

Ohio Council for the Social Studies

Position Statement: Assessment and Testing

Approved by Board in 2016

With the signing of ESSA late last year, it is timely for the OCSS membership to consider what the research says about what types of assessment systems and types of tests are best and state our research-based views. The numerous set of standards informing and governing social studies (NCSS, 2013; NCSS, 2010; the Partnership for 21st Century Skills standards, 2008; Association of American Geographers, National Council for Geographic Education; National Geographic Society, 1994; Center for Civic Education, 1994; Council for economic Education, 2010; National Center for History in the Schools, 1994a) include some form of a critical thinking and/or problem-solving skills expectation. This expectation informs our commitment to fostering the growth of active and informed citizens, such that social studies:

- “Helps students develop the ability to make informed decisions for themselves and for the common good;
- Prepares them for their role as citizens and decision makers in a diverse, democratic society;
- Enables students to learn about significant people, place, events, and issues in the past in order to understand the present; and
- Fosters students’ ability to act responsibly and become successful problem solvers in a independent world of limited resources” (ODE, 2010, p. 4).

This Ohio statement of the purpose of social studies aligns with best practices according to the research, which affirms that student-centered and inquiry oriented instructional strategies are the most successful methods for engaging the civic learning of students and support student civic learning (IEA Civic Education Study, Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2004; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald & Schulz, 2001). In opposition to research-based best practices in both teaching and assessment are wholly teacher-centered approaches focused on rote memorization (see

OCSS Position Statement on the Use of the U.S. Citizenship and Naturalization Test for Measuring Student Civic Learning).

As such, we support assessment systems and testing that help Ohio students reach these social studies goals through active learning and appropriate assessment systems and testing. Assessment systems and testing are integral parts of social studies education in Ohio and across the nation, the most central purpose of which is to drive student learning and achievement. Arnie Duncan recently stated the ESSA requirements should “offer actionable information about students’ learning” (2015, para 4), implying that assessment should help teachers help all students succeed. Research shows that assessment can in fact drive instruction and thereby improve student achievement, but only if 1) purposefully integrated with planning and 2) closely aligned with standards (Shepard, 2000).

Purposeful integration with planning means that data from assessments are available in a timely, transparent, and comprehensive fashion. Teachers can use the data to inform instruction and thus impact student achievement, thereby providing “actionable information about student learning” (Duncan, 2015). The research shows conclusively that “formative assessment does improve learning” (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p. 47), and that summative assessments can also be used to inform teaching and impact learning in positive ways.

OCSS encourages the Ohio Department of Education to improve transparency in reporting testing data for students and teachers so that they may conduct thorough analyses for their programs and provide substantive feedback to students and communities.

Close alignment of assessments with standards also is associated with increased student achievement (Shepard, 2000). One of the challenges of standardized testing is finding a balance between the student mastery of knowledge and facts and higher order, critical thinking standards present in the numerous sets of standards that guide social studies curricula. Critical thinking skills are more difficult to assess than content knowledge on a single standardized test. By their nature, state-wide tests cannot not measure student mastery of the significant about of content required in the standards, and as such, tend to focus on content that is “easiest to test,” meaning lower-order recall and memorization (Chudowski and Pelligrino, 2003; Horn, 2006; DeWitt, S., Patterson, N., Blankenship, et al., 2013). Additionally, there is evidence that mandated, high-stakes testing has

impeded efforts to reform instruction in ways that promote complex, high-level learning (Fischer, Boi, & Pribesh, 2011) and teaching (Misco, Patterson, & Doppen, 2011).

In view of these challenges inherent in high-stakes testing, OCSS applauds the significant effort the Ohio Department of Education has made to include higher order, critical thinking items on the Ohio State Tests. OCSS encourages ongoing attention to the inclusion of validated higher order items that relate directly to social studies disciplinary skills and the stated purpose of Ohio social studies.

In summary, we would like to see the governor, state legislature and state education boards and administrators continue to focus on the following best practices in assessment:

- Timely, transparent, and comprehensive reporting of testing data; and
- Strong alignment of social studies assessments with the critical-thinking purposes stated in the standards with inclusion of items that provide students with opportunities to critically think about data and provide evidence-based arguments.

References

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