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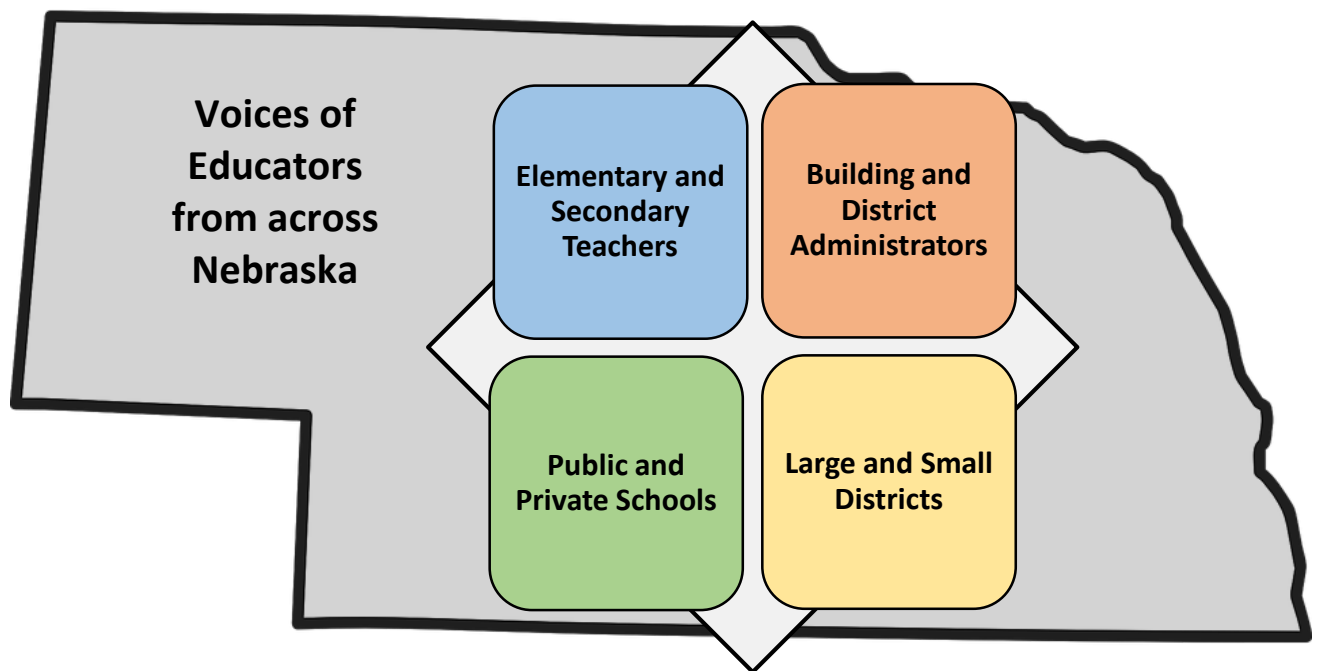
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Summary Report of the 2018 Educator Focus Groups on the Nebraska Social Studies Standards



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University of Nebraska at Omaha
2018

Respectfully Submitted to the
Nebraska Department of Education

Summary Report of the 2018 Educator Focus Groups on the Nebraska Social Studies Standards

Overview

In June and July, 2018, the Nebraska Department of Education invited teachers and administrators to provide feedback on the Nebraska Social Studies Standards. Nebraska educators provided input by participating in eight focus groups intended to complement a previous survey of Nebraska’s elementary and secondary social studies teachers. Individuals submitted written input if they were not able to participate in a scheduled focus group. The information gathered from the focus group participants offered opportunity to: 1) develop insights and a deeper understanding regarding K-12 educator perceptions of the current Nebraska Social Studies Standards and 2) solicit input for the upcoming review of these standards.

Dr. Connie Schaffer from the University of Nebraska at Omaha conducted the focus groups and assured participants their input would be confidentially summarized in a manner that did not identify individuals, schools, and/or districts. The first focus group was conducted in a face-to-face setting during the Nebraska Social Studies Conference held in Lincoln. The remaining seven focus groups were conducted via video conference technology with unique conferences for elementary teachers, secondary teachers, and school and district administrators.

In total, 51 individuals provided input including 35 teachers and 14 administrators (building administrators and district-level) representing public and private schools and districts as well as two educators outside of K-12 settings (non-profit organization and higher education institution). The vast majority (88%) of teachers who participated currently teach at the secondary level. Most (78%) participants provided input via the video conferences.

The Educational Service Units (ESU) represented by the focus group participants included:

ESU 1 – Wakefield	ESU 5 – Beatrice	ESU 9 – Hastings	ESU 16 – Ogallala
ESU 2 – Fremont	ESU 6 – Fremont	ESU 10 – Kearney	ESU 18 – Lincoln
ESU 3 – Omaha	ESU 7 – Columbus	ESU 13 – Scottsbluff	ESU 19 – Omaha
ESU 4 – Auburn			

Participants identified their schools or districts as located in the following communities:

Arlington	Deshler	Madison	Ponca
Auburn	Grand Island	Minatare	Shelby-Rising City
Bellevue	Hastings	Millard	Sidney
Bennington	Kearney	North Platte	South Sioux City
Blair	La Vista	Oakland	Superior
Central City	Lincoln	Omaha	Wakefield
Chadron	Loomis	Peru	Wilber-Clatonia
Columbus			

Each focus group lasted approximately one hour. The questions listed below guided the discussion of the focus groups.

- What standards or what about the standards do you find to be most/least useful in your instruction? Why?
- What standards or what about the standards do you consider to be vague and how would you restate those standards?
- What is one thing in the way the standards are currently written that should be maintained/changed? Why?
- How important is the teaching of social studies to leaders in your district? Why?
- What resources have you found to be most useful to teach the standards?
- What professional development have you found to be most helpful in preparing to teach or supporting your teaching of the standards?

Because the focus groups were intended to give educators opportunity to share their perspectives on the Nebraska Social Studies Standards, participants' contributions were purposefully allowed to direct and redirect discussions. Interaction between focus group participants was encouraged, and participants made connections to a wide range of concepts during the discussions. For some groups, this resulted in the exploration of topics in addition to those reflected in the above questions. Participants repeatedly expressed gratitude for the opportunity to provide feedback and be meaningfully involved in the review of the Nebraska Social Studies Standards.

Summary of the Findings

During their discussions, focus group participants shared varied perspectives and experiences. In general, focus group participants voiced positive perceptions and support for the current Nebraska Social Studies Standards. Participants suggested revisions be limited to “clarifications” or “minor tweaks” and that the standards “not be changed for the sake of changing.” They also noted some concerns and offered suggestions related to the standards.

The findings and suggestions summarized on pages 3 through 7 paraphrase input from multiple focus groups and across demographic categories of educators. For confidentiality purposes, quotes from participants are not attributed to specific individuals. Findings are categorized as input regarding:

- The Current Standards
- Resources and Professional Development
- Upcoming Revisions to the Standards

The Current Standards

Horizontal and vertical documents of the standards offer teachers a choice of “road maps.”

Participants as a whole did not identify a preference for either the horizontal or vertical version of the standards. Based on individual preference, participants rely on either the horizontal or vertical versions of the standards to guide their instruction and rarely reference the other version. Focus group participants shared that the length and visual presentation of the standards documents can be “overwhelming” and “daunting.” Participants felt this to be particularly true for beginning teachers. Elementary participants also felt this may be exacerbated for elementary teachers who are responsible for teaching multiple content standards.

Suggestions related to the social studies standards documents included the following:

- Create shorter companion documents for each discipline in order to “bring home the main components”
- Create posters or other brief documents with the standards written in grade-appropriate, student-friendly language
- Develop a tool for teachers to track standards as they are taught in a given grade/course
- Enlarge the print type and change the color used in the documents

Language in the current standards allows for “flexibility and autonomy” which is both “a blessing and a curse.”

According to the participants, the level of specificity represented in the language of the current standards allows teachers the professional discretion to make content and pedagogical decisions. Participants, particularly in the secondary focus groups, did not view the standards as overly vague. Rather, they voiced appreciation for the level of specificity in the current standards which they stated allows for “interpretation” and supports “local control.” Not only do they feel the language in the current standards allows them the flexibility to tailor social studies instruction to their specific context, they also interpreted the current language in the social studies standards as an implicit trust in their professional acumen.

However, the level of specificity in the current standards represented some concerns at the elementary level. On one hand, some participants viewed the language in the standards as too vague. Vague language, coupled with the possibility that elementary teachers may be less confident in their social studies content knowledge than their secondary counterparts, may impact the implementation of the elementary social studies standards. This creates a risk that elementary social studies instruction becomes “dependent on the passion or enthusiasm of an individual teacher” more so than the guidance of the state standards. On the other hand, some focus group participants felt new and beginning teachers can become overwhelmed with the level of specificity represented in the indicators.

Suggestions related to the language in the social studies standards included the following:

- Implement the use of instructional coaches or content-specific mentoring for social studies at the elementary level to address misunderstandings and misconceptions due to the length and perceived vagueness of the standards
- Provide sample pacing guides and curriculum maps
- Revise the history standards to make them less “wordy” where possible
- Update the lexicon as needed
- Keep the standards free from polarizing language
- Have an outside entity review the standards to identify unintended bias

The standards include “tasks and skills that represent appropriate academic rigor.”

The current standards emphasize skills such as analysis, reasoning, and critical thinking which participants viewed as fundamental to the social studies disciplines as well as to the preparation of responsible and engaged citizens. According to one participant, “We can no longer merely dictate a national narrative to an eager group of students and perpetuate an understanding of the past. Rather, we have to focus on skills.” In addition, participants felt the emphasis on these skills promotes appropriate academic rigor at the various grade levels.

However, social studies assessments may not match the academic rigor represented in the standards. Focus group participants reported some teachers remain “stuck on recall assessments” and “default to this even though the standards are asking for more.”

Suggestions related to the rigor represented in the social studies standards included the following:

- Communicate how the skills represented in the social studies standards may enhance student achievement not only in social studies but in other content areas as well
- Complement the dissemination of the revised standards with professional development for teachers “to improve teachers’ assessment literacy within the social studies”
- Create a pool of exemplars which demonstrate varied ways students can demonstrate proficiency related to each of the standards

The scope of the standards should be reviewed with particular attention to “identifying gaps and overlaps” with other content areas.

Certain concepts appear in the social studies standards as well as the standards of other content areas. Where possible, these redundancy should be eliminated or, at the very least, clearly noted in the standards.

Participants felt there were too many economic standards, particularly when compared to the history, civics, and geography. In addition, economic standards are often taught in classes considered outside the social studies discipline. To further complicate the issue, students are

often not required to take economics courses. Even when a personal finance course is required, it is likely to address only a fraction of the economic standards. As a result, economic standards may be inconsistently woven into other social studies content areas.

Suggestions related to the scope of the social studies standards included the following:

- Review the number of economic standards and provide examples of integrating economics standards into other social studies disciplines as well as disciplines such as mathematics and business
- Facilitate easy access to national standards in areas such as psychology and sociology that are not addressed in the Nebraska Social Studies Standards

The social studies standards “take a backseat” and teaching social studies is like “being on the fringe.”

Focus group participants expressed administrative support for social studies but noted teachers experience greater latitude in addressing the social studies standards when compared to other content standards such as language arts, mathematics, and science. The degree of scrutiny regarding the social studies standards was attributed to the absence of a statewide test in social studies.

Participants perceived an overall diminishing importance associated with social studies instruction which may eventually compromise students’ ability to demonstrate proficiency regarding social studies standards. Elementary participants reported a reduction of time being allocated to social studies instruction, and some went as far as wishing for “mandatory minutes” for social studies instruction. Participants reported elementary teachers often integrate social studies concepts with other content areas. Participants viewed this practice as “an injustice” to social studies that could lead to inconsistent social studies instruction. The practice may also complicate the scope and sequence of social studies curriculum as well as the opportunities for teachers to adequately assess students’ mastery of social studies standards.

Middle school participants reported student “readiness is in decline” and noted students’ background knowledge related to social studies standards is lacking. At the high school level, social studies classes were referred to as the “go-to-courses” during which students are scheduled for other school-related activities such as ACT preparation.

Suggestions related to elevating the role of social studies included the following:

- Foster strong social studies leaders within the administration and the classroom and who can advocate for social studies
- Provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate with other teachers both within and across districts regarding best instructional practices related to the social studies standards

Resources and Professional Development

Teachers value “vetted” and “research-based” resources to support the standards.

Both elementary and secondary participants identified the Standards Instructional Tool (SIT) made available by the Nebraska Department of Education as a helpful resource. They felt it warranted the resources needed to adequately appraise the content it included and to keep the links updated.

Participants discussed a vast array of resources they find helpful in teaching the social studies standards. Many participants identified elementary resources specific to Nebraska such as the Unicam Classroom, Nebraska Virtual Capital curriculum, NET Virtual Learning Library, Student Atlas of Nebraska, and resources available on Nebraska Statehood 150 website. As might be expected, participants reported secondary teachers use resources designed for a specific social studies discipline. For example, participants indicated secondary history teachers frequently use resources provided by the Stanford History Education Group, Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, Library of Congress, and the National Archives.

Participants also discussed a general lack of resources as well as the use of resources such as Pinterest and Teachers-Pay-Teachers that may not be thoroughly or consistently vetted and/or may not be research-based. According to participants, they often “have to compile their own resources.” They also identified the need for specific resources. For example, participant indicated maps “have disappeared from classrooms” and high resolution images of primary documents are difficult to find.

Suggestions related to resources which can be used to support the social studies standards included the following:

- Organize links to credible resources in a “single clearinghouse”
- Encourage teachers to use primary documents as resources as this supports the skills and cognitive rigor represented in the standards

Preferences for professional development related to the standards vary, but teachers “love learning with other dedicated teachers.”

Once potential revisions to the social studies standards are finalized, participants felt professional development for teachers would “definitely be needed.” There was little consensus regarding the delivery method or preferred timing of the professional development. However, participants repeatedly asked for opportunities to exchange expertise, resources, and ideas with other teachers.

Participants felt teachers may view time to collaborate as equally valued and in some cases more valued than remuneration for attending meetings, training, or events scheduled after school, on

weekends, or during the summer. In order to improve the scope and sequence of instruction as well as identify previously noted gaps and overlaps, participants asked that teachers “be brought to gather” and for time to talk with teachers in their own schools and districts. However, participants also value time to learn what pedagogy and resources colleagues in other districts are using.

Suggestions related to professional development to support the social studies standards included the following:

- Allow time for professional development to occur during the school day
- Vary the delivery methods to include on-line options, ESU coordinated staff development, and statewide professional development organized by the Nebraska Department of Education
- “Make at least some of the professional development static” so teachers can access material and information as the need arises and it can reach the maximum number of teachers
- Take measures to ensure coherence and follow-through in the professional development and avoid what can be the “haphazard nature of social studies professional development”
- Recognize professional development must vary for teachers who have content area expertise (secondary teachers) and those who have little social studies background (elementary teachers)

Upcoming Revisions to the Standards

Participants want to continue to partner with the Nebraska Department of Education regarding the upcoming standards revisions.

Participants often said “thank you for asking” for their input via the focus groups. However, they felt the involvement of teachers may have been limited given the focus groups were conducted during the summer. Participants asked how they would get updates regarding the upcoming review of the standards. They were also curious about the timeline for drafting, releasing, and seeking public comments regarding any potential revisions to the standards.

Suggestions related to the upcoming revisions to the social studies standards included the following:

- Inform teachers and district administrators when the standards will be released as well as when and where public input will be gathered
- Publish a brief overview of “what’s changed and what’s stayed the same” document for teachers at various grade levels
- Conduct question and answer sessions after teachers have had time to review the revisions to the standards
- Couple the release of the revised standards with professional development for teachers