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Report of the External Review Committee social studies education K-12 Weston public schools

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**Report of the External Review Committee
Social Studies Education K-12
Weston Public Schools | Weston, MA
November 29, 2022**

External Review Committee:

Rob Martinelle Ed.D., Chair
Alex Kuschel
Lora DeSalvo
Adrienne Billingham Bock

Presented to the School Committee, November 29, 2022

Executive Summary

The following report is the result of the Weston School Committee's request for an independent review of the district's K-12 Social Studies / History education program and summarizes findings by the committee charged with that endeavor. It addresses research questions informed by the social studies department's 2021 self-study report and includes commendations regarding the district's progress in meeting their own goals, as outlined in their self-study, as well as numerous recommendations and suggestions for exploration.

Composition of the External Review Committee

The External Review Committee was composed of four members representing a cross-section of social studies education expertise. All committee members, prior to assuming leadership roles in teacher education, curriculum design and evaluation, and professional development, spent numerous years teaching K-12 social studies in a variety of school contexts. As such, they brought with them an insider and outsider's perspective to bear on this exercise.

Committee Members

Rob Martinelle, Ed.D., Chair
Lecturer, Social Studies Education | Teaching & Learning
Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development
robm@bu.edu

Catherine "Alex" Kuschel
K-5 Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator
Lexington Public Schools
ckuschel@lexingtonma.org

Lora DeSalvo
Curriculum Associate
iCivics
lbd5323@gmail.com

Adrienne Billingham Bock
Director of Curriculum | Democratic Knowledge Project
Edmond & Lily Safra Center for Ethics | Harvard University
adriannebock@fas.harvard.edu

Committee Visit and Methods

The committee met in May of 2022 across several Weston Public Schools. Over a two-day period, we were afforded incredible access to all school curriculum, faculty, administration, students, school board members, and parents. Our first visit occurred on May 9, 2022, where we began the day meeting with members of the school committee in the Field School Library. We were then afforded the opportunity to hear (and answer questions) from parents and community members through a Parent and Community Forum in the Field School Café. The next several hours were spent doing walkthroughs of several social studies classrooms across the Field and Country elementary schools. During our classroom visits, we observed social studies teaching and learning and, when appropriate, spoke with students and teachers. After, we were transported to Golden Ball Tavern, a local historical site, where we observed several elementary classes taking part in a tour. Our visit also allowed us to discuss the site's educational utility for students with a historian who works with the site. Classroom visits were followed by lunch with Elementary Principals, Erin Maguire and Dan Green, where we discussed, among many things: ongoing professional development initiatives, issues of teacher morale, and school cultural norms. The day concluded with an Elementary Teacher Forum in the Woodland School Library. Teachers across all three elementary schools attended the forum, answering questions germane to our research as well as those provoked by our visit up to that point.

The May 10th visit focused on social studies teaching and learning at the secondary level. The day began with a discussion with numerous middle and high school teachers, followed by a meeting with High School and Middle School Principals: Midge Connolly, Kimo Carter, Amy Kelly, Paul Peri, and John Gibbons. The remainder of the day was primarily spent visiting several social studies classrooms across Weston Middle and Weston High School. There, we observed a variety of social studies classes (i.e., U.S. History, World History, Psychology, Civics) across multiple levels (i.e., Advanced Placement, College Prep, Honors). As was the case the previous day, we were able to speak with students and teachers during our observations. Between observations, we also met with Alida Hanson, a Library Resource specialist. The day concluded with lunch and an open forum with a group of high school students, whom we interviewed about their school experiences and topics relevant to our research.

During both visits, we compiled our notes from (and reactions to) observations and interviews in a shared Google document. We were also provided ample space to meet as a group on both days to discuss and make sense of our observations, during which Social Studies 6-12 Department Chair Sue Bairstow and K-5 Curriculum Specialist Susan Erickson were available to answer our questions and provide needed context for our observations. In addition to our collective observations and interviews, we were given access to teachers' Google Classroom sites, which housed their syllabi, assignments, and course readings. Analysis of the foregoing data continued into the summer, where the committee remained in communication with one another, shared findings, and collaborated on the production of the report.

Limitations

Although we are confident in the validity of this report, several limitations must be noted. First, however diverse a sample of classrooms we observed, those observations were limited in number. Thus, our claims about social studies teaching and learning have less evidentiary warrant than those made about the district's social studies curriculum, the latter of which we had more time with and access to for this exercise. Our charge to research effective teacher feedback

in Question 5 is an instructive example of this limitation, as we could mainly assess where there were meaningful opportunities for feedback, not the feedback itself. Second, any generalizations made about teachers' curriculum lacks an abundance of contextual information, namely teachers' decision-making rationales for creating and using select materials, without which we could not capture how these materials were being interpreted, used, and/or supplemented by teachers in classrooms. Finally, we must acknowledge that our entire committee identifies as white and that no individuals of color took part in the collection and analysis of data. While we were (and continue to work to be) conscientious of how this influences our frame of reference, the lack of racial diversity among our committee represents a shortcoming of the report.

Committee Charge & Organization of the Report

The Committee was charged with researching the following questions:

1. *How can we better integrate the voices and history of marginalized people into our current curriculum and avoid “the danger of a single story?”*
2. *How well do we currently, and how do we improve, our teaching of critical thinking skills, public speaking, critical reading, analytical and persuasive writing and presentation at all levels?*
3. *How do we best help our students become global citizens as set forth in our district Mission Statement?*
4. *How can we increase Social Studies time in elementary schools given the schedule constraints?*
 - a. *How do we take advantage of interdisciplinary opportunities and other teaching models?*
 - b. *Would it be feasible for teachers to split areas of expertise and students switch for certain subjects?*
 - c. *How do we work with teachers to learn and implement the practices?*
5. *What does effective assessment and feedback look like at each level?*
6. *In what ways can we strengthen our relationships with local places and people to continue and increase place-based learning opportunities for students and integrate these opportunities into our curriculum?*
7. *How is student voice and choice considered in decisions, planning, and curriculum development? How do we develop student voice in our K-12 curriculum?*

Accordingly, we organize our findings along these lines. In addressing each question, we begin with our findings in relation to the curriculum, followed by those gleaned from our classroom observations and interviews with faculty and students. Interwoven with these findings are our commendations, which are in part based on our assessment of the district's progress toward meeting the goals set forth in their 2021 self-study report. Each section is bookended with our recommendations, the latter of which takes into consideration concerns voiced by students, teachers, and administrators. It should be noted that because some research questions overlap in focus, findings and recommendations in relation to them follow suit. Ultimately, we hope readers of this report gain a sense of the interconnectedness of the findings from a careful reading of them in their entirety.

Response to Committee Charge: Findings

Question 1: How can we better integrate the voices and history of marginalized people into our current curriculum and avoid “the danger of a single story?”

In its internal review of their program in 2021, WPS’ social studies department laid bare its commitment to active antiracism and culturally responsive pedagogy, highlighting necessary steps to actualize this in classroom practice, including but not limited to: ensuring that classroom resources minimize racial bias, decolonizing world history and world geography curricula, better including the histories of marginalized groups, and ensuring that teachers have ample opportunity to receive related professional development. From our observations, interviews, and analysis of curricular materials, we found WPS has made considerable progress regarding these goals.

Curriculum. At the elementary levels, the district’s commitment to inclusion is evident within the curriculum, with students afforded numerous opportunities to think critically about issues of identity and challenge the “single story” narrative. Texts used in kindergarten and 1st grade classrooms include a range of experiences and highlight the strengths and contributions of traditionally marginalized people. Units on leadership and family highlight disability activists and the leadership traits of women, avoiding the traditional narrative that marginalized groups are only worth exploring in relation to their oppression or trauma. Likewise, resources used in a unit focused on Ghana reflect a variety of experiences within the country, combatting narrow (and problematic) narratives about African nations. Finally, careful attention is paid to the assumptions embedded within language used to describe oppressed groups. A 3rd grade unit, for example, highlights the importance of correctly labeling indigenous people as they prefer¹, as does a 5th grade unit on slavery which emphasizes the importance of students differentiating between “slave” and “enslaved person.”

Similar progress is seen throughout much of the secondary curriculum, particularly in the questions students are prompted to consider. For example, overarching questions used in 11th grade Advanced Placement U.S. History (APUSH) include: *Is America a land of opportunity?* and *What is the nature of justice in America?*. In an 8th grade Civics unit, students study citizenship through the lens of Japanese internment and are asked to consider how stories of interment influence their view of democracy, the Supreme Court, and the human spirit. And in 9th grade world history courses, students are encouraged to think about whose perspectives are included and excluded in national monuments and whether present-day Thanksgiving celebrations should be better viewed as national days of mourning. Questions such as these stand to disrupt the “single story” of American progress and exceptionalism that permeates traditional history education models (VanSledright, 2011). Finally, in several elective courses, oppression is a focal point of study, most notably in the elective, *Race, Class, & Gender*, which poses critical questions around issues of identity, power, and activism. Other courses, such as *American Politics*, *World Issues*, and *Action Civics*, feature units or assignments focused on justice and racism.

Observations & Interviews. It was evident from our observations and conversations with students and faculty how much WPS has invested in becoming a more culturally inclusive

¹ “If you know the tribe, you say, “she’s a member of the Nipmuc tribe”. You can also use indigenous or just native people. Native Americans is not a term that they like used. The Federal Government still refers to Indigenous people as American Indians.”

district. For example, at the elementary level, the committee noted a plethora of multicultural books, fiction and non-fiction, throughout classrooms and was impressed by the amount of student work focused on identity posted throughout the hallways. Most impressive was a 5th grade lesson we observed about environmental racism, where we noticed considerable comfort and sophistication among (white) students discussing racism and how environmental policies often advantage white communities.

WPS teachers, for whom much of this work is new, expressed excitement about the ways in which they've amended their courses to be more inclusive of marginalized voices. For 1st grade teachers, the inclusion of a unit on Ghana was important so that their students would not associate Black history only with slavery, as was the importance of distinguishing refugees from immigrants for 2nd grade teachers, who spoke of how they were trying to help students challenge harmful stereotypes in their curriculum. Secondary teachers spoke of how much of their work in this regard has been fueled by student voice; world history teachers described ways they were trying to decenter European perspectives in their courses, highlighting a collaboration with the English department that centered the Haitian Revolution while studying the American and French Revolutions. Such efforts have not gone unnoticed by students, some of whom were appreciative of the predominantly white faculty's attempts to diversify the perspectives taught in their courses.

The presence of administrative (and other forms of) support for such teaching was evident as well. The high school librarian, for example, works closely with the department, creating online resources for student research and is in the process of revamping the library's books to better reflect the varied identities of its student population. Additionally, summer workshops have been (and will continue to be) offered for teachers, as will mandatory trainings focused on culturally responsive education, the latter of which administrators increasingly expect to see evidence of in teachers' classrooms.

Recommendations

Shifting to a more inclusive, anti-oppressive model of social studies is challenging and discomfiting work, the type that seldom, if ever, yields immediate results. The committee believes, however, that the district is generally working toward this aim in good faith and with grace toward one another. Nevertheless, we offer the following recommendations:

- **From Including to Centering Marginalized Voices:** The question guiding this section, *How can we better integrate the voices and history of marginalized people into our current curriculum and avoid "the danger of a single story?"*, may implicitly suggest that integration of such voices alone is enough. Many students we spoke to thought otherwise, saying that, while appreciative of some teachers' efforts, the single (often dominant and Eurocentric) story remained at the center of their courses. The timing by which certain groups' experiences are recognized in the curriculum is illustrative of this point. Consider how high school students spoke of studying India in their World Studies class but only from the point at which they were colonized, or how African kings and queens were mentioned in the class but not in the same depth that colonization was studied. The committee noticed similar issues in its portrayal of indigenous groups at the elementary level, as several lessons implicitly suggested them to have lived only in the past. For us and many students, the European experience remains the "anchor" of history curriculum in WPS, something further reinforced by the lack of AP courses offered

outside of European and American history. The committee agrees; no doubt, progress is being made but the department's anti-oppressive mission will not progress further without (space for) deliberation on how their practices are reaffirming or challenging oppressive narratives. The latter can only happen when marginalized voices are centered, not merely included, in courses.

- **Naming Oppression & Whiteness:** A few exceptions aside, we noticed that racism and other forms of oppression are seldom named, let alone condemned, in curricular materials. Case in point, of the many syllabi we examined, nearly all made no mention of race or racism being a focal point of any topics they would be examining, despite opportunities for doing so. At the secondary level, such invisibility extended to course content, resulting in missed opportunities for students to engage in anti-racist thinking. A grade 9 world history lesson, for example, discusses slavery exclusively through the lens of trade routes and maps and uses documents² that neither name the race of its authors nor condemn its use of language like “slaves” to describe enslaved people. Likewise, an entire American Civil War unit in a secondary U.S. history class fails to mention racism as playing any role in the conflict. Along these same lines, even instances where racism is acknowledged in assignments or courses, its generally defined as something that only disadvantages people of color, not something that also advantages white people. The committee worries that in doing so, it absolves white people, and by extension white teachers, of the responsibility they have in dismantling systems of oppression (Love, 2019); moreover, we fear it (falsely) “teaches” students that issues of race are strictly confined to courses like *Race, Ethnicity, & Gender*, and that other courses are “racially neutral.”
- **Avoiding A “Balanced” Approach When Teaching About Oppression:** The danger of a “single story” cannot be avoided if students are offered the opportunity to legitimize such stories. By this, the committee means that, on occasion, there were instances in the curriculum where students were posed questions that gave them space to rationalize oppression. An elementary grade lesson about the Pilgrims, for example, states “students will explore where would have been a good place to settle and examine whether or not it was alright to steal the Wampanoags' supplies.” As part of future equity audits, the committee recommends that space be given to teachers to critically examine the overarching questions that frame their lessons. Questions open to interpretation are the crux of meaningful social studies (Grant, 2013); however, those that would allow space for students to debate another group's humanity are antithetical to the social studies' democratic, justice-oriented mission (Sibbet & Au, 2017; Vinson, 2001).
- **Content-Focused Professional Development:** By their own admission, teachers across all levels cited a lack of content knowledge as a barrier to better including more marginalized voices in their courses. Studies of history educators underscore this point, (Blevins et al, 2020; Branch, 2004); put simply, teachers cannot teach what they do not know. The committee believes there to be a great thirst for such knowledge and counternarratives among faculty; indeed, several teachers told us how offerings, such as workshops on LGBTQ history and professional development (PD) by Primary Source,

² <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xQp01cs5nshaBxP5rWS0JgU8sFJduSVb0Zf9Dplkcqk/edit>

greatly impacted their classroom practices. More professional development opportunities to quench that thirst are needed.

- **Race-Focused Professional Development:** Secondary students confided in us that, however well-meaning teachers were, they were unequipped to guide students through discussions about issues of identity and power with them. One student, for example, recalled how in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder, their teacher allowed students to not attend class in order to process the tragedy in lieu of pausing instruction to have students do so collectively. Several teachers admitted as much, noting how they need training on how to better guide students through discussions about race. To be sure, the question of *how* to guide such discussions is one of importance for (white) teachers, with books like *Race Dialogues* (Kaplowitz et al, 2019) being a valuable resource district leaders might consider adopting for use with teachers in professional learning communities. Such practical guidance may provide teachers with the knowledge (and confidence) they need to facilitate these conversations. At the same time, a preoccupation with *how* may sidestep the important internal work Weston teachers, most of whom are white, must continually engage in around their own racial identities to do this work. In speaking with administration across all levels, they maintained all faculty (including themselves) have much to work on in relation to their implicit biases and in interrogating their own discomfort around (discussing) race (DiAngelo, 2016). The committee believes that space to do so in PD is crucial and that it can coincide with PD focused on more “practical” matters. Moreover, we contend over time such opportunities will go a long way in addressing some of the previously mentioned curricular issues.

Question 2: How well do we currently, and how do we improve, our teaching of critical thinking skills, public speaking, critical reading, analytical and persuasive writing and presentation at all levels?

Historically, social studies classrooms have been marred by models of instruction that would have students uncritically memorizing and repeating an uncontested narrative about their nation’s past (Wineburg, 2004), assuming them to be incapable of the critical thinking and literacy skills needed for democratic citizenship. It is clear to the committee that WPS social studies teachers harbor no such assumptions, quite the contrary. As evident from our visit and time with the curriculum, students of social studies in WPS are expected to derive deep meaning from their assignments and are given numerous opportunities to strengthen their analytical skills and expand their curiosity.

Curriculum. Seeds for critical thinking are planted early on in Weston’s social studies program. As early as kindergarten, students are asked to reflect on past choices and think critically about the choices of historical figures, while 1st graders are tasked with determining what they believe to be the most important qualities of a good leader. Further, in later grades, an emphasis on historical thinking is evident. For example, 3rd graders are asked to not merely consume historical information but to make sense of conflicting historical accounts and to question their accuracy; along these same lines, 5th grade curriculum emphasizes the historian’s craft, teaching students how their claims are supported by multiple sources. Across all elementary grades, be it with texts, maps, or any number of visuals used in the classroom, there

is great emphasis on teaching students how to think in lieu of what to think when engaging with historical sources.

Secondary courses continue this trend, with great attention paid to (the teaching of) analytical and persuasive writing skills. Explicit instruction on persuasive writing as well as opportunities for peer feedback are seen in 8th grade civics curriculum; a research paper assignment in AP World History is carefully scaffolded, with students given guidance on how to annotate sources and how to effectively integrate textual evidence, while effective thesis statements are modeled for Honors Politics students. What's more, much of these assignments have students coming to their own conclusions, affording them the opportunity to clarify their beliefs about important historical and contemporary problems. We see an extension of this in other courses, which require students communicate their positions to external audiences. For example, 10th grade World History students seeking honors credit must submit an original essay to an outside organization; likewise, opportunities to publicly speak are given to Action Civics students.

Observations and Interviews. One of the more impressive observations discussed by the committee was the degree to which explicit instruction on thinking routines was seen across our elementary classroom visits. In every class, we saw variations of the “noticing/wondering” strategy, with almost every student highly engaged in the lesson and often formulating their own questions about what was being learned; no matter the topic, the committee found great affinity among teachers for their students’ curiosity, as evident from their use of wait time when posing tough questions and in their explicit explanations of what effective “wondering” is in the first place. Elementary social studies teachers should be commended for the level of cooperation among one another in this regard, as it was clear that this was a department-wide goal. Evidence of critical thinking was also on display across the secondary classrooms we visited. In one class, students were heard discussing themes of power and gender in TV shows; in another, students were critically analyzing challenges for one of the Korean dynasties. Finally, many students shared with us how they are often afforded the opportunity to discuss (and form opinions about) topics with one another in class.

Recommendations

Calls for social studies educators to shift their instruction from a transmission-based model to a more student-centered, inquiry-based one have clearly been taken to heart by WPS teachers. The committee believes the below recommendations will further strengthen the department’s evolution in this regard.

Consistency Across Secondary History Classrooms: While most secondary history syllabi and curriculum we examined prioritized critical thinking and literacy, some did not. Rather, they featured assignments and questions that treated the discipline of history as a purely, static narrative and positioned students not as possible authors of history, but merely consumers. It is the committee’s position that WPS teachers don’t have to choose between students consuming knowledge or students critically questioning knowledge when teaching history; both are necessary. In future department meetings or professional learning communities, time should be spent auditing syllabi and assignments for critical thinking opportunities, a starting point for which could be centered on teachers compiling (and sharing with one another) the types of questions they use to frame their lessons and then collectively analyzing them using established criteria for compelling questions

(Grant, 2013; Obenchain et al., 2011; Virgin, 2014). Such discussions needn't be limited to the social studies department too, as the need for more cross-departmental meetings was a point of emphasis from secondary administrators. To be clear, this recommendation is not advocating for standardization; rather, we believe that such meetings over time stand to help teachers across the department develop a shared definition of critical thinking, without which, true critical thinking may only develop in siloed fashion throughout the department.

More Time for Elementary Teachers: Issues of time and coverage have long been common constraints to enacting (and sustaining) inquiry-based pedagogy in social studies classrooms (Reisman, 2012). WPS elementary teachers' experiences are no exception. Support for such teaching was universal among teachers we spoke to and observed; yet many voiced concerns over feelings they had to adhere too strictly to curricular demands in other subjects, which often constrained the time students needed to arrive at their own conclusions about topics. The committee understands remedying this issue is difficult; more ideas and questions for consideration on this issue are discussed in Question 4.

Question 3: How do we best help our students become global citizens as set forth in our district Mission Statement?

- A. How can we best prepare students to identify bias in sources?***
- B. How can we best incorporate geographical understanding?***
- C. How do we best appropriately apply student civic knowledge, civic dispositions, and critical thinking to current events?***
- D. How can we encourage thoughtful, respectful dialogue and teach students how to persuade and how to be persuadable?***
- E. How do we best integrate service learning into our curriculum?***

In its mission statement, the Weston Public Schools states global citizenship as one of its core values and aims, defining global citizens as those “who understand the world around them, value other perspectives, communicate and collaborate with culturally diverse audiences, and take appropriate action to improve local, national, and global communities.” As this goal aligns with the mission of the social studies (Kirkwood-Tucker, 2012), the department's self-study report recommended that, among many things: (a) more civic action projects be undertaken by students across grades, (b) civil rights curriculum expand its scope beyond the African-American struggle, and (c) teachers be provided more civics-focused professional development opportunities. Overall, progress toward these goals was evident to the committee, as was quality opportunities for students to develop the habits of global citizens.

Curriculum. At the elementary level, civics is interwoven with other disciplines; in kindergarten, students are given the opportunity to consider (and pose solutions to) problems of local significance, such as the amount of waste produced by their school³; overlapping with question 2's focus, they are also tasked with how to convince others throughout the school to reduce and recycle waste. In 1st grade, a unit on citizenship highlights historical examples of how young people made positive differences in their communities. Tasks such as these are

³ <https://sites.google.com/weston.org/gk-science-social-studies-jour/the-3rs-taking-care-of-our-community/the-3rs-communities-that-care>

approachable to all learners and model for them how to act on something of immediate importance in their lives.

Additionally, elementary students are taught not to see themselves and their communities as the center of the universe but as one of many, each with rich traditions and customs that should be respected and valued. 1st graders, for example, learn about their classmates' cultural traditions and customs during a unit on family; they also are exposed to Ghana as another country in their global community, studying how its cultural norms diverge from and converge with those of America. In subsequent grades, the practices of historians are laid bare for students, with a focus on how and why they identify bias, reliability, and relevance when constructing historical narratives. In a lesson about the Pilgrims, 3rd graders are encouraged to consider whether a source is trustworthy or useful in addressing an inquiry question; later, they are taught to see how the context in which a source was created is another factor in determining its relevance. Finally, an emphasis on geographical understanding is seen throughout elementary curriculum, particularly in 3rd and 4th grade, where students study how weather and geography impacted how and where Pilgrims settled and how, through examining census data and maps, human geography evolved over time in the U.S. Collectively, the foregoing skills, even if not explicitly linked to citizenship in lessons, are planting powerful seeds for civic habits and dispositions in a global, interdependent world.

Among secondary courses, considerable effort has been made to integrate activism and civic action projects into courses that are, on the surface, not explicitly focused on civics. *U.S. History II* students, for example, are afforded agency to choose from a list of problems (i.e. anti-Asian hate crimes, access to health care, etc.) one they wish to address and must write a letter to an elected official persuading them to take action; in *Contemporary World Issues*, students research groups who are trying to combat environmental inequities; in *AP Psych*, students apply their knowledge of psychology to pose solutions to educational issues at Weston High School; and the course, *Race, Class, and Gender*, is bookended with an entire unit on activism, where students study historical examples of groups who took action against discrimination and inequity.

Observations and Interviews. From various faculty, we learned of other ways citizenship is being cultivated throughout WPS. Freshmen, for example, are required to take a Digital Literacy Seminar, while 8th grade civics teachers spoke of recently including a unit on Media Literacy in their course. At the elementary level, 2nd graders help organize and partake in food drives, and 4th and 5th graders can participate in student council, where their input is considered on decisions that impact their schooling. Finally, from classroom observations across grades, the committee saw substantial evidence of thoughtful, respectful dialogue not just being encouraged by teachers but exhibited by students. Again, such dialogue may not have been linked explicitly to citizenship by teachers, but it's clear that WPS' commitment to cultivating civic attitudes is paying off with students.

Recommendations

WPS faculty should take pride in the many ways they are cultivating dispositions and knowledge for global citizenship with students. The following suggestions may stand to improve what is already a great strength of the district:

Better Linking Topics and Skills to Citizenship: As noted, so much of WPS' social studies curriculum stands to develop the type of citizens outlined in the district's mission

statement. To further increase the likelihood of that outcome, we recommend teachers consider where in their lessons, they can make more explicit to students the linkage between what is being asked of them and how that benefits them as citizens later in life. Consider the many lessons where students are asked to consider source biases in history classes. Without teachers drawing students' attention to how such thinking is also needed to make informed political decisions outside of school, students may see it as having limited utility beyond a study of the past⁴. The same could be applied to the respectful discussions (and disagreements) we heard students engaging in during lessons. The value of such dialogue extends beyond its contribution to a healthy classroom environment to the health of democracy itself. As part of any future curricular audit teachers undertake, attention should be paid to where teachers feel they can make that link clear to students.

Incorporating Justice and Anti-Oppression into Citizenship: Banks (2017) writes that for a democracy to be truly democratic for all, it requires that justice and equity be at the forefront of how citizenship is perceived. Transformative citizenship, he argues, occurs when citizens, as individuals or in groups, take action to disrupt inequitable power relations and make policy changes that are consistent with values such as human rights and social justice. As noted, many of the civic action projects students partake in at WPS are in service of this aim. The committee feels that adoption of a more justice-oriented definition of citizenship, one that prioritizes addressing social inequities, stands to further ensure students internalize that the duties of citizenship go beyond bettering their personal circumstances but improving those of their fellow citizens, especially those who have been historically denied the privileges of citizenship.

Question 4: How can we increase Social Studies time in elementary schools given the schedule constraints?

- a. How do we take advantage of interdisciplinary opportunities and other teaching models?*
- b. Would it be feasible for teachers to split areas of expertise and students switch for certain subjects?*
- c. How do we work with teachers to learn and implement the practices?*

Over the last twenty years, an increased emphasis on high-stakes tests that prioritize math and language arts has led to a significant decrease in social studies instruction time in the elementary grades (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Fitchett et al., 2014). Indeed, WPS elementary teachers feel (and continue to navigate) such constraints. The committee commends the novel ways they are doing so and the overall level of responsibility they have assumed in addressing this issue. At the same time, further administrative and institutional support is needed.

Curriculum. Many elementary teachers have taken advantage of interdisciplinary opportunities as one way of increasing social studies time. Lessons focused on informational reading, for example, are used as opportunities to learn about other countries; in 4th grade, examination of historical events, such as the Dust Bowl and Hurricane Katrina, are integrated with science so students understand how (and why) the earth changes over time. Such integration is also present in 5th grade, with students examining how climate and weather economically

⁴ The committee recognizes that such linkages may be happening by teachers in classrooms, observations of which were very limited in our brief visit. As a reminder, this assessment is based entirely on curricular observations.

impacted American colonies. Instances such as these are commendable and can function as exemplars for which future interdisciplinary lessons can be modeled after.

Interviews and Observations. Despite this integration, overwhelmingly, elementary teachers maintained the need for a longer and more singularly focused social studies periods. For example, 2nd grade teachers spoke of having as little as 15 minutes some days for social studies instruction, hardly enough time for students to discover information on their own. What’s more, teachers feel the lack of time in the schedule negatively impacts their ability to avoid the “single story” issue discussed earlier. Rightfully, the teachers wondered, however much they desired it, whether it was realistic to expect a robust social studies experience for students under such a constraint.

Recommendations

As we alluded earlier, the committee (and teachers, to an extent) understand that providing more time, be it through extending the day or lessening requirements in other areas, would not be without its own issues. Nevertheless, the committee feels the district would be remiss to not explore the possibility, along with the below suggestions.

Exploring An Extension of the School Day: A substantial amount of time should be set aside, perhaps during the summer, by administration and faculty⁵ to discuss what the impact of extending the school day would have on families, students, and all WPS stakeholders. Alternatively, if that discussion yields little progress, discussing how time could be taken from the existing schedule must be explored. Among teachers we spoke to, there was a feeling among them that, despite vocal support from administrators on this issue, the absence of action on it thus far implicitly conveys otherwise. The committee contends that taking this initial step would go a long way in reversing that perception.

Increased (Opportunities for) Pedagogical and Content Support: It bears repeating here how important content-focused professional development is for social studies teachers. Many of the elementary teachers we spoke to mentioned how, in the absence of extending the school day, more support, whether it through hiring additional content specialists or providing teachers more space for social studies-centric professional development, is sorely needed. While budgetary concerns may dictate the former to be difficult, the latter could prove crucial to helping elementary teachers find time for more (and better) social studies instruction within the existing schedule. For teachers struggling to find ways to integrate social studies into other subjects, job-embedded time with teachers who have had success doing so or simply time for collaborative lesson planning could make a difference. Related, while subjects such as science or language arts may appear more relatable to the social studies than math (as evident from the interdisciplinary lessons we saw), guidance for how to integrate math with social studies at the elementary level exists and should be utilized in professional learning communities (Koestler et al., 2022).

⁵ As this is likely a labor issue as well, union representatives should be present for this meeting too.

Question 5: What does effective assessment and feedback look like at each level?⁶

Quality assessment is: (a) varied so not to privilege certain forms of knowledge and understanding over others, (b) conducted before, throughout, and after instruction, (c) linked to an authentic and intellectually worthy task, and (d) reveals to teachers as much about their own development as it does their students' (Wiggins, 2011). Likewise, feedback from teachers should occur at frequent intervals and alert students of the all the ways they are meeting learning goals as well as ways they can continue to grow. Keeping with that spirit, assessment and feedback practices throughout WPS' social studies program are progressing but can improve along several dimensions.

Curriculum. Throughout Kindergarten and 1st grade, quality and age-appropriate opportunities for formative assessment abound within the curriculum. Often, students are tasked with drawing pictures to display their understanding of concepts and many classroom activities allow for student thinking to surface orally and in writing, without which it could not be assessed to begin with. We see such opportunities throughout the elementary grades, as much of the curriculum positions teachers as knowledge-facilitators in lieu of knowledge-givers. Because of this, it lends itself to teachers providing feedback on students' growth and the process of learning, not just whether they are completing tasks or not. In the middle grades, assessment is quite equitable, with students given a variety of ways to exhibit understanding (e.g., role-playing, written expression via letter writing, collages, journal entries, communicating through Google Slide presentations etc.). Traditional assessments that emphasize memory recall remain, but they are balanced with more creative assessments that promote development of different skills. Moreover, most summative assessments are accompanied by rubrics at the onset of being assigned, providing students with clear expectations and a way of measuring their own progress. Evidence of these practices were evident at the secondary level as well. Generally, there is a healthy balance of traditional (e.g., tests, quizzes, etc.) and more innovative assessments (e.g., portfolios, debates, creating videos, etc.), and like the middle grades, an intentional progression of skills from one grade to the next is evident.

Observations and Interviews. From an observational standpoint, across all grades, instruction was conducted in ways that allowed for teachers to provide in-the-moment feedback to students. In many ways, quality assessment is predicated upon quality instruction. Because almost every teacher we observed created space for students to discuss ideas with one another, we were able to observe them being responsive to student thinking. Interviews with high school students echoed these observations. Students of AP courses, for example, were appreciative of how teachers scaffolded preparation for document-based assessments, providing them with frequent feedback on practice tests and opportunities to discuss any mistakes made on them. Likewise, secondary administrators have noticed positive change regarding how frequently teachers are returning formal assessments to students.

Recommendations

Overall, the committee was impressed with how thoughtfully assessment was treated throughout the social studies program. Often, students are being in assessed in ways that serve

⁶ Although grading is often discussed in tandem with assessment, the two are distinct from one another. Thus, we generally avoid such discussion here as grades say little about a student's development and more about how a teacher is judging that development. Future reviews, however, should examine grading practices and the value teachers place on certain assignments over others.

their interests as much as teachers, if not more. To further strengthen these practices, the committee recommends the following:

Increase Opportunities for Retaking Assessments: The example of how appreciative AP students were to see and learn from their mistakes is instructive for teachers at all levels. More than just offering students the opportunity to improve a grade, it “teaches” students that learning is more mistake- and process-driven than result-driven. Inevitably, providing students more opportunities to redo assignments stands to slow the pacing of their curriculum or increase their workload pertaining to feedback and assessment. To be clear, the committee neither takes that lightly nor is suggesting that it is practical to allow all assessments to be retaken by students. Rather, we are encouraging teachers to deliberate on the types of assessments that would be most valuable for students to retake, such as those measuring essential skills or their understanding of larger course themes, and to allow them opportunities to do so along with meaningful feedback to assist.

Assessment Diversity Within, Not Just Across, Classes: While the committee found great diversity in assessment across classes, that was not always the case within classes. In early elementary grades, for example, forms of expression beyond drawing and writing words may help a wider range of students demonstrate what they know. Likewise in middle grades, some classes had many opportunities for students to practice expository but not persuasive writing. This extends to high school, where mainstream classes seem to lack as many persuasive writing and oral presentations opportunities as elective courses. Interviews with high school students confirm this observation, with some telling us their courses privileged multiple-choice tests over other forms of assessment. At a minimum, teachers should be given space to (collectively) reflect on the types of knowledge, understanding, and skills their classes are privileging. From there, they can theorize (and share) with one another ideas for making assessment more equitable in their classrooms.

Question 6: In what ways can we strengthen our relationships with local places and people to continue and increase place-based learning opportunities for students and integrate these opportunities into our curriculum?

Over the years, WPS has cultivated relationships with several outside organizations and local places to provide students with rich opportunities for place-based learning. As evident from the department’s self-study report, the district and the entire community value such opportunities, especially considering the time missed from school due to the pandemic. More important, the effort by teachers and the department to ensure students’ learning is locally grounded and experiential is truly impressive.

Curriculum. Connections (and visits) to local places could be seen throughout the elementary curriculum. In an interdisciplinary lesson, kindergarteners learn about Land’s Sake Farm and, in their unit on recycling, are visited by the custodian to learn more about where trash goes after its disposed. 4th graders visit the Harvard Peabody Museum and hike the Legacy Trail, while 5th graders learn about enslaved people in Weston and visit the Golden Ball Tavern as part of a unit on colonial life. Such opportunities occur at the secondary level as well. Through a Weston Foundation grant, 6th graders can participate in an archaeological dig on campus; in high

school, students take themselves on self-guided historical field trips throughout Weston, and visits by guest speakers are mentioned throughout classroom websites. That students are afforded such efforts requires a great amount of planning and coordination on the part of faculty and administration and is even more commendable for being done amid very legitimate concerns around public health.

Observations and Interviews. The committee was fortunate to partake in a visit to the Golden Ball Tavern and witness first-hand students learning about their town's history and how it relates to their curriculum. There, we also spoke with some of the Tavern's staff and learned of the ways they work with Susan Erickson to ensure the site's learning goals and those of the district are aligned. One such way involved efforts to elevate the story of Lucy, an enslaved woman who at one point lived there, during student visits to the site. Although further discussions with historians working with the site revealed problems that we address in our recommendations, the visit exemplified the type of relationship schools should have with local historical sites. At the same time, we learned from secondary teachers we spoke to that some courses feature much more place-based learning opportunities than others. Some mentioned the challenge of how they often conflict with other disciplines' schedules, while AP history teachers cited pressure to ready students for exams as something they must weigh against possible site visits. And middle school teachers' desire to have entire grades attend field trips is hard for some sites to accommodate. Still, teachers noted they have found ways to incorporate local sites, such as visiting nearby farms and tying it to stories of migration in 9th grade or having students work with historical markers throughout the school. There was a feeling, however, among teachers that more need to buy in to the value of such learning before they can further address issues of practicality regarding it.

Recommendations

Of the many challenges associated with place-based learning, understanding where it fits within existing school curriculum remains a great one. As such, Weston social studies teachers and specialists are doing a wonderful job utilizing local places and resources in ways that not just relate to but enhance what students are learning in class. Still, the committee sees additional opportunities for cultivating school-site relationships along with a cautionary tale to consider when doing so.

Considerations for New Place-Based Learning & Site Connections: The committee sees many points of entry within Weston's social studies curriculum for local places and place-based learning opportunities. To start, the Taza Chocolate factory in Somerville, MA, has a sustainable, fair-trade farming connection with Ghanaian cocoa farmers. It could be interesting for 1st grade teachers to connect with them to learn more about their business model and the choices they made to develop this relationship. Of great importance, they offer group tours. In the middle grades, guest speakers could include archaeologists from local universities, the City of Boston Archaeologist, museum curators, or education specialists from museums whose collections include artifacts from the civilizations that are centered in the curriculum; virtual exhibits from (and visits to) these museums should also be considered. Civics curriculum is rife with potential for place-based learning. For example, groups of students could attend school board meetings that take place during school hours. Zoom meetings with town officers or school board members could also be coordinated, as could attendance at jury trials so

students could see courts in action. Alternatively, local judges or attorneys could be invited to classes to speak about court procedures and the rule of law. Finally, in high school, scavenger hunts to find evidence of historic markers representing events from different time periods (i.e., The Gilded Age, 1920s Art Deco, etc.) could be considered.

The Danger of Places Telling “Single Stories”: Just as texts can convey and elevate a “single story,” so too can historic places. Case in point, during our visit to the Golden Ball Tavern, we spoke with its executive director about how the Tavern was incorporating the story of Lucy, an enslaved person, into the larger narrative about the Tavern’s past. From them, we were told that not much was known about her and that her enslaver, Isiah, should not be looked down upon because Lucy was “only” a house servant, effectively trivializing her oppression. From there, the historian, who referred to Lucy as a “slave” throughout, maintained that she would not give into “woke” history and teach Tavern visitors that its patrons or other revered (white) historical figures were “bad people” for having “slaves.” In short, she did not feel the need to discuss Lucy’s story. Of course, such erasure is not something Weston’s social studies program condones, and they have already put in place steps to ensure students hear about Lucy’s story in future visits. Yet, the anecdote is instructive by reminding WPS teachers of the importance of teaching students to look as closely at what historic sites don’t reveal as much as what they do reveal.

Question 7: How is student voice and choice considered in decisions, planning, and curriculum development? How do we develop student voice in our K-12 curriculum?

How a school considers student voice and choice in curricular and policy decisions manifests itself in many ways: through its promotion of questions open to student interpretation, by the options students are afforded to exhibit what they know, and by the agency they are afforded to pursue topics of their choice in classes, to name only a few. The committee’s analysis yielded evidence of such autonomy, while also revealing avenues that administrators and teachers can pursue to further develop students’ agency throughout the school.

Curriculum. In kindergarten, there are many instances in which students can choose how they respond to content, often during activities centered on personal information students wish to share with one another. In 1st grade, students can choose how they share their knowledge during a unit on family, and more broadly throughout the elementary grades, opportunities for students to notice and wonder incorporate (and help cultivate) student voice. Several civics projects in the middle grades allow students to choose topics of interest along with their method for informing others about the topic, and in select high school courses, students are surveyed about which topics they are most interested in exploring. These examples, along with others highlighted in previous sections, highlight the myriad of ways social studies teachers consider (and have affinity for) students’ voices.

Observations and Interviews. In elementary grades, student voice is considered in the formation of classroom norms. Touring elementary schools, we noticed many classrooms posted class contracts, which were co-signed by students. We also noticed how common it was for teachers to employ proper wait time during classes, which encourages more students to contribute to discussions. As mentioned earlier, 4th and 5th graders can also participate in student council, where they can have input on school decisions. At the secondary level, one crucial way

students' voices are being considered is through the creation of a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) alliance. The space was created by the high school's principal and director of equity to better address the concerns of students with marginalized identities, several of whom said during interviews that it has helped them feel more seen in the school.

Recommendations

While the above findings are to be commended, we offer the below recommendations to make student voice a more prominent influence on both the formal and hidden curriculum of Weston's schools.

More Voice in What, Not Just How, Students Are Learning: As noted throughout this report, students across all grades are generally afforded agency over how they are learning. Yet, we did not see as much agency over what they are learning. To be sure, courses beholden to standards and issues of time pose a challenge to this, but we nevertheless would encourage teachers to consider where in their existing curriculum they can afford students opportunities to conduct related original research. This need extends to course requirements as well. High school students, for example, were adamant that the elective, *Race, Class, & Gender*, be a required course for all 9th grade students. Action on this issue would convince students that their voices have an actual impact on school decisions, further incentivizing them to voice their concerns in the future.

Recruiting (and Retaining) More Secondary Teachers of Color: From our discussions with secondary students, oft repeated was the lack of racial diversity among high school faculty and their perception that little was being done about it. Predominantly white institutions have a long history of vocally supporting faculty diversity initiatives but coming up with excuses for why it can't be done (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Heeding the concerns of students, the committee wishes to challenge all Weston administrators to ask themselves difficult questions about why this issue persists throughout the district (e.g., *Where and in what ways are we recruiting teachers of color? To what extent are Weston Public schools a hospitable and comfortable environment for teachers of color? How do we know? To what extent are we explicitly prioritizing this in job postings? What creative avenues is the district pursuing to diversify staff? Etc.*). More importantly, we would urge them to show students how seriously they take this concern and to be transparent with them about action steps that will be taken in response.

Conclusion:

Weston's social studies education program is a model for which other districts who are committed to democracy can look to for inspiration, not because it's infallible, but because it's made up of educators who are acutely aware of their fallibility. The existence of this report alone is a testament to that fact and the district's commitment to continuously improve how they serve their students, their community, and the broader world. The committee is grateful for our time with its faculty and for trusting us to conduct this review.

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