

THE ALBERTA TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

Response to the Social Studies Curriculum Draft

ISSUE

The Draft Social Studies Kindergarten to Grade 6 Curriculum and Draft Social Studies Kindergarten to Grade 12 Subject Overview, released on March 14, 2024, requires revision to reflect Albertans' expectations and the recommendations of teachers responsible for its implementation.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Ministry of Education (the ministry) revise the Draft Social Studies Kindergarten to Grade 6 Curriculum and the Draft Kindergarten to Grade 12 Social Studies Subject Overview to reflect the recommendations provided by Alberta teachers through the Alberta Teachers' Association (the Association).

BACKGROUND

- Historically, curriculum development and implementation processes have substantively involved the Association and its membership. Teachers and representatives from the Association routinely engaged with the ministry through a variety of roles that capitalized on the expertise, resources and insights teachers offer to curriculum development and implementation.
- Since the dissolution of the memorandum of understanding that formalized a partnership between the ministry and the Association in curriculum development, the ministry has developed curriculum without the substantive involvement of and consultation with the Association and its members.
- In recent months, the ministry has engaged the Association and its members in consultations on kindergarten to Grade 12 (K–12) social studies curriculum development.
- In addition to promoting the ministry's public engagement survey regarding the draft K–12 subject overview and K–6 social studies curriculum released on March 14, 2024, the Association has collected feedback from teachers about the proposed curriculum.
- Data collected by the Association is drawn from almost 600 Alberta teachers, including data collected at teachers' convention engagement sessions and teacher focus groups.
- Focus groups convened by the Association included active K–6 social studies teachers, social studies curriculum specialists and consultants, and administrators and representatives from the Association's Early Childhood Education and Social Studies specialist councils.



ANALYSIS

- Given a lack of substantive involvement in the curriculum development process in recent years, teachers lack confidence in the new curriculum, writ large.
- A dedicated and clearly communicated effort to use feedback received from teachers and the Association specifically may increase the credibility of this curriculum.
- Advice provided by teachers through the Association is supported by a significant body of established research, including child development, best practices in curriculum development and higher-order thinking skills, including the critical thinking skills Albertans have prioritized.
- Revising the curriculum to reflect Albertans' priorities identified through the Social Studies Curriculum Engagement Survey and subsequent Leger Report (December 13, 2023) may also increase the credibility of this curriculum.
 - For example, Albertans identified critical thinking skills as a priority. Teachers note that critical thinking skills are lacking in the draft curriculum.
 - As well, Albertans identified problem solving, research and investigation, decision making, organizing information, current events and media literacy as priorities. While these words are present in the K–12 subject overview, these skills and processes are largely absent in the draft.
- Indigenous communities expect that revisions to the curriculum will reflect the ministry's demonstrated commitment to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action on Education for Reconciliation, specifically Calls 62 and 63.
- Francophone communities expect to see evidence of the ministry's commitment to the historical and constitutional role of francophone perspectives, experiences and histories.

RECOMMENDED APPROACHES

RECOMMENDATION 1

Revise the Draft Social Studies Kindergarten to Grade 12 Subject Overview.

- Enhance the subject overview and curriculum front matter to philosophically position the curriculum and communicate Alberta's priorities for social studies education.
- Expand the definition of knowledge beyond memorizing facts and include dimensions that promote higher order thinking such as historical thinking, geographical thinking and creative thinking.
- Include explicit reference to social studies learning skills, such as research, inquiry, collaboration, communication, research, writing and representing.
- Describe the importance of multiple perspectives and how such perspectives impact views of history and contemporary life.
- Create a grid structure so the curriculum can be viewed at once across grades (eg, [Big Ideas](#) and [Curricular Competencies](#)) to examine for gaps and sequencing issues.

Rationale

- The philosophical positioning of curriculum through this overview sets a direction for student learning experiences. The front matter of the curriculum should be a robust description of the end goal for students at the conclusion of the K–12 educational experience.
 - The document must create a student-centered vision that creates a sense of momentum for the future of our students and this province and is focused on their best interests.
- The focus in the Ministerial Order on Student Learning on “inheritance” as a mechanism for learning reduces learning to a passive rather than an active process. The ministry continues to position the curriculum as a “knowledge-based curriculum” (p 1). The knowledge acquisition of this overview is exemplified through the repeated use of the phrase “Content covered” in each grade-level overview.
 - Revising the “Content covered” phrase to “Concepts explored” would reposition the intent of the curriculum to move beyond knowledge acquisition and into critical thinking.
 - Including the dimensions of thinking and skills leads to higher-order thinking and real learning.

Risks

- Leaving the K–12 subject overview in its current form may result in a curriculum that has vague intent and purpose, that is perceived as problematic by teachers and that is inconsistently implemented in the field.
- Continuing with a knowledge-based orientation in the curriculum may result in learning experiences that lack relevancy to contemporary student and community contexts, as well as a lack of student engagement in active learning processes.
- Although a shift away from a knowledge-based curriculum orientation may seem counter to the call for curriculum “based on fact and not narrative” (p 7) noted in the December 2023 Leger Report, the curriculum will continue to be based in both fact and in the critical thinking skills also desired by Albertans.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Adjust the content ratio within Knowledge, Understandings, Skills and Procedures (KUSPs).

- Currently, the curriculum includes a significant number of knowledge items in learning outcome KUSPs.
- Reduce the number of KUSP knowledge items to reduce the content load of the curriculum in each grade level.
- Taken together with the reduced KUSP knowledge items, ensure that any adjustments to the wording of learning outcomes, understandings, skills and procedures can be implemented in one school year in a complex classroom environment.

Rationale

- Although the number of learning outcomes has been reduced in this draft curriculum, the content load of the current curriculum is retained in the KUSPs. Moreover, there are significantly more knowledge items as compared to the understandings, skills and procedures items included in KUSPs across grade levels.
- The Ministerial Order on Student Learning (028/2020) states, “Students will integrate the broad knowledge base of these subjects to learn to think for themselves, solve problems creatively, collaborate and communicate effectively.” The ministerial order also says there will be “space in the curriculum for the study of local traditions, history, and geography, including Alberta’s francophone history.” The curriculum in its current form does not facilitate these goals and is not congruent with the ministerial order’s intent to make space for deep learning.
- A reduction in KUSP knowledge items and enhanced inclusion of higher-order thinking skills will encourage meaningful, engaging learning experiences in the classroom.

Risk

- Although a reduction in the number of knowledge items included in curriculum may signal a shift away from a knowledge-based curriculum orientation, student retention of essential knowledge will be enhanced by increased opportunities to engage with higher-order thinking skills.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Clarify and elevate expectations for depth of learning and assessment in Learning Outcomes and KUSPs.

- Conduct an audit of the verbs used in organizing ideas, guiding questions, learning outcomes and KUSPs to understand the depth of learning required by the draft curriculum.
- Strengthen learning outcomes focused on “exploration.” Employ more specific verbs that indicate higher-order thinking and specify the depth of learning to be assessed through formative and summative means.
- Learning outcomes and KUSPs revised to include specific higher-order thinking skills must be balanced by a reduction in KUSP knowledge items for teachers to ensure completion of curriculum within one school year.

Rationale

- Changing verbs from lower to higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy fundamentally changes student learning experiences and enhances student retention. For example, “explore” and “recognize” require less rigour than “compare,” “evaluate” or “create.”
- Learning experiences that are founded in higher-order thinking skills promote opportunities for students to make personal connections to learning and develop habits of mind that transcend subjects and grade levels.

Risks

- Retaining a predominantly knowledge-based curriculum may be perceived as a lack of ambition for students and Alberta's education system overall. The notion of passive knowledge inheritance noted in the ministerial order does not reflect the best interests of students who deserve to learn through best practices in education.
- A knowledge-based curriculum orientation that deprioritizes higher-order thinking skills may undermine Alberta's international reputation for high-quality education.
- Although a segment of the population supports a knowledge focus, parents may become disillusioned with this approach when overarching skill deficits begin to surface (eg, media literacy skills, conflict resolution skills, etc).

RECOMMENDATION 4

Review Learning Outcomes and KUSPs to ensure they are developmentally appropriate.

- Abstract concepts such as time, history, money and taxes are currently in some grades where students do not have the developmental ability to understand the KUSPs as written. For example, children who are five years old do not grasp the nuances of time that are asked of them. The ability to understand time as written occurs when students are between 7 and 10 years old.
- Early learners can make meaning if the KUSPs start with themselves and then build out to their families, their classrooms, their communities and beyond. KUSPs should be examined to ensure the grade levels where they are located are developmentally appropriate.

Rationale

- Decades of research on child development and lived experiences of families and teachers tell us that our youngest students are egocentric and, because of their developmental stage, think in preoperational ways. These students are not able to think abstractly until they are older.
- Having developmentally inappropriate outcomes and KUSPs will lead to student frustration and will not encourage productive learning experiences.

Risks

- Inclusion of learning outcomes that are not developmentally appropriate will result in students who become frustrated and disengaged with learning opportunities.
- Developmentally inappropriate learning outcomes create situations in which students are unable to learn, remember and apply information.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Revise learning outcomes and KUSPs to build on one another and progress from grade to grade in a logical sequence.

- Address sequencing issues to reduce opportunity for student confusion and disorientation. For example, in Grade 1, students are asked to discuss the roles/responsibilities of group members. Then, in Grade 2, students are asked to

discuss governmental roles. This is too large of a conceptual leap for students of this age group. Use the grid strategy referenced under the Association's subject overview feedback to check for such issues.

- Teachers expressed that grade levels appear disjointed and written in isolation. Moreover, verbs used across grade levels do not yet appear purposely chosen to create a progression of skills and understandings.
- Align the curriculum with the competency progressions.
- Recognize that kindergarten is not mandatory in Alberta and, therefore, students in Grade 1 may not have knowledge and skills from the kindergarten curriculum.

Rationale

- A logical progression wherein KUSPs build on one another and progress in a purposeful sequence will ensure that students are always building on previous learning.

Risks

- Retaining the current grade-to-grade sequencing may result in a disjointed experience wherein students have difficulty making conceptual connections between concepts.
- Restructuring the current grade-to-grade sequencing is associated with minimal risk as it involves repositioning concepts currently included in the curriculum draft.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Add dedicated learning outcomes in each grade level that explicitly address the development of discipline-specific social and emotional skills, Dimensions of Thinking used in current programs of study and/or the competency progressions from the new curriculum.

- Ensure these outcomes and skills purposefully progress and build upon one another in each grade level.
- Include discipline-embedded social and emotional skills such as cooperation, collaboration, consensus-building, conflict resolution, discussion skills, debate skills and active listening skills.

Rationale

- The Dimensions of Thinking employed in the current curriculum are highly regarded by teachers. It is recommended that these be purposefully incorporated into dedicated and explicit learning outcomes.
- The competency progressions offer a developmentally appropriate progression of skills that are relevant to curriculum and that could be woven into dedicated learning outcomes.
- A logical developmental progression of discipline-specific social and emotional skills and Dimensions of Thinking within curriculum will create a unifying band of outcomes that allow curriculum to feel like a purposeful and consistent developmental progression.

Risks

- The optics of supporting student social, emotional, behavioural and cognitive skill development are positive and present minimal risk for the ministry.
- Inclusion of these skills and competencies may increase the credibility of this curriculum within the educational sphere.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Add cross-disciplinary connections in the New LearnAlberta ecosystem where cross-disciplinary skills covered in other subjects are applicable to a social studies KUSP.

- Research skills covered in the English language arts and literature curriculum are directly applicable in a social studies context and should be explicitly connected.

Rationale

- Including a feature that links KUSPs to cross-disciplinary skills in other subjects would support multisubject and multigrade teachers in efficient planning for instruction.

Risk

- There is minimal risk associated with this recommendation, as it involves connections to curriculum components that are currently finalized and implemented.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Add explicit discipline-specific literacy and numeracy skills in KUSPs that progress logically from grade to grade.

- While the ministerial order emphasizes literacy and numeracy across curriculum, teachers do not see these concepts present in the knowledge-focused social studies curriculum.
- For example, identifying developmentally appropriate text schema (ie, cause/effect, chronology, case study, persuasion) in social studies writing and applying specific text schema in students' own social studies writing are literacy strategies that function as universal supports for students, including newcomers and students learning English as an additional language.
- Inclusion of developmentally appropriate oral literacy skills that scaffold student ability to engage in productive discussion and debate supports social studies specific learning.

Rationale

- A logical developmental progression of disciplinary literacy and numeracy skills within curriculum will create a unifying band of outcomes that allow curriculum to feel like a purposeful developmental progression.
- Explicit inclusion of disciplinary literacy and numeracy skills functions as a universal support for students as they engage with curriculum. These skills also support students who may be newcomers or learning English as an additional language.

Risk

- There is minimal risk associated with this recommendation, as it reinforces the direction on literacy and numeracy outlined in the existing Ministerial Order on Student Learning.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Add current events and global perspectives, including media literacy skills such as verifying sources of information, across all grade levels.

- Within the Citizenship band, include a developmentally appropriate progression of digital and media literacy skills within every grade level.
- Within the Citizenship band, add a dedicated learning outcome, with developmentally appropriate KUSP progression, of current events analysis skills.

Rationale

- There is an enormous volume of information that today's students must contend with. They need specific skills to be able to verify sources and use them to organize information, make decisions and solve problems.
- References to current events and issues are scant in the draft curriculum.
- Enhance connections to students' lived reality through meaningful opportunities to grapple with current events that bring the social studies curriculum to life.
- Current events are an entry point for all students into curriculum, including students who are newcomers and those learning English as an additional language. Current events allow students to connect social studies to matters of personal, global and contemporary relevance.
- The Leger Report indicates the development of research skills is important to Albertans.

Risks

- Scant inclusion of current events and media literacy skills indicates a deprioritization of the critical thinking that was prioritized in the Leger Report findings.
- Continuance with current curriculum may result in citizens who struggle to locate, verify and apply accurate information, and who feel unprepared for postsecondary education and the workforce.
- The omission of current events and media literacy is a missed opportunity to provide an entry point for all students to engage with curriculum. Inclusion of these opportunities may enhance the credibility of this curriculum with the educational community.

RECOMMENDATION 10

Include contemporary, in-depth, inclusive and respectful views of Indigenous peoples and implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

- Learn about treaties and residential schooling in a sequenced, age-appropriate way.
- Recognize that Indigenous peoples have perspectives on confederation and colonization that are different than what is depicted in the curriculum.

Rationale

- References to Indigenous peoples exist almost entirely in time and place, relegating them to historical artifacts rather than understanding their role in contemporary society.
- The government must implement the Calls to Action.

Risks

- There is significant risk that, if this recommendation is not addressed, the lack of trust between the government and Indigenous peoples will be bolstered. Indigenous peoples have spent considerable time providing specific feedback and feel that, to this point, their voices have not been heard.
- Neglecting this recommendation may result in publicity highlighting the government's unwillingness to follow the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

RECOMMENDATION 11

Include contemporary, in-depth, inclusive and respectful views of francophone people and communities.

- Increase opportunities to talk about francophones across the province, their communities and their contributions to the province across grades.
- References to francophones exist largely within time and place, leaving contemporary contributions of francophones absent.
- Recognize both of Canada's official languages and learn about francophone communities in Alberta.
- Extend existing KUSPs to learn the French and bilingual lyrics to "O Canada," the meaning and symbolism of francophone flags and francophone cultural celebrations.
- Accurate resources will be important so students can access accurate and consistent information.

Rationale

- French is one of Canada's two official languages and has special protection under the Canadian Constitution; therefore, it should take a more significant place in curriculum.
- Learning about francophone people, communities and cultures is an important perspective to know and understand in historical and contemporary aspects of social studies.

Risks

- Francophone communities expect more than surface-level treatment of their language, culture, history and contemporary roles in society. Neglecting this recommendation may result in further erosion of the relationship between francophone communities and the government.
- Neglecting this recommendation will result in students experiencing surface-level

learning opportunities regarding francophone perspectives and experiences.

RECOMMENDATION 12

Revise the curriculum to ensure accessibility of the curriculum for all students regardless of intersectional identity factors.

- The curriculum should demonstrate a respect for the beliefs that exist within Alberta’s pluralist society. Inclusion of learning from multiple traditions in addition to “God Save the King,” “O Canada” and displaying the Canadian flag should be purposefully included. For example, inclusion of treaty flags, the Métis flag, and references to religions that do not recognize flags or symbols is recommended.
- Revise references to gender binary roles, as current references imply that all cultures subscribe to a gender binary.
 - Clarify that prior to colonization and in contemporary society, many cultures have had roles for people who identify as nonbinary.
- Learning outcomes focused on wants are based on multiple factors outside of students’ control. These references may be unintentionally marginalizing for students with a variety of intersecting identity factors.

Rationale

- Alberta’s schools are charged with creating welcoming, safe, caring and respectful learning environments for all students. Retaining exclusionary references in curriculum undermines the efforts of school communities to ensure that all students feel safe, cared for and respected at school.

Risk

- There is substantive risk in retaining these references in curriculum, as they may cause psychological harm to students, their families and members of the school community.

RECOMMENDATION 13

Correct inaccurate references in the curriculum.

- *Chief* is referenced as a municipal government position, which is inaccurate and undermines Indigenous nation sovereignty (Grade 3, Learning Outcome: Students investigate decision making and government structures in Alberta).
- Treaties were not negotiated by the Government of Canada, but by the Crown.
- The phrase “time immemorial” excludes the Métis and should be changed where it is inaccurate.
- Revise the wording of “treaties in Alberta,” as treaties transcend and predate provincial boundaries.
- Students are asked to use maps to identify locations where Indigenous languages are spoken, but an accurate map of this nature would be difficult if not impossible to find, and may result in inaccuracies in instruction.
- In Grade 4, one learning outcome states: Students examine significant historical events

that contributed to the formation of the country of Canada. The KUSP skills and procedures then ask students to hypothesize about different perspectives on colonization. It is not appropriate to ask students to hypothesize about events that have already happened; rather, students could learn about Indigenous perspectives on colonization.

Rationale

- Curriculum must be error-free and factually accurate.

Risks

- Inaccuracies in curriculum may result in systemic embarrassment and undermining of Alberta's international reputation for providing high-quality education.
- Retaining curriculum inaccuracies may result in the alienation of Indigenous communities, leaders and peoples.

NEXT STEPS

- Acknowledge teachers' pedagogical expertise and responsibility for curriculum implementation by elevating teacher and Association curriculum feedback in the curriculum revision process.
- Create a plan to routinely and substantively involve the Association and its members in curriculum writing, revision and implementation planning processes.
- Collaborate with the Association to create a routine and substantive approach to this work.
- Create a communications plan accompanying the next draft that clearly identifies (1) recommendations the ministry received from teachers, and (2) what changes were made as a result of teachers' recommendations.