



A Second-Class Subject?

Why Social Studies Gets Short Shrift in U.S. Middle and High Schools

One of the core purposes of public education is to provide students with the skills and knowledge required to actively and productively participate as citizens in our democracy.

Ninety-eight percent of secondary social studies teachers and administrators who influence social studies agree with that statement, according to a new survey of 700 K-12 educators commissioned by Thinking Nation, a social studies-focused nonprofit, and conducted in the summer of 2023 by the nonprofit, nonpartisan, EdWeek Research Center. The goal of the survey was to improve social studies instruction by shedding light on how teachers and administrators perceive social studies and the resources allocated to the subject.

Social studies is not just valued because it is the class where students are most likely to acquire the knowledge and skills associated with citizenship, survey results suggest. Eighty percent of survey respondents say that the content and skills taught in social studies contribute an enormous amount,

a lot, or a fair amount to academic outcomes related to English/language arts. Asked about four key skills emphasized by high-quality social studies instruction, more than 90 percent of teachers and administrators said each of these learning areas is important to preparing students for college and careers.

Yet survey results also reveal a stark gap between the degree to which educators say they value social studies and the degree to which it is supported.

Just 8 percent of survey respondents say social studies is a top priority at their schools while 49 percent say the same of English/language arts; 53 percent say the same of math; and 18 percent say the same of science.

Resources follow suit. Median per-pupil spending for secondary English/ language arts instructional materials is 25 percent higher than for secondary social studies resources, according to survey respondents who play a role in social studies resource purchasing.

When it comes to curriculum design, social studies may also receive less attention than other subjects. Although most respondents say the majority of social studies instruction should have some degree of consistency across grade levels so that one course builds upon another, just over 1 in 3 educators say social studies in their district or school is either not at all aligned vertically across grades and years or that it is only aligned a little bit. And less than half of secondary social studies teachers (40 percent) use the best practice of inquiry-based instruction at least once a week.

One reason may be that social studies teachers may need more and better PD. Less than 1 in 4 educators say their social studies professional development is very sufficient or excellent.

Overall, teachers and administrators alike say secondary social studies is crying out for more attention, especially in a day and age of rampant political polarization and misinformation. Three out of four respondents (including 82 percent of social studies teachers and 69 percent of administrators) say their districts or schools should place more emphasis on this subject. By contrast, 34 percent say their districts/schools should place more emphasis on math; 41 percent say they should place more emphasis on English/language arts; and 54 percent say they should place more emphasis on science.

The whitepaper concludes with recommendations that aim to close the value-resource gap between the degree to which educators value social studies and the level at which it is supported.

The majority of respondents say social studies instruction should have some degree of consistency across grade levels so that one course builds upon another.

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Introduction

For as long as public education has existed, preparing students to participate effectively in our democratic society has been a core goal of American schools. Social studies is the main means of imparting the knowledge and skills required to engage in even the most basic functions of citizenship such as voting, abiding by the law, or serving on a jury. Beyond that, social studies teaches students to empathize with other perspectives, evaluate evidence, and construct fact-based arguments.

Yet in our current era of educational accountability, subjects that get tested often get prioritized. The era was ushered in by the 2002 reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act as No Child Left Behind. Now known as the Every Student Succeeds Act, this law mandates that states test students annually in math and English/language arts in grades 3-8 and once in high school as well as three times in science. Despite the fact that we need an informed and engaged citizenry to sustain democracy, social studies assessment is not required.

A 2018 [report](#) by the Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings found that, while civics exam scores in grades 4 and 8 increased slightly on the National Assessment of Educational Progress between 1998 and 2014, gaps between white and Black students and students from lower- and higher-income families grew substantially during that period. A contributing factor may be the greater emphasis on test preparation in schools that serve Black students and students from lower-income families, who have historically received lower test scores in all subjects.

With the onset of the worldwide pandemic, it is possible that these gaps have grown, given that schools serving Black and low-income students were often closed to in-person learning longer than were schools attended by white and higher-income students. Further, NAEP civics exams assess only

ABOUT THE SURVEY

WHO	766 K-12 educators including 369 who teach history, social studies, civics, or a related topic to students in grades 6-12; 251 middle and high school leaders who indicated that they influence secondary social studies curricula; and 146 district leaders who indicated they influence secondary social studies curricula
WHAT	A 36-question survey
WHEN	July 19th through September 11th, 2023
WHERE	The survey was administered online
WHY	To gain an updated understanding of K-12 educators' experiences and perceptions of social studies curricula and instruction

one aspect of the social studies curriculum. They cannot assess how teachers are approaching social studies instruction more broadly, or whether they have the resources and training to do so effectively.

In the summer of 2023, the social studies-focused nonprofit, Thinking Nation, set out to provide this data by commissioning the nonprofit, nonpartisan, EdWeek Research Center to survey teachers, school leaders, and district leaders about practices and perceptions related to social studies education. The focus was on middle and high school social studies, where students are fast approaching the age at which they will be expected to use the skills they learn in this coursework to exercise the rights and responsibilities associated with civil society in our country.

The Perceived Value of Social Studies

Study results clearly indicate that survey respondents value social studies because it help schools fulfill a core mission of preparing young people to be knowledgeable, effective, and engaged citizens.

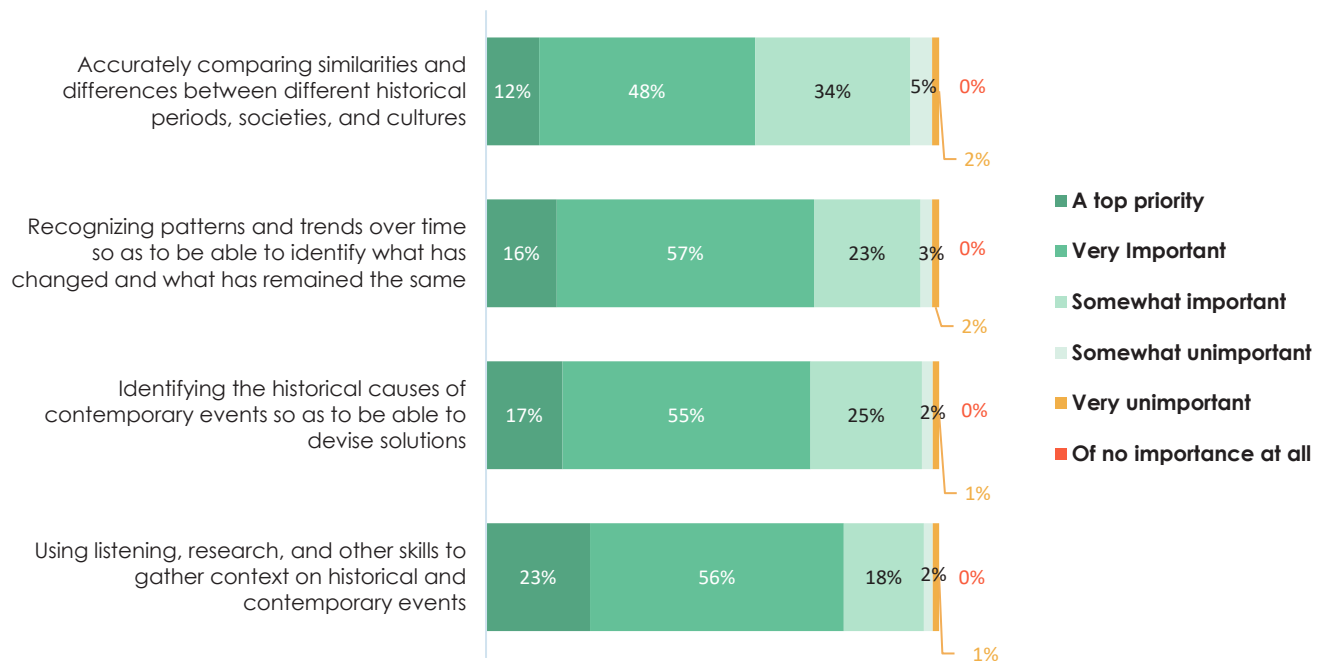
“There isn’t another discipline that will have a greater impact on a person’s citizenship and contribution to this democratic republic,” an Illinois social studies teacher wrote in response to an open-ended survey question.

“Additionally, I see no better place [than] social science to teach the ever-important soft skills of leadership, accountability, grit, empathy, etc.”

Survey results also suggest that educators view social studies as important for academic reasons that transcend education’s core civic mission: Asked about four key skills emphasized by high-quality social studies instruction, more than 90 percent of teachers and administrators said each of these learning areas is important to preparing students for college and careers.

Figure 1

When it comes to preparing middle and high school students for college and careers, how important are the following skills?



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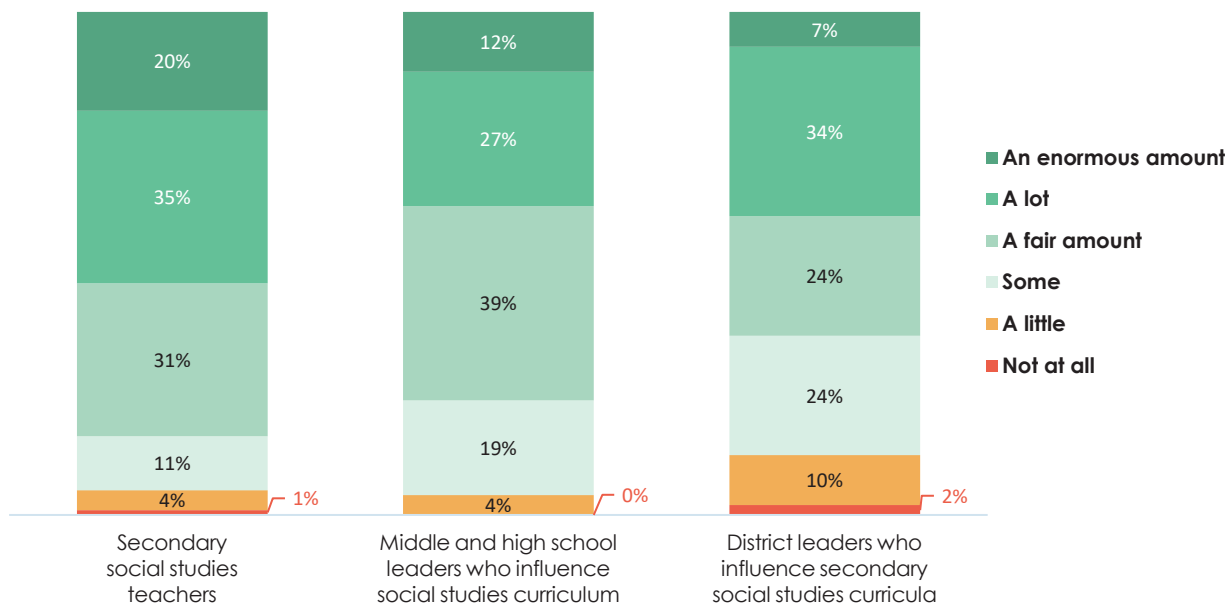
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Additionally, 80 percent of respondents say that the content and skills students learn in social studies contribute an enormous amount, a lot, or a fair amount to academic outcomes related to English/language arts. Those closest to the classroom (middle and high school social studies teachers) are even more likely to say social studies impacts literacy. Eighty-six percent say social studies contributes at least a fair amount to English/language arts as compared to 78 percent of middle and high school principals and 65 percent of district leaders. The views of these teachers align with a [2020 analysis](#) that found that, by the end of grade 5, students who spent more time on social studies had significantly higher scores in reading. No other subject—including English/language arts—was associated with improvements in literacy.

“If people only understood that the background knowledge that social studies and science topics provide help bridge connections in reading—which help immensely with reading comprehension ...” a Florida social studies teacher wrote in response to an open-ended survey question.

Figure 2

In your view, how much, if at all, do the content and skills students learn in social studies help contribute to academic outcomes related to English/language arts?



Social Studies' Second-Class Status

Survey results clearly indicate that educators believe that the skills social studies teaches are critical to the core mission of public education, and that content and skills associated with the subject also are critical to preparing students for college and careers and for supporting the academic goal of literacy development.

Yet the results also suggest that social studies may be getting short shrift: While roughly half of secondary social studies teachers and administrators say that math and English/language arts are a top priority in their districts and/or schools, just 8 percent say the same of social studies.

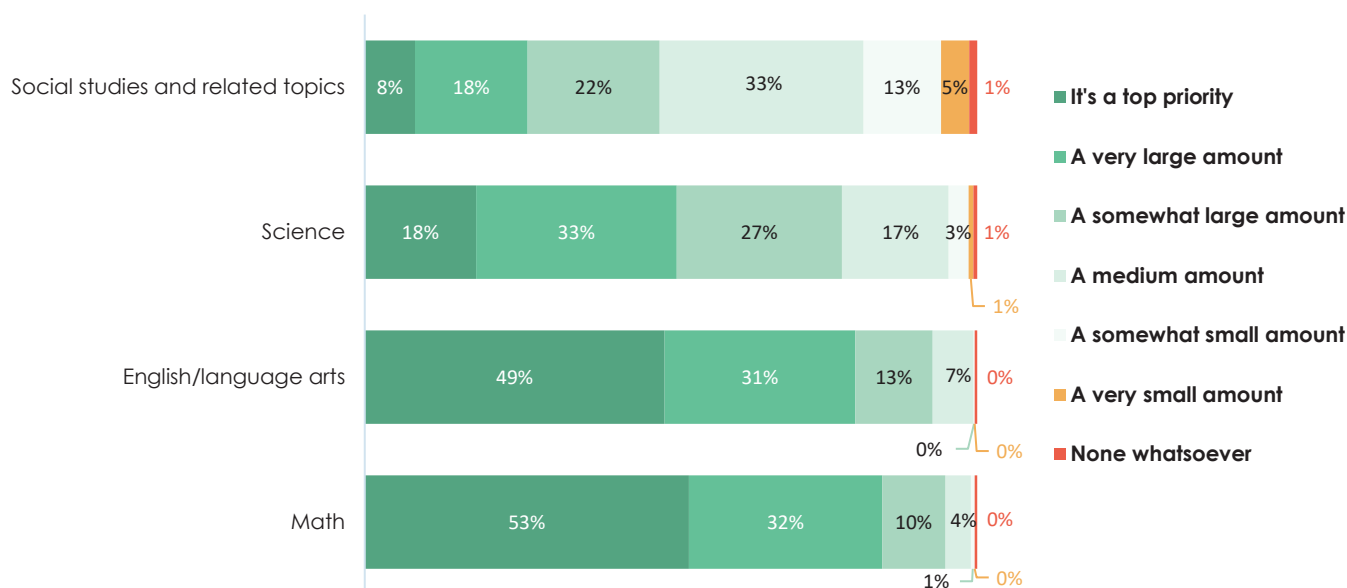
“Social studies has become an ‘optional’ subject,” an Oregon middle school principal wrote in response to an open-ended survey question. “Some of that has to do with the lack of emphasis put on social studies as a ‘non-tested’ subject. We’ve gone years with social studies and science being seen as ‘nice if we can fit it in’ at the expense of the heavily tested subjects of language arts and math at

the elementary level. So students are coming to us in secondary with little to no foundation to work from within the subject. I’ve visited surrounding districts where social studies is listed as an elective class at middle level, and thus totally optional. And I think the most telling thing of all—when our district goes to post a social studies position (few and far between), we can get over 40 applicants. When we post for any of the other subjects, we are lucky to get over three applicants, and sometimes zero applicants.”

Middle and high school social studies teachers are even less likely than administrators who influence secondary social studies curriculum to say that social studies is a priority: Seventeen percent say social studies is a top priority or receives a very large amount of emphasis in their districts/schools as compared to 38 percent of middle and high school leaders and 44 percent of district leaders. There were no statistically significant differences between the way teachers, school leaders, and district leaders viewed the level of emphasis placed on science, math, or English/language arts.

Figure 3

How much emphasis does your district or school place on the following subjects at the middle and/or high school levels?



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“Social studies has taken a back seat to reading and math,” a North Carolina social studies teacher wrote in response to an open-ended survey question. “Monies are limited and districts are forced to do more with less ... so social studies is viewed as an extra to some degree.”

Most administrators who influence secondary social studies curriculum say the subject deserves more attention than it currently receives. However, secondary social studies teachers are more likely than administrators to call for a greater level of emphasis on social studies. Eighty-one percent say social studies deserves more attention as compared to 71 percent of school leaders and 62 percent of district leaders.

“Typically, social studies curriculum is pushed aside for other subjects, especially math,” a Colorado social studies teacher wrote in response to an open-ended survey question. “My department has started the process of adopting new curriculum three times. Each time, we are told that math needs to be pushed before us because they need help with their scores and they hope that new curriculum is the answer. It always seems that social studies is not viewed as an important subject by many administrators.”

Figure 4

Percentage of secondary social studies teachers and administrators who influence social studies curriculum who say social studies, science, math, and English/language arts are a top priority or receive a very large amount of emphasis in their districts/schools

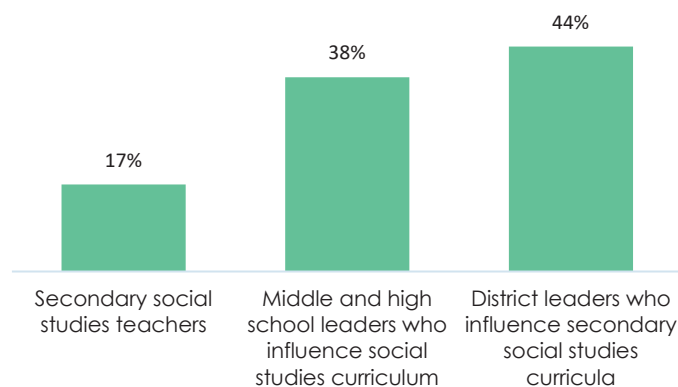
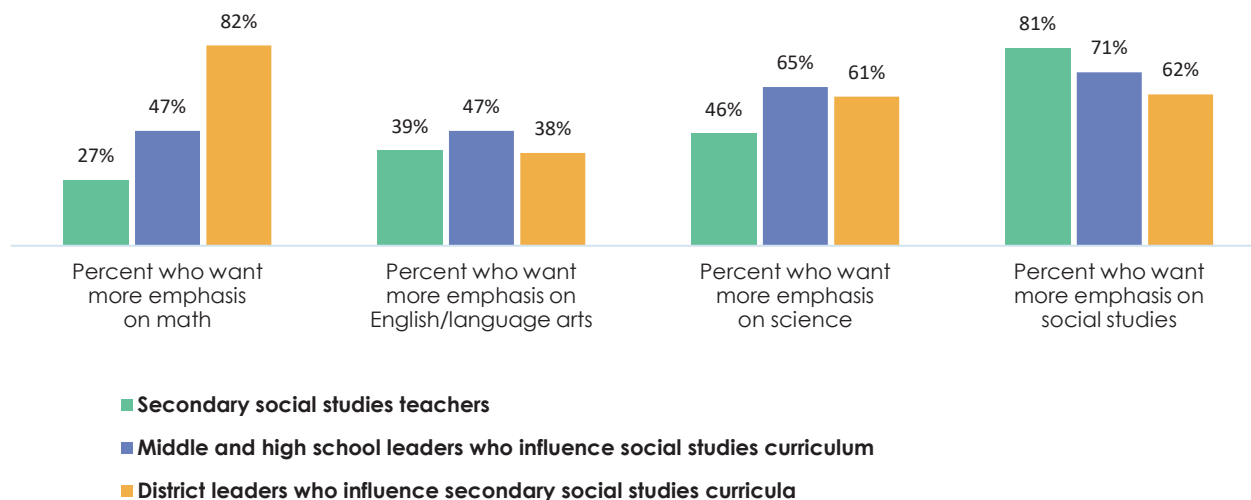


Figure 5

Percentage of secondary social studies teachers and administrators who influence social studies curriculum who say their district/school should place more emphasis on the following subjects



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The Impact of Social Studies' Second-Class Status

Financial Impact

Secondary social studies does not just get less attention. It gets less money.

School and district leaders who influence secondary social studies curriculum say they spend a median of \$200 per middle and high school student for instructional resources for that subject.

They say they spend 25 percent more (a median of \$250 per secondary student) on instructional resources for middle and high school English/language arts.

In addition, less than 1 in 3 survey respondents say the resources and support available to teach civics in their district or school are excellent or very sufficient.

In responses to an open-ended survey question, educators described how resource constraints impact instruction.

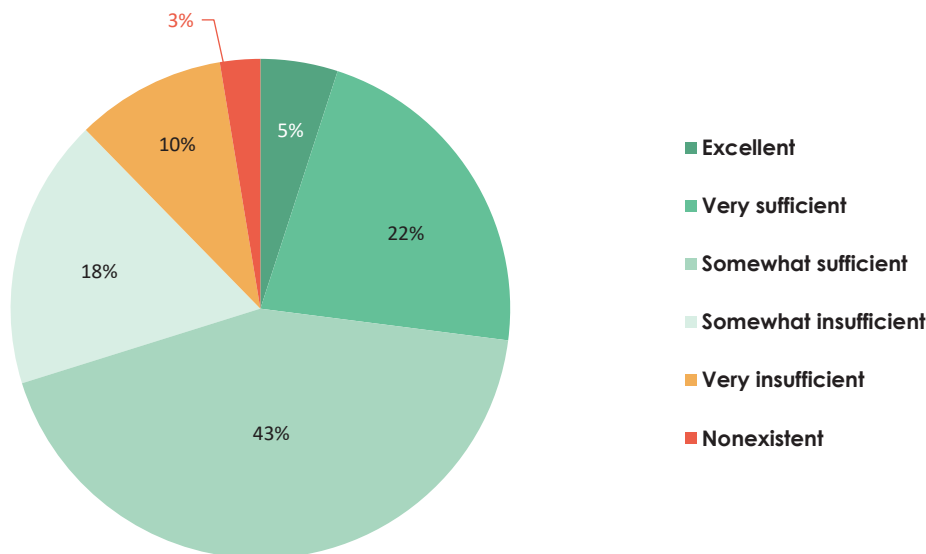
“Social studies is the bottom of the list in our district,” an assistant principal in New Jersey wrote. “Our textbooks (what we have of them) are from the 1990s. Clinton is the last president listed.”

Wrote a middle school social studies teacher in Arizona:

“We have one textbook for 6th grade published in 2001. It doesn’t cover the standards ... It is so frustrating because students love my class (and my co-teacher’s class). Our subject is vital to reading comprehension, but not introduced until 6th grade. Then I have to Google lessons...I find textbooks online and download them by chapter. Unfortunately, one of the two series that I use—I am unable to get a teachers’ guide for. I would buy it myself, it’s just out of print. Also—I could be a better teacher if I could have some direction instead of creating everything myself.”

Figure 6

How would you describe the resources and support available in your district or school to teach civics to middle and high school students?



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Impact on Curricular Alignment

When teachers are left to compile their own curricula, consistency may suffer. While most survey respondents (61 percent) say it is very important or a top priority for social studies instruction to be vertically aligned so that coursework in one grade level builds upon coursework in another, less than 1 in 3 report that there is a lot of alignment or complete alignment in their district or school.

“Our curriculum is not aligned and as a result, many of our students have a haphazard understanding of social studies, history, and civics,” a district-level curriculum director in Wisconsin wrote in response to an open-ended survey question.

Social studies teachers are less likely than administrators to view their curriculum as highly aligned.

“We try to vertically align our courses but our sophomore level of social studies is a range of electives the students choose from—everything from Civics to Latin America History to AP Euro History,” an Illinois social studies teacher wrote in response to an open-ended survey question. “The teachers that teach these electives have VERY different views on what skill development should be. We want to keep offering electives for the Social Studies year to allow students to develop individualized interests but we find that students are at very different stages in skills when they enter to the junior year of required US History.”

Educators in larger districts are significantly less likely than those in smaller districts to report high levels of vertical social studies alignment.

“There is a disconnect between the scope and sequence in our social studies classes,” a school leader in a 27,000-student district in Washington wrote in response to an open-ended survey question. “Students bounce back and forth from US History to World History to Geography to Civics.”

Figure 7

In your view, how important is it for social studies instruction in your district or school to be vertically aligned, with coursework in one grade level building on prior coursework?

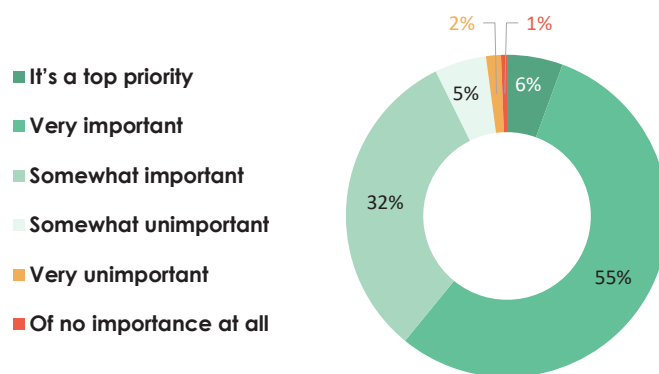
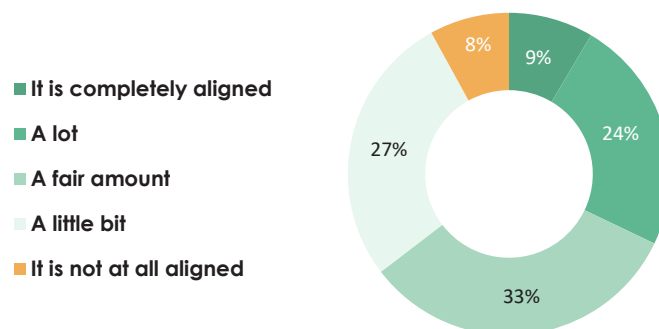


Figure 8

To what extent, if any, is social studies instruction in your district or school vertically aligned, with coursework in one grade level building on prior coursework?



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Figure 9

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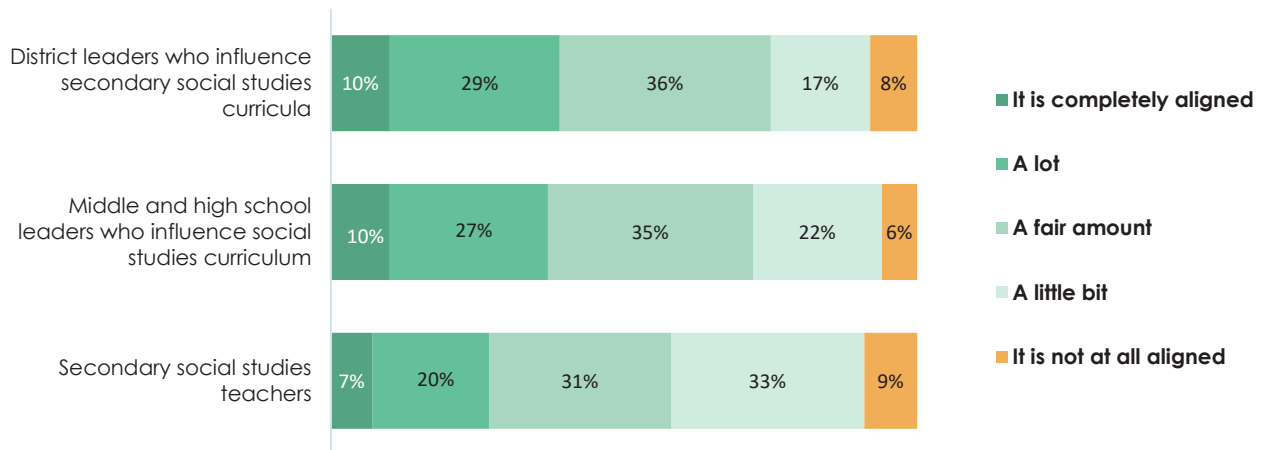


Figure 10

To what extent, if any, is social studies instruction in your district or school vertically aligned, with coursework in one grade level building on prior coursework?



The Impact of Social Studies' Second-Class Status

Impact on/of Professional Development

Even in districts where social studies curricula are vertically aligned, professional development may be insufficient to support consistent instruction.

“I believe we have a scope and sequence in History/Civics that is well thought out and aligned, however, I do not feel as a system we continue to engage new teachers in our system to this sequencing and how it builds from year to year in an efficient and consistent manner,” a high school assistant principal in Washington wrote. “This leads to gaps and challenges for students who have different teachers from year to year who may or may not have been well versed in this.”

Wrote a social studies teacher in Wisconsin:

“The district/building is attempting to align, but the PD is lagging and not helpful in accomplishing this.”

Less than 1 in 4 survey respondents say social studies professional development for themselves or the teachers in their districts or schools is very sufficient or excellent.

“Professional development is often offered in my district, but it is not specifically aimed at social studies, history or civics education,” a

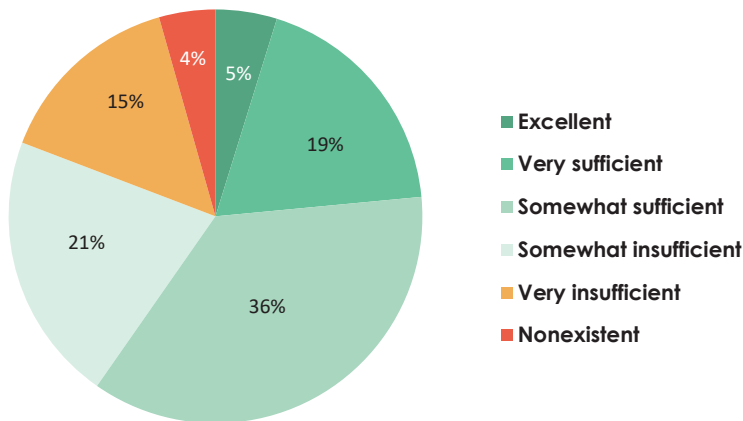
social studies teacher in New York wrote in response to an open-ended survey question. “English, math and the STEM areas receive priority in all things. New York State eliminated the 8th grade Social Studies assessment several years ago which, in turn, eliminated Social Studies as a priority in the district. There has not been active administrative leadership for middle level social studies for the development of professional learning opportunities, curriculum development or alignment in several years. I seek professional development through outside sources.”

Even in districts where social studies is more of a priority, it is not always easy for leaders to identify professional development opportunities that meet local needs.

“Professional development offerings for social studies teachers [are] very difficult to find,” an assistant superintendent in Illinois wrote in response to an open-ended survey question. “As the person in charge of finding PD, I struggle to locate organizations that can bring best practice and sound instructional strategies to my teachers. Additionally, much of the published curriculum available is not culturally responsive which presents a problem for my very, very diverse (nearly 70 home languages) students. We create our own curriculum which presents its own set of problems.”

Figure 11

How would you describe the professional development currently available to you—or if you are not a teacher—to the middle and high school social studies teachers in your district or school?



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Impact on Adoption of Best Practices

One impact of insufficient professional development may be that teachers are not consistently using the best practice of [inquiry-based instruction](#), an interdisciplinary approach in which students start with a question that they investigate by gathering evidence from different sources. Less than half of secondary social studies teachers use this approach weekly or daily and nearly 1 in 4 use it a few times a year or never.

“We have recently (last year) adopted a new inquiry based social studies curriculum which I think is amazing,” a social studies teacher in Colorado wrote in response to an open-ended survey question. “We need more professional development to go with this curriculum. Having kids be critical thinkers and using questions to drive instruction has been instrumental for engagement and understanding.”

Structural issues also create barriers to inquiry-based instruction, teachers reported in response to an open-ended survey question. For example, a teacher in Ohio avoids inquiry-based instruction because her/his courses prepare students for a state exam and the content associated with it must be covered.

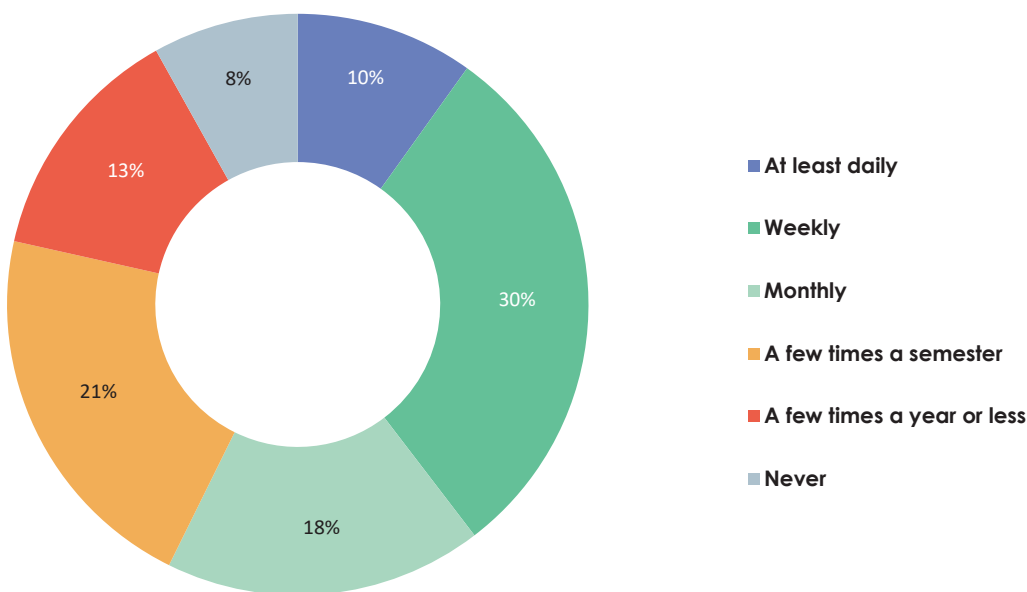
“There's just not enough time to do a good job,” the teacher wrote.

A teacher in Wisconsin described how the school's schedule made it challenging to take an inquiry-based approach.

“My courses are semester only classes on an A/B block, which does not provide the kind of time I had in an 8 period day to go into more inquiry and research-based work,” the teacher explained.

Figure 12

In inquiry-based social studies, instruction is interdisciplinary, and students start with a question that they investigate by gathering evidence from different sources. How often do you use this approach in your classroom?



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Conclusion

The results of the survey summarized in this report suggest that K-12 educators value secondary social studies for its contributions to the core public school mission of teaching young people to effectively participate in our democratic society and for the subject's ability to develop literacy skills and prepare students for college and/or careers.

Yet survey results also clearly identify a disconnect between the degree to which social studies is valued and the level to which it is supported.

Survey results suggest several ways educators might go about addressing this value-resource gap:

- Educators should consider analyzing the amount of money spent on social studies resources versus the amount spent on resources for other core subjects, considering whether the funding for social studies in their district or school is equitable when compared to funding for math, English/language arts, and science and whether it is sufficient to meet the needs of teachers and students.
- While educators do not control and cannot readily change which

courses are associated with high-stakes mandatory tests, they can account for the fact that non-tested subjects have much to contribute to learning in tested subjects and to consider this contribution when allocating resources. Further, the narrowing of the curriculum to focus almost exclusively on tested subjects is an unintended consequence of accountability measures rather than an explicit objective and one to be guarded against rather than embraced since success on standardized tests is only one of multiple educational outcomes important to students, their families, and their schools.

- Though it is less likely to be tested than other core subjects, social studies imparts skills that are incredibly relevant to tested subjects—especially English/language arts. These skills include critical thinking, persuasive writing, and collaboration. Further, educators clearly believe that preparing students to be engaged and knowledgeable citizens is a core mission of education. Social studies is the class where these skills are taught. As a result, the subject has value outside of test preparation to the point that some survey respondents view it as the most important subject of all.

Image: iStock/Getty

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Conclusion

- Ninety-three percent of survey respondents say it is at least somewhat important for social studies curricula to be vertically aligned so that coursework in one grade level builds upon coursework in another. Yet just 27 percent of secondary social studies teachers say their curricula is completely aligned or aligned a lot. Administrators and teachers should take a step back and examine their social studies curriculum as a whole, if necessary, rearranging and redesigning it so that students are not receiving a hodgepodge of instruction that leaves them struggling to understand how the events of one era influence another, or applying core concepts such as historical thinking skills in multiple periods and situations.
- Survey results indicate that social studies teachers may need more and better professional development, especially if they are to implement a vertically-aligned curriculum that embraces best practices such as inquiry-based instruction.
- Administrators should consider whether the structure of their courses and schedules allows for inquiry-based instruction. In order for this approach to work well, teachers may need longer course periods, additional resources (such as supports for emerging bilinguals), and opportunities to engage in interdisciplinary planning with their colleagues.

One has only to observe the partisan gridlock in our nation, accompanied by the spread of disinformation and the proliferation of hate speech, to realize the urgency of improving access to high-quality social studies instruction.

As a California social studies teacher wrote in response to an open-ended survey question:

“Social studies has been marginalized at my high school, a trend which has been playing out throughout the country over the past 30+ years. As a result, we have adults who don't have a basic understanding of civics, which has led to increased partisanship. Our schools need to do a better job of preparing high schoolers for the political environment that awaits them after high school.”

Wrote another social studies teacher, also from California:

“Teaching all young people to be informed, thoughtful, critical thinking citizens is more important today than perhaps ever before (at least in my lifetime).”

Thinking Nation is a 501c3 nonprofit specializing in innovative social studies curriculum, assessments, and professional development. Our mission is to cultivate thinking citizens with a model that empowers students to read closely, think deeply, and write persuasively, by employing more effective, student-centered teaching practices and professional development activities. We promote learning practices among students that reflect the diversity of identities, histories, contributions, and experiences to support enriched educational opportunity, equity, and success for all.

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