Creating Civic Minded 21st Century Learners with Social Studies Standards

ACSP Phase One

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Standards are necessary in many facets of life. For example, when one goes to the doctor, one expects a certain standard of care to be met. Or perhaps when one is getting a haircut, certain standards are followed to ensure a precision cut. The same is true of education. Standards in education provide a framework in which educators should follow to achieve desired results. More precisely, "standards-based education specifies precisely what students should learn, focuses the curriculum and instruction on meeting these standards, and provides continual testing to see if the standards are achieved" (Sadker & Zittleman, 2012, p. 327). Despite the logic found in having a standards-based education, it has been fraught with political divisiveness and turmoil. In the area of Social Studies particularly, standards can be politically charged, and motives behind the implementation of certain standards are frequently questioned on both sides of the political isle. Often, questions and controversy arise regarding topics that are either included or omitted in the required standards that are to be implemented. Regardless of ones feelings toward the standards, it is imperative that educators become intimately familiar with their content area subject standards.

History of Standards

Standards based education reform (SBER) officially began in 1983 when the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s (NCEE) released a report entitled, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Kenna & Russell, 2014, p. 75). As the title infers, the report essentially stated that America, and the future of the nation and succeeding generations, was at risk because of declining academic rigor. Though not immediate, higher standards were devised and implemented, as a direct result of this report. Over the years, various implementations of SBER have gained traction, while others have failed to gain momentum.
Two pieces of legislation occurred under President Bill Clinton in 1994, entitled *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* and the *Improving America's Schools Act* [a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act] (Kenna & Russell, 2014, p. 76). These are significant because they began to lay the groundwork for the future of standards based education. Under Clinton’s *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* initiative, states were awarded funding to create their own standards (Kenna & Russell, 2014, p. 76).

SBER continued under George W. Bush, with the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB). Again, this was just a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, originally signed in 1965. NCLB is particularly critical in the larger discussion of SBER, because it substantially expanded the federal government’s role in education, while at the same time increasing accountability (Kenna & Russell, 2014, p. 76). Despite the bipartisan support of NCLB, it has not been as successful as originally hoped. It has lead to increased testing, and the expectation of 100% proficiency in math and English standards by the 2014-15 school year. Presently, the state of NCLB is under revision, as Congress is currently reconsidering its effectiveness and its possible repeal in the near future. The general consensus is that this will provide states with more autonomy than in years past (Klein, 2015). And according to a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, a new bill entitled “Every Student Succeeds Act” is presently before Congress, receiving bi-partisan support, and is pending a vote sometime in December 2015. Furthermore, it states: “The compromise bill’s backers expressed optimism that, if passed, it would usher in more flexibility and stability after years of uncertainty about the future of No Child Left Behind” (Brody, Nov 30 2015).

Most recently, in 2010, the majority of states has come together and established the Common Core State Standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015). It is interesting
to note that in 2013, 45 states were participating in CCSS. That number has dropped to 42, as states have reconsidered their adoption of the standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015). Nevada adopted the CCSS in June 2010, with the commitment of full implementation in the 2013-14 school year (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015).

Over the past several decades in education reform, it is important to remember that as politicians and educators address changes to the educational system, more emphasis has been on making data-drive decisions that are in the best interest of the children. Unfortunately, good intentions can have unintended consequences. This has been demonstrated with the rise of standardized testing. As such, very recent developments indicate that the Obama administration will be seeking to limit testing, as initiated by the Testing Action Plan (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

**Social Studies Standards**

CCSS offers content standards in the area of mathematics and English Language Arts. While CCSS do not have individual standards for social studies, it has made an effort to align ELA literacy standards with social studies skills, such as analyzing primary source texts. As such, History/Social Studies is an appendage to the literacy standards found within the English Language Arts Standards. CCSS for Social Studies does not specify content, but it does inform educators of the skills necessary as it pertains to ELA.

The National Council for the Social Studies offers the C3 Framework, which is similar, in that it “focuses on inquiry skills and key concepts, and guides—not prescribes—the choice of curricular content necessary for a rigorous social studies program” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013, p. 6). A common theme found on a national level for social studies standards, is that it focuses on big ideas. Another example of this is when, “in 2010, NCSS
published *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*. The revised standards, like the earlier social studies standards published in 1994, continue to be structured around the ten themes of social studies” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2015). Nationally, Social Studies standards are broader and more skills-based, compared to math and ELA standards.

Looking toward the state of Nevada, the first set of standards was released in 1994 by the Nevada Department of Education. In 2008, revised social studies standards were released, which is presently used by the State of Nevada and Clark County School District. The CCSS for Social Studies are to be used in conjunction with the Nevada Sate Standards, as they complement each other as it relates to content and skills. In the creation of the Nevada Social Studies Standards, it should be noted that the goal of the standards “is to articulate a foundation of skills and content knowledge necessary for Nevada’s students to be successful in our increasingly diverse society” (Nevada Department of Education. 2008, p. i). Furthermore, a big idea stressed by the CCSS, C3 Framework, and the Nevada Department of Education is that they are all promoting 21st century skills for students to be college and career ready. To make the Nevada standards more user friendly for educators, “the history standards have been organized thematically to allow the teacher greater flexibility to meet the needs of their students and for designing lessons that capitalize on their area(s) of expertise.” (Nevada Department of Education, 2008, p. ii). By providing educators the freedom to capitalize on their strengths, it should follow that students will be able to have a more enriched learning experience in the classroom. Moreover, as social studies classroom become increasingly student-centered with the increased integration of technology, the thematic standards presently mandated provide the flexibility needed for increased student learning.
Conclusion

Despite the ever-changing political landscape found in education, the C3 Framework succinctly states: “there will always be differing perspectives on the objectives. The goal of knowledgeable, thinking, and active citizens, however, is universal” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013, p 5). While the NCSS is specifically referring to their own objectives, this can aptly be applied to all social studies standards and learners. The hope that lies within standards based education is that students will receive a quality and uniform education, and that educators are held accountable for the delivery of content. Clearly, standards are not the only facet to a high quality education – it is simply one piece of the puzzle. Parental involvement, adequate funding, and highly qualified educators are just a few examples of the myriad components to a successful education for students. Keeping this in mind, it is imperative that as educators, we keep the whole child in mind and remember the African Proverb, that it takes a village to raise a child.
References:


