

# “Building K -12 Teams/Building District Standards in Social Studies”

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In 1995, I assembled our first K - 12 group of teachers to discuss the implications for the proposed Regents standards and assessments in social studies. I had recently been named to a new post, K - 12 Social Studies Standards Coordinator at Pittsford Central Schools. Pittsford Central Schools supports K - 12 Standards Coordinators in Social Studies, English, Science and Math and elementary coordinators in science and math as “Teachers on Special Assignment” with .4 released time from their teaching assignment. The K - 12 Social Studies Standards receives about \$40,000 yearly to support curriculum development, teacher released time, conferences, and consultants.

A focus group of about 10 social studies teachers were discussing the concepts that their students were mastering in their classes. For many of the teachers, it was the first time they heard about what was being taught at other grade levels. While discussing classroom instruction in economics, we realized that our students were making the same poster in senior economics that they made as third graders: cut-out pictures of “economic needs” on one side, cut-out pictures of “economic wants” on the other. It was clear we had work to do.

While some skeptics and cynics were attacking the new Regents standards and assessments, in Pittsford we saw an opportunity for our district to involve teachers, administrators, parents, students, and the community in a growing dialogue about what knowledge and skills were important for our children to master.

We began the process in social studies with a K - 12 program needs assessment. Surveys were circulated to all social studies teachers 6 - 12. Groups of elementary teachers were convened in focus groups. Meetings were held with administrators and secondary department leaders. All these instruments pointed to the same conclusion, that the best opportunity to improve our pro-

gram and student performance would come from a better alignment of our program K - 12.

Our existing system had divided teachers into separate buildings, grades and classrooms, and expected them to teach in manner that would help children succeed in a system that is linear and sequential. Little time was available for teachers to meet and plan at any grade level, much less between them. The system had no mechanisms to root out redundancies in the program. Ironically, it was students moving through our program who had the best insight into the K - 12 picture. They knew how many times they had remade their “economic needs and wants” poster. We didn’t.

Our district Social Studies Steering Committee set three major directions that have guided our work over the last two years:

- *A cohesive K - 12 program:* Clearly define where students should be at each grade level in our program. Develop explicit standards and testing to determine if standards have been met. Keep the emphasis on measurable results. Create a program where different students can achieve the same high level of performance. Develop strategies to intervene and remediate where students are not meeting the standards.
- *A public K - 12 program:* Involve all district stakeholders in a dialogue about our standards and assessments. Publicly declare our curriculum. Link home and school by providing a clear guide to parents, teachers, and the child regarding the sequence of our social studies program.
- *A dynamic K - 12 program:* Shift the focus from trying to define what the teacher does to clearly defining what the students should know and be able to do. Foster creativity, initiative and collaboration among teachers. Use the standards and assessment

goals as a reference point for teachers to discuss the merits of different instructional practices for different learning and teaching styles.

Our review of district practices YK - 12 began with geography, a subject taught across all grade levels that invites an examination of knowledge outcomes, skills strands and assessment models. The geography program review was accomplished with a number of instruments:

- Faculty surveys based on National Geography Standards and State Education Department standards.
- Components of the National Assessment of Educational Progress test in Geography administered to approximately 120 students in grades 4, 8, and 12.
- Comparison of district best practices with national and SED standards.

We found that a student's instruction in geography was largely a product of which teacher each had. Compared to the national results in the NAEP test, our elementary through middle school showed strong results; however, our high school students performance fell off. Our curriculum review demonstrated that instruction in geography peaked in the sixth grade. From that point on, the emphasis moved away from developing new geographic skills and competencies and focused on merely using the same skills in different historic and regional contexts.

The results of the geography review were reported at an evening "Social Studies Dinner / Program Showcase" attended by members of the Board of Education, administrators, Parent-Teacher-Student Association members, and K - 12 social studies teachers. A walk-through social studies showcase of student work K - 12 was included. The "Dinner / Program Showcase" was our first "public" opportunity to highlight our work and proved to be effective in both communicating our progress to district stakeholders and recruiting more teachers into the process. As one faculty member commented, "By the end of the night, I felt proud to be a member of this department." Our progress also resulted in an expansion of our budget to support additional teacher released time, conference attendance, and summer curriculum development time for teachers.

The process used to review geography was evaluated and modified to improve the quality and efficiency of our program evaluation. Revisions to our process included:

- Develop a separate social studies skills strand.
- Incorporate teachers from other disciplines, librarians, and special education.
- Drop large scale surveys; focus on teacher interviews.
- Improve our knowledge base concerning standards and assessments

In fulfillment of the last goal, teams of teachers were sent to a variety of national, state, and regional conferences and institutes including Advanced Placement conferences, "History Alive," and the Harvard Graduate School of Education "Institute on Standards and Assessments." Teams of teachers were recruited to work on submitting curriculum material for the SED Social Studies resource guide. The work of three groups of teachers was accepted into the peer review process. The team that attended the SED session in Schenectady returned with new strategies that we applied to our program. We were all quite proud when the SED new "Social Studies Resource Guide" was recently posted on the Internet. Of 15 lessons included, two were the work of Pittsford teachers.

This past summer we held a district "Social Studies Curriculum Institute" with intensive YK - 12 strand development sessions in civics, economics, and social studies skills. We began our K - 12 review of American and world history. For the first time, teachers in 4th, 5th, 7th, 8th and 11th grades met to discuss how our program in American History can be designed to build competencies from elementary through high school. In a similar manner, teachers in the 3rd, 6th, 9th and 10th grades discussed how to develop a cohesive multi-year study of world history and cultures. 9th and 10th grade teachers met with librarians, special education, English, and art teachers to discuss the transition from Global Studies to World History and consider how we could develop a new program better integrated across the humanities and able to meet the needs of students of all ability levels.

In September, we presented the results of our summer work to district stakeholders for review and comment. The draft of "K - 12 Social Studies Strands in Civics, Economics, Geography, and Skills," represents the efforts of over 30 contributors who were charged with developing a document that will:

- Serve as a clear guide to the knowledge and skills that students should master by the completion of each grade level.
- Improve program sequence between grade-levels.

- Bring district practices into alignment with evolving SED standards and assessment.
- Provide guidance to teachers so that they can assist students of all ability levels to meet and exceed new SED and district standards.
- Facilitate interdisciplinary collaborations and improve program interface with Special Education.
- Provide a reference point for dialogue between teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community members regarding further program improvements.
- Be the foundation of improvements in instructional practices and assessment.

This draft was circulated to a variety of district stakeholders including faculty, administrators, and the PTSA. It has served to expand the dialogue beyond the school building into our community to build consensus concerning the knowledge and skills that our students will master at each grade level.

To facilitate communication with the community we launched a Pittsford Social Studies Standards Website with links to standards, curriculum, assessments, student showcase, and research tools for use by teachers, students and their parents. It includes options for on-line feedback and comment about our standards. These options give our program a dynamic element of on-going review and improvement. A search engine connects teachers and parents to a wide variety of curriculum ideas. A student showcase presents exemplary student work to the community. Viewers can search the site for New York State standards as well as state and national standards across the social studies. Students and parents can use the site for Internet research projects and to connect with faculty. A standards news section keeps faculty updated and provides information concerning upcoming conferences and workshops. Teachers are able to register for committee work on-line and receive an e-mail confirmation of their registration.

Teachers are now using the K - 12 strands as a guide for instruction and assessment. The K - 12 Strands document serves a guide to our "Task Force for At-Risk

Students," a collaborative group from Social Studies and Special Education which works to insure that all our students succeed on new high-stakes tests.

During the summer of 1998, a K - 12 faculty committee will review faculty feedback regarding their experiences with the strands, and incorporate new SED standards and assessments into to an updated version of the K - 12 strands document. Committees will develop and incorporate the final two Social Studies strands, American History and World History. Groups of teachers will produce guides to elective courses and commencement standards.

Pittsford's K - 12 Social Studies program has had many accomplishments over the last two years. Much remains to be done. We are just beginning to turn our attention to assessments with groups of teachers; we are just beginning to train in using assessments and rubrics. Many of the details of our transition to new Regents curriculum and assessments have yet to be developed and tested.

The new Regent's standards have been both a challenge and an opportunity. We hope that in Pittsford, they were "harnessed" as a catalyst to bring together teams of teachers to improve and better align our program. While we are proud of our accomplishments, we realize that our efforts are ultimately directed toward the "process" rather than the "product." The fruits of our work will be so much more than a document detailing our K - 12 program; the more enduring achievement will be our capacity for an on-going dialogue among diverse stakeholders about what is important in the education of our children.

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Note: The website discussed above is located at <http://pittsford.monroe.edu/>