

An Open Letter on the New Social Studies Curriculum [March 15, 2024]

As professional educators and researchers who were part of the Curriculum Specialist group invited by Alberta Education to contribute our collective expertise towards the development of the new K-6 Social Studies curriculum, we have significant concerns with the draft curriculum released this week by Education Minister Demetrios Nicolaides. We are asking the Government of Alberta to reconsider the path forward.

A lack of an overall contemporary and relevant vision for social studies

Despite our efforts to provide a detailed compelling rationale for social studies, the subject matter introduction is insufficient. An absence of clear purpose has created a random sequence of learning moments rather than a coherent animating vision of what it means to engage in social studies, and why. Instead of a program that inspires hope and possibility for engaging the pressing issues of our world, this draft is an exhausting and unwieldy roadmap to a better version of yesterday.

The lack of animating vision is compounded by a failure to define key social studies concepts. Leading jurisdictions of education across Canada provide extended research-informed explanations of key concepts such as critical thinking, citizenship, historical thinking, inquiry and multiple perspectives. These definitions are absent in the new program. Ultimately, the lack of conceptual frameworks for understanding key concepts means teachers lack the support and guidance needed to make instructional decisions that are developmentally, culturally and contextually meaningful, and engaging for students.

Limited opportunities for critical thinking and informed decision making

In 2023, a survey involving 13,000 Albertans overwhelmingly emphasized the importance of helping students “develop critical thinking skills to make informed decisions.” Despite our best efforts, the proposed K-6 draft social studies curriculum focuses largely on learning outcomes that do not ask students to think critically about events and issues in our world today. For example, in [grade 6](#) students learn about the key principles of a democracy. Yet, there are over 100 Knowledge outcomes listed alongside 40 Skills and Processes that are little more than low-level information processing activities devoid of any connection to active engagement in civil society. Despite recent claims from MPs from across the political spectrum that democracy in Canada [is increasingly fraying, in part due to the impacts of social media and extreme partisanship](#), the new curriculum reflects a thin understanding of democratic processes. Instead, it emphasizes the acquisition of disconnected facts that does not prepare young people for active and meaningful participation in democratic life.

A token gesture towards First Nations, Métis, and Inuit worldviews and perspectives

The newest draft social studies program rightly acknowledges First Peoples and their longstanding occupancy on these lands. It is also absent of overtly racist references. At first

glance, this is a marked improvement; yet, the unique knowledge systems, languages, perspectives, and worldviews of local Indigenous peoples are noticeably absent. The social studies curriculum lacks the integrity needed to address the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and its [recent stalling](#) out. For example, in grade 7 students will learn about the Numbered Treaties. Yet, there is no indication that students will gain access to the knowledge traditions of Indigenous Elders and other Knowledge Holders on the original spirit and intent of the Treaties. Nor is there reference to longstanding knowledge traditions such as the Cree notion of Wahkohtowin that can, according to Indigenous community members and scholars including [Dr. Dwayne Donald](#), [teach how humans are related to each other and to all life forms](#). In a province where Métis settlements are a unique political reality, students in grade 7 are expected to learn only a partial history of the emergence of the Métis Nation. By using the term 'Red River conflict' in the draft curriculum, the draft reverts to an outdated focus on the 1885 Resistance, rather than the unique history of the Métis people in Alberta that preceded the formation of the province.

Notably, after grade 7 when the program expands to topics outside Alberta like "Building the Canadian Identity" in Grade 10 and "A Changing World" in grade 12, the contemporary presence of Indigenous peoples and their unique worldviews have been completely taken out of the new social studies framework. The message is clear: Indigenous peoples and their unique perspectives are entrenched in the past with no contemporary relevance that might help young people better understand relationships in the present and navigate the challenges of an increasingly complex future.

Fails to acknowledge the diverse identities in Alberta today

Contemporary research in the Learning Sciences has clearly shown that "prior knowledge matters." [Studies show](#) that learners come to any learning situation with lived experiences and belief systems that filter and shape new information in powerful ways. As such, it is essential to engage students' prior beliefs when they are encountering new learning. The new program, however, treats students as empty vessels to be filled with information with no connections made to their already existing frames of reference.

The draft K-6 social studies curriculum provides limited opportunities to meaningfully engage students in diverse worldviews and beliefs, and perspectives that may be different from their own. The program takes an informational approach to knowledge that fails to recognize the diverse cultures, histories, contributions, and perspectives that exist in contemporary Alberta, including that of Francophones. Consequently, students will not be afforded the opportunity to gain an appreciation of the frames of reference and worldviews that shape how diverse groups of people and groups view and act in the world.

Conclusion

We are deeply disappointed with this draft curriculum and concerned about the lack of transparency in the curriculum development process. As researchers and educators, we have

provided critical feedback and constructive advice that could inform the creation of a high-quality social studies program for Alberta students. However, our strategic advice and alternative directions have been largely ignored to the detriment of future generations. Alberta students deserve better.

We urge the government to immediately convene a meeting of the key education partners to develop a protocol to restart the curriculum rewriting process.

K-6 Curriculum Development Specialist Group