



State board tees up a revision process and standards characterized by civic engagement and cultural responsiveness.

District of Columbia Embeds Antiracist Lens in Update of Social Studies Standards

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When current social studies standards in the District of Columbia were last revised in 2006, President Barack Obama had not yet been elected as the first African American president of the United States, the landmark Supreme Court case *Obergefell v. Hodges* had not been decided, and Black Lives Matter protests and anti-Asian rhetoric and attacks had not begun to press American society to confront what it means to be antiracist. Despite the strengths of DC’s existing standards—their clarity and breadth—a revision was long overdue.

In 2019, the DC State Board of Education began to explore how it would review and revise its preK-12 social studies standards. Its elected members asked several questions: How often should

state standards be reviewed and updated? How have states designed standards review processes that best engaged key and marginalized stakeholders and the public? How does a state embark on a standards review process in the absence of codified practices in state statute?

The board saw this process as an opportunity for DC to be progressive and bold. It affirmed its priorities and direction by stating at the outset of the process that the revised social studies standards would be “culturally inclusive and antiracist, impart important social studies content in the early grades, strengthen student knowledge of democratic principles and values, and promote civic engagement.”¹ At the same time, members knew the task ahead would not be easy.

Past Standards Revision Processes

DC is a unique “state” in many regards. First, it only established a state education agency, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), in 2007 as part of the Public Education Reform Amendment Act.² When OSSE was established, DC was home to just over 71,000 public school students in DC Public Schools and 15 public charter schools. Today, there are nearly 95,000 public school students across 68 local education agencies (LEAs)—each with the flexibility to develop and implement its own curriculum. Consequently, there are no state-wide textbooks or curriculum tools that are used across all of the public schools in DC, and there is no clarity around requirements for all LEAs to select curriculum that meets the standards that the state board adopts.

Over the last 10 years, DC has seen some changes to its statewide standards. For instance, in 2010, DC was awarded \$75 million in federal Race to the Top funds and adopted the Common Core State Standards for mathematics and English language arts as a condition of the award. In December 2013, DC adopted the Next Generation Science Standards, and in April 2016, the state board and OSSE adapted and then voted to adopt the Young Women’s Project Health Education Standards. The state board has since adopted physical education standards. Yet DC has not written learning standards from scratch, and there is no guidance in state statute about how standards should be reviewed or how often they should be reconsidered.

Beginning a New Process

In the absence of codified guidance on how state standards of learning should be updated, the state board in July 2019 began a multiyear work plan under the leadership of Ward 6 Representative Jessica Sutter, a former middle school social studies teacher. The plan to update and revise the social studies standards included extensive collaboration with OSSE and the convening and engagement of a diverse set of stakeholders. The goal is to revise social studies standards for implementation at the beginning of the 2022–23 school year, and the work is ongoing (table 1). The state board hopes these revised standards will be implemented in all LEAs across DC.

The initial work plan and discussions predated the Black Lives Matter protests that peaked in the summer of 2020 after the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and many others. In 2019 and into early 2020, the state board convened a Social Studies Standards Committee to discuss the process by which it would update the standards and how key and marginalized stakeholders and the public would be engaged. Because many citizens in the nation’s capital and around the world were discussing what it means to be antiracist, Black Lives Matter served to amplify the importance of this standards revision work.

The committee’s first step in July 2020 was to convene a diverse, representative Social Studies Standards Advisory Committee (SSSAC) and to set a timeline for the state board to collaborate with OSSE and its Technical Writing Committee on moving toward final standards. The SSSAC was charged with drafting guiding principles and making recommendations to the state board and OSSE on how the state standards should be revised and updated to reflect the needs of DC students and teachers.

Unlike most other states, DC does not have locally elected school boards with direct oversight of local school policies and personnel. The state board serves as the only directly elected body responsible for public education in DC. Thus it was important for the state board to ensure that a diverse set of community voices, engagement, and participation was forefront in the revisions process.³ That meant seeking a membership that was diverse in many ways: by wards of residence and work, race, ethnicity, and gender, as well identity: parents, preK-12 teachers, school leaders, students, and curriculum and content experts. By the end of the open application process, the state board had received over 100 applications for its 26-member advisory committee. The state board conducted a deidentified review of applicants, ranking applicants based on responses, and then checked to ensure that the selected committee was representative based on the demographic diversity factors listed above.

The SSSAC conducted community stakeholder outreach, providing two opportunities for feedback. The first was a three-question survey that asked the public to rate its satisfaction with the current social studies standards and provide thoughts on what students should know by the

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Table 1. DC Social Studies Standards Revision Process and Timeline

TIMEFRAME	PHASE	KEY STAKEHOLDERS
December 2019– March 2020	Brainstorm State board frames initial direction for revision.	state board
April–June 2020	Planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ OSSE and state board presents plan at state board working session. ■ State board develops process for SSSAC selection. ■ State board convenes SSSAC. ■ OSSE and state board secure personnel to work on social studies standards. 	OSSE, state board
July–December 2020	Establishing Guiding Principles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ SSSAC convenes to build knowledge base on social studies standards, develop plan for engaging the public on guiding principles, obtain public feedback, and draft guiding principles. ■ State board approves adoption of guiding principles. 	SSSAC, public, state board
January– November 2021	Revision <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ OSSE develops process for Technical Writing Committee selection. ■ OSSE convenes committee. ■ Writing Committee reviews existing standards, assesses standards against guiding principles, revises, issues revised draft to OSSE and state board. 	Technical Writing Committee
December 2021– March 2022	Approval <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Public provides comments on revised standards. ■ Incorporate revisions as needed. ■ OSSE submits standards and resolution to state board for approval. ■ State board votes to approve standards and resolution. ■ OSSE introduces revised standards to educators and supports instructional implementation. 	state board, OSSE, public

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time they graduate from a public school in DC. The three-question survey was open for a three-week period in the fall 2020 and received nearly 270 responses from residents with children in DC Public Schools, public charter schools, and private and parochial schools, as well as individuals without children in DC schools. To ensure equity of access, flyers with QR codes were posted at school meal distribution sites and community locations, and the electronic survey link was widely distributed via email, social media, and various community contacts

(i.e., Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners, Ward Education Councils, DC Public School and public charter school leadership teams). Most survey respondents shared that they were moderately dissatisfied with DC social studies classes and learning.

The second opportunity for community stakeholder outreach was when the SSSAC asked for public comment after the guiding principles were drafted. A 10-day public comment period was open at the end of November 2020. Sixty people—representing teachers, parents, students,

and interest-based organizations—submitted public comment, and an additional five people and interest-based organizations submitted formal letters. The majority of respondents applauded the SSSAC’s work, process, and efforts in drafting the guiding principles. Global perspectives, DC history, antiracism, and human rights guiding principles were consistently appreciated. Eighty-three percent of respondents also agreed with the proposed preamble as written, awarding an average score of 3.13 out of 4.

At monthly meetings from July to December 2020, the SSSAC hosted expert panels⁴ on the importance of civics education, teaching “hard history,”⁵ and addressing social science concepts in early grades. Experts also drew the SSSAC’s attention to understanding critical race theory and the benefits of having the standards take a local and global approach.

Drafting and Framing Guiding Principles

The SSSAC defined a “guiding principle” as a statement that would provide OSSE and their Technical Writing Committee with information on how to revise and rewrite the existing standards. Each statement is intended to be clear and actionable for standards writers. Because the SSSAC knew it would ultimately generate a long list of guiding principles, it decided to narrow down the list, through internal discussions and with public input, to 15 to 20 principles for eventual state board adoption.

Beginning in July 2020, the SSSAC met monthly for two-hour sessions in which members discussed the current standards, the interests of the state board, and the SSSAC’s own hopes for updated standards. Over six months, during public meetings and via individual worksheets and surveys, SSSAC members brainstormed and crafted a draft list of Guiding Principles. Members had the chance to vote individual principles up or down, and the SSSAC engaged in facilitated discussion to arrive at consensus on the final Guiding Principles presented to the board for adoption.

In December 2020, the SSSAC delivered a final list of 19 guiding principles to the state board, which adopted them during its December meeting.⁶ The principles are categorized into four groups: (1) structure and content, (2) knowledge and skills, (3) diversity

and inclusion, and (4) instruction flexibility and equity. Below are key themes from the guiding principles:

- fewer, higher, clearer, rigorous standards that will be coherent, developmentally appropriate, and vertically aligned across preK-12;
- expansion of the types of skills and knowledge to which all DC students should be guaranteed access (e.g., digital literacy, student agency, active participation in a democratic society, analysis of power, and bias in history); and
- recognition that the world in which DC students are growing up in is—more than ever before—globally interconnected and culturally and racially diverse.

Building on the state board’s call for antiracist and culturally inclusive standards, the preamble of the guiding principles implores the authors of the new standards to move beyond a “heroes and holidays” treatment of history content and states that “no District student should graduate without authentic interracial, intercultural, international exchange and experience.”

In DC, 64 percent of students identify as African American/Black (non-Hispanic), and 20 percent of students identify as Hispanic or Latinx. In addition, OSSE has designated 47 percent of public school students as at risk,⁷ and 12 percent of students receive English learner services.⁸ Because educational policy-makers tend to be removed from the students directly affected by their work, the SSSAC also recommended that OSSE seek standards writers who would reflect the demographics and experiences of DC students and communities (e.g., LGBTQ+ writers, advocates for people with disabilities, and Black and Indigenous people of color, or BIPOC).

The SSSAC also recommended that the writers encourage teaching Black history through the words of Black people and giving agency to BIPOC rather than discussing history only in relation to white people. One member of the SSSAC, Lamar Bethea, a teacher at Statesman College Preparatory Academy for Boys, shared his perspective on this: “If history is only taught through a Eurocentric lens, every other race becomes ‘other.’ Eurocentric ideals become the default view of teaching the material, so authentic teaching of BIPOC becomes

more of an offshoot or elective/alternative history. We need to make the shift into giving BIPOC agency in history lessons because it can help remove the feeling of ‘otherness.’” Another committee member, Jessica Rucker, a teacher at E.L. Haynes Public Charter School, reflected: “In my courses, US History no longer simply means ‘United States History.’ It means ‘US’ history: us and our stories. In this way, students’ voices and words and the words of the broader BIPOC community, is the curriculum.”

From Principles to Standards

The Technical Writing Committee began work in February 2021. It comprises preK-12 social studies educators from DC Public Schools and public charter schools, as well as local and national technical experts. Five members of the SSSAC are also on the writing committee, providing continuity between the state board and OSSE working groups.

The work of the writing committee is grounded in the guiding principles. As part of the collaborative process, the writing committee is providing the SSSAC several outlines and drafts for feedback during the writing year. The SSSAC conducted its first review of the writing committee’s work in April 2021. They considered content strands, cross-cutting concepts, core ideas, and skills. Additional opportunities for feedback from the SSSAC occurred in June 2021, focused on the structure of the standards and brief course descriptions by grade, and in mid-August 2021, when the SSSAC reviewed a full draft of the revised standards.

This fall, OSSE hopes to present a revised draft of standards to the state board. The board will then seek public feedback on the draft during winter 2021 and schedule a vote to adopt the new standards next spring.

Challenges, Lessons Learned, and Next Steps

To date, and through this multiyear process, the state board managed a number of challenges:

- balancing the relative weight of priorities of the elected state board and its members (i.e., democratic principles) versus the priorities raised by a community advisory panel (i.e., SSSAC);
- managing decisions about whether to adopt or incorporate existing social studies and civics

frameworks such as the National Council of the Social Studies “College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework” versus creating something unique to DC; and

- creating and ensuring that a first effort at a statewide, community advisory panel is diverse, representative, and promotes equitable participation.

The state board learned a few key lessons as well, which will be applicable to future state standards work in DC and could be considered by other state boards embarking on this type of work:

- **Plan ahead.** Have an idea of the work you want to accomplish—with a rough timeline and milestones (mutually negotiated with partners)—before the process begins. There will likely be continuous improvement, collaboration, and partnership as the work gets started, but without an initial set of guardrails and foundation, the work may never feel truly grounded in purpose.
- **Build a team.** Have a core group of dedicated staff, partners, and community members to ensure that the work moves forward. Designating a series of point persons and co-chairs to help define meeting agendas and goals is key.
- **Less is more.** Honor timelines and deadlines that you have set for yourself, and know when you may need to close or end a particular part of the process so that the work stays grounded and moves forward. It is okay to leave some unanswered questions on the table, and it may be necessary to cut back or limit items for inclusion in, for example, the guiding principles drafted by the SSSAC.

DC’s state board has designed and coordinated a collaborative process to revise social studies standards that will ideally facilitate learning the long, interconnected arcs of history, economics, politics, and geography that run through the American past, helping students make connections between history and the present, where they are active agents of civic change. While the new standards will not be implemented until the 2022–23 school year, the state board has planned these revisions with a rapidly changing world in mind and prioritized the critical examination of history as an essential skill for all DC students. ■

You may need to close or end a particular part of the process so that the work stays grounded and moves forward.

¹DC State Board of Education, “State Board of Education Resolution on the Implementation of Working Group Proposal,” SR19-7, July 17, 2019, <https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/publication/attachments/SR19-7%20Implementation%20of%20Working%20Group%20Proposals%20Signed.pdf>.

²Previously, state-level functions related to education were carried out by the central office of DC’s largest local education agency, DC Public Schools.

³DC State Board of Education, Social Studies Standards Advisory Committee, “Why Revise DC’s Social Studies Standards?” web page, <https://sboe.dc.gov/page/social-studies-standards>

⁴Experts included Dr. Danielle Allen, director of Democratic Knowledge Project at Harvard University; Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, historian and producer of the Southern Poverty Law Center podcast “Teaching Hard History”; Dr. Karen Thomas-Brown, member of C3 Framework Writing Committee; Natalie Wexler, author of *The Knowledge Gap*; Dr. Bernard Demczuk, historian at Ben’s Chili Bowl Foundation; Jennifer Manise, executive director of The Longview Foundation for World Affairs and International Understanding; and Christopher Riano, executive director of the Center for Civic Education.

⁵Historian David Blight describes hard history as dealing with the “hard questions of our past—slavery, exploitation, violence, dispossession, discrimination and the work that has been done to overcome or thwart those realities.” “Teaching Hard History” (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018), p. 7.

⁶DC State Board of Education, “State Board of Education Resolution: Social Studies Standards Guiding Principles,” SR20-15, December 16, 2020, <https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/documents/SR20-15%20Social%20Studies%20Standards%20Guiding%20Principles%20SIGNED.pdf>.

⁷DC does not use the free and reduced-priced lunch designation. Instead, DC designates particular students at risk: those who qualify for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, have been identified as homeless during the academic year, are under foster care, or are high school students at least one year older than the expected age for their grade.

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¹⁰Florida Department of Education, “Routes to a Florida Professional Certificate,” table, rev. April 19, 2018, <http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/9915/urlt/RoutesEdPrep.pdf>.

¹¹Aaron S. Horn and Sung Tæ Jang, “The Impact of Graduate

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¹²Casey Boyd-Swan and Chris M. Herbst, “The Demand for Teacher Characteristics in the Market for Child Care: Evidence from a Field Experiment,” *Journal of Public Economics* 159, (2018): 183–202, doi: 10.1016/j.jpubeco.2018.02.006.

¹³Douglas O. Staiger and Jonah E. Rockoff, “Searching for Effective Teachers with Imperfect Information,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 24, no. 3 (2010): 97–118, doi: 10.1257/jep.24.3.97.

¹⁴Ana María Villegas and Beatriz Chu Clewell, “Increasing Teacher Diversity by Tapping the Paraprofessional Pool,” *Theory into Practice* 37, no. 2 (1998): 121–30, www.jstor.org/stable/1477293.

¹⁵Conor P. Williams et al., *Multilingual Paraprofessionals: An Untapped Resource for Supporting American Pluralism* (Washington, DC: New America, 2016).

¹⁶Robert Rueda, Lilia D. Monzo, and Ignacio Higuera, “Appropriating the Sociocultural Resources of Latino Paraeducators for Effective Instruction with Latino Students: Promise and Problems,” *Urban Education* 39, no. 1 (2004): 52–90, doi: 10.1177/0042085903259213.

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