

TRUTH DECAY

SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON KEY CIVIC OUTCOMES IN 2010 AND 2019

CIVIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE ERA OF TRUTH DECAY

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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,¹ and scholars continue to refer to the system as a "guardian of democracy."² 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.³

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 community⁴

Social studies classes in U.S. public schools often focus on building students' knowledge and skills in such subjects as history, economics, and politics. Mastery of these subjects can help support readiness for college, career, and community life.⁵ But civic development also involves the cultivation of such dispositions as an understanding of the need to support one's community or to display a strong work ethic, and these too are relevant to readiness for life after high school. These civic dispositions have much in common with popular conceptualizations of social and emotional learning (SEL).⁶ Teacher and principal enthusiasm for SEL is high,⁷ and a growing body of research highlights the value of some SEL- and civic-related competencies for promoting long-term student success.⁸ But evidence regarding educators' embrace of core civic dispositions is lacking.

Social studies teachers play an important role in fostering civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Although several factors, such as state standards and assessments, influence public-school teachers' decisions about what content to cover, individual teachers typically have some degree of autonomy over what happens in the classroom.⁹ This may be especially true in the field of social studies, which most states do not include in their accountability systems.¹⁰ Therefore, teachers do not face the same high-stakes testing pressures in their social studies instruction as they typically do for mathematics and English language arts. At the same time, the content covered in social studies curricula has been a topic of contentious debate (Hess and Rice, 2020; Vinnakota, 2019). Given the lack of consensus about how schools should promote civic development, it is valuable to hear from social studies teachers themselves about what

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aspects of civic development they prioritize and how their views on the subject have changed over the past decade as societal factors (e.g., the media landscape, political polarization) have changed.

In this Data Note, we build on a 2010 report published by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI)¹¹ and explore changes in high school teachers' perspectives since 2010 regarding the importance of teaching various topics related to students' civic development and regarding the role of social studies instruction more generally. Unlike the other Data Notes in this series that focus on teachers of social studies in kindergarten through 12th grade, this one provides results only from the 223 high school teachers in our survey because the 2010 AEI report included only high school teachers.¹² We explore public high school social studies teachers' perspectives on these outcomes in fall 2019 and examine how their views have changed over the past decade. All the differences between 2010 and 2019 results that we highlight in this Data Note were statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.¹³ Although we cannot ensure that the 2010 and 2019 samples are equivalent in terms of representativeness, this set of comparisons allows us to identify patterns of differences

across survey questions that suggest broad themes regarding how teachers' perspectives have changed.

In both 2010 and 2019, majorities of high school social studies teachers rated numerous aspects of civic development as absolutely essential; knowledge of facts was the lowest-rated item.

Table 1 shows the percentages of public-school social studies teachers who rated each of several aspects of civic development as "absolutely essential" for their high school to teach. It also indicates the percentages that were somewhat or very confident (as opposed to "not at all confident") that most students in their high schools would have learned each aspect by the time they graduated. The list addressed knowledge and understanding of some social studies topics, along with such dispositions as tolerance and community service. The 2010 AEI report described these 12 items as capturing the "twelve concepts of citizenship."¹⁴

TABLE 1 Comparison of Perceived Importance and Confidence Ratings for Public High School Social Studies Teachers in 2010 and 2019

	ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL		VERY/SOMEWHAT CONFIDENT	
	2010	2019	2010	2019
To be tolerant of people and groups who are different from themselves	76%	80%	74%	92%*
To have good work habits such as being timely, persistent, and hardworking	80%	76%	50%	87%*
To embrace the responsibilities of citizenship such as voting and jury duty	78%	66%*	65%	82%*
To see themselves as global citizens living in an interconnected world	57%	66%*	52%	81%*
To identify the protections guaranteed by the Bill of Rights	83%	65%*	79%	91%*
To understand concepts such as federalism, separation of powers, and checks and balances	64%	53%*	69%	81%*
To follow rules and be respectful of authority	60%	53%	61%	90%*
To be knowledgeable about periods such as the American Founding, the Civil War, and the Cold War	63%	43%*	72%	88%*
To understand economic principles such as supply and demand and the role of market incentives	50%	43%	51%	75%*
To develop habits of community service such as volunteering and raising money for causes	43%	40%	57%	85%*
To be activists who challenge the status quo of our political system and seek to remedy injustice	37%	37%	37%	70%*
To know facts (e.g., the location of the fifty states) and dates (e.g., Pearl Harbor)	36%	32%	56%	83%*

NOTES: Columns 1 and 2 are based on the following survey item: *How important do you think it SHOULD be for your high school to teach students each of the following? Use a one to five scale where 1 is 'not important at all' and 5 is 'absolutely essential.'*

Columns 3 and 4 are based on the following survey item: *How confident are you that by the time they graduate, most students from your high school have actually learned the following? (Response options: not at all confident, somewhat confident, very confident).*

* indicates that the difference between 2010 and 2019 results is statistically significantly different from zero ($p < 0.05$).

The outcomes in Table 1 are rank ordered according to the 2019 percentages describing them as “absolutely essential.” The 2019 rankings are similar to those in 2010. In particular, the lowest-ranked item in both years was “to know facts.” We did see significant declines in percentages rating a few topics as absolutely essential—embracing responsibilities of citizenship; identifying protections guaranteed by the Bill of Rights; and understanding such concepts as federalism, separation of powers, and checks and balances. The only topic for which the percentage of teachers rating it as absolutely essential increased by more than 5 percentage points was “to see themselves as global citizens living in an interconnected world.”

Although high school social studies teachers were less likely to rate some civic concepts as absolutely essential in 2019 than in 2010, their confidence in the likelihood that students would learn civic concepts in high school increased.

Table 1 does show substantial increases in the percentages of teachers who said that they were at least somewhat confident that students would have learned each concept by the time they graduate. The 2019 ratings of somewhat

or very confident were at least 12 percentage points higher than in 2010 for all items; in some cases, the increases were by more than 30 percentage points. The largest increases tended to be for outcomes that represented dispositions, such as having good work habits and being activists. Increases for knowledge or understanding of social studies concepts were typically smaller. Although we do not show the results here, we also observed significant increases in teachers’ ratings of most of the concepts they were “very confident” students would learn in high school.

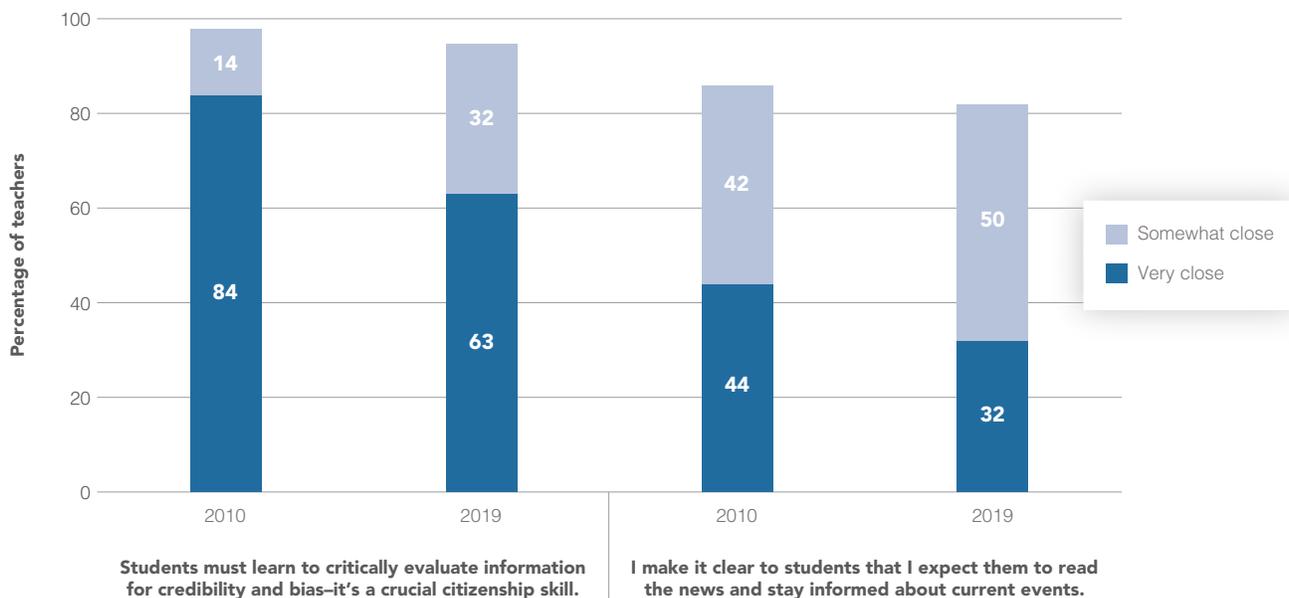
Teachers’ support for some aspects of media and information literacy appears to have declined.

Figure 1 shows teachers’ ratings of how close the following two statements about media and information literacy came to their own views:

- Students must learn to critically evaluate information for credibility and bias—it’s a crucial citizenship skill
- I make it clear to students that I expect them to read the news and stay informed about current events.

Media literacy is a crucial element of civic education,¹⁵ and teachers in our survey sample endorsed the idea

FIGURE 1 Comparison of Statements Regarding Media and Information Literacy for Public High School Social Studies Teachers in 2010 and 2019



NOTE: This figure is based on two similar but not identical survey items. The 2019 survey item is: *Here are some statements about civic education and about your own school and classroom. How close does each of the following come to your own view?* The 2010 survey item is: *Here are some statements about high schools and social studies in general. How close does each of the following come to your own view?* Response options in both surveys: very close, somewhat close, not too close, not close at all.

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that schools should address it, as described in another Data Note in this series that focuses on social studies teachers' responses to items on media literacy.¹⁶ Although large majorities of survey participants in both 2010 and 2019 indicated that the statements in Figure 1 came at least somewhat close to their views, the percentages who indicated that they came "very" close were lower in 2019 than in 2010.

Majorities of high school social studies teachers in both 2010 and 2019 reported accountability pressure and student lack of enthusiasm as challenges.

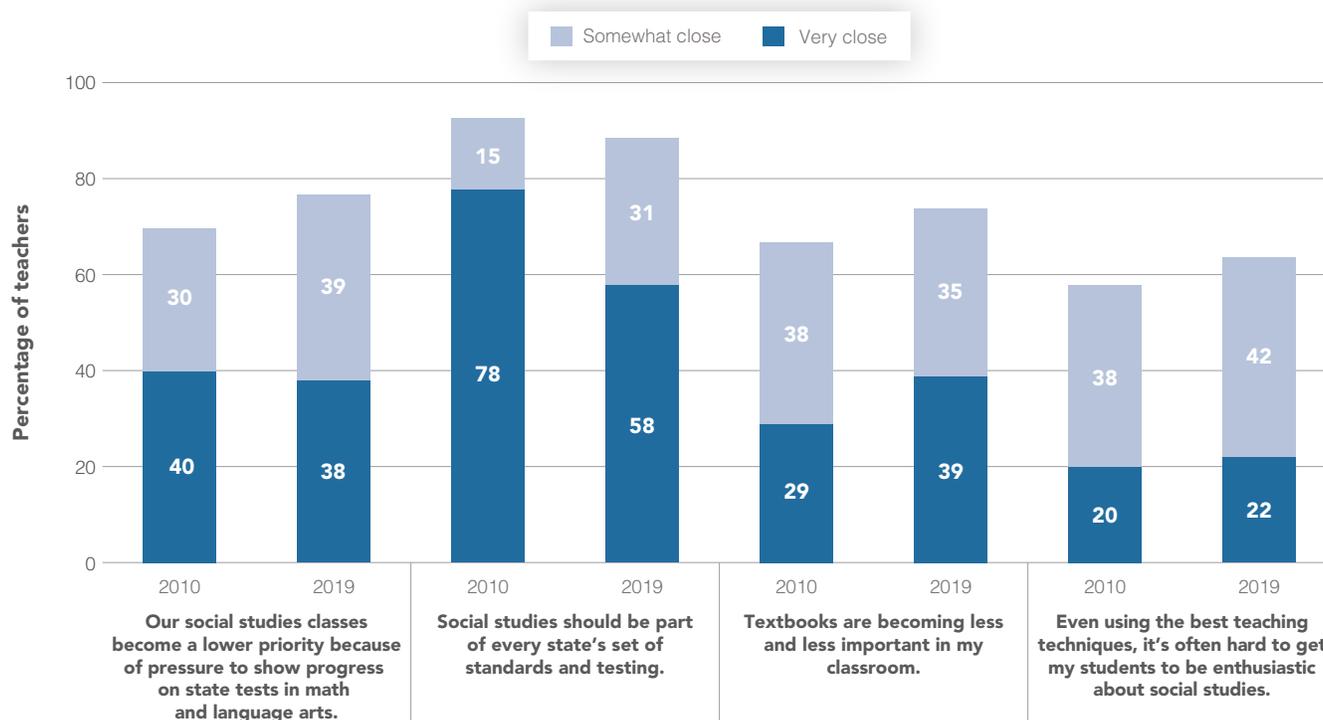
The final set of questions we examine in this Data Note explored teachers' views regarding social studies instruction (Figure 2). As in 2010, most teachers in 2019 indicated that social studies has become a lower priority because of pressure stemming from state tests in other subjects, and most endorsed the idea of incorporating

social studies into state standards and assessment systems. However, fewer described the latter statement ("Social studies should be part of every state's set of standards and testing") as coming "very" close to their views in 2019 than in 2010. Teachers also continued to report that textbooks were becoming less important, with a higher percentage of teachers expressing that view in 2019 than 2010.¹⁷ As in 2010, about two-thirds of teachers in the 2019 sample said that it was difficult to get students to be enthusiastic about social studies, although only one-fifth said that this statement came very close to their own views (a percentage similar to the one from 2010).

What should you make of these data?

Most public high school social studies teachers said that schools should support the development of civic dispositions in addition to civic knowledge and skills, a finding that aligns to some degree with widespread teacher support for SEL, as discussed earlier. Although precise comparisons of the 2010 and 2019 data are not appropriate because of potential differences in the samples, a comparison of data from

FIGURE 2 Comparison of Statements Regarding Social Studies for Public High School Social Studies Teachers in 2010 and 2019



NOTE: This figure is based on two similar but not identical survey items. The 2019 survey item is: *Here are some statements about civic education and about your own school and classroom. How close does each of the following come to your own view?*

The 2010 survey item is: *Here are some statements about high schools and social studies in general. How close does each of the following come to your own view?*

Response options in both surveys: very close, somewhat close, not too close, not close at all.

2010 and 2019 suggests that the general support for addressing a broad set of civic-related outcomes has remained strong over the past decade. Despite changes to the education policy landscape and to broader societal conditions, teachers' priority ratings for various civic outcomes were consistent over time, as were their perceptions regarding such challenges as the lack of student enthusiasm and pressures of state testing. The finding that teachers rate numerous civic outcomes as a high priority does not necessarily imply a strong instructional emphasis on these outcomes. A forthcoming report in this series will explore relationships between teachers' views regarding social studies instruction and their instructional practices.

One notable area of change was teachers' confidence in students' civic learning. We observed sizable increases in this confidence in 2019 compared with 2010, even as teachers' perceptions on whether some of those concepts were essential decreased. This increased confidence is not corroborated by the recently released National Assessment of Educational Progress scores for civics, which show that 8th-graders' performance has been largely flat.¹⁸ However, the relevance of the national assessment to our survey results is limited because of the differences in grade levels and specific topics assessed. Civic dispositions are poorly suited for measurement via standardized assessments, so other data sources would be needed to assess the correspondence between changes

in teachers' perspectives on students' civic development and students' actual performance. The only widely available measure of civic behaviors is voting rates,¹⁹ which provide valuable but limited information about civic behaviors after high school. Recent advances in assessment approaches that can better capture evidence of students' behaviors and attitudes could help address this gap.²⁰

We also observed changes in how teachers value some aspects of media literacy. The 2019 survey results imply that teachers continue to support the need for students to keep apprised of the news and to evaluate information through a critical lens, but the declines suggest that fewer teachers might be prioritizing these concepts than in 2010. The decline of 21 percentage points in the percentage of teachers who indicated that their "students must learn to evaluate information for credibility and bias" is especially concerning in light of the fractured media landscape and the growing prevalence of disinformation.²¹

The coronavirus disease 2019 crisis has highlighted the value of civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. A constructive societal response to the pandemic requires a solid understanding of how government works, combined with an appreciation for individuals' responsibilities to engage civically. This Data Note sheds light on how one group of educators—public high school social studies teachers—perceives the importance of supporting civic development and some of the challenges to doing so.

Notes

¹ Mann, 1855.

² Gould, 2011.

³ National Center for Education Statistics, undated.

⁴ Hansen et al., 2018; Vinnakota, 2019.

⁵ Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017; Rebell, 2018.

⁶ Finn and Hess, 2019; Vinnakota, 2019.

⁷ Hamilton, Doss, and Steiner, 2019.

⁸ Aspen Institute, 2019.

⁹ Johnston et al., 2020.

¹⁰ Johnston et al., 2020.

¹¹ Farkas and Duffett, 2010.

¹² The sample for the AEI report consisted of high school social studies teachers from both public and private schools. Because our ATP sample consists of public-school social studies teachers, we report results from only the public-school respondents in the AEI report ($N = 866$). The AEI sample was randomly selected from social studies teachers who were listed in the same database used by the AEP to identify panelists (Robbins and Grant, 2020).

¹³ We conducted t -tests of the differences in proportions using the standard errors and sample size reported in Farkas and Duffett, 2010.

¹⁴ Farkas and Duffett, 2010, p. 23.

¹⁵ Gould, 2011; Hansen et al., 2018; Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017. Definitions of *media literacy* vary, but the following definition captures how educators typically define it: "Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication" (National Association for Media Literacy Education, undated).

¹⁶ Hamilton, Kaufman, and Hu, 2020.

¹⁷ Another Data Note in this series (Kaufman, Hamilton, and Hu, 2020) discusses instructional materials for social studies in detail.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Education, undated.

¹⁹ Vinnakota, 2019.

²⁰ Gill, 2019.

²¹ Huguet et al., 2019; Kavanagh and Rich, 2018; Pollard and Kavanagh, 2019.

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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 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 Countering Truth Decay initiative (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018), which studies the diminishing role of facts and analysis in American 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.

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. Questions about this report should be directed to laurah@rand.org and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to 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) 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 or visit 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, *Teachers' Civics Instructional Materials: Civic Development in the Era of Truth Decay*, RR-A112-3

- Julia H. Kaufman, Laura S. Hamilton, 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.^a 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. 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.

^a 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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