

Review of Minnesota Academic Standards History and Social Studies by Harold (Hal) Balsiger

Thank you for the opportunity to review the first working draft of the Minnesota K-12 Social Studies Standards. I wish to congratulate you and the standards drafting committees for contributing to what I know can be a difficult and provocative task. The parents, educators, representatives from business and higher education who participated can only help to strengthen the quality of your final product and assure it meets the needs of all the children of Minnesota. I hope my reactions and questions do not in any way diminish or disparage the excellent work that has been invested to date.

Your e-mail requested biographic information. Allow me to share briefly some of my background in an attempt to offer a context for my biases. I have served the public schools of Wisconsin for 35 years. My career has taken me to urban, suburban and rural schools: eight years as a high school Social Studies Instructor, seven years as a High School Principal, six years as a Middle School Principal and the last fourteen years as an Administrator in the Teaching and Learning Department of the Madison Metropolitan School District. I have taught in the associate degree programs of Wisconsin's technical schools and worked with undergraduate, graduate and doctoral candidates at the university level. I have served on numerous accreditation teams. I have served as an outside evaluator for grants and offered numerous reviews of school district K-12 curriculum guides. I was active in the creation of the Wisconsin Assessment Consortium. I have recently served on the Office of School Service Advisory Board of the Wisconsin State Historical Society. I have presented workshops and staff development at the local, state and national level. The two most recent successful grants I have authored and administered related to Social Studies were *Beyond the Textbook* (40 high school social studies instructors working to integrate technology and inquiry in the social studies classroom) and *Internet Detectives* (75 middle school instructors at 10 middle school sites working to assist students in searching and evaluating resources available electronically). My most recent publication was as co-author of The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's *Planning Curriculum in Social Studies*. In June of 2003 I retired from the Madison Metropolitan School District.

I have made the following assumptions as I read your working draft:

- ~ The benchmarks are expectations held for all students.
- ~ A benchmark translates the standard into what the student should understand and be able to do at a developmentally appropriate level (grade level).
- ~ There was a purposeful disjoining between History and Social Studies in your draft.
- ~ The disciplines of the Social Studies in your draft document offer a formal framework including only Government and Citizenship, Geography and Economics.

I have chosen to frame my responses to the draft in the form of questions.

1. Did your drafting committees include any sociologists, anthropologists, or psychologists? Where, for example, is a consideration of how people learn or learning theory? What is the role of groups and organizations, other than nations, at the local, national or international level (as in international terrorists groups)? Where do students confront the artifacts of the past and understand them as rich sources of history?
2. Why is there a quantitative skew in benchmarks relating to Western History? Is non-western history only paid lip service in the benchmarks? Is it the authors' intent to make the focus of the World History benchmarks European History or European-related history? Are the benchmarks reflective of a history of the world? Given the nature of current international relations and interdependence, do these benchmarks allow the students of Minnesota the opportunity to learn the rich and diverse backgrounds (both historical and cultural) they will need to participate in a global community?
3. A recent joint declaration by the American Historical Association and the National Council For Social Studies reads, "*too fully and properly understand the rights and responsibilities that are central to civic life in a democracy, students must acquire historical knowledge. They must also be able to analyze historical issues and make informed, deliberative decisions while using historian's habits of mind.*" (Drake, 2003) Where in the benchmarks do students demonstrate the historian's habits of mind? Are the benchmarks designed to only acquire historical knowledge or will students ever be expected to do history (or civics)?
4. I count approximately 850 benchmarks. Do you know any educators, legislators, scholars or parents who could demonstrate proficiency with this vast range of knowledge and skills? Are all benchmarks created equal? Do all of these benchmarks require an enduring understanding? Are all of these benchmarks important to know? Aren't some of these just worth being familiar with in a

unique context? How many of these do I need to recall or if I need to know could I look up? What of these benchmarks are essential? Are the benchmarks that require factual information as important as those that address key concepts, generalizations or processes within the disciplines? Would you consider placing your draft on a diet? Social Studies and History will never lack for content! A major challenge facing the Social Studies and History is the ever-increasing amount of information. How do the benchmarks assure students can organize, analyze, and evaluate current, and new issues and problems and construct new concepts and understandings?

5. Why is the strand Essential Skills only occasionally developed within the draft? Specifically, where are the Essential Skills of investigation, communications or participation in the Social Studies disciplines addressed in the benchmarks? Allow me to offer an example of what might be benchmarks K-10 for the Essential Skill of Investigation:

- ~Gathers and records information from direct and indirect experiences of people and places.
- ~Selects, compares and categorizes relevant information.
- ~Frames questions and identifies sources of information.
- ~Identifies the types of data and sources required by a task and decides how they will be used to gain information.
- ~Recognizes significant issues in an area of investigation and selects suitable ways of investigating them.
- ~Explains various ways of viewing an issue and the information associated with it.
- ~Uses the methodologies of the learning area to investigate different perspectives on an issue.
- ~Presents a research proposal and designs a research plan using the methodologies of social and environmental inquiry.

Social Studies classrooms provide abundant opportunities for students to apply interpretive skills to form generalizations and construct meaning from information, whether in the form of textual data, observed phenomena or other stimuli. Where are the benchmarks for interpretation, issue analysis, problem solving, reasoned persuasion or research/investigation?

6. I reviewed the taxonomy of process words used in the benchmarks for grades 6,7, and 8. Using the six traditional thinking skills categories of Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation (Bloom or Rank/Hughes), over 95 % of the process verbs are found in the first three levels of the taxonomy (Knowledge, Comprehension, Application). One hundred and seven of the benchmarks use *understand* a level two (Comprehension) verb as the process verb. Next in frequency are *describe* (level two) and *identify* (level one) used approximately 20 times each. Approximately 17 of the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade benchmarks have process verbs residing in the top three categories of the thinking skills verb taxonomy. In my review of the verbs used in the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade benchmarks, approximately 70% are in the first three levels and 30% in

the highest levels. I am aware, for example, that we can debate at which level *explain* should appear (level 2 or 5) depending upon the complexity of the description the benchmark solicits. It is my studied observation that most of the benchmarks in the draft require lower order thinking skills.

Is it the intent of the committees to have such a clear and significant skew in the level of skills required to meet the benchmarks and are these truly a rigorous set of expectations? Are rigorous standards defined by the quantity of benchmarks or the degree of difficulty of the benchmarks? Is the purpose of the draft to cover or uncover the Social Studies for the students of Minnesota?

A serious and fundamental challenge faces the Social Studies. Simultaneous with the information and access to information explosion is the discovery of an appropriate tension or balance between what we expect students to know and what they should be able to do. I want to thank you for sharing your continuing struggle around these issues with me. I enjoyed reacting to the draft and wish you well in completing your task.

I grant permission for my comments to be posted on your Minnesota Department of Education web site.