

March 15, 2018

To Whom it May Concern,

We, the Marshwood Middle School Social Studies Department, appreciate the opportunity to provide commentary on the *Maine Learning Results* Social Studies Standards. In developing a standards-driven curriculum for our respective levels, we have undertaken the task of breaking down each standard and, while coordinating with the *Common Core State Standards*, planning of units of study to allow students to demonstrate proficiency in myriad ways. We have reached the following conclusions:

***Breadth vs. Depth**

The Civics/Government, Geography, and Economics standards are fairly intuitive and self-explanatory. These standards, while containing a great deal of information, manage to be specific without being confining, and offer the teachers direction without taking away the freedom to teach and assess their students as they see fit. The Research (A1-A3) and History (E1-E2) standards, however, are so expansive that, at the middle school level, any effort to genuinely teach and assess each standard necessitates a survey-like “coverage model” at the expense of deep, genuine learning.

The Research band of standards, while offering a detailed description of the research, goes too far; any genuine service learning or civic action project (A3) risks falling into the “jumping through hoops” category by requiring a (real or simulated) checklist of all the steps of the research process. Because of the sheer volume of performance indicators through which students demonstrate proficiency, any worthwhile planning requires combining the research and service-learning/civic action aspects, even at the expense of genuine knowledge. The main reason for this is simply the lack of time, as necessitated by the sheer breadth of History standards.

The History Standards, covering four-hundred-plus years of American and Maine history *and* three-*thousand*-plus years of world history, are simply untenable in three years of middle school. Coupled with the Geography, Civics, and Economics standards *and* a research-driven service learning project, the idea that *all* standards can be adequately taught and assessed in roughly 450 hours of middle school social studies instruction is shaky at best. In this model, teachers must resort to using isolated, one-time, hit-or-miss, “courtesy consideration” of some ideas. Since “a strong social studies education depends on a clear understanding of its interrelated disciplines” (from introduction), expecting students from ages 10 to 14 to develop this clear understanding in a three-year period in *all* identified historical areas is laughable. Teachers are forced to sacrifice clarity and genuine understanding in the name of coverage, or are forced to ignore large chunks

of history in order to produce clear, genuine understanding. The totality of the standards strive for a goal that is unrealistic for the average middle school student.

***Clarity (History Standards)**

The disparity between the specificity of, for instance, the prescribed research process and the vagueness of the SAU-selected eras of the history standards is unnerving. Without further clarification about the “essentials” of which era(s) is/are to be covered, and with each SAU presumably making independent choices, the subsequent lack of consistency between districts and schools begs the question as to how “essential” each era is. This inconsistency saps confidence in the standards themselves, from the perspective of teachers, students, and parents.

Furthermore, at the middle school level, students arrive in class with less exposure to social studies events, ideas, and concepts as elementary schools focus on math and ELA instruction. The emergence of the Common Core State Standards has precipitated a shift in focus that has left students without a sufficient social studies background to guide future instruction; intelligent, capable students often give the impression of being “clueless,” for no other reason than they have not been exposed to basic social studies contexts. As long as this gap in elementary instruction persists, many students at middle and high school levels are set up for failure.

To a degree, these issues of elementary social studies instruction and assessment are products of SAU decisions, which further highlights the irony of the situation: many decisions produced under the guise of SAU freedom act as a hindrance to the statewide expectations for middle and high schools.

***Genuine Learning/Loss of Teachable Moments/Experiences**

While this concern could be included in the “breadth vs. depth” discussion, the plethora of specific expectations (and the race against time to meet these expectations) comes at the expense of the “teachable moments” that inspired many teachers to enter the field in the first place. As SAUs strive for consistency and “equitable learning experiences” by pigeonholing teachers into scripted lesson plans for the sake of assessing and reporting on standards, lost in the shuffle is the impromptu, responsive handling of current issues that bring learning to life.

***Outdated**

Social studies educators are in the unique position in that the content they are responsible for is perpetually expanding. For instance, the “1961 to present” band has expanded from 36 years to 57, and includes such essential topics as the War on Terror, multiple global conflicts, and the emergence of social media as a viable form of political discourse. Limiting the History Standards to fewer eras with more connections to today’s global community would go a long way toward achieving the goal of all educators: creating lifelong learners.

***Wheels Spinning**

Overall, the aforementioned lack of consistency in the standards gives us the feeling of “spinning our wheels.” For all the specificity in performance indicators for students, the vagueness of the “selected by SAU” historical eras of significance leaves us questioning the value of our efforts; we have been working for three years unpacking these densely worded standards, which are currently on the verge of revision, if not extinction. While we can appreciate that the nature of education is cyclical and that we should be constantly reflecting on our practice, it is our contention that the standards should be pared down to the essentials; in order to preserve the primary purpose of social studies, “to develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world,” there should be a greater focus on skills than on “learning” facts that will be soon forgotten.

Thank you for inviting our commentary. If you have any questions or comments, please contact our department curriculum coordinator, Andy Rowe, at andy.rowe@rsu35.org.

Sincerely,

Marshwood Middle School Social Studies Department
626 HL Dow Highway
Eliot, ME 03903

