

# TRUTH DECAY

## TEACHERS' CIVICS INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

### CIVIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE ERA OF TRUTH DECAY

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**R**AND research in K–12 (kindergarten through 12th grade) mathematics and English language arts (ELA) suggests that teachers use and modify instructional materials in diverse ways, and that they often develop or find their own materials.<sup>1</sup> RAND researchers have also documented how teachers' use of instructional materials in mathematics and ELA is connected to the instructional practices in which teachers report engaging their students,<sup>2</sup> and, as Steiner points out,<sup>3</sup> multiple studies have connected the use of particular math and ELA curricula with increases in student achievement.

However, little is known about the use of instructional materials for social studies—particularly regarding the content that teachers rely on to provide instruction in civics-related topics, which has implications for students' civic development.

This Data Note unpacks ways in which social studies teachers across the United States reported using instructional materials in their classrooms to teach civics. These data are intended to inform policymakers, researchers, and educators about potential ways to support civics teaching and learning.

#### DEFINING CIVIC DEVELOPMENT

Public schools in the United States play a key role in preparing students not only for college and careers, but also for civic life. Indeed, the founders of the U.S. system of public education argued that the primary mission of public schools was to develop educated citizens who would uphold the nation's democratic values,<sup>4</sup> and scholars continue to refer to the system as a "guardian of democracy."<sup>5</sup> Schools can equip students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to contribute to their communities and their country as adults. This set of attributes can be characterized as *civic development*. The need to support students' civic development is particularly important in the face of recent results from the Nation's Report Card that documented no improvements between 2014 and 2018 in students' civic scores and declines in their achievement in U.S. history and geography.<sup>6</sup>

**Civic knowledge:** an understanding of government structures, government processes, and relevant social studies knowledge and concepts, along with U.S. and global history and the ways that history affects today's government and society

**Civic skills:** abilities that allow students to engage in democratic processes in an active and informed way, such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration

**Civic dispositions:** attitudes that are important in a democracy, such as a sense of civic duty and concern for the welfare of other people as well as for one's country and community<sup>7</sup>

## When asked what instructional materials they use for the majority of classroom time, higher percentages of teachers reported using items that they have found themselves (rather than materials provided by their district or school).

Our data suggest that K–12 social studies teachers are much more likely to be using instructional materials that they found or created than they are to be using textbooks; we also found that the use of textbooks might be diminishing. When specifically asked how closely the statement “Textbooks are becoming less and less important in my classroom”<sup>8</sup> resembled their own views, 72 percent of all social studies teachers we surveyed indicated that it was “somewhat close” or “very close.”

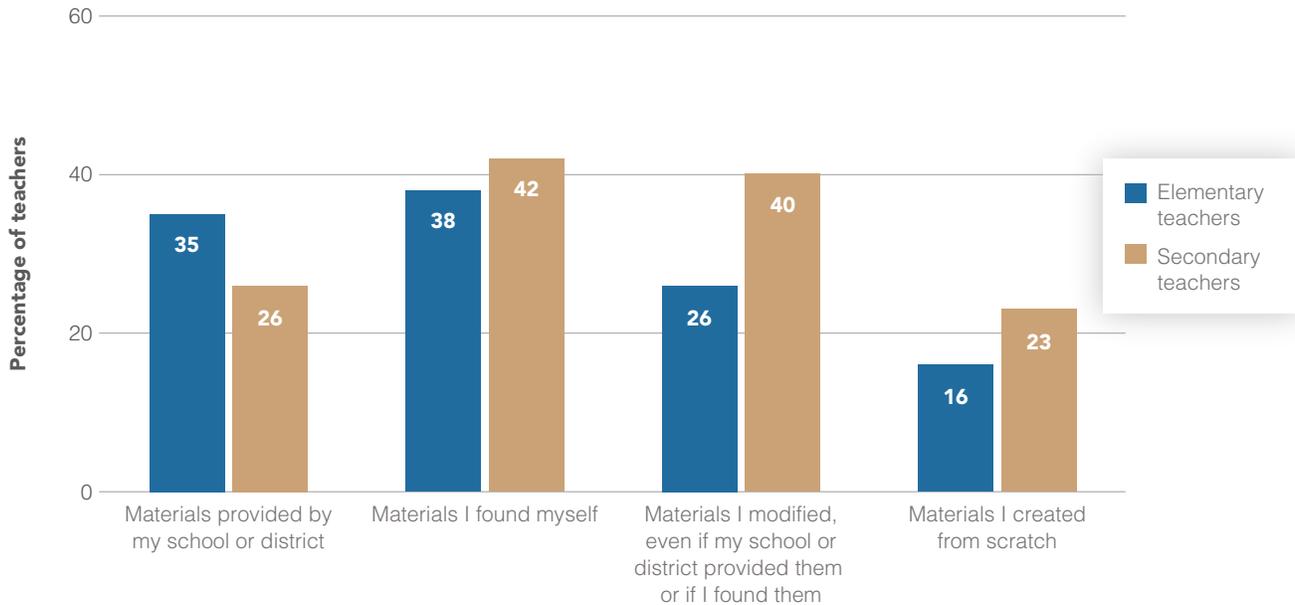
We also asked teachers about the origins of the resources that they used for their social studies and/or civics instruction, seeking the estimated proportions of materials that

1. the school or district provided
2. teachers found themselves
3. teachers created from scratch.

Teachers were also asked about the proportion of materials from the first two categories that they modified.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, teachers most commonly indicated that “found” resources made up the majority of their social studies teaching materials. However, findings varied considerably by teachers’ school levels. At the secondary level, 42 percent of teachers indicated that resources they found themselves accounted for a majority of their curricula, and only 40 percent indicated “materials I modified” as constituting a majority.

**FIGURE 1** Materials that teachers reported made up the majority of what they used to teach social studies this school year (2019–2020)



NOTE: Bars convey the percentage of teachers who indicated that “more than half” or “all” of their materials were of each type. Percentages do not sum to 100 percent across elementary or secondary teachers because teachers were able to choose separately what proportion of their materials were of each type. This figure is based on the following survey item: *Of the instructional materials you have used or anticipate using to teach civics and/or social studies this school year (including textbooks, readings, software, assignments, and other lesson materials), what proportion are...* [response choices are shown in the figure; response scale: none, less than half, about half, more than half, all].



In contrast, elementary teachers were split nearly equally in indicating that the majority of their social studies materials was made up of things that they found or that were provided by their school or district, while they were less likely to indicate the majority of their materials were ones they modified. These findings echo our past research in ELA and mathematics. Specifically, prior RAND surveys indicated that nearly all ELA and math teachers used content that they found or created for at least some of their instruction and that secondary teachers of those subjects were more likely than elementary teachers were to report using materials that they found or created.<sup>9</sup>

We observed no substantive differences in the instructional resources reportedly used by teachers serving different populations of students (i.e., teachers serving higher proportions of low-income students, non-white students, and English-language learners) or among teachers in schools that varied according to urbanicity.

**Majorities of secondary social studies teachers reported spending three or more hours per week searching for or developing their own materials to teach civics.**

Secondary teachers reported spending far more time than did elementary teachers on searching for and developing their own teaching resources for civics instruction. This is to be expected; elementary teachers typically are tasked with providing instruction in multiple subjects beyond social studies. Among secondary teachers, 38 percent reported spending four or more hours per week searching for or developing their own materials, and a majority (57 percent) reported spending three or more hours per week doing so. On the other hand, about 9 percent of elementary teachers reported spending four or more hours per week searching for or developing content for civics instruction, and about 66 percent reported spending one hour or less doing so.

These data are slightly different than our findings on time spent on mathematics and ELA instructional planning from prior research, which were that between roughly 40 and 50 percent of teachers at all grade levels reported spending four or more hours developing or selecting their own materials for either ELA or math.<sup>10</sup> It is likely that elementary teachers spend at least as much time on instructional planning for all subjects as secondary teachers do for just the social studies courses that they teach.



**We observed no substantive differences in the instructional resources reportedly used by teachers serving different populations of students (i.e., teachers serving higher proportions of low-income students, non-white students, and English-language learners) or among teachers in schools that varied according to urbanicity.**

**Although most teachers had positive perceptions of the social studies and civics resources provided by their school or district, 27 percent to 42 percent of teachers did not perceive these civics instructional materials to be engaging or effectively promoting students' civic development.**

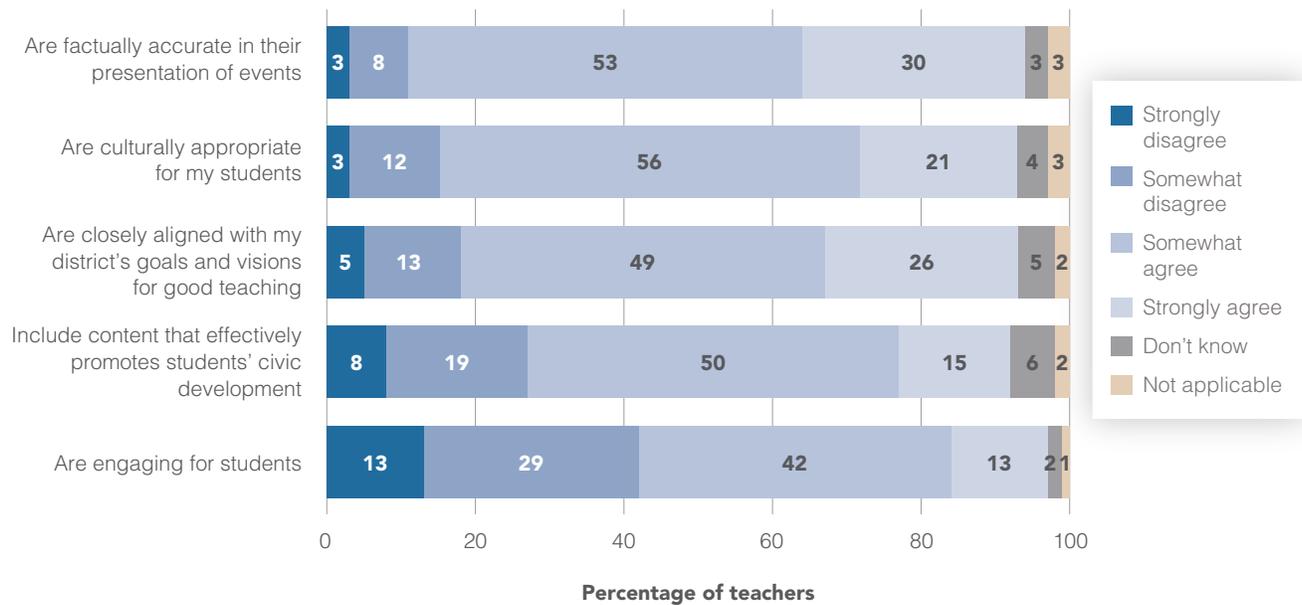
Teachers' perceptions of instructional materials provide one window into possible reasons that they are searching for or developing their own alternatives. We asked teachers about the extent to which they

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agreed with a range of statements about the resources that their school or district provided for teaching civics and social studies. Figure 2 demonstrates that 75 percent or more agreed that these materials were accurate, culturally appropriate, and aligned with their district's vision. Majorities of teachers also agreed that these materials included content that promoted students' civic development and were engaging. On the flip side, a little over 40 percent of teachers disagreed that their materials were engaging, and 27 percent of teachers did not agree that their materials effectively promoted students' civic development. Furthermore, it is concerning that 11 to 18 percent of teachers disagreed that their district- or school-provided materials were factually accurate, culturally appropriate, and closely aligned with their district's goals.

We did not identify significant correlations between teachers' perceptions and whether teachers indicated finding their own materials or the time that they spent seeking alternatives. It could be that perceptions of resources are not a driving force for what teachers decide to use for their instruction and that teachers report finding and creating their own materials because of their own beliefs about how to teach social studies or because of messages from their district or school about how much to rely on those provided materials. We did not observe any significant differences in teachers' perceptions relating to whether they were elementary or secondary teachers; nor did we observe any differences according to the urbanicity of teachers' schools or the population of students that they served.

**FIGURE 2** Percentage of teachers agreeing with statements about their civics and/or social studies instructional materials



NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey item: *Indicate whether you disagree or agree with the following statements about the instructional materials your school or district has provided to you to teach civics and/or social studies. The civics and/or social studies instructional materials provided by my district or school...* [response choices are shown in the figure; response scale: strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, strongly agree, don't know, not applicable]. Bars might not sum to 100 because of rounding.

## What should be made of these data?

These data suggest that, to teach social studies and civics, K–12 teachers are likely relying more on content that they found or created than on textbooks or other curricula provided by their district. Furthermore, although teachers expressed generally positive opinions of the social studies materials their schools or districts provide, only a little more than half of teachers indicated that they thought those provided resources were engaging for students, and only two-thirds agreed that they effectively supported students' civic development. Although this Data Note is not meant to provide in-depth analyses or specific policy implications, it does lead to some potential considerations for state or school system leaders, researchers, and providers of instructional materials:

- State or school system leaders might examine what resources and instructional materials they have required or recommended that teachers use to teach civics—and social studies more broadly—and investigate the extent to which teachers are

using what is provided versus creating or finding their own teaching material. How can states, districts, and schools support teachers and provide them with better resources for their teaching? If teachers indicate that what has been provided is not engaging, how can they be directed toward high-quality additional resources that align with what has already been provided?

- Researchers could consider digging deeper into how teachers are using materials and how those behaviors might be related to more-robust student learning. In addition, if—as teachers indicated—social studies materials are not always engaging for students, what is the relationship between student engagement in coursework and student learning?
- Providers of instructional materials might consider ways to provide better and more-engaging social studies tools and resources to support teachers' instruction. What kinds of resources are teachers most likely to use? Of those materials, which are most likely to support student learning?

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Opfer, Kaufman, and Thompson, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Opfer et al., 2018; Kaufman et al., 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Steiner, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Mann, 1855.

<sup>5</sup> Gould, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, undated.

<sup>7</sup> Hansen et al., 2018; Vinnakota, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> This question was borrowed with permission from a survey administered to high school social studies teachers by the American Enterprise Institute. For more information, see Farkas and Duffett, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Opfer, Kaufman, and Thompson, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Opfer, Kaufman, and Thompson, 2016.

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers and school leaders across the country. We are extremely grateful to the U.S. public-school teachers and leaders who have agreed to participate in the panels. Their time and willingness to share their experiences are invaluable for this effort and for helping us understand more about how to better support their hard work in schools. We thank our reviewers—Brian Gill, Alice Huguet, and Andrew McEachin—for helpful feedback that improved this report. We also thank editor Arwen Bicknell, production editor Monette Velasco, and designer Pete Soriano for their support in presenting this series.

This work is part of RAND’s Truth Decay initiative (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018), which studies the diminishing role of facts and analysis in public life. Through this initiative, RAND has invited researchers and engaged stakeholders to find solutions that counter Truth Decay

and the threat it poses to evidence-based policymaking. More information about Truth Decay is available at [www.rand.org/truth-decay](http://www.rand.org/truth-decay).

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. More information about RAND can be found at [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org). Questions about this report should be directed to [laurah@rand.org](mailto:laurah@rand.org) and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to [educationandlabor@rand.org](mailto:educationandlabor@rand.org).

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## ABOUT THIS SERIES

The AEP Civic Education Data Note series is intended to provide brief analyses of results from our American Teacher Panel civic education survey. If you would like to know more about the dataset, please see our technical documentation ([www.rand.org/t/RR-A112-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A112-1)) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting. If you are interested in using AEP data for your own analysis or reading other AEP-related publications, please email [aep@rand.org](mailto:aep@rand.org) or visit [www.rand.org/aep](http://www.rand.org/aep).

This Data Note is one in a series about how schools can equip students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to contribute to their communities and their country as adults. The other Data Notes in this series are

- Laura S. Hamilton, Julia H. Kaufman, Lynn Hu, David Grant, Claude Messan Setodji, and Matt Strawn, *2019 American Teacher Panel Civic Education Survey: Technical Documentation*, RR-A112-1
- Laura S. Hamilton, Julia H. Kaufman, and Lynn Hu, *Media Use and Literacy in Schools: Civic Development in the Era of Truth Decay*, RR-A112-2
- Julia H. Kaufman, Laura S. Hamilton, and Lynn Hu, *Social Studies' Teachers Perspectives on Key Civic Outcomes in 2010 and 2019: Civic Development in the Era of Truth Decay*, RR-A112-4
- Laura S. Hamilton, Julia H. Kaufman, and Lynn Hu, *Social Studies Teachers' Trust in Institutions and Groups: Civic Development in the Era of Truth Decay*, RR-A112-5.

A more comprehensive report on the state of civic education in America's schools is also in development.

To explore how teachers and schools promote civic development, we created a survey for social studies teachers that was administered to members of the RAND Corporation's American Teacher Panel in fall 2019.<sup>a</sup> These teachers included both general-education teachers (typically for kindergarten through 5th grade [K–5]) and teachers who reported teaching social studies exclusively or in combination with a small number of other subjects (typically teachers in middle and high schools). This Data Note is part of a series that provides some snapshots of results from this survey; it is intended to convey field-relevant findings in a brief, accessible format. We summarize responses separately for elementary (grades K–5) and secondary (grades 6–12) teachers; where relevant, we discuss differences in responses for subgroups of teachers when they are statistically significant for an outcome of interest, as indicated by regression models that included several teacher- and school-level factors as independent variables. Additional details about the survey and analytic methods, including our definitions of these subgroups and methods for testing statistical significance of differences, are available at [www.rand.org/t/RR-A112-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A112-1).

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<sup>a</sup> Teachers were sampled to participate in this survey if they reported teaching social studies, civics, or similar material in a previous survey. Teachers were screened at the beginning of the survey to ensure that they still taught the target subject or subjects—i.e., if they indicated teaching "social studies or social science (including general social studies, geography, history, government/civics, etc.)." If they did not, they were screened out of the survey.

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