



## *Instructional Spotlight: Civics Education, a new focus in the Massachusetts Social Science & History Standards*

Amy Clouter, Assistant Superintendent  
for Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment

### *Overview*

The passage of the Ed Reform Act in 1993 resulted in the development of grade level standards and launched a statewide campaign to raise academic expectations for all students in the Commonwealth. Shortly thereafter, the initial *Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework* was approved, with a revised framework following in 2003. Both documents reflect the belief that an understanding of the foundations of democracy is a critical component of public education. Indeed, this principle was first articulated in the passage of the law:

The standards shall provide for instruction in at least the major principles of the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Federalist Papers. They shall be designed to inculcate respect for the cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity of the Commonwealth and for the contributions made by diverse cultural, ethnic and racial groups to the life of the Commonwealth. The standards may provide for instruction in the fundamentals of the history of the Commonwealth as well as the history of working people and the labor movement in the United States. ... The board may also include in the standards...an awareness of global education and geography.<sup>1</sup>

That vision holds true today- and is strengthened by the most recent revisions to the Frameworks. In 2017 the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) gathered a group of educators to review the 2003 standards and to recommend changes. The following year the Department released the [2018 Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework](#) together with a document articulating [Guiding Principles for Effective History and Social Science Education](#). These documents continue to shape our implementation of the new curriculum within the district, specifically as it applied to our approach to Civics education.

### *District Efforts to Date*

In 2017, concurrent with the work happening at the state level, our curriculum leaders noted several key changes in the new History and Social Science Frameworks, namely:

- at the Elementary level, a stronger foundation in history and government builds on existing standards on the American Revolution and early Republic.

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<sup>1</sup> [Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 69, Section 1D.](#)

- At the Middle level, a new civics course occurs in grade 8 was introduced to provide students with the knowledge of principles and structures of United States government and to lay the foundation for the study of history and social science in high school.
- Some standards have been edited or added to present recent historical scholarship and collections of online primary sources have been expanded, and
- Throughout the grades, an emphasis on Social Science practices encourages educators to structure learning experiences so that students may apply their learning, and, in this way, become engaged citizens.

I am gratified to report that from the start our approach to this curriculum initiative was collaborative. Mrs. Jennifer DiFrancesca, Director of Social Sciences at Shrewsbury High, teamed with Mr. Robert Dunn, Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator for Grades 5-8 to determine how best to bring classroom teachers into the conversation. In turn, Mr. Dunn partnered with Instructional Coaches/Curriculum Coordinators at the Elementary level to further their own learning. Embracing the new standards means shifting content across levels- primarily in Grade 8 and up. For that reason, our work has begun with a primary focus on the upper grades. The goal is to implement gradually, and with fidelity. In many ways, this work (in History and Social Science) mirrors our approach to adopting the 2016 Science and Technology/Engineering Curriculum standards. The similarities are most apparent in a shared focus on Social Science practices.

### *Different Content, Similar Approach*

As stated in the accompanying documents,

The primary purpose of a history and social science education is to prepare students to have the knowledge and skills to become thoughtful and active participants in a democratic society and a complex world. “Government of the people, by the people, for the people” is not just a historical phrase from Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” but an ideal that must be renewed and reinvigorated by each succeeding generation. The future of democracy depends on our students’ development of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will enable them to embrace democracy’s potential, while recognizing its challenges and inherent dilemmas.<sup>2</sup>

This vision is depicted well in Social Science practices.

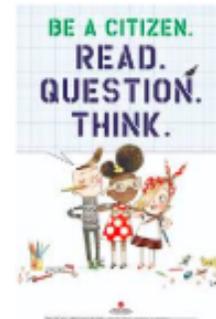
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<sup>2</sup> Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework, 2018

# MA FRAMEWORKS → SKILLS & CONTENT

## Standards of Practice

1. Demonstrate civic knowledge, skills, and disposition.
2. Develop focused questions or problem statements and conduct inquiries.
3. Organize information and data from multiple primary and secondary sources.
4. Analyze the purpose and point of view of each source; distinguish opinion from fact.
5. Evaluate the credibility, accuracy, and relevance of each source.
6. Argue or explain conclusions, using valid reasoning and evidence.
7. Determine next steps and take informed action, as appropriate.



The goal of this instructional spotlight is to familiarize you with these practices and how they feature in the implementation of the new curriculum.

### *Next Steps*

By 2020-2021, all teachers at the Middle and High School level will fully implement the new Social Science and History curriculum. This gives the Elementary team time to evaluate new resources. As we anticipate next steps, it's important to acknowledge the hard work of the pilot teachers and our curriculum leaders. As they work to develop model lessons and units, these pioneers are the caretakers of the initial vision from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. I am confident that our educators will do their part to build on it by creating engaging, rigorous and authentic learning experiences for our students.

