

Developing Thematic Units of Study in Social Studies

by
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As we move from a mechanistic industrial age to a global, ecological age, new directions in social education are called for. At least, that was the rationale of the social studies committee in West Des Moines as it created a new elementary curriculum. Designed by fourteen social studies chairpersons and written by three teachers from each grade level, the new program (when completed in 1993-94) will have taken four years to develop and fully implement. This fall grades four, five, and six will be the first to connect the new curriculum to the classroom.

Countless resources were used in designing and writing the curriculum; however, Walter Parker's ASCD guide, Renewing the Social Studies Curriculum, was utilized extensively in building the foundation for the new program. Dr. Lynn Nielsen, principal of the UNI Price Laboratory School, provided invaluable assistance throughout the project.

The new model is based on the study of three social studies disciplines: History, Geography and Civics. Each discipline is regarded as critical to the study of social education and, therefore, each receives equal emphasis in the curriculum.

Central to the structure of the new curriculum are thematic units which replace the traditional expanding horizons model. Each grade level will study five or more diverse units throughout the year. The themes of the units were selected by the chairpersons based on their value to the study of social issues, their potential to stimulate student interest, and the breadth of learning provided during the year. Citing the need for a stronger global emphasis at the elementary level, the committee selected a foreign country or continent to study in each grade.

The thematic units for grades K-6 include:

- Kindergarten -
1. This is School
 2. All About Me
 3. Communications
 4. Oceans
 5. Space
 6. Mexico

(The Kindergarten curriculum is comprised of 13 units -- these are the 6 which emphasize social studies issues.)

- First Grade -
1. Changes - From Wagon Wheels to Automobiles
 2. Togetherness
 3. Choices - It's Up to You
 4. American Symbols and Stories
 5. Africa - From Zulu to You
- Second Grade -
1. Get Involved! (mini-unit)
 2. This Land is Your Land . . .
 3. Home Sweet Home
 4. People Between Two Rivers
 5. Japan - Land of the Rising Sun
- Third Grade
1. From Madrid to Madrid (communities)
 2. Cartography (Map Making)
 3. Access to Information
 4. My Role In a Democracy
 5. Australia
- Fourth Grade
1. Comparing Regions (States and Capitals)
 2. Exploring Economics
 3. Iowa Geography
 4. Nobel Peace Prize Winners
 5. Commonwealth of Independent States
- Fifth Grade
1. Becoming Backyard Historians
 2. Discovering America ...What If?
 3. Celebrating the Constitution
 4. Exploring the Wild Wild West
 5. Living in a Nation Torn
 6. Getting on Track for Change
 7. Investigating Iowans in the 20th Century
 8. Connecting England
- Sixth Grade
1. There's No Place Like . . . (reviewing map & globe skills)
 2. The Friendly Giant Next Door (Canada - Geography and Government)
 3. In Search of El Dorado (Latin American Research Study)
 4. And If Elected I Will . . .
 5. The Great American Salad Bowl

The foundation for the K-12 social studies curriculum is provided by five key concepts (referred to as essential elements in West Des Moines). These include: The Democratic Ideal, Global Perspective, Economic Development, Cultural

Diversity, and Participatory Citizenship. These concepts or "essential elements" will be studied and built upon each year in social studies.

The new curriculum is philosophically compatible with the district's whole language and inquiry-based science programs. The student is regarded as an explorer and decision-maker; the materials are authentic when possible; and the activities afford students choices, time to research, interact, and reflect, and opportunities to create. No textbooks will be used in grades K-3; however, grades 4-6 will have sets of texts to be used as resources in some units. The units are interdisciplinary, including connections to other subject areas maintained in the curriculum.

The concept "Think Globally, Act Locally" has been incorporated into the program through a K-12 emphasis on local government. In conjunction with the city managers of the communities which the school district serves, Clive, Urbandale, West Des Moines and Windsor Heights, a project was initiated to develop a resource guide for the study of our local governments. Jointly funded by the school district and the four western suburbs, the project will provide each elementary teacher and every secondary social studies teacher with a guidebook filled with information about how local government works in the western suburbs of Des Moines, the decision-making processes used, citizen involvement, and even information about local governments in other countries. Karen Willis, a doctoral candidate at ISU, was hired to research and develop the project. Material in the guidebook will be used to focus on local issues from primary grades through high school.

Traditional curriculum goals and objectives are replaced by Focus Questions in the new program. These questions provide direction to students and teachers and serve as a springboard for student inquiry in each unit. The committee determined that, particularly in the area of social studies, meaningful questions provide more impetus for investigation and study than do objectives. Although several Focus Questions accompany each unit, teachers or students may develop their own questions for study.

There will surely be revisions and expansions of the ideas presented. Our hope is that we have laid in place a social studies framework which can change and grow with the times.

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