

Ohio Council for the Social Studies Position Statement: Changes to Ohio's Social Studies Education Programs

Identified Issues:

1. Ohio Academic Content Standards Revision
2. Proposed Assessment Program Revisions: End of Course exams, Nationally-Normed Standardized Assessment
3. Proposed Assessment Program Revisions: Service Learning and Senior Capstone
4. Professional Development

#1 - Ohio Academic Content Standards Revision

The Ohio Department of Education has announced a revision schedule for the Academic Content Standards in Social Studies, with revised standards ready for adoption in late 2010. OCSS welcomes the revision of the standards as the standards inform classroom instruction and promote rigorous benchmarks for learning in every school. As ODE moves forward with the revision process, OCSS encourages those leading the process to recognize:

- The current standards are grounded in an integrated social studies approach to K-12 instruction, which promotes learning connections across the social science disciplines. The standards revision should maintain this integrated approach.
- There is considerable stress in the education community over the question of specificity in the Ohio Social Studies Academic Content Standards. Some in the community would like to see additional specificity in the grade level indicators (GLI's) so there are identifiable content limiters for test construction. Others believe that greater specificity confines instruction and limits teachers, discouraging them from exploring meaningful topics that reflect their professional training and interest in order to rigidly address a litany of names and facts.

The nature of the OGT and OAT assessments lead classroom teachers to request additional specificity in order to assure that they have taught specific content selected for multiple-choice and constructed response questions. An unintended consequence is a focus in some classrooms on lists of factual information and minutiae rather than on higher-order skills of analyzing information and applying knowledge. We believe that this can be alleviated through the implementation of better assessments, possibly modeled after the New York Regents exams.

The New York Regents exams offer alternatives in answering questions. The tests have several sections and in the sections with open-ended responses, there will be perhaps three questions addressing different aspects of history (if it is the history regents) and the students answer one of the three questions. They have similar choices in other sections of the test.

- OCSS is dedicated to assisting teachers develop, share, and implement effective, research-based classroom strategies that actively engage students in the 21st Century Learning Skills promoted by Governor Strickland, KnowledgeWorks, and the Partnership for 21st Century Learning. These types of learning experiences require more time than a more traditional didactic instruction model. A common concern for social studies teachers across Ohio is the struggle to effectively address all

components of a grade level curriculum in the time provided. Therefore, we ask ODE to develop academic standards that focus more on depth of learning over breadth of content.

A shift to a more focused curriculum is consistent with the governor's education reform efforts because it supports the Top 10 list of findings from the 2007 Subcommittee on Education in the Global Economy (EDGE) research on "the most important skills, knowledge and behaviors students will need to provide Ohio with competitive advantages in the new global economy" (ODE, 2009). Broad survey courses as currently implemented force teachers to choose between topical "coverage" in order to complete a long list of benchmarks and grade level indicators, and developing critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and utilizing constructivist approaches that promote application of knowledge, refinement of communication skills, and development of team learning and work as outlined in the EDGE findings.

- Among the Top 10 Findings of the EDGE report is the need to ensure our students graduate with global awareness, and understanding other cultures (including history, economics and geography). To accomplish this, the standards must go beyond a curriculum focus on Western Civilization with tangential study of non-Western cultures. The revised standards must draw more fully from the research and strategies related to global education and multicultural education.
- ODE has stated that a goal of the revision process is to include technology standards. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills last year released the *21st Century Skills and Social Studies Map* developed by the National Council for the Social Studies (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008). The map demonstrates how the integration of 21st century skills into social studies instruction prepares students to become effective and productive citizens. The map provides specific grade level outcomes and examples of how 21st century skills can be infused into classroom practice. We encourage ODE to draw from this national framework in selecting technology standards to integrate in Ohio's social studies content standards.

#2 – Proposed Changes to Ohio's Assessment Program for High School Students

OCSS applauds Governor Strickland's efforts to replace the current focus on a single high-stakes assessment with a multiple-assessment program that will be "compensatory, rather than conjunctive." This reflects current research on assessment and learning and recognizes that Ohio's students can demonstrate learning in multiple ways. As the Ohio General Assembly moves forward in adopting a new assessment program and ODE moves forward in implementing the program it is important that the following concerns be addressed:

- Moving towards a nationally-normed standardized assessment, such as the ACT, places emphasis on only three of the four "core" subject areas: English, Science, and Math. There is a danger of marginalizing social studies in the high school even as 21st century learning, including economic literacy, cultural literacy, civic literacy and global awareness has focused attention on the crucial role of social studies education.

Research on the marginalization of social studies in the elementary schools should serve as a cautionary message for decisions made about assessment in the secondary program. The National Council for Social Studies notes in volume 71 of

- End-of-course exams are specified in Governor Strickland's education reform plan. OCSS strongly recommends that the exams in social studies reflect the integrated nature of the social studies standards rather than a single content area, such as a history assessment.

Secondly, OCSS recommends that the exams selected include at least the freshman and sophomore programs, ensuring that schools will maintain a rich American studies and world studies program. If ODE chooses to assess an additional course, we recommend that American Government be selected as it is specified in the Ohio Revised Code.

Thirdly, OCSS recommends that ODE develop end-of-course exams that reflect critical thinking and analysis, provide choice in constructed-response items, and include components such as Document-Based Questions (DBQ's) and performance-based assessments. We reiterate here that the New York Regents exams offer a model that for revising Ohio's assessments.

Fourthly, OCSS recommends that ODE ensure flexibility within the end-of-course exam program. Schools or districts that effectively integrate world and American studies courses or employ the program models developed by ODE should be able to continue delivering effective programs while meeting the requirements of the exam program.

- Teachers and school officials have long noted the impact of extended periods of testing on students. By the end of a testing week, students are noticeably tired and have difficulty staying focused on the assessments. Beginning with the Ohio Proficiency Tests, and continuing with the Ohio Graduation Test and Ohio Achievement Test, social studies has been tested at the end of the testing cycle. The revised assessment program affords ODE the opportunity to ensure no subject area is continually disadvantaged by the placement of the assessment within the testing cycle.

#3 – Service Learning and Senior Capstone

OCSS applauds Governor Strickland's plan to include service learning and a senior capstone project as a part of the assessment program for graduation. Both reflect the mission of a social studies program, described by the National Council for the Social Studies: "Social studies educators teach students the content knowledge, intellectual skills, and civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy" (NCSS, 1992). Service learning allows students to engage in participatory citizenship while a capstone program will provide an opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills learned in high school to the study of an issue or topic.

- Schools currently using one or both of these programs note the time-intensive nature of the programs and the need for staffing to coordinate the community links and partnerships. It is essential that schools are fully funded for the staff necessary to coordinate these programs.
- Community partnerships are necessary for effective and successful service learning programs. Local, county, regional, and state governmental offices and agencies offer a rich set of opportunities for partnering with schools and students. Just as the federal government has tasked agencies with developing educational programs and resources, we ask that Governor Strickland and the Ohio General Assembly task all governmental agencies with fully partnering with schools for service learning and senior capstone projects.

#4 – Professional Development

Effective, accessible, on-going professional development is an absolutely essential component in any curriculum implementation process. It is vital that the Ohio General Assembly and the Ohio Department of Education fully fund and deliver the professional development necessary to prepare every Ohio social studies teacher to successfully implement the new standards as they enter the classroom in the 2011-2012 academic year and support additional professional development opportunities in subsequent years.

References

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