

Social Studies Knowledge Map™ Findings Brief

Identifying Trends in Social Studies Curricula Used in Today's Classrooms

Summer 2021

Research has strongly demonstrated how important high-quality, content-rich curriculum is for student success. *But how do we know if a curriculum is high quality?* While the field has made progress in evaluating English language arts, science, and mathematics materials, evidence-based reviews of social studies materials are few and far between. *Until now.*

The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy Social Studies Knowledge Map™ is a first-of-its-kind, proprietary analysis that maps every piece of student-facing material across a social studies curriculum to determine the specific background knowledge it supports, in what depth and quality, and with what attention to multiple perspectives and primary sources.

At a time where our country is more divided than ever before, the Social Studies Knowledge Map™ looks closely at what our students are being taught – or not taught – in their social studies and civics classrooms today to provide actionable data and insights to parents, educators, administrators, and policymakers.

IN THIS BRIEF

This Findings Brief outlines why high-quality social studies and civics curriculum is important, how the Social Studies Knowledge Map™ works, what the Institute has learned from analyzing numerous social studies curricula, and a topline review of specific findings from five nationally used curricula.

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The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy is dedicated to integrating research, policy, and practice to achieve educational excellence for all of America's students. Specifically, we connect research to the policies and practices that will ensure all children have access to intellectually challenging curricula, highly effective educators, and school models that meet students' diverse needs. By delivering the strongest evidence to the policymakers who set the course and the practitioners who teach and lead, we hope to serve the American children who enter our classrooms every day. Learn more at edpolicy.education.jhu.edu.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Why does social studies curriculum matter so much? After all, in many states it is not considered a “core” subject area.

Political scientists look to four key indicators of successful civic formation:

1. **Political Knowledge:** Mastering not only knowledge about the United States’ history and government, but also of world history, geography, economics, philosophy, and religion.
2. **Political Skills:** The capacity to interpret legislation, write to elected officials, analyze news stories.
3. **Habit of Civic Engagement:** Volunteering and contributing to civil society and to democratic elections.
4. **Practice of Civil Tolerance:** Holding strong beliefs while honoring those of others.

Many institutions can and should contribute to preparing young people for democratic citizenship. Families, religious communities, and a wide variety of non-profits play a role. However, governments around the world depend on K-12 education to provide the foundational knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable an engaged citizenry.

Schools cannot do everything, but they can offer opportunities for young people to master critical domains of knowledge, encounter diverse perspectives, deliberate and debate ideas and policies, and exercise agency in the wider world.

A high-quality social studies curriculum is the first, critical step to successful civic formation.

Even an excellent curriculum, however, lies fallow unless system leaders simultaneously support teachers to deliver it, and policymakers incentivize its effective use through appropriate assessments. The good news is that some school systems and states are already honoring this work, and nonprofits and philanthropies are stepping up to provide the resources they need.

UNDERSTANDING THE KNOWLEDGE MAP™

The Institute designed the Social Studies Knowledge Map™ to address a gap in the field about the quality, coherence, and multi-vocal nature of different social studies materials. We conduct the analysis by “mapping” the domains of knowledge and topics that a curriculum opens up and those it omits, grade by grade, and by assessing the quality of each resource on its own and in tandem with others.

The Social Studies Knowledge Map™ review goes beyond just measuring the content and quality of the materials, though; it also assesses how well a curriculum supports teachers in presenting multiple perspectives and creating an open classroom climate. Both indicators are necessary for teaching civil tolerance and encouraging long-lasting political engagement.

Key Questions

The Social Studies Knowledge Map™ seeks to answer the following questions:

- What topics, in what depth, are addressed?
- What is the quality of the material – primary and secondary – used to address a given topic?
- Do the materials in a given unit of study, taken together, create a coherent, rigorous, learning experience for students?
- Are key topics sequenced across grade levels so that students encounter a progression of learning that builds on previous knowledge?

Fundamental Principles

The following principles capture the Institute’s curriculum analysis approach.

Content Knowledge Matters. Research from around the world shows that background knowledge, rather than disaggregated skills, is a critical lever for accelerating students’ learning and narrowing achievement gaps. The background knowledge should include sources that reflect a wide range of perspectives and voices.

High-Quality Content is Essential. A high-quality text or visual does many important things, often simultaneously. It touches students’ emotions, enlivens deep conversations, helps students understand their world, and builds knowledge about other times and places. A low-quality text or visual does not.

A Curriculum Cannot Cover Everything. The Knowledge Map™ is designed to track how the content developed by a specific curriculum compares to the universe of possible content. It’s a landscape analysis, not an impossible ideal.

The United States is Behind – And We Want to Change That. Most of our democratic peers provide much richer curricula than our school systems do – and their academic outcomes show it. Our research team has looked at international models and found overwhelming evidence that a rigorous, knowledge-focused curriculum helps all students succeed, and also closes the gaps between well-off and low-income kids. These outcomes matter.

We Do Not Evaluate the Belief Systems Within Curricula. We apply the same quality criteria to all of the texts we review – regardless of their philosophical, pedagogical, or religious values.

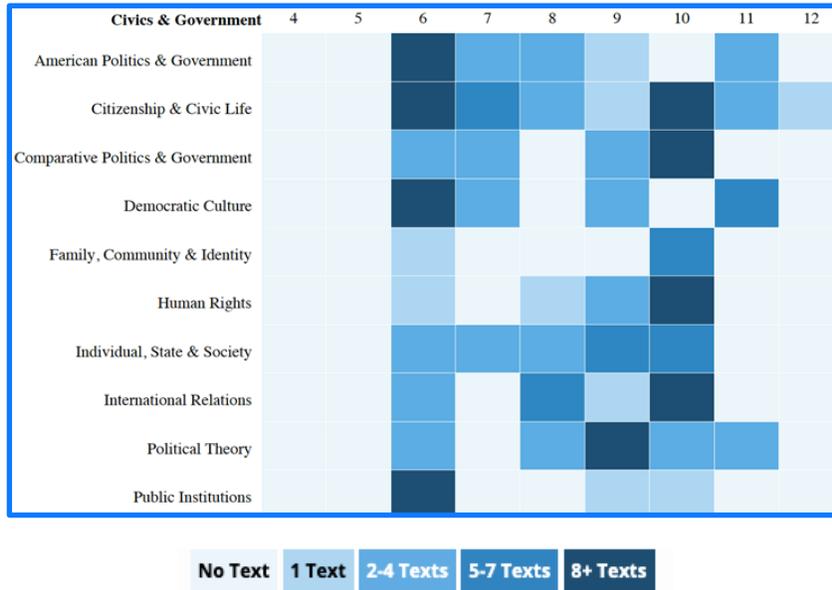
Report Components

The Social Studies Knowledge Map™ and the resulting reports have four main components:

1. Knowledge Domain Heat Maps
2. Quality & Coherence Maps
3. Open Classroom Climate & Multiple Perspectives Analysis
4. Recommendations for Continuous Improvement

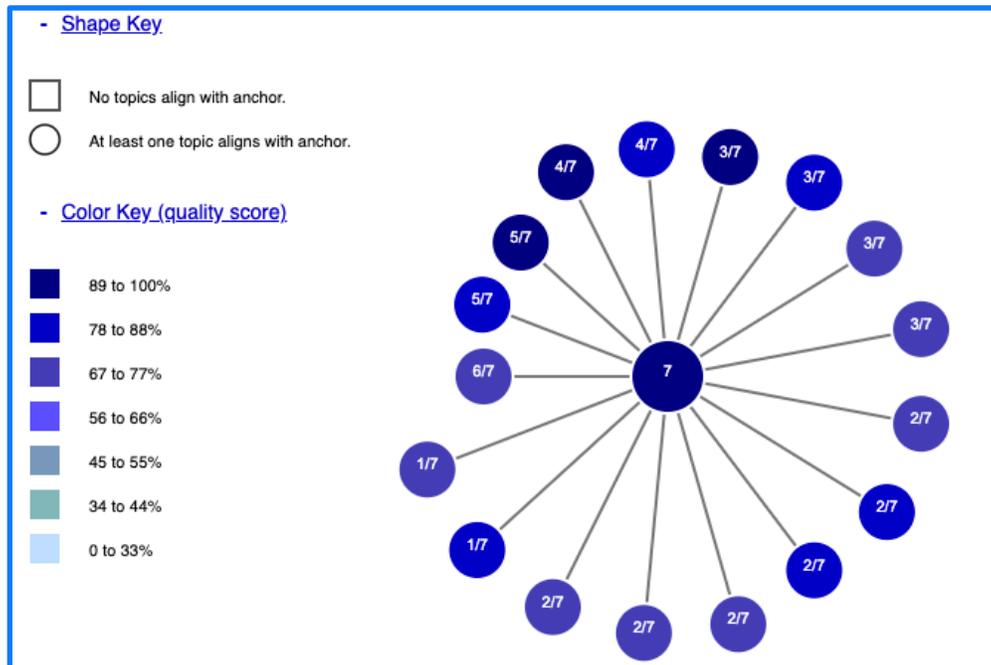
Knowledge Domain Heat Maps

The Social Studies Knowledge Map™, quite literally, charts high-level domains of knowledge (such as Civics & Government, U.S. History Since 1865, Economics, and Ancient Civilizations) and specific topics within them (such as The Constitution, the Great Migration, and the Early Roman Empire), and illustrates which are covered – and which are not.



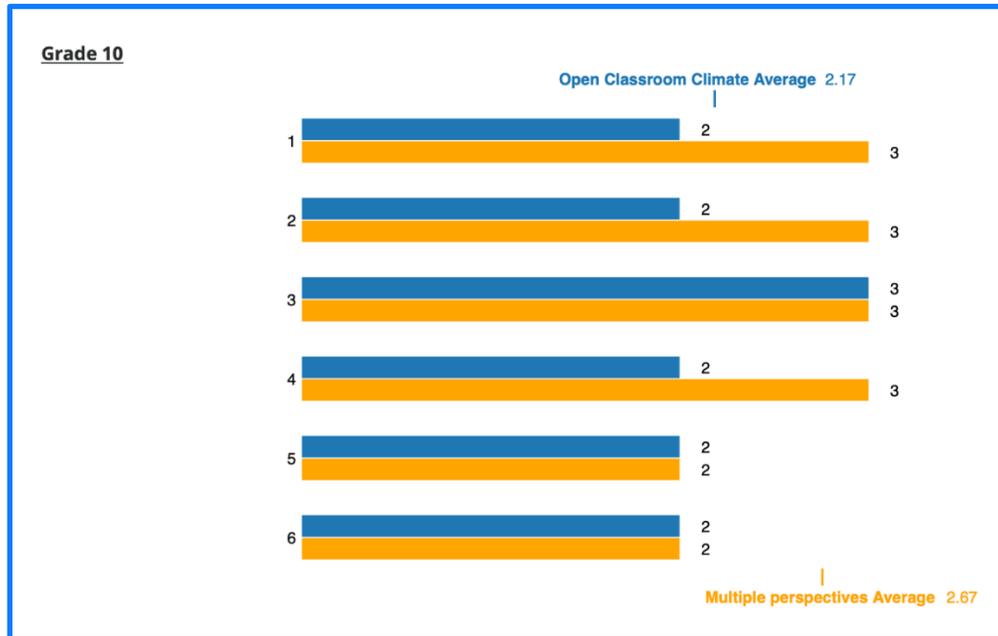
Quality/Coherence Maps

The analysis also measures the quality (evidentiary base of the material) and coherence (how the various materials within a unit relate to one another) of each curriculum unit.



Open Classroom Climate & Multiple Perspectives Analysis

This part of the review offers a unit-by-unit analysis of the prevalence of multiple perspectives and assesses whether the teacher-facing materials encourage deliberation and debate in the classroom.



Recommendations

Each Social Studies Knowledge Map™ report provides recommendations to improve the knowledge domain coverage, quality, coherence of the curriculum, and materials. We also note the ratio of primary and secondary sources. The recommendations and results of the Knowledge Map™ provide immediate, actionable data to partners to help guide instructional, policy, and procurement decisions at all levels of K-12 education and to curriculum providers to help improve their materials.

Social Studies Knowledge Map™ Partnerships

The Institute evaluates social studies materials for two purposes: first, to help individual school systems assess and improve the materials they already use; second, to provide public analyses of commonly-used curricula to the field.

In the first case (partnerships with individual states or systems), *we do not publish the findings*. Since Spring 2020, we have evaluated the social studies curricula of three large school districts, one mid-sized school district, one charter school network, and one private school.

In the second case (externally-funded analyses of commonly-used materials), *we do publish the findings*. On July 28, 2021, we released the first five reviews of curricula from the Bill of Rights Institute, iCivics, McGraw Hill, myWorld by Savvas Learning Company, and The 1619 Project. [Learn more about these specific reports](#).

The Knowledge Maps™ assess only the formal materials rather than real-world implementation. We have [a different tool](#) to chart teachers' use of materials, and [yet another tool](#) to evaluate whether a school culture includes classroom deliberation and debate of controversial ideas.

INSTITUTE FINDINGS

The trends in this brief reflect what we've learned from all 11 Social Studies Knowledge Map™ partnerships with school systems, publishers, and philanthropies since early 2020.

Overall Trends – Analysis of 11 Curricula

Key trends emerged in our analysis of all 11 curricula which range from just a single unit's worth of materials, to single-grade courses, to the entire scope of materials used from kindergarten to 12th grade. Although there are certainly some disappointing findings, we also found some bright spots.

- **Positive:** *Many* curricula build a strong foundation in elementary grades.
- **Positive:** *Most* curricula reflect a clear focus on state and local history (where targeted to state or local standards).
- **Neutral:** An open classroom climate is only *sometimes* suggested in the teacher guides.
- **Neutral:** Multiple perspectives on a given issue are only *sometimes* apparent.
- **Needs Improvement:** Elementary grades *often lack* primary sources.
- **Needs Improvement:** Units often display *topical incoherence* across unit materials.
- **Needs Improvement:** Religion and philosophy are *very rarely addressed*.
- **Needs Improvement:** There is *insufficient attention* paid to Central American, South American, African, and Asian history.

The Institute's dataset will expand appreciably as we evaluate more materials from across the country. In the meantime, we are encouraged by some of the strong examples in the field that are academically challenging, non-ideological, nuanced, and intentionally multi-vocal.

Analyzing Five Popular Curricula

On July 28, 2021, the Institute released Social Studies Knowledge Map™ analyses of five widely-used curricula/sets of materials.

It is important to note that, while there is only one Knowledge Map™ methodology, *the five curricula themselves differ in important ways.*

- Savaas myWorld and McGraw-Hill curricula are *multi-year, multi-course* offerings (K-8 and 9-12, respectively).
- The Bill of Rights and iCivics curricula represent *one-year* civics courses.
- The 1619 Project materials constitute *one unit's* worth of materials.

We selected these resources for formal review, because each of them is in wide use in the field. This work was supported by the Louis Calder Foundation and the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University. The curriculum publishers were not part of the Social Studies Knowledge Map™ analyses. However, we shared each report prior to release and offered publishers the opportunity to respond publicly in tandem with our release (as Savvas Learning Company and The 1619 Project did) or request corrections if appropriate evidentiary support could be provided.

The following section provides a high-level overview of each analysis. Details and recommendations are available in the full reports.

Bill of Rights Institute

Type: One-Year Civics Course

Analysis: The Bill of Rights' one-year civics course is user-friendly and fosters an open classroom environment. The materials support critical thinking through strong coverage of American History, Government, and Civics, and they are almost uniformly of high quality.

Top Recommendation: A wider range of authors and voices throughout the curriculum would allow more students to see themselves in the country's history.

[View Bill of Rights Institute Report](#)

iCivics

Type: One-Year Civics Course (Seventh Grade) Review

Analysis: iCivics's interactive civics course is designed to help students strengthen their civic knowledge through discussion and debate. iCivics has strong measures for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Top Recommendation: Building up the number of primary source materials would enhance the curriculum's overall quality.

[View iCivics Report](#)

McGraw Hill

Type: Grades 9-12 Curriculum Review

Analysis: McGraw Hill's full-year and elective coursework provide robust and generally high-quality coverage of important knowledge domains.

Top Recommendation: The addition of opportunities for scaffolded debates and seminar-style discussions would make the teacher guides stronger and more likely to support an open classroom climate.

[View McGraw Hill Report](#)

myWorld

Type: Grades K-8 Curriculum Review

Analysis: myWorld (K-8) by Savvas Learning Company has an excellent balance of primary and secondary sources throughout and offers students opportunities to engage not only with historical events and geographies, but also the diverse philosophies that often accompanied them.

Top Recommendation: Unit materials could more tightly align with one another to create a more coherent knowledge build.

[View myWorld Report](#)

[View Comment from Publisher](#)

The 1619 Project

Type: Single-Unit Materials Review

Analysis: The 1619 Project's single unit offers an important, if limited, structuralist lens through which to understand American history, using many types of secondary sources (essays, op eds, poetry, photography).

Top Recommendation: Its monistic view of history means that it should be taught in tandem with other sources (especially primary sources) that present a more capacious understanding of the American story.

[View The 1619 Project Report](#)

[View Comment from Publisher](#)

NEXT STEPS

The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy is committed to helping school systems, states, publishers, teachers, and policymakers ensure that students have access to high-quality curriculum and to the civic-building opportunities that support equitable access to democratic citizenship.

Connect with our team members at the Institute to learn more about the Social Studies Knowledge Map™ and our other work.

- Questions About this Findings Brief - [Ashley Berner, Director](#)
- Social Studies Knowledge Map™ and ELA Knowledge Map™ – [Amy Fuller, Program Manager](#)
- School Culture 360™ Survey – [Ashley Berner, Director](#)
- Teacher Survey of Curriculum Use - [Al Passarella, Research Analyst](#)