approximately 10 courses required

for a major are electives selected by the students! These institutions, presumably, have known for years that the Minnesota students are not taught a vast and comprehensive overview of history (at least not until the current standards!), yet this fact never compelled them to require such a regime of their majors! Why? Presumably because the opportunity cost is too great--something I will explain below.

I fully acknowledge the difficulty in determining what counts as "essential" versus simply "desirable" knowledge by the end of grade 12, however, the task is made all the more difficult if the framework lacks a definition of "social studies", including fundamental goals and purposes. Without a definition and purpose statement, readers of this document can only infer that the goal of Minnesota social studies education is to inculcate in students a broad but superficial understanding of information and ideas contained in four disciplines (i.e., history, geography, political science/civics, and economics). Perhaps an articulation of the fundamental purposes of Minnesota social studies would serve as a guide to pare back this mountain of content. For example, is it essential that Minnesota students know about "isolines" on climate maps or "choropleths" on income maps (see the second geography standard for 7th grade) and, if so, can the committee explain why? Or, why must all students "...describe the patterns of languages on the surface of the Earth and identify patterns of change"? (See the 5th geography strand for 8th Grade.) To what larger ends or purposes does this factual understanding serve?

The public input web site also includes many concerns about the "developmental appropriateness" of the standards. Cognitive science research over the past 20 years has revealed that students can, with proper instruction and sufficient time (i.e., in-depth study), undertake very sophisticated kinds of thinking--undermining many of the developmental limitation claims of Piaget and others. Instead of claiming cognitive deficiencies due to age, I would instead ask why one would want children (and teachers) to be spend valuable school time trying to acquire certain understandings at such a young age! For example, why does Minnesota what their 8 year old 3rd graders to "construct an overview of the eras included in world history"? Or, why spent valuable instructional time requiring 10 year olds to know how "...technology promoted development in certain parts of the U.S. between 1800 and 1877" (a 5th grade U.S. History standard)? Again, are there larger purposes here or is knowledge of 19th century technological change the primary or essential end?

Let's assume for a moment that the goal or purpose of a state curriculum framework is to create competent young adults who possess information, ideas, skills, attitudes and beliefs that enable them to do the following:

- (a) participate effectively in our democratic system of government as a public citizen;
- (b) participate effectively in the workplace and to be economically self-sufficient as a private citizen/worker; and,
- (c) experience an active life of the mind, enjoying and appreciating the riches of our highly advanced and diverse culture.

I don't believe the current framework effectively promotes the above purposes. Let's start with "a", our public citizen. The current draft is inadequate with respect to preparing our next generation of citizens to effectively engage in the political process, primarily because the standards are almost exclusively about "knowing" and "understanding" rather than "analyzing", "evaluating" and "doing." More specifically, the standards need greater emphasis on citizen action skills and student decision making about public issues--both past and present. Students must learn to identify ethical sub-issues that underlie public policy issues (e.g., the "public good" vs. individual liberty or freedom of speech vs. national security, and so on) and construct justifications for choosing one democratic value over another when they conflict in a given context. Similarly, students need to be able to identify and examine the various factual and definitional sub-issues that underlie all public policy issues. Students need practice in public speaking, public debate, research skills to access information and different points of view, interviewing experience, and so on. (The state of Michigan has done a nice job of identifying the kinds of knowledge and skills needed by our future public citizens, specifically sections "V: Inquiry", "VI: Public Discourse and Decision Making", and "VII: Citizen Involvement" on pp. 43-45 at: http://www.michigan.gov/documents/MichiganCurriculumFramework_8172_7.pdf .)

In short, what's needed is much more balance between "knowing" versus "thinking and doing". Some might call it a distinction between superficial knowing versus developing "skilled use of knowledge." A commitment to thinking and skill development requires, by definition, in-depth exploration and repeated application, both of which cannot occur in a regimen of vast and superficial content coverage. Cognitive complexity occurs when lessons involve content complexity, and content complexity is achieved through in-depth study. The current framework's galaxy of content necessitates quick skim and very limited opportunities for thinking, skilled application and intellectual growth. Quick transmission of information through lecture, video, textbooks and other "more efficient" (thought not effective) instructional formats tend to replace class discussion, primary and secondary source readings, simulations such as mock trials, oral presentations, student research, class debates, and so on. I have described at length the deleterious effect broad content coverage has on classroom thoughtfulness, and student thinking and engagement. (See Onosko, J. (1991). "Barriers to the promotion of higher-order thinking in social studies." Theory and Research in Social Education, 19(4), 341-366.)

I strongly encourage the committee to review the very exciting research of University of Wisconsin Professor Fred Newmann in the Chicago public schools. Newmann and associates were able to significantly improve student achievement on state and national tests regardless of gender, ethnic group, or socioeconomic background when students experienced in-depth content, challenging tasks, and classroom discussion. (Go to: <http://www.consortium-chicago.org/publications/p0a02.html> .) Stated another way, student achievement on broad, coverage-oriented standardized tests, paradoxically, increased (rather than decreased) when students studied fewer topics in-depth.

Turning now to purpose "b" above, the framework does not effectively contribute to the creation of economically independent, skilled citizen/workers. The almost exclusive emphasis on knowledge acquisition in four disciplines, particularly history, is far

removed from the kind of learning outcomes advocated by the business community and the U.S. Department of Labor--whether it be today or in previous decades. I encourage the committee to review the U.S. Labor Department's SCANS America 2000 Report, "What Work Requires of Schools." (Go to: <http://wdr.doleta.gov/SCANS/whatwork/whatwork.html>.) Again, the lack of balance between knowing versus thinking, doing, and skill development will not prepare Minnesota's young people for the world of work and develop in students the competencies outlined by our nation's business leaders and the U.S. Department of Labor.

Finally, cultivating an "active life of the mind" (purpose "c" above), including a sense of joy and wonder about learning and the world, is not effectively promoted by the current framework. The breakneck pace needed to "get it all in" will dampen student interest in and appreciation of history and the social sciences. Minnesota's public input web site that I referred to above contains numerous teacher warnings on the negative effect these new standards will have on student engagement and enthusiasm for learning. Social studies consistently receives the lowest ranking in survey polls when students are asked to identify their least favorite subject in school. The current standards will only enhance this perception.

Below are some relatively minor observations and suggestions compared to the above diatribe on content coverage:

- * The distinction between "benchmarks" and "examples" is unclear. Some benchmarks have examples embedded within the statement while examples for other benchmarks are placed in the "examples" section. Also, why do some benchmarks not have examples?

- * Related, be aware that "examples" often become "the standard" when assessments are created. Given teachers' limited time and the galaxy of content to cover, carefully select examples, as they are likely to be the only ones taught by teachers.

- * Many of the "essential skills" look more like content standards than "skills". For example, "place events in chronological order" (an "Essential Skill" for Kindergarten) involves the same type of knowledge acquisition as "...naming the Presidents of the United States" (the 3rd Gov't & Citizenship standard for Kindergarten). Similarly, why is the "concept of time" a skill but the "concept of location" not?