

**Social Studies Curriculum (Grades 8 to 12)
Needs Assessment**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BC Ministry of Education

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The BC Ministry of Education contracted with Polestar Communications Inc. to conduct research and develop a needs assessment questionnaire for a review of BC's social studies curricula for grades 8 to 12. The purpose of the research and questionnaire was to:

- 1) identify recommendations regarding curricular content for social studies grades 8 to 12; hence, to assess what educators, parents, students, and other stakeholders believe constitute essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes and/or what they believe should appear in the revised social studies curricula; and
- 2) gather data and recommendations that will guide curriculum developers in writing a revised/new 8 to 12 social studies program.

Polestar Communications, assisted by a project team, completed the research project by conducting four types of research:

- In-depth interviews with social studies experts to explore the relevance and content of social studies courses and to identify trends and exemplary models in social studies education
- A literature review of recent research, both in Canada and internationally, to identify current thinking and best practices in social studies education
- A review of grades 8-12 social studies curricula in the 10 Canadian provinces, to see how B.C.'s approach fits with that of other provinces
- A needs assessment questionnaire to gain the views of educators, parents, students and other stakeholders on the curriculum and social studies education, and to identify what essential knowledge and skills they believe should appear in the curriculum.

Key Findings

It is worth noting that the commitment of everyone who took part in the research, both the interviews and the questionnaires, was outstanding. Interviewees and questionnaire respondents took the time to comment and reflect with a high degree of thoughtfulness, detail and passion. The tone of their comments was generally positive and constructive. British Columbians, especially teachers, care deeply about social studies education, and they want to see the curriculum

improved and strengthened so that it truly meets the needs of BC students and society at large.

Following are the key findings that emerged from the four research strands. They are grouped as foundational strengths of the curriculum, trends in social studies education, and identified concerns. In general, parents' and other non-educators' responses were consistent with those of the educators.

Foundational Strengths

Citizenship focus

The focus on citizenship education (that is, a core of knowledge, beliefs, values and skills that are necessary to function in and contribute to society) as the central goal of the social studies curriculum is appropriate and should continue.

Essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes

The essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes that BC students should acquire through the social studies program are:

- In-depth understanding of Canadian history, geography and government
- Understanding of the rest of the world from historical, geographical, political, and economic perspectives
- Understanding of contemporary issues and their historical origins
- Critical thinking competencies
- Written and oral communication skills
- Knowledge of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and a willingness and ability to actively engage in the community and Canadian society
- Attitudes of compassion, understanding, respect and tolerance for others, and pride in who they are and in Canada's unique history and role in the world

Scope and flow of topics

Overall, the scope of topics covered by the grades 8 to 12 social studies curriculum is considered valid, useful and important. A large majority (73 per cent) of educator respondents to the questionnaire feel that content overlap and repetition among courses have been kept to a minimum. However, educators are less satisfied with the flow of content between courses, especially from grade 8 to grade 9 and from grade 11 to grade 12, so some improvement may be needed in this area.

Chronological approach

The chronological approach to teaching social studies provides a sense of coherence and order, and is seen by many as a good way to organize the curriculum, especially history.

BC and Canada

BC fits well with the other provinces in terms of offering courses in world history, Canadian history, civics, geography, law and Native studies. Educator and non-educator respondents to the questionnaire offered suggestions for additional electives, but the majority of teachers, students and parents agree that the current array of courses offers students a good selection to choose from.

BC-focused IRPs (Integrated Resource Packages)

The involvement of teachers and other stakeholders to develop IRPs, and the fact that the IRPs are written for BC and not adapted from other provinces, are seen as strengths of the social studies curriculum.

Trends

Critical thinking

The development of critical thinking competencies is a well-established trend and one of the most relevant concepts in social studies education.

Community engagement and active citizenship

There is a growing trend toward the use of community engagement and active citizenship projects to take social studies learning beyond the classroom and connect school with students' lives.

Use of technology, media, and the arts

The use of interactive technologies, multi-media resources and the arts to enrich and expand social studies skills and understanding and to engage students creatively in their learning is a rising trend.

Identified Concerns: Curriculum

Fewer than half of educators (46 per cent), parents (41 per cent) and students (48 per cent) agree that, in general, the BC social studies 8-12 program serves the needs of students well and needs only minor adjustments to make it even better. Many students find social studies boring and do not see the relevance of course content to their own lives. This perception may negatively affect their attitudes toward historical inquiry, government processes and involvement as engaged citizens in society. Teachers, parents and students all want social studies to be more interesting, relevant and engaging for students.

Content overload

Overall, the content of social studies courses is considered valid, useful and important. However, many courses are overloaded with content; this is particularly true of Social Studies 11, which is seen as a valuable and important

course, but one that is so content-heavy that teachers can do little but skim through it.

The research findings clearly indicate that the amount of content in several courses, especially Social Studies 11, needs to be reduced. Less content to cover will give teachers the time they need to exercise their professional training to provide students with a variety of teaching techniques and active learning experiences inside and outside the classroom; to provide more in-depth study of topics, opportunities for research and critical inquiry; and to make connections between the past and current situations and contemporary issues.

Integrated Resource Packages (IRPs)

Although the IRPs are generally seen as useful guides to instruction, many teachers find them confusing and lacking in specifics. The IRPs do not show how much emphasis to put on different thematic areas; some have achievement indicators while others do not; and some prescribed learning outcomes (PLOs) are vague. In addition, the same content can often be found within more than one organizer. More clarity is needed on the sequence of topics within a course and on how the topics connect to curriculum organizers and themes. In addition, there is evidence from the educators' comments on the questionnaire that some teachers may not be familiar with the IRPs or may not be using them effectively.

Community engagement and active citizenship

Fewer than a quarter (22 per cent) of educators feel that students have ample opportunity in required social studies courses to practise active citizenship, and many feel that the curriculum does not adequately help students feel connected to Canadian politics or develop the attitudes and abilities to be active participants in democratic society. Similarly, fewer than half of parents feel that adequate time and attention are devoted to developing students' citizenship skills or that students acquire a good grasp of how government works in our country from the social studies grades 8 to 11 curriculum.

Incorporation of relevant issues

Many of those who participated in the research believe that the social studies program does not do a good enough job of incorporating contemporary world issues and the experiences of immigrants and other ethnic groups into the curriculum. As a result, many students feel that social studies does not relate to their lives. As well, many respondents do not feel that there is an appropriate balance of local, regional, national and global emphases in the curriculum.

A very large majority of educators (81 per cent) agree that clear learning objectives are needed to ensure that issues of the 21st century are addressed. Parents and students agree that addressing social justice issues and including Canadian and world current events in social studies is very important. Many commented that linking past events, history and developments to current events and issues needs more emphasis. Students would like more opportunity to discuss contemporary issues in class.

Many educators and non-educators feel that more information is needed on social justice issues such as poverty, gender identity, gender equality, racism and human rights, and the roles and contributions of women in Canada and other countries. Some also think that the coverage of Aboriginal and Canadian ethnic and cultural minorities and history is inadequate.

Content needs to be reduced to allow the time needed for incorporation of world issues.

Recommendations: Curriculum

- **Reduce content**

The amount of content in social studies courses, particularly Social Studies 11, needs to be reduced, without hindering the ease of teaching, the flow of content or students' understanding. These comments were made in relation to recent deletions in Social Studies 11 in the government and geography sections. Comments from the questionnaire and interviews express the idea that the social studies curriculum cannot "do it all," or at least not well. The data overwhelmingly indicate that the Ministry should consider eliminating or streamlining topics, as well as what is core and what is supplemental. In addition to allowing greater depth of coverage, reducing course content should alleviate some concerns about time constraints in delivering the curriculum, i.e., all Prescribed Learning Outcomes.

- **Increase emphasis on critical approaches to content and community engagement**

Although reducing course content will allow more time and emphasis to be placed on critical thinking and community engagement, these approaches need to be more explicitly supported in the curriculum. This can be achieved by creating PLOs with appropriate language that clearly denotes higher level thinking and the actions of community engagement.

- **Incorporate contemporary global issues into the curriculum**

The PLOs should be revised as needed and should explicitly include relevant issues such as social justice and current world events and issues facing Aboriginal and Canadian ethnic and cultural minorities. Content overload should be reduced to allow the time needed to cover relevant and global issues.

- **Improve the IRPs (Integrated Resource Packages)**

The IRPs should be revised with clearer PLOs, consistent achievement indicators, a clearer sequence of topics within courses, and a skills mastery matrix.

Non-curricular Concerns

The needs assessment was conducted for the purpose of the curriculum. However, respondents also expressed concerns and recommendations pertaining to issues not directly related to curriculum, such as teacher qualifications, provincial examinations, teacher in-service and support, and learning resources.

These concerns and recommendations have been forwarded to the appropriate sections of the Ministry for consideration.

SUMMARY

In November 2007, the former Content and Achievement Standards Unit was re-structured and renamed the Education Standards Unit. One of this unit's main objectives in 2008 will be to delve into the world of technology and investigate ways to revise, update, develop, and communicate about curriculum.

Over the next few years, the Education Standards Unit will continue to liaise and consult with our education partners and with Ministry staff, e.g., Assessment Branch (provincial examinations), to improve the Social Studies curriculum.

