Prioritizing Social Studies Instruction in the Midst of the Pandemic

In this first year of district-wide implementation of the current social studies standards, naturally, teachers have wondered, “how should my instruction be different and exactly what should I be teaching?” With the impact of the pandemic on student learning stacked on top of new standards, many teachers are even less confident about the best course of action when planning social studies instruction. Here, we attempt to provide some guidance in targeting what’s most important for students to learn in social studies.

What’s Essential for Students to Know and Be Able to Do

Every unit of study should include lessons targeting inquiry practices. The current set of social studies standards elevates the importance of skills and practices, particularly those of inquiry, to be at least equal with what we think of as “traditional” social studies content. Analyses of the practice test for the state assessment in social studies (the only released items we have right now) and experts’ work at the national level (C3 Framework) support the movement of inquiry skills and practices to the forefront of classroom instruction.

Instruction should focus on the disciplinary concepts of the standards. Each standard statement contains important concepts that are foundational to the specific discipline. These concepts appear repeatedly in the progression of a standard K-12 (refer to Appendix A of KAS for Social Studies). Students are expected to learn, or come to understand, these concepts if they are to master the content area. For example, in the 5th grade standard below, the concept of (encouraged and restricted) movement of people, ideas, and goods should be the focus of instruction.

5.G.MM.1 Analyze how cultural, economic and environmental factors encouraged and restricted the movement of people, ideas and goods to and within the United States.

The details of unit contexts are tertiary to inquiry and disciplinary concepts. Even under normal circumstances there is not enough instructional time to teach everything about a particular time period or topic (e.g., American Revolution, community). Now, more than ever, the details (i.e., specific events, people, dates) need to be sacrificed as teachers efficiently plan to use only the details essential for students to grasp the inquiry practices and disciplinary concepts targeted in the unit. Like many social studies standards, the 5th grade standard above could be taught in multiple units using numerous examples. Teachers will have to cull through all the possibilities to settle on the best details to use to achieve student understanding of the concept.

Thinking Through the Planning Process

When planning daily instruction, teachers should meet in Professional Learning Communities to make decisions about what they will teach and assess. In this case, teachers should determine, with grade level or course colleagues, what’s most essential for students to know and be able to do in social studies. Here are steps to follow when thinking through the process:
1. Use the Instructional Planning Tool or Unit Framework documents to locate the standards included in the upcoming unit.

2. Deconstruct the inquiry standards identified for the unit to determine which inquiry skills or standards you will target in the unit. For example, students must be able to do several skills in order to master the 6th grade standard below. Students may not be ready to demonstrate proficiency of the entire standard.

6.I.CC.2 Construct arguments, using claims and evidence from multiple credible sources, while acknowledging the strengths and limitations of the arguments, to address how a specific problem can manifest itself at local, regional and global levels over time.

   ★ Construct arguments
   ★ develop claims
   ★ use evidence
   ★ determine credible sources

3. Review the standards included in the unit to identify the disciplinary concepts that will be the focus of instruction. In the high school economics standard below, the expected outcome of instruction should be students being able to explain how government policies and taxation impact the economy rather than simply knowing about several policies or taxes. The importance of this concept is supported by repeated appearance of “government interaction with the economy” throughout the K-12 standards.

   HS.E.MA.4 Analyze the impact of fiscal policies, various government taxation and spending policies on the economy.

4. Decide which details—specific examples of policies, events, people, dates—are most appropriate to include in the unit, given the inquiry practices and disciplinary concepts to be taught in the unit. Factors in the decision of what to include may hinge on resource availability.

5. Design assessments and lessons (or modify existing ones) that align with the essential content identified for the unit. Revise supporting questions from the Instructional Planning Tool or Unit Framework as needed.

Other Considerations
- Since this is the first year that the current social studies standards have been taught across the district, gaps in student knowledge and skills aren’t only a factor of the pandemic.
- Taking out all the standards from one discipline (e.g., taking economics or geography standards out of history units) undermines the intent of the KAS for Social Studies and the integrity of the FCPS curriculum documents.