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The Missing Infrastructure for Elementary (K–5) Social Studies Instruction

Findings from the 2022 American Instructional Resources Survey

KEY FINDINGS

- State-level infrastructure (such as academic standards, accountability policies, and assessment programs) to support elementary social studies instruction was largely missing in many states in the 2021–2022 school year. Where such infrastructure was in place, its quality varied widely.
- Similarly, districts and schools provided teachers with less support for social studies relative to other core subjects, especially English language arts (ELA) and math. For example, in the 2021–2022 year, elementary principals reported less teacher evaluation and professional learning focused on social studies instruction than on ELA, math, and—to a lesser extent—science instruction.
- Only half of elementary principals said their schools or districts had adopted published curriculum materials to support kindergarten through grade 5 (K–5) social studies instruction. Accordingly, elementary teachers generally regarded themselves or their peers as key decisionmakers on what curriculum materials to use for their social studies instruction. Perhaps because of the absence of guidance on materials, teachers' reports suggest that they typically cobble together or create their own materials to support social studies instruction.
- Elementary principals in schools with a more extensive suite of social studies supports, such as teacher evaluation, professional learning activities, and guidance around materials, were more likely to report the presence of shared social studies teaching practices.

When elementary school students nationally were last assessed in 2010 in social studies topics—including U.S. history, civics, and geography—through the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the results were concerning: Only one-quarter or less of U.S. fourth-graders attained a proficient score in these content areas (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020; NCES, undated-e; NCES, undated-f).¹ We do not know how student achievement in social studies among U.S. elementary schoolers has changed over the past decade because students have not been assessed. But if trends among fourth-graders are anything like what we see at the middle school level, the news is not good. At grade 8—where students have periodically been assessed over the past decade—consistently fewer

Abbreviations

AIRS	American Instructional Resources Survey
C3	College, Career, and Civic Life
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
EAD	Educating for American Democracy
ECS	Education Commission of the States
ELA	English language arts
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act
K–5	kindergarten through grade 5
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
NCLB	No Child Left Behind

students have reached NAEP proficiency standards in social studies topics than in other core subjects, such as reading, science, and math (NAEP, 2018; NCES, undated-b; NCES, undated-c; NCES, undated-d).

One hypothesis for why student proficiency in social studies remains persistently lower than in other core subjects is that the infrastructure supporting social studies instruction is largely missing and that this absence is in sharp contrast to other core subject areas. In using the term *infrastructure*, we mean the practices and policies in place at the state, district, and school levels that, when combined, create an environment to support teachers' instructional practices and, thereby, student learning. This infrastructure consists of academic standards for social studies and other supports, such as professional learning for social studies teachers, principal feedback and evaluation of teachers in regard to their social studies instruction, and allocation of instructional time for social studies.

In this report, we use data from the RAND Corporation's American Educator Panels to understand the state of infrastructure to support elementary social studies instruction during the 2021–2022 school year. We focus at the elementary (specifically, kindergarten through grade 5 [K–5]) level because we hypothesized that infrastructure for social studies is especially lacking at this grade level. To the best of our knowledge, this report is the first effort to build a national picture

of state-, district-, and school-provided infrastructure specifically for social studies instruction and also the first to provide national estimates of what social studies curriculum materials elementary teachers regularly use for their instruction.²

As we discuss in this report, we found convincing evidence to support our hypotheses. The infrastructure we examined is much less robust for social studies than for other core academic subjects, especially at the elementary level. Our findings contribute to a growing body of evidence showing that social studies instruction is underrepresented in the U.S. education system. Our findings imply that improvements to social studies teaching and learning require much more than piecemeal efforts. Instead, a more comprehensive set of supports provided at the state and local levels is necessary to improve the state of social studies instruction across the United States.

Background

In many ways, the weak state of infrastructure for social studies education that we outline in this report is unsurprising. In the past few decades, school systems have increasingly put more attention on students' academic and career preparation as one of their central priorities, often sidelining students' civic development. In particular, federal and state policies have emphasized science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education in an effort to prepare students for a 21st century labor force (Winthrop, 2020).

Yet despite these shifts, public schools have historically served as important civic institutions that play a critical role in developing students' civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Vinnakota, 2019). Concerning trends in both the United States and around the world, such as truth decay, declining trust in institutions, increased political polarization, and abuses of political power, have only underscored the need to reinvest in the civic mission of schools (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018; Jones, 2022; Kaufman et al., 2022; Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro, 2020). Others too have advocated for a renewed focus on social studies education after decades of neglect (e.g., Educating for American Democracy (EAD), undated; Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017; Vinnakota, 2019; Winthrop, 2020; Hansen et al., 2018).

Importantly, previous research has shown that it is possible to make room for social studies instruction without sacrificing other goals. For example, one analysis found that improved literacy was not associated with increased instructional time in English language arts (ELA) but increased instructional time in *social studies* (Tyner and Kabourek, 2020). This finding is not entirely surprising, because research has demonstrated the critical role of background knowledge in aiding reading comprehension (Smith et al., 2021). Thus, supporting students' knowledge of social studies content may serve not only to help schools achieve their goal of developing civically engaged citizens but also to help them achieve the academic goals they have increasingly prioritized, such as improving literacy.

Overview of Methods in This Report

First, to build context for our survey results, we conducted a literature review of what is known about state policies for social studies. Our literature review focused on existing analyses of state social studies standards and accountability policies. We synthesized the findings into tables and text to illustrate variability in social studies policies among states.

Next, using data from the nationally representative 2022 American Instructional Resources Survey (AIRS), we examined the extent to which local-level infrastructure is in place to support elementary (K–5) social studies instruction. Specifically, our analyses leveraged data from 745 K–5 public school teachers collected via a survey conducted in the spring of the 2021–2022 school year. Sixty-one percent of these

teachers predominately taught lower elementary (K through grade 2), and the remaining 39 percent predominately taught upper elementary (grades 3 through 5).

We supplement these teacher survey data with information from 1,598 K–12 public school principals collected in the same time frame. Although the focus of this report is on elementary instruction, we include some data from secondary school principals in sidebars throughout this report to draw comparisons between social studies instruction in elementary and secondary grades. We include these comparisons by grade level primarily because they help to contextualize the results for elementary schools. However, these data points also provide some signals that neglect of elementary social studies education has spillover effects to the secondary level that merit additional research. We also include comparisons with other core subjects, such as reading, math, and science, throughout this report because these offer useful reference points against which to understand the findings for social studies. In the text, we call out only differences between subjects and grade levels that are statistically significant at the 5-percent level. Taken together, our analyses looking across grade levels and subjects help convey the extent to which the infrastructure for elementary social studies instruction is missing.

For more details about the AIRS administration, see Doan et al., 2022. For more information about the methods we used to generate the descriptive statistics we present in this report, see the “How This Analysis Was Conducted” sidebar at the end of this report.

Study Context

Our surveys were fielded in the spring of the 2021–2022 school year, during a period in which schools were busy helping students recover from several years of disruptions to learning related to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. We know that students' learning suffered many setbacks throughout the pandemic, including among students in the earliest grades (e.g., Kuhfeld and Lewis, 2022b; NAEP, undated). Furthermore, federal and state accountability policies were back in place for the 2021–2022 school year after a two-year pause, meaning that states once again had to administer summative assessments in ELA and math in the elementary grades to monitor student learning and identify low-performing schools. Thus, 2021–2022 was likely an atypical school year in that schools might have been particularly concerned about improving ELA and math achievement given that students are still performing below normal levels in these subjects (e.g., Kuhfeld and Lewis, 2022a). Readers should keep this study context in mind when interpreting results.

Organization of This Report

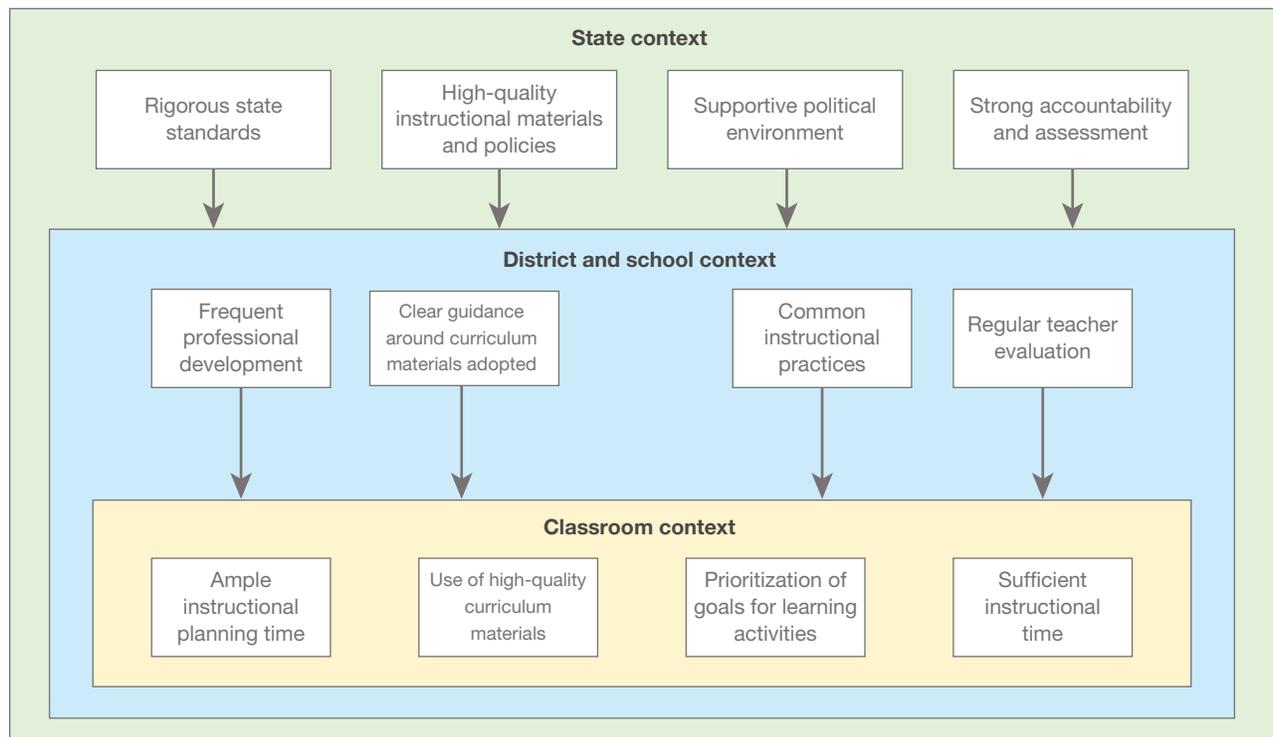
Figure 1 illustrates key elements of the social studies infrastructure that we hypothesized would be important to support teachers' social studies instruction. We use this figure to anchor our organization of this report, beginning with state-level infrastructure, and working our way down to the classroom level. At the state level, we consider differences in state standards and accountability policy, and then discuss states' differing political environments. We hypothesize that state policies and guidance around high-quality instructional materials are theoretically important. However, while many states are focused on encouraging use of high-quality materials for mathematics, English language arts, and science (CCSSO, undated), we have little evidence that states are focused on such policies for social studies.

After considering state-level infrastructure, we then use data from our nationally representative principal survey to consider the prevalence of local infrastructure—or school- and district-provided supports—such as teacher evaluation, professional

learning opportunities, and guidance around curriculum materials. We then examine teachers' reports of what is actually happening in their classrooms, likely as a consequence of this infrastructure—how much time they are spending on social studies instruction, what materials they are using to teach social studies, and how they prioritize choosing learning activities for social studies. We also offer a brief analysis of the extent to which local infrastructure contributes to shared instructional practices. Although our analyses cannot provide evidence of causal relationships, throughout this section we consider how teachers' instructional practices might be related to these various state and local inputs.

We conclude this report with a brief discussion on the implications of the missing social studies infrastructure and what this absence might mean for student learning in this subject area. Finally, we offer recommendations for state departments of education, district leaders, principals, teachers, and curriculum developers for how to build and strengthen this infrastructure in ways more parallel to other subjects.

FIGURE 1
Hypothesized Infrastructure Leading to Student Learning



The Status of State-Level Infrastructure: Varying Standards, Little Accountability, and Contentious Political Environments

In this section, we provide a brief summary of the status of state-level infrastructure for social studies education using data from other organizations that have published reports on this topic in the past ten years. Although these data are not new, we include them to build a holistic picture of the status of state-level social studies infrastructure. We return to these data periodically throughout our analyses of the AIRS principal and teacher data to examine whether differences in educators' reports of what social studies instruction looks like may be related to variation in state context.

Despite High-Quality Frameworks Outlining Critical Content for Social Studies Instruction, Academic Standards for Social Studies Vary in Both Content and Rigor Across States

One challenge in determining the extent to which infrastructure is in place to support social studies instruction is the difficulty in drawing a clear boundary of exactly what constitutes social studies instruction. Teachers themselves perceive broader aims for social studies instruction beyond just content knowledge, especially at the elementary level. For example, elementary teachers, more so than their secondary school counterparts, see developing students' social and emotional skills and their skills in conflict resolution as an important aspect of social studies instruction (Hamilton, Kaufman, and Hu, 2020; Diliberti and Kaufman, 2022). Furthermore, developing students' civic skills and dispositions is commonly agreed to include more than just content instruction but also other areas, such as service learning, participation in extracurricular activities, and engagement in school life (Guilfoile, Delander, and Kreck, 2016; Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017).

Several resources have been developed to help navigate this ambiguity and to define the content

What Is Social Studies Instruction?

The National Council for the Social Studies (undated-a) defines this content area as “. . . the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing on such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.”

and skills that should be emphasized as part of social studies instruction, including at the elementary level. The first resource, the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework, is a guidance document intended to help states update their social studies standards (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). The C3 Framework identifies a series of indicators across four dimensions specifying what students should be able to do at the end of each grade band (e.g., kindergarten through grade 2 and grades 3 through 5). Indicators at the elementary level include such things as “identify core civic virtues and democratic principles that guide government, society, and communities” and “evaluate a source by distinguishing between fact and opinion” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013).

Another key resource is the roadmap for EAD, which identifies key concepts that should be covered at each grade band to build students' content knowledge in U.S. history and civics and their civic dispositions. Driving questions and key concepts at the K–5 level are broad and include such things as “exploring why the U.S. form of government is so complex,” “recognizing the value of civic friendship and the value of compromise,” and “learning about conflicts and histories of oppression and power” (EAD, 2021). Despite having broad buy-in, both of these resources share the same weakness: They identify the appropri-

ate content for specific *grade bands* rather than grade levels. Use of grade bands makes it difficult for states and educators to determine what content should be covered in each grade level and leaves a lot of autonomy for these decisions to be made locally.

Importantly, unlike in other core subjects in which there has been some attempt to adopt common and rigorous instructional standards (McCann, 2021; Achieve, 2017), no efforts have been made to do this in social studies in the past decade. States rely on the resources we just previewed to varying degrees to inform development of their standards. For example, Brookings Institution researchers estimated that only half of states were using the C3 Framework to inform development of their instructional standards as of September 2017 (see column 3 in Table 1) (Hansen et al., 2018). States' autonomy in this area has resulted in a set of disparate standards for social studies instruction with large variation across states in both content and rigor.³

The conservative-leaning Thomas B. Fordham Institute conducted a review of states' elementary and secondary standards for civics and U.S. history—two essential social studies topics. Specifically, Fordham researchers examined information on state department of education websites and other state-mandated materials. The researchers evaluated materials for content, rigor, organization, and clarity using a predetermined set of criteria defined by the researchers. These criteria considered the extent to which standards covered essential content (e.g., separation of powers, equal protection), skills (e.g., critical thinking, argumentation), and dispositions (e.g., respect for other people and opinions, historical perspective). Although some scoring may be open to interpretation, this report is nonetheless the most comprehensive and up-to-date review of states' social studies standards at the present time.

In total, Fordham researchers rated only four states (plus the District of Columbia) as having “exemplary” standards on both topics (see columns 1 and 2 in Table 1) (Stern et al., 2021). The few states that earned “exemplary” ratings were rated as such by researchers because they had standards that specified exactly what students should learn about U.S. government institutions and history; emphasized building both skills (e.g., critical thinking, arguing

from evidence) and civic dispositions; and had standards documents that were organized and easy to use. Meanwhile, researchers rated 20 states as having “inadequate” standards in both civics and U.S. history. States that received “inadequate” ratings were rated as such for different reasons, but common themes included having guidance that was too vague or overly broad to be useful to educators; omitting critical topics; and paying too little attention to things like problem analysis, argumentation, and discussion of current events (Stern et al., 2021).

A separate analysis conducted by Brookings Institution researchers examined whether states' standards and curriculum frameworks emphasized various *proven practices* commonly agreed to support high-quality civics instruction (e.g., discussion of current events, service learning, simulations of democratic processes, news media literacy). This analysis also identified a high degree of variation across states (see columns 4 through 7 in Table 1). For example, Brookings researchers found that only 11 states had standards that included service learning and 27 states had standards that emphasized simulations of democratic processes (Hansen et al., 2018).

The observed variation in states' social studies standards and curriculum frameworks is both unsurprising and surprising. On the one hand, providing states with autonomy in decisionmaking will naturally lead to different choices across contexts. On the other hand, the variation in standards is also surprising given that there is a high level of consensus across resources (e.g., the C3 Framework and EAD roadmap), across organizations (e.g., the National Council for the Social Studies), and among researchers around what content should be emphasized in social studies classrooms.

Few States Use Assessments to Monitor Achievement in Social Studies or Incorporate Achievement Indicators into Their Accountability Systems

In addition to many states having inadequate standards, most states lack the infrastructure to monitor student proficiency and progress in social studies, despite having this infrastructure in place for other

TABLE 1
State Variation in Infrastructure for Social Studies Education

State	State Standards							Assessment and Accountability			Political Environment	
	Quality Grade ^a			Inclusion of Proven Practices for Civic Learning ^c				Assessment	Accountability		Content Ban ^g	Summary Rating ^h
	Civics	U.S. History	C3 ^b	Discussion of Current Events	Service Learning	Democracy Simulations	News Media Literacy	Use of State-Developed Assessment ^d	Social Studies or Civics Included in ESSA Plan ^e	Social Studies Achievement Listed as Indicator in State's School Rating System ^f		
AK	F	F		X								Low
AL	A-	A-		X	X		X		X		X	Medium
AR	C	C	X	X			X					Low
AZ	C-	D+	X	X		X	X					Low
CA	A-	A-	X	X	X	X	X					High
CO	D	D	X	X	X		X	X	X			Medium
CT	D+	C-	X	X		X	X			X		Low
DC	A-	A-		X		X	X					Medium
DE	F	F	X	X				X	X	X		Medium
FL	B	B		X		X	X	X*		X*	X	Medium
GA	B+	B+	X	X			X	X			X	Medium
HI	C+	C	X	X			X					Low
IA	D	F	X	X			X				X	Low
ID	D	F		X							X	Low
IL	F	F	X	X		X	X					Low
IN	B+	B		X				X	X			Medium
KS	C-	D+	X	X			X	X*	X			Medium
KY	C	C	X	X				X		X	X	Medium
LA	C+	B+		X			X	X	X	X		Medium
MA	A-	A-	X	X		X	X		X			High
MD	B+	B	X	X		X	X	X*				Medium

Table 1—Continued

State	State Standards							Assessment and Accountability			Political Environment	Summary Rating ^h
	Quality Grade ^a		Inclusion of Proven Practices for Civic Learning ^c					Assessment	Accountability			
	Civics	U.S. History	C3 ^b	Discussion of Current Events	Service Learning	Democracy Simulations	News Media Literacy	Use of State-Developed Assessment ^d	Social Studies or Civics Included in ESSA Plan ^e	Social Studies Achievement Listed as Indicator in State's School Rating System ^f		
ME	F	F		X	X	X						Low
MI	B	B		X	X	X	X	X				Medium
MN	B-	B-		X		X	X					Low
MO	C	C	X	X				X*				Low
MS	B	B-		X	X	X	X	X*		X*	X	Medium
MT	F	F		X		X	X				X	Low
NC	D-	F		X	X	X	X					Low
ND	D+	D+		X		X	X				X	Low
NE	D	D-		X	X	X	X					Low
NH	F	F		X							X	Low
NJ	C	C	X	X	X	X	X					Medium
NM	C	C-		X				X*				Low
NV	D	F		X			X					Low
NY	B+	A-	X	X		X	X	X*				High
OH	B	C		X	X	X	X	X*		X*		High
OK	B+	B+		X			X	X*	X		X	Medium
OR	D-	F	X	X		X	X					Low
PA	F	F		X			X					Low
RI	D	F		X		X	X		X			Low
SC	B	B		X		X	X	X			X	Low
SD	C-	D+		X			X				X	Low

Table 1—Continued

State	State Standards				Assessment and Accountability				Political Environment	
	Quality Grade ^a		Inclusion of Proven Practices for Civic Learning ^c		Assessment	Accountability		Content Ban ^g	Summary Rating ^h	
	Civics	U.S. History	Discussion of Current Events	Service Learning	Democracy Simulations	News Media Literacy	Use of State-Developed Assessment ^d			Social Studies or Civics Included in ESSA Plan ^e
TN	A–	A–	X	X			X		X	Medium
TX	B+	C+		X		X	X*		X	Low
UT	C	C	X	X		X			X	Low
VA	B+	B+	X	X		X	X		X	Medium
VT	F	F		X		X				Low
WA	D	D	X	X						Low
WI	F	F		X			X			Low
WV	C	C+	X	X	X	X				Medium
WY	F	F		X			X			Low

NOTE: We used existing data sources to populate this table and have not verified that these are up to date.

^a Quality grades on state standards are drawn from Stern et al., 2021. These grades are not specific to elementary social studies. Stern et al. (2021) translated letter grades into ratings (e.g., A = “exemplary,” B = “good,” C = “mediocre,” and D or F = “inadequate.”)

^b Data on inclusion of the C3 Framework (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013) come from Hansen et al., 2018.

^c Data on inclusion of proven practices for civics education in state standards and curriculum frameworks are drawn from Hansen et al., 2018.

^d Data on state assessments come from ECS, 2018b. Table only includes summative assessments and subject-specific end-of-course assessments. An X indicates the state provides assessments given at the elementary and secondary grades, while an X with an asterisk (X*) indicates the state provides assessments at the secondary level only.

^e Data on whether references to social studies or civics are included in the state’s ESSA plan—regardless of for what level—are from Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017.

^f Data are from ECS, 2021. An X indicates the state uses an indicator for social studies achievement in its school accountability system for elementary and secondary schools. An X with an asterisk (X*) indicates the same but only for secondary schools. We note whether states use social studies achievement in their school accountability systems regardless of what weight they use but acknowledge that, for some states, the weight placed on social studies achievement may be low relative to the weight of other indicators.

^g Data on content bans are drawn from Schwartz, 2021.

^h We created summary ratings to describe the robustness of states’ infrastructure for supporting social studies instruction. To create these summary ratings, we looked across all of the indicators listed in this table and assigned point values to each indicator. States received 1.5 points for each A they received for the quality grades of their civics and U.S. history state standards. They received 1 point for each B, and 0.5 points for each C. States received 1 point for including the C3 Framework in their state standards, 1 point for including all four proven practices for civics instruction, 1 point for using a state-developed assessment, 1 point for including social studies or civics instruction in their ESSA plans, and 1 point for listing social studies achievement as an indicator in their states’ school rating systems. States also lost 1 point if they passed a content ban, because such bans may constrict the kinds of social studies content that teachers are allowed to address (Woo et al., 2023). States were able to earn a total of 8 points. States with the highest number of points (i.e., 4.5 or 5 points) were given a rating of “high.” States with 3 to 4 points were given a rating of “medium.” States with fewer than 3 points were given a rating of “low.”

core subjects. Among other changes, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 introduced high-stakes summative assessments for all students in grades 3 through 8 in both math and reading. NCLB also required states to assess students in science at least once at the elementary level (Institute of Education Sciences, 2009). Importantly, this policy change was accompanied by the introduction of federal accountability policy, introducing negative consequences for schools that consistently failed to improve student performance. Such consequences include options for students to leave those school systems and the requirement of turnaround interventions that could lead to state takeover of schools or districts. In a related effort to focus on improving students' reading performance, many states have enacted "science of reading laws" or "third grade reading laws," which allow or require schools to retain students in grade if they do not meet reading proficiency minimums by a certain time point (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2019; Schwartz, 2022a). (Note that although many states suspended these laws during the pandemic [Schwartz, 2020], states have now started to resume enforcement of these policies [Schwartz, 2022b]).

NCLB was later overhauled by the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which offered states some flexibility to refine their accountability systems to incorporate state-specific goals. However, ESSA

retained high-stakes assessments in math and reading in grades 3 through 8 and also the requirement to assess students in science at least once in each grade band. All states now assess science at least once at the elementary level, usually in grades 4 or 5 (ECS, 2018a). Importantly, all states consider student proficiency and growth in ELA and math in their accountability formulas, and many also consider science (ECS, 2021). However, student achievement in social studies remains largely absent from states' accountability frameworks (see Table 1). Only a handful of states include social studies performance in their accountability formulas—and, in the rare cases in which states do factor in social studies achievement, it is weighted at much lower levels than student achievement in other core subjects (ECS, 2021). Nevertheless, roughly one-fifth of states mention civics in their ESSA plans (see Table 1), which is at least a signal that some states are considering students' civic development among their state priorities.

One factor that severely limits states' ability to include indicators of social studies achievement in their accountability systems is a lack of social studies assessments. As shown in Table 1, only a handful of states use a statewide summative assessment in social studies like they do in ELA and math (ECS, 2018b; Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017). Typically, states do not assess at all in this subject area, although some do offer assessments, such as a citizenship test or end-of-course exams for certain social studies courses. These assessments are more commonly administered at the secondary level, usually as a graduation requirement. Among the states that do assess in some manner, no clear pattern exists as to what grade levels are assessed or what content is included, providing further evidence of disagreement across states about the most important social studies content to emphasize. Furthermore, some of the states that historically assessed students in social studies suspended their assessments because the COVID-19 pandemic—while retaining test requirements in other subjects—a signal that social studies is seen as a lesser priority (Colorado Department of Education, 2023; South Carolina Department of Education, 2022).

The net result of these federal and state accountability policies is that states do not have incentives

One factor that severely limits states' ability to include indicators of social studies performance in their accountability systems is a lack of social studies assessments.

to invest in improving student achievement in social studies, especially if such an improvement comes at the expense of investments in math and reading. Said another way, the absence of social studies from states' accountability and assessment systems sends a signal to educators that developing students' knowledge in this area is not a priority.

States' Differing Political Environments Contribute to Variation in Guidance Around Social Studies Instruction

The political environment is another state-level factor that can vastly shape supports and guidance around social studies instruction. Although we focus on state-level policies in this report, district or school policies can also dictate the specific content covered in social studies classrooms and the messaging around this content.

Some of this is not new. For example, inclusion or exclusion of certain topics in state standards has always been viewed as a political decision, which has historically led to much public scrutiny and disagreement over content and curriculum choices. Nonetheless, there is some evidence that national political disagreements are increasingly entering into schools and causing stress for educators to navigate (e.g., Woo et al., 2022; Diliberti and Schwartz, 2022; Jochim et al., 2023). In the past few years, several states (e.g., Virginia, Texas, Michigan) have experienced political disagreements over their state social studies standards (e.g., Oliver, 2022; Najarro, 2022; Wisely, 2019).

Of particular relevance for this report are coordinated efforts begun in 2020 to ban discussion of certain concepts related to race, racism, sexism, or gender identity in the classroom—topics that are likely to arise in the context of social studies instruction. As of the writing of this report, 17 states have passed laws limiting teachers' ability to address certain concepts related to race or gender in the classroom (see Table 1) (Schwartz, 2021). Much media attention has been given to these critical race theory bans and to efforts to ban books and restrict discussion of perceived controversial content in school classrooms (Pendharkar, 2022). Notably, support for these policies and discussion of controversial content in schools generally falls

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along political party lines (Polikoff et al., 2022), and passage of these content bans are largely driven by a state's political environment.

In our companion report (Woo et al., 2023), we examine the impact of these laws on teachers' instructional practices in much more detail. We found that one-quarter of teachers reported that these limitations have influenced their choice of curriculum materials and instructional practices, although the effects of these laws were felt less at the elementary level.

The Status of Local-Level Infrastructure: Less Teacher Evaluation, Fewer Opportunities for Professional Learning, and Little Guidance about Curriculum Materials

We now turn to discuss the prevalence of local (school- and district-provided) infrastructure to support K–5 social studies instruction. Specifically, we used data from the 2022 AIRS principal survey, which we restricted to include only elementary school principals, to examine the prevalence of social studies-focused

This divergence suggests schools serving more-advantaged student populations might have the luxury of providing feedback to improve social studies instruction because they are not as concerned about reaching proficiency targets on ELA and math assessments.

teacher evaluation, professional learning activities, and adoption of published curricula.

We note that principals themselves are a critical piece of school-level infrastructure to support social studies instruction. Previous research has noted that principals make numerous contributions to teaching and learning, including efforts to support and improve teachers' instructional practices, manage resources, and establish a positive school climate (Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay, 2021). Principals' own teaching background, familiarity with what constitutes high-quality instructional practice in this content area, and personal beliefs about the importance of social studies instruction relative to other school priorities likely all contribute to how social studies instruction is operationalized, above and beyond the supports we discuss here.

Although Elementary Principals Universally Evaluated Their Teachers in ELA and Math, Only Two-Thirds Did So in Social Studies; These Evaluations Were More Common in Low-Poverty Schools and Schools Serving Larger Proportions of White Students

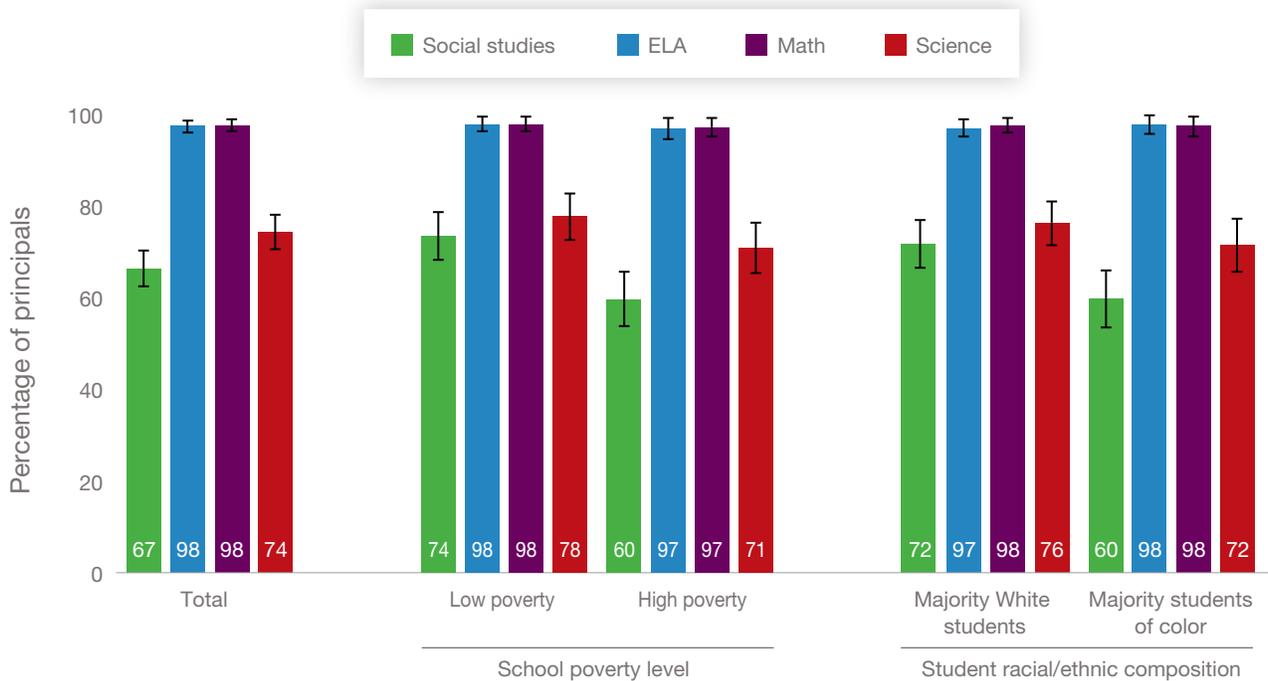
The feedback teachers receive from school leaders or others who evaluate them can be an important mechanism for improving the quality of their instruction. According to a previous RAND report from Prado Tuma, Hamilton, and Berglund (2018), roughly nine in ten teachers reported receiving regular feedback on their instructional practices. The vast majority of those teachers reported receiving feedback from their school principals through formal classroom observations.

We used principals' reports of whether they evaluated teachers in the 2021–2022 school year as a proxy for teachers receiving feedback on the quality of their instruction. Almost all elementary principals (98 percent) reported that they evaluated teachers in ELA and math during the 2021–2022 school year, and 74 percent said they did so in science (Figure 2). This near-universal teacher evaluation in ELA and math is unsurprising given that states' accountability policies at the elementary level emphasize student achievement in these subjects. In contrast, only 67 percent of elementary principals reported evaluating teachers in social studies.

We also observed differences in the prevalence of social studies–focused teacher evaluations by school context. Elementary principals serving in *low-poverty schools*—or schools in which less than half of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals—were more likely than their high-poverty counterparts to report that they had conducted evaluations of social studies instruction in 2021–2022 (74 percent versus 60 percent, respectively). In a similar pattern, elementary principals in schools serving predominantly White student populations or located in non-urban settings were more likely to indicate that they had evaluated teachers in social studies than their counterparts. However, when we accounted for all of these factors at once, the school poverty level had the strongest relationship with principals' likelihood of

FIGURE 2

Percentage of Elementary Principals Who Evaluated Teachers in Their Schools in 2021–2022, by Subject Area and School Demographics



NOTES: This figure uses response data from the following survey question ($n = 610$): “In which subject areas do you evaluate teachers in your school?” Respondents were asked about teacher evaluation in ELA, math, science, social studies, and “other.” Responses of “other” have been omitted from this figure. The survey also included an option, “I do not evaluate teachers at my school,” which was selected by 1 percent of respondents. The figure includes only responses from elementary school principals. Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

evaluating social studies. In addition to school demographics, a school’s historical ELA achievement level was also related to principals’ likelihood of evaluating in social studies: In schools where prepandemic ELA achievement was far below grade level, only 55 percent of principals reported conducting teacher evaluations in social studies.⁴ Conversely, in schools where students were historically performing far above grade level in ELA, 81 percent of principals evaluated in social studies in the 2021–2022 school year.

Notably, we did not observe these same differences in the prevalence of teacher evaluation by school demographics or prepandemic achievement level for ELA or math. This divergence suggests schools serving more-advantaged student populations—who have historically had higher achievement levels—might have the luxury of providing feedback to improve social studies instruction because they are not as concerned about reaching proficiency targets on ELA and math assessments.

Conversely, in schools serving more historically disadvantaged student populations, a focus on improving teaching quality in such core high-stakes subjects as ELA and math to improve assessment scores in these subjects may be crowding out a focus on social studies instruction. These differences in social studies evaluation in high- versus low-poverty schools are concerning given the potential implications for students’ equitable access to high-quality instruction: If principals serving historically disadvantaged schools are systemically less likely to evaluate teachers’ social studies instruction, it is possible that students in those schools may be receiving lower-quality social studies instruction. Teachers also may not be paying as close attention to the quality of their social studies instruction if they are not evaluated on it.

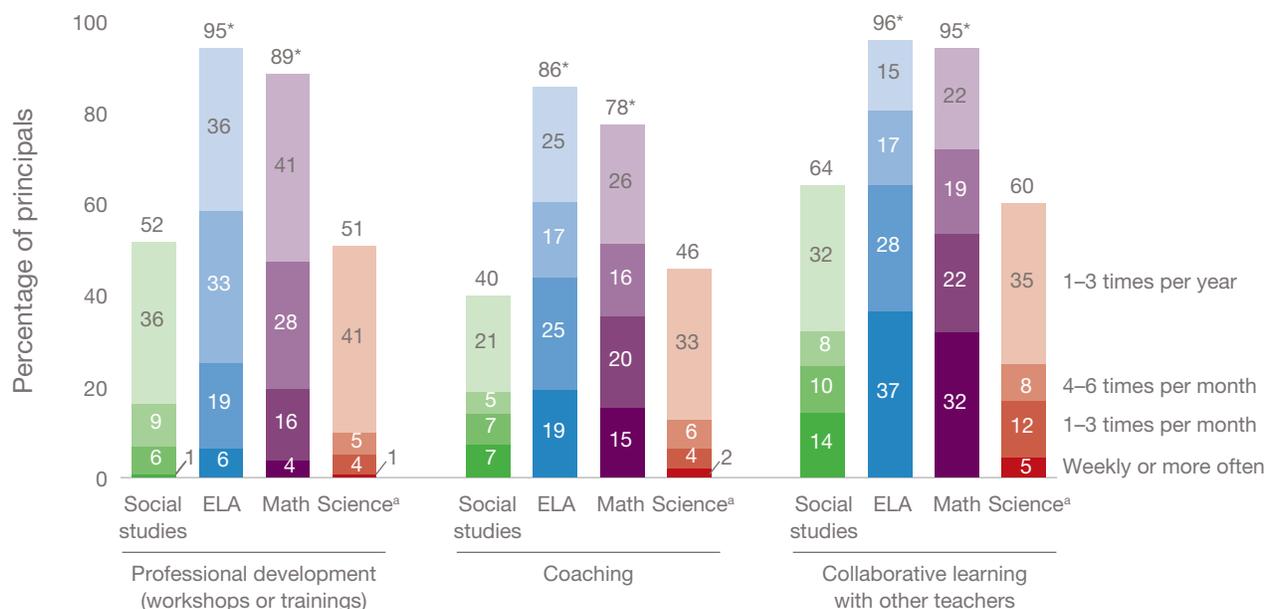
In addition to the school context, principals’ own backgrounds might be related to their likelihood of providing feedback on social studies instruction. Elementary principals who are certified in

social studies—likely former social studies teachers themselves—were more likely to conduct teacher evaluations in social studies: 86 percent of principals who are certified to teach social studies said they evaluate teachers in this subject area, compared with only 65 percent of teachers not certified in social studies. This divergence suggests that principals’ subject-matter knowledge could be important and might be influencing the extent to which they are prioritizing evaluation in different subject areas.

Professional Learning Activities Less Commonly Supported Social Studies Instruction Than ELA or Math Instruction—Especially at the Elementary Level

Data from previous AIRS analyses have shown that teachers’ access to professional learning activities influences how they use curriculum in their classrooms (Kaufman et al., 2020), which likely has downstream consequences for students’ learning. Nevertheless, principals indicated in our survey that district- or school-provided professional learning activities to support social studies instruction were relatively rare at the elementary level in 2021–2022 (see Figure 3). Only 52 percent of elementary principals reported that their schools or districts provided professional development workshops or trainings to

FIGURE 3
Percentage of Elementary Principals Who Reported Provision of Professional Learning Activities, by Type of Activity, Subject Area, and Frequency of Provision



NOTES: This figure uses response data from the following survey question ($n = 611$): “Thinking about this school year (2021–2022), how often has your district or school provided the following types of professional learning activities to teachers at your school specifically to support their [subject] instruction?” The figure includes only responses from elementary school principals. Bars might not sum to total percentages because of rounding. An asterisk (*) indicates the percentage of elementary principals who reported provision of the professional learning activity in that subject was statistically different ($p < 0.05$) than the percentage of elementary principals reporting provision of that activity in social studies.

^a Data for science are from the 2021 AIRS because the 2022 survey did not collect data on professional learning opportunities for science. We note small wording differences between the 2021 and 2022 survey items. We caution that readers should avoid overinterpretation of the science data and instead encourage readers to focus solely on the general pattern of less provision of professional learning activities in science relative to ELA and math. Because of differing data years, we do not conduct significance testing for science.

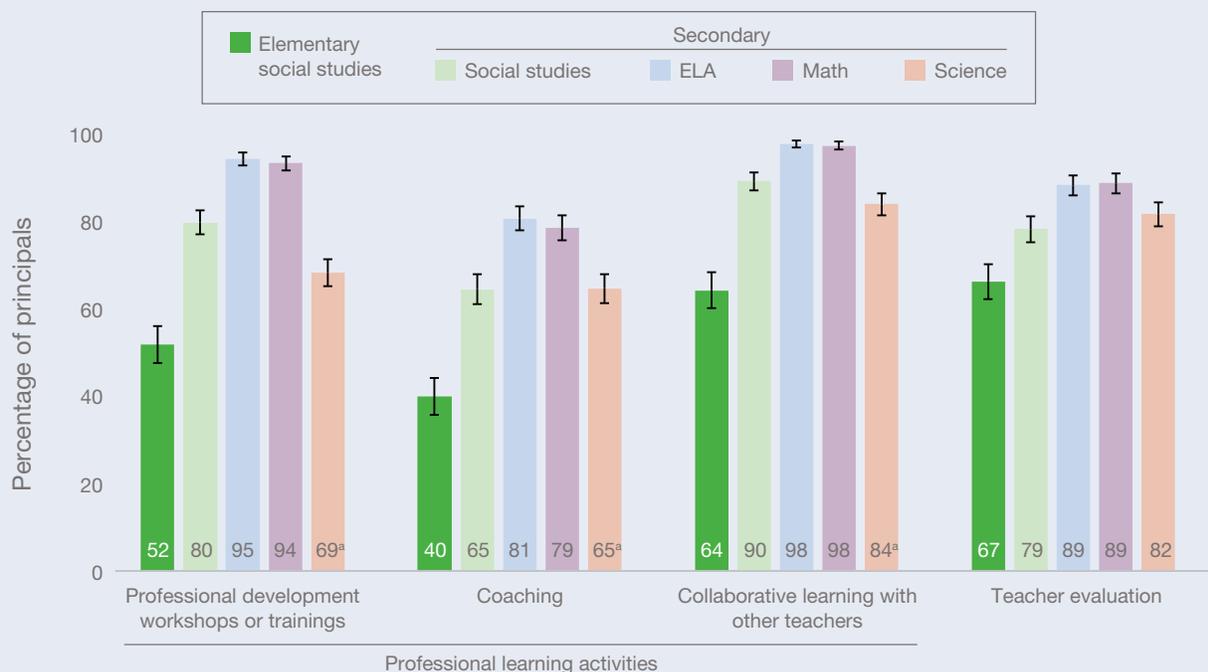
Secondary Social Studies Snapshot: School- and District-Provided Supports for Social Studies Instruction Are More Prevalent in Secondary Schools Than in Elementary Schools, But Even in Secondary Schools, Supports Are Underprovided Relative to Other Subjects

In the 2021–2022 school year, teacher evaluations and all three types of professional learning activities were more common at the secondary level than at the elementary level for social studies instruction (see Figure S.1). The greater prevalence of supports at the secondary level likely stems from differences in how social studies instruction is structured across grade levels. Although social studies is among one of many subjects that general elementary teachers teach throughout the school day, social studies is generally taught in subject-specific courses (e.g., civics, U.S. history, geography) at the secondary level.

However, even at the secondary level, supports for social studies were still less prevalent than for ELA and math, although they were about on par with the level of supports provided for science. For instance, although 79 percent of secondary principals reported evaluating teachers in social studies—greater than the 67 percent of principals who did so at the elementary level—this figure was still less than the 89 percent of secondary principals who evaluated teachers in ELA and math. We also observed a similar pattern for the availability of professional learning supports. For example, 81 percent and 79 percent of secondary principals said their schools or districts provided coaching for ELA and math, respectively, at least once during the 2021–2022 school year, while only 65 percent said they provided this support for social studies.

FIGURE S.1

Percentage of Principals Who Reported Any Provision of Supports for Social Studies Instruction, by Type of Support, School Grade Level, and Subject



NOTES: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions ($n = 1,515$): “Thinking about this school year (2021–2022), how often has your district or school provided the following types of professional learning activities to teachers at your school specifically to support their [subject] instruction?” and “In which subject areas do you evaluate teachers in your school?” For the professional learning activities, the figure includes principals who indicated their schools or districts provided this support at least once during the 2021–2022 school year. It includes responses from elementary and secondary (middle and high) school principals. Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

^a Data for science are drawn from the 2021 AIRS because the 2022 survey did not collect data on professional learning opportunities for science. We note small wording differences between the 2021 and 2022 survey items. In sum, we caution overinterpretation of the science data and encourage readers to focus solely on the general pattern of less provision of professional learning activities in science relative to ELA and math.

The infrequency of professional learning focused on supporting social studies instruction was relatively on par with the level of support provided in science, but it was in contrast to the near ubiquity in provision of such activities in math and ELA.

teachers to support their social studies instruction, meaning one-half of elementary principals reported their teachers had no access to such professional learning activities for social studies in 2021–2022. Coaching was even less common: Only 40 percent of elementary principals reported that their schools or districts provided any coaching to teachers to support their social studies instruction. Among the three types of professional learning activities we asked about on the survey, collaborative learning with other teachers was the most common type of support for elementary social studies instruction.

Importantly, principals who evaluate in social studies—including those most likely to have been former social studies teachers—were more likely to say their schools offered all three types of professional learning activities (i.e., professional development workshops or trainings; coaching; and collaborative learning) at least once during the 2021–2022 school year, providing some indication that these principals might be more in tune to their teachers’ social studies instructional needs. Larger elementary

schools—those serving more than 450 students—were also more likely to provide professional development and collaborative learning opportunities related to social studies.

Yet, even in cases where schools did provide social studies–focused opportunities in 2021–2022, principals’ responses indicated that teachers received these opportunities infrequently, generally only one to three times per year. Very rarely did principals say teachers engaged in weekly or biweekly professional development, coaching, or collaborative learning with other teachers focused on social studies instruction.

The infrequency of professional learning focused on supporting social studies instruction was relatively on par with the level of support provided in science, but it was in stark contrast to the near ubiquity in provision of such activities in math and ELA.⁵ Roughly 90 percent or more of elementary principals reported that their schools or districts provided professional development workshops or trainings or peer collaborative learning to support ELA or math instruction. Although coaching for ELA or math was less common in comparison with other types of professional learning activities, it was still about twice as common as coaching for social studies instruction. Furthermore, not only did principals say their teachers are more likely to receive professional learning opportunities in subjects other than social studies, but they also said teachers receive these opportunities *more often*. For example, according to principals’ reports, over half of ELA and math teachers engaged in weekly or biweekly collaborative learning opportunities with other teachers in 2021–2022, compared with only one-quarter who did so for social studies. It is important to keep in mind that there might be some overlap in principals’ responses that is impossible to tease out in our data. For example, principals might have counted activities intended to focus primarily on teachers’ ELA instruction but that covered social studies topics as social studies professional learning or vice versa.

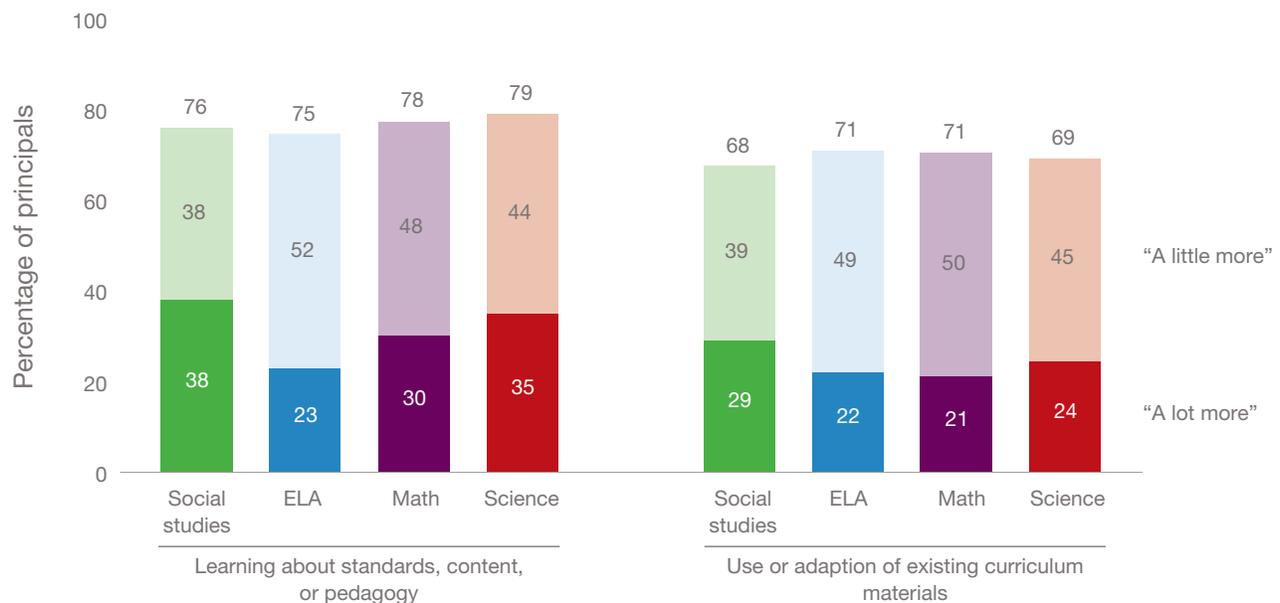
In contrast to teacher evaluation, where support was more prevalent in more-advantaged schools (i.e., higher income schools, schools serving predominantly White students, schools with higher levels of prepandemic achievement), social studies–focused professional learning opportunities were more preva-

lent in historically disadvantaged schools. More specifically, principals in elementary schools serving predominately students of color were more likely than their counterparts in majority-White schools to indicate that their schools or districts provided professional development trainings and coaching focused on social studies instruction. This divergence complicates our understanding of which elementary teachers may lack access to sufficient school- and district-provided infrastructure to support their social studies instruction.

Perhaps because of the relative lack of emphasis on social studies in teachers’ professional learning opportunities, a majority of elementary principals expressed that their teachers need more professional learning to support their social studies instruction. In 2021–2022, 76 percent of elementary principals reported their teachers need “a little more” or “a lot more” professional learning about social studies standards, content, or pedagogy, while 68 percent of

elementary principals said their teachers need “a little more” or “a lot more” professional learning on the use or adaption of existing social studies curriculum materials (see Figure 4). Although these percentages were roughly on par with principals’ reported need for any additional professional learning in other core subjects, elementary principals were more likely to report that teachers need “a lot more” professional learning about standards, content, or pedagogy in social studies than in ELA. Although 38 percent of elementary principals reported that their teachers need a lot more professional learning about social studies standards, content, or pedagogy, only 23 percent reported that their teachers need a lot more similar professional learning regarding ELA. Almost no principals suggested less time was needed on professional learning for social studies.

FIGURE 4
Percentage of Elementary Principals Who Reported Need for a Little More or a Lot More Professional Learning to Support Teachers’ Instruction, by Subject and Need Level



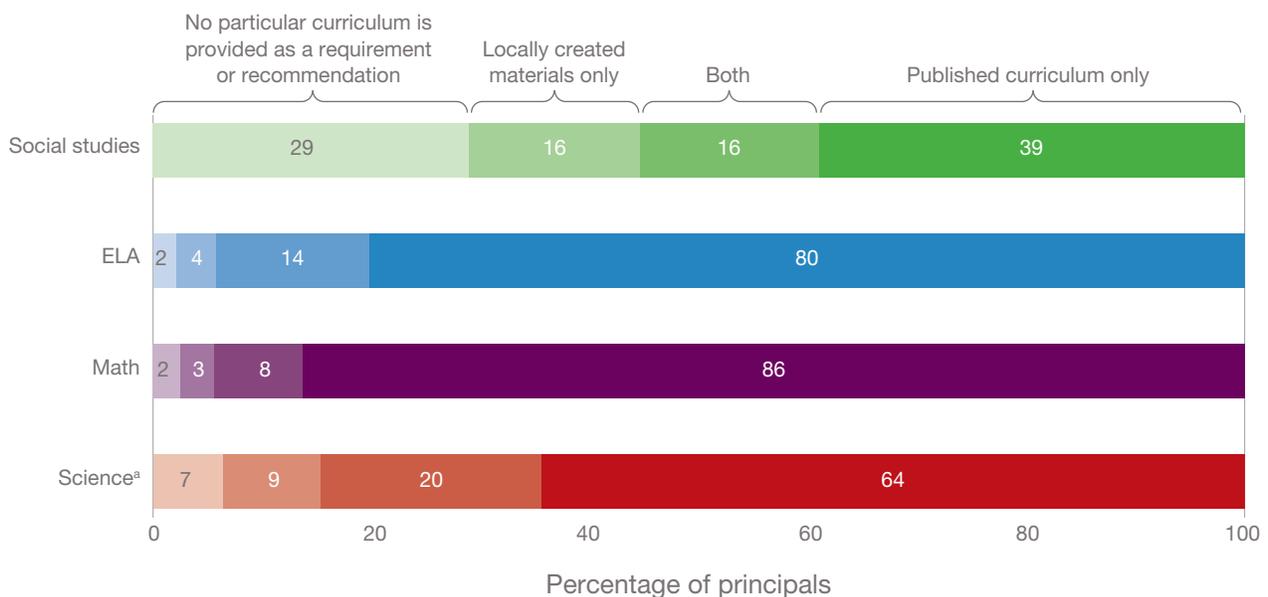
NOTES: This figure uses response data from the following survey question ($n = 607$): “Relative to the support and instruction already provided to teachers (if any), how much more or less professional learning do you think teachers need on the following topics to support their instruction?” The figure includes only responses from elementary school principals. Bars might not sum to totals because of rounding. There were no significant differences by subject in the percentage of elementary principals who indicated their teachers need “a little more” or “a lot more” professional learning to support teachers’ instruction.

Only Half of Elementary Schools Have Adopted Published Curriculum Materials to Support Their Elementary Social Studies Instruction

We asked principals whether their schools had adopted specific curriculum materials in the 2021–2022 school year. By *adoption*, we mean that the school provides specific curriculum to their teachers to use for their instruction either as a requirement or as a recommendation. In the 2021–2022 school year, 29 percent of elementary principals said their schools had not adopted any curriculum materials, meaning that their schools or districts had not chosen any curricula to provide to teachers to support their social studies instruction (see Figure 5). As a point of comparison, only 2 percent of elementary principals said their schools or districts had not adopted a curriculum for ELA or math and only 7 percent said similarly for science.

The remaining principals said their schools had adopted materials in some form; however, schools differed in terms of whether they provided *published curricula* (curricula developed by publishers) or *locally created curricula* (curricula developed in house by teachers, school, or district leaders). Looking first at social studies, 55 percent of elementary principals said their schools had adopted a published curriculum to support instruction in this area, although roughly a third of these schools had adopted locally created materials too. The most commonly adopted published curricula was Studies Weekly, which 19 percent of principals indicated was provided to teachers as a requirement or recommendation. Interestingly, 14 percent of principals identified ELA curriculum materials as their adopted social studies curricula. (For a full list of schools’ recommended or required materials to support their elementary social studies instruction, see Table A.1 in the appendix.) Meanwhile, 16 percent of elementary

FIGURE 5
Percentage of Principals Who Indicated School or District Adoption of Curricula for Elementary Instruction, by Subject and Type of Curricula



NOTES: This figure uses response data from the following survey item posed to elementary school principals ($n = 624$): “Select the following [subject] curricula that are provided by your school or district, either as a requirement or recommendation, this school year (2021–2022).” Respondents were asked whether their schools or districts require or recommend use of various curricula (see Table A.1 in the appendix). We reviewed principals’ responses and grouped principals into four categories based on whether their schools had adopted any material(s) as a requirement or recommendation, and, if so, what types of materials were adopted.

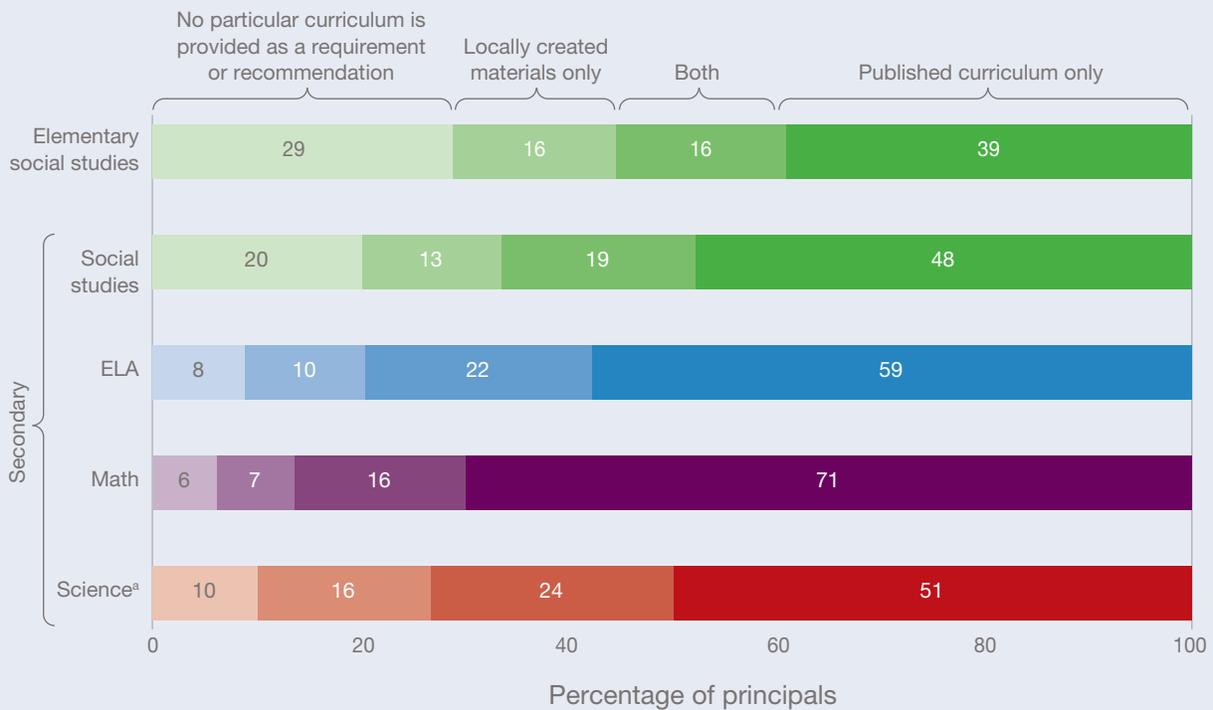
^a Data for science are from the 2021 AIRS because the 2022 survey did not collect data on recommended or required materials for science.

Secondary Social Studies Snapshot: Secondary Principals Also Reported Low Adoption Rates of Published Social Studies Curricula

Although one-fifth of secondary principals indicated that their schools had not adopted any curricula for their secondary social studies instruction, 67 percent of secondary principals reported adoption of a published curricula to support social studies instruction—somewhat similar to the 55 percent of elementary principals who also indicated such adoption (see Figure S.2). Among those secondary principals who reported adoption of published curricula, the most commonly identified curricula were U.S. History and World History (both published by McGraw Hill). (For a full list of adopted materials to support secondary social studies instruction, see Table A.3 in the appendix.)

At the elementary level, the rate of adoption of published social studies curricula was relatively low compared with other subjects. Although the same pattern was broadly present at the secondary level, the gap in adoption of materials between social studies and other core subjects was much smaller. Because fewer principals reported adoption of published ELA and math materials at the secondary level, the lack of guidance around social studies materials at the secondary level looks less like the exception we saw at the elementary level.

FIGURE S.2
Percentage of Principals Who Indicated School or District Adoption of Curricula, by Grade Level, Subject, and Type of Curricula



NOTES: This figure uses response data from the following survey item ($n = 1,542$): “Select the following [subject] curricula that are provided by your school or district, either as a requirement or recommendation, this school year (2021–2022).” Respondents were asked whether their schools or districts require or recommend use of various curricula (see Tables A.1 and A.3 in the appendix). We reviewed principals’ responses and grouped principals into four categories based on whether their schools had adopted any material(s) as a requirement or recommendation, and, if so, what types of materials were adopted. This figure includes responses from elementary and secondary school principals.

^a Data for science are drawn from the 2021 AIRS because the 2022 survey did not collect data on recommended or required materials for science.

principals indicated their schools had adopted locally created materials only and no published material.

Elementary schools' low adoption rate of published social studies curricula was in stark contrast to high uptake in ELA and math, and, to a lesser extent, science. Upward of 90 percent of elementary principals said their schools had adopted published materials to support ELA and math instruction. Furthermore, the vast majority of these schools adopted only published curricula; only a small number of elementary principals reported adoption of locally created materials.

Although small sample sizes generally prevent us from investigating patterns in schools' adoption of specific materials by school context, we do note two findings. First, principals in high-poverty schools were somewhat more likely to report no adoption of any material for social studies instruction than their low-poverty counterparts (33 percent versus 25 percent, respectively). Secondly, elementary principals who are not certified to teach social studies were more likely than their certified counterparts to indicate an absence of any district-recommended or required materials. Although we cannot establish a causal link between principals' area of certification and materials used at their schools, these results suggest that principals who are more familiar with the content area may be better equipped to support teachers in identifying suitable materials, whether published or locally created, for their instruction.

Furthermore, not only were elementary schools less likely to have adopted curricula in social studies than in other core subjects, such as ELA and math, but principals were also less likely to encourage their teachers to actually use required curricula. Only 52 percent of principals said they encouraged their teachers to use recommended or required social studies curricula, regardless of what these curricula were. In comparison, roughly 70 percent of principals encouraged use of required ELA and math curricula.

Beyond curricula, some elementary principals said their schools were recommending or requiring additional supplemental materials to support social studies instruction in 2021–2022. Some of the most commonly identified required or recommended supplemental materials were BrainPOP (selected by 32 percent), Scholastic News (selected by 29 percent),

Kahoot! (selected by 26 percent), and Newsela (selected by 22 percent). To learn more about what additional materials principals recommended to elementary teachers for use in social studies instruction in the 2021–2022 school year, see Table A.2 in the appendix.

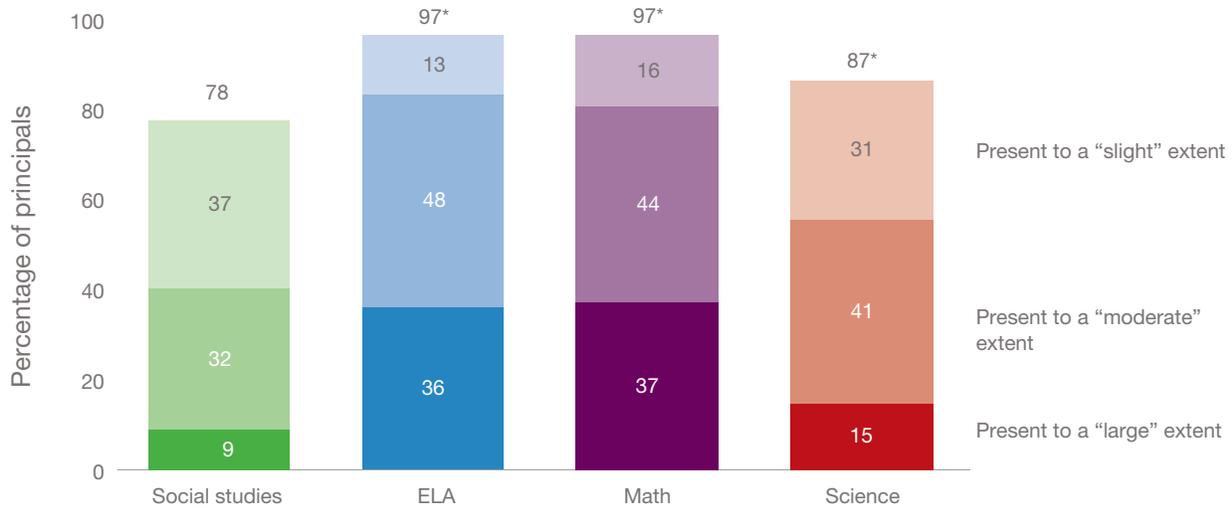
A Common Set of Schoolwide Teaching Practices Is Less Prevalent in Social Studies Than in ELA and Math, Although Schools with More-Comprehensive Supports Have More Frequently Shared Social Studies Teaching Practices

We asked principals to what extent a shared set of teaching practices used by all teachers in their schools was present in 2021–2022.⁶ Shared teaching practices—along with such factors as defined goals for student learning, a shared purpose, and processes to support collaboration—are hypothesized to be an important condition for enabling instructional system coherence and avoiding fragmentation or inconsistency in student learning (Polikoff et al., 2020). Although according to principals' perceptions as opposed to enacted practices observed in classrooms, these data provide some indication of a school's policy or expectations about teaching practices and the extent to which conditions for supporting a coherent instructional system for social studies instruction are present.

Principals' reports suggest a shared set of teaching practices was the exception rather than the norm for social studies instruction in the 2021–2022 school year. Seventy-eight percent of principals said shared teaching practices for social studies were present to some extent; however, only 9 percent of principals said shared practices were present to a "large" extent in social studies while 32 percent said they were present to a "moderate" extent (see Figure 6). In comparison, principals near universally reported these practices were present to some extent in ELA and math, and large majorities of these principals reported such practices were present to a "moderate" or "large" extent in 2021–2022 (84 percent and 81 percent, respectively). Principals' responses suggest shared practices were prevalent to a greater extent in science

FIGURE 6

Principals’ Reports of the Extent to Which a Shared Set of Teaching Practices Were Present in Their Schools in 2021–2022 to Support Teachers’ Instruction, by Subject Area



NOTES: This figure uses response data from the following survey item ($n = 609$): “To what extent are the following present in your school to support teachers’ instruction? A set of [subject] teaching practices that are used by all?” This figure includes responses from elementary school principals. The asterisk (*) indicates the percentage of elementary principals who reported shared practices were present to some extent in that subject was statistically different ($p < 0.05$) than the percentage of principals reporting shared practices for social studies.

than in social studies, but they were not quite at the level seen for ELA and math.

To investigate whether elementary schools that provided more supports for social studies instruction also had principals who were more likely to say that their schools had a shared set of teaching practices to support social studies instruction, we divided schools into three categories (low support schools, medium support schools, and high support schools) based on the extent to which principals reported that teacher evaluation, professional learning activities, and guidance around materials for social studies instruction were present in their schools in 2021–2022. The vast majority of elementary schools in our sample (83 percent) were medium support schools. Meanwhile, 11 percent of our elementary schools were high support schools, and 6 percent did not provide any of these supports. Low-poverty schools were no more likely to be categorized as high support than high-poverty schools.

We found evidence that shared instructional practices for social studies were prevalent to a greater

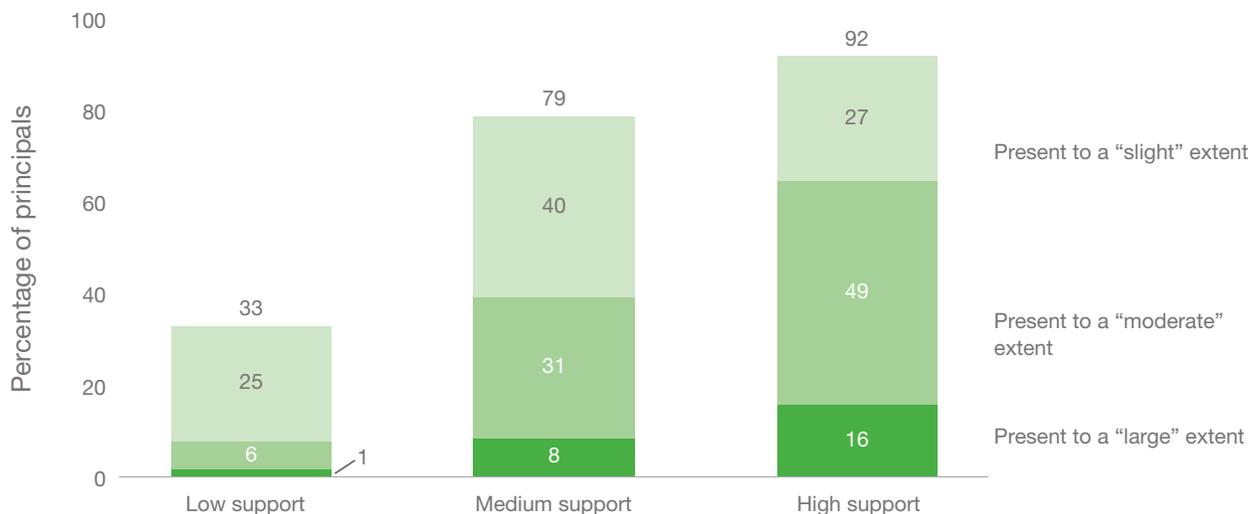
How We Defined Support Types

The schools we deem as *high support* are those where (1) the principal evaluates teachers in social studies, (2) each type of professional learning activity is provided at least once during the school year, (3) the school has adopted as a requirement or recommendation a published social studies curriculum, and (4) the principal encourages their teachers to use recommended materials. *Low support schools* provide none of these supports, while *medium support schools* provide some, but not all, of them.

extent in more-supportive school environments in 2021–2022 (see Figure 7). Nearly all elementary principals in high support schools reported shared practices were present to some extent, and two-thirds reported this was present to a “moderate” or “large” extent. Conversely, only 8 percent of principals in “low support” elementary schools said shared practices were present to a “moderate” or “large”

FIGURE 7

Principals’ Reports of the Extent to Which a Shared Set of Teaching Practices Was Present to Support Teachers’ Elementary Social Studies Instruction in 2021–2022, by Level of School-Provided Supports



NOTES: This figure uses response data from the following survey questions ($n = 609$):

- “To what extent are the following present in your school to support teachers’ instruction? A set of social studies teaching practices that are used by all?”
- “In which subject areas do you evaluate teachers in your school?”
- “Select the following social studies curricula that are provided by your school or district, either as a requirement or recommendation, this school year (2021–2022).”
- “Thinking about this school year (2021–2022), how often has your district or school provided the following types of professional learning activities to teachers at your school specifically to support their social studies instruction?”
- “Which of the following do you most encourage social studies teachers at your school to use as the basis for their lesson plans.”

The figure includes responses from elementary school principals. Bars might not sum to totals because of rounding.

extent. According to principals’ perceptions, this preliminary analysis suggests that providing more-comprehensive supports might be an effective mechanism to support development of more-formalized and coherent instructional practices in this subject.

The Status of K–5 Social Studies Classroom Instruction

We now turn to investigate what is happening inside K–5 social studies classrooms. We use data from the 2022 AIRS on teachers to examine teachers’ instructional practices for social studies versus other core subject areas. We posit that missing state-, school-, and district-provided infrastructure for social studies may help explain why teachers’ instructional practices look somewhat different in this subject area, which we discuss in more detail in the final implications section.

Unlike in ELA and Math, Teachers Perceive Themselves to Be the Primary Decisionmakers About Elementary Social Studies Instructional Materials

As noted in the previous section, elementary schools generally provided less guidance about what materials to use for social studies instruction in the 2021–2022 school year than they did for ELA and math instruction. Perhaps related to the lack of guidance they are receiving from their school systems, teachers perceived themselves and their peers to be the primary decisionmakers about what social studies instructional materials to use in their classrooms each day. Thirty-eight percent of teachers said they themselves are the decisionmaker, while 21 percent indicated “teachers in their school system” primarily make these decisions. In contrast, only 39 percent said

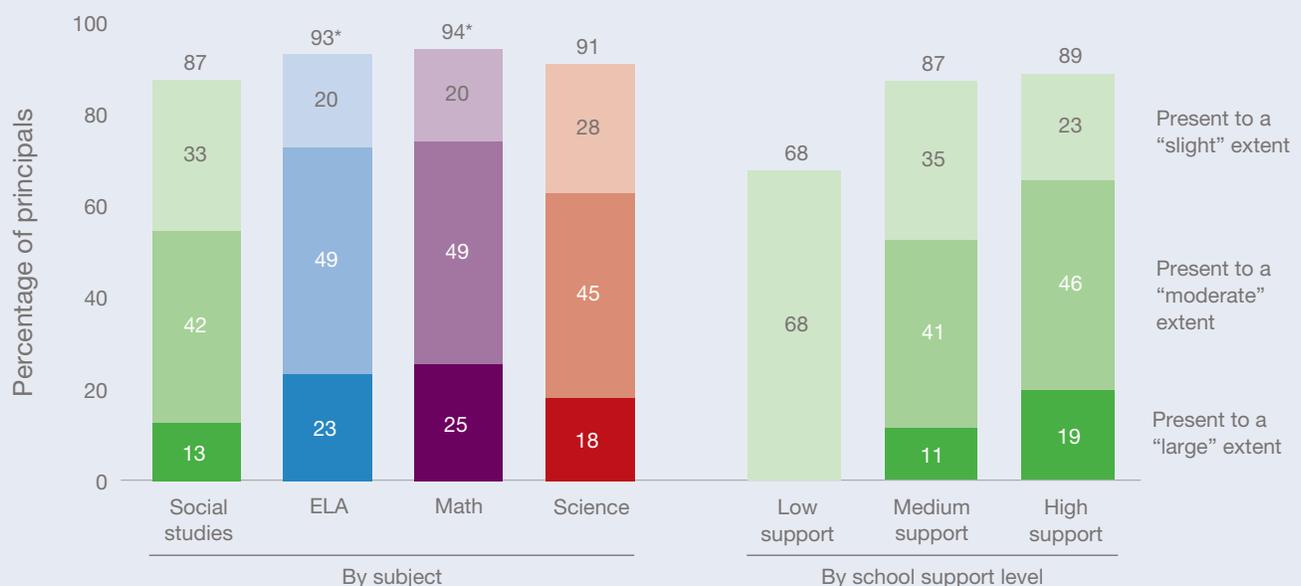
Secondary Social Studies Snapshot: Shared Teaching Practices for Social Studies Were Present to a Greater Extent in Secondary Schools Than in Elementary Schools

Although we lack data on social studies instruction from secondary teachers, data from our principal survey give us a glimpse into secondary social studies instruction. In 2021–2022, shared teaching practices for social studies instruction were more common at the secondary level than at the elementary level: 87 percent of secondary principals said shared practices were present to some extent and 55 percent said these practices were present to a “moderate” or “large” extent (see Figure S.3). Overall, principals were just about as likely to report shared practices for social studies at the secondary level as they were for science, but they were slightly more likely to report these practices for ELA and math. Importantly, they indicated shared practices were present to a greater extent for math and ELA than social studies at the secondary level.

Similar to their elementary counterparts, the vast majority of secondary schools (81 percent) were medium support schools in 2021–2022. However, unlike at the elementary level, we categorized only 1 percent of secondary schools as low support and the remaining 18 percent as high support schools. The same pattern of higher support schools being more likely to use schoolwide teaching practices for social studies instruction to a “moderate” or “great” extent we observed at the elementary level also held at the secondary level. However, no low support secondary schools indicated this practice was present to a “moderate” or “large” extent, although 68 percent indicated it was present to a “slight” extent.

FIGURE S.3

Principals’ Reports of the Extent to Which a Shared Set of Teaching Practices Was Present to Support Teachers’ Secondary Social Studies Instruction in 2021–2022, by Subject and Level of School-Provided Supports



NOTES: This figure uses response data from the following survey questions ($n = 903$):

- “To what extent are the following present in your school to support teachers’ instruction? A set of [subject] teaching practices that are used by all?”
- “In which subject areas do you evaluate teachers in your school?”
- “Select the following social studies curricula that are provided by your school or district, either as a requirement or recommendation, this school year (2021–2022).”
- “Thinking about this school year (2021–2022), how often has your district or school provided the following types of professional learning activities to teachers at your school specifically to support their social studies instruction?”
- “Which of the following do you most encourage social studies teachers at your school to use as the basis for their lesson plans?”

The figure includes responses from secondary school principals.

An asterisk (*) indicates the percentage of secondary principals who reported shared practices were present to some extent in that subject was statistically different ($p < 0.05$) than the percentage of principals reporting shared practices for social studies.

school or district leaders are the main decisionmaker about what materials to use. Of these, the vast majority indicated these decisions were made at the district level rather than the school level. Although principals overall agreed teachers are the decisionmakers about social studies materials, they more commonly believed that groups of teachers as opposed to individual teachers are making these decisions, while teachers more commonly said they themselves were making these decisions in 2021–2022. This finding suggests there might be a divergence here between what principals believe is happening and what teachers say is actually happening in their classrooms.

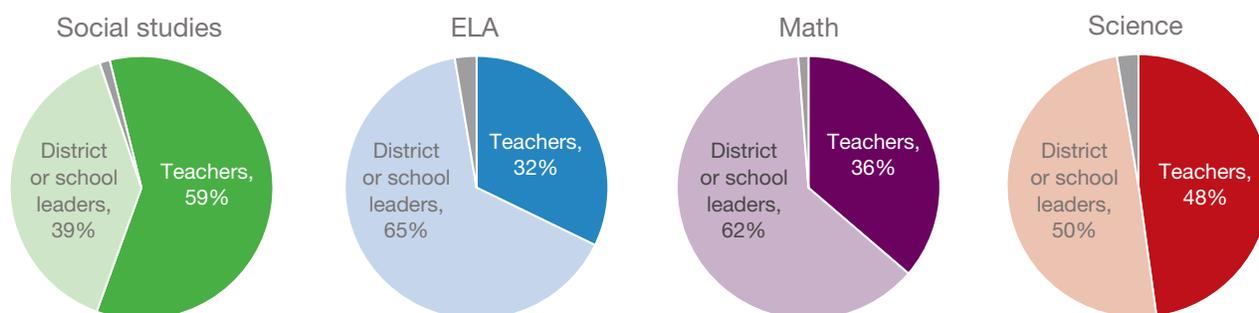
The autonomy that teachers perceived in determining what elementary social studies instructional materials to use is unique to the subject area (see Figure 8). For ELA, math, and, to a lesser extent, science, majorities of elementary teachers perceived school or district leaders to be in charge of decisions about materials, with the vast majority saying that these decisions are made at the district rather than school level. We generally interpret these patterns as a signal that decisions about curriculum materials are more coordinated in other subjects (especially math and ELA) than in social studies. We hypothesize multiple reasons that might help explain these patterns. Perhaps tighter control of ELA and math curricula at the district level could be a downstream effect of the high-stakes nature of ELA and math assessment. District leaders might also have a better

understanding of what constitutes high-quality instructional materials in ELA and math than in social studies, allowing them to provide more guidance to teachers in these subjects. Or it could be that some schools employ literacy or math coaches who contribute to decisionmaking around materials and that these same supports might not be available for social studies.

Only 16 Percent of Teachers Used a Required Textbook for the Majority of Their Social Studies Instructional Time; More Commonly, Teachers Cobbled Together Their Instructional Materials or Primarily Used Self-Created Materials

Only a minority of elementary teachers (16 percent) used district-recommended published curriculum, or textbooks, for the majority of their social studies instructional time in 2021–2022 (see Figure 9). Instead, most of the elementary teachers in our sample (52 percent) were *cobblers*. (For more information on how we defined these profiles, see “Creating the Teacher Curriculum Use Profiles” box.) These teachers either were not using any curricula regularly—which we defined as once a week or more—or used some combination of locally created and published curricula materials regularly, but no

FIGURE 8
Elementary Teachers’ Reported Perceptions of the Primary Decisionmaker About What Instructional Materials to Use, by Subject



NOTES: This figure uses response data from the following survey question ($n = 3,654$): “Who is the primary decisionmaker (i.e., the person or people who typically make most of the decisions) about which [subject] instructional materials you use in your classroom each day?” Gray slices represent a “someone else” option selected by less than 3 percent of respondents in each subject area. This figure includes responses from only elementary teachers.

Creating the Teacher Curriculum Use Profiles

Our survey asked teachers what social studies curriculum materials—whether published or locally created—were required or recommended by their schools or districts in 2021–2022, what curricula they used, and for what proportion of their instructional time did they use those materials. We used teachers’ responses to these survey items to sort them into four categories. Although we present these categories because they help illustrate key patterns, we caution overinterpretation. In the survey, teachers could select multiple curricula and sometimes provided contradictory information about how they used materials, making some teachers difficult to categorize. With these limitations in mind, we defined our categories as follows:

- (1) *Textbook teachers*, those who used a district-required or recommended published curriculum for the majority of their instructional time
- (2) *Do-it-yourself (DIY) teachers*, those who used self-created materials for the majority of their instructional time, regardless of whether this practice was required or recommended by the school or district
- (3) *Local material teachers*, those who used materials developed locally by their school or district, were recommended or required to use these materials, and who did use them for most of their instructional time
- (4) *Cobbler teachers*, those who do not fall into any of the previous categories. Because the cobbler category is broad, we offer some additional information to illustrate what the teachers in this category are doing. Thirty-five percent of these teachers did not use any curricula regularly, whether published or locally created, meaning they are likely relying solely on additional supplemental materials for their lessons. Thirteen percent used some combination of published curricula and locally created curriculum materials regularly (at least once per week) but did not use either for the majority of their instructional time.

one single material for the bulk of their social studies instructional time. Among those who did indicate using published curriculum materials regularly—regardless of whether this material was recommended by their district or used for most of their instructional time—teachers most often used Studies Weekly (selected by 16 percent of elementary teachers) and MyWorld Interactive (selected by 7 percent of elementary teachers). (For a full list of the curriculum materials teachers say they used regularly in 2021–2022, see Table A.4 in the appendix.)

In addition to the cobblers, there was also a sizable portion of elementary teachers (22 percent) who were DIY teachers in 2021–2022 (see Figure 9). These teachers used self-created materials for most of their social studies instructional time. We hypothesize that the high prevalence of cobblers and DIY teachers is related to the lack of guidance teachers were receiving from their school systems about what materials to use and their perception that they have autonomy to determine what materials to use in their classrooms.

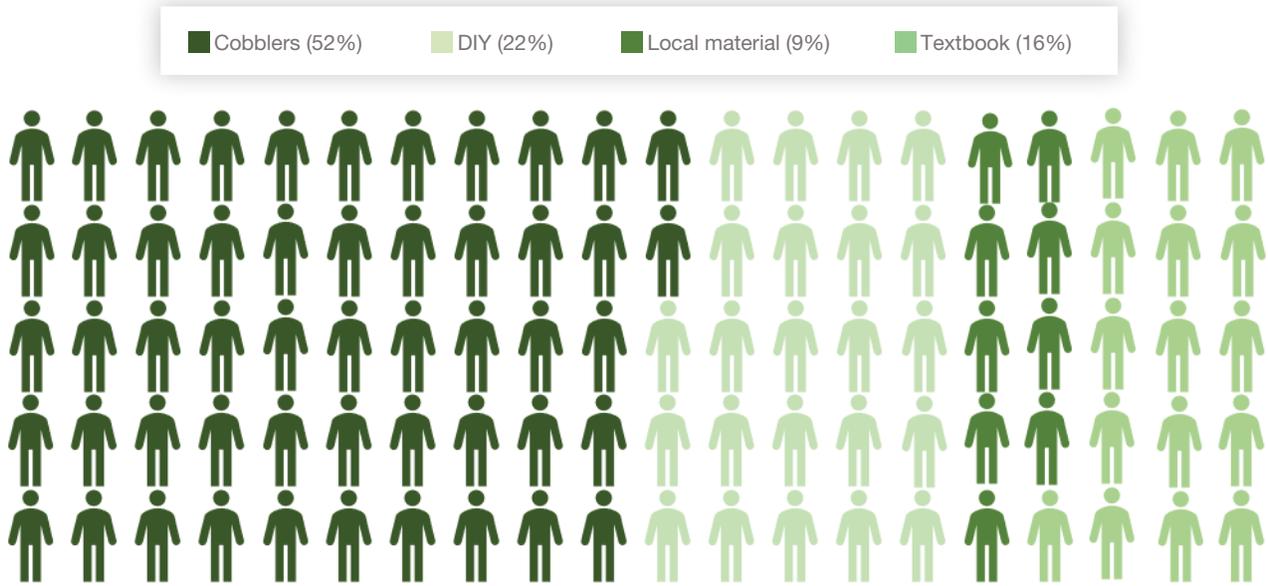
Although the profiles provide a useful way to think about teachers’ social studies curriculum use in 2021–2022, it is important to note that *many* elemen-

tary social studies teachers were cobbling together materials to some extent, even those who said they used published curricula. Many regularly used (once a week or more) the supplemental materials that we asked about on the survey. For example, roughly half or more of elementary teachers regularly used materials from Teachers Pay Teachers, BrainPOP, and YouTube to supplement their social studies instruction. About a third of elementary teachers regularly used Scholastic News, Kahoot!, or materials collected from a Google search. Despite the high uptake of these materials, few teachers used any single one of these materials for large proportions of their instructional time in 2021–2022. Thus, we conclude that teachers primarily viewed these materials as a way to supplement other textbooks and locally and self-created materials. (For a full list of the additional supplemental materials elementary teachers say they used regularly in 2021–2022, see Table A.5 in the appendix.)

In some ways, cobbling together materials could speak to teachers’ resourcefulness to meeting students’ learning needs, and some degree of cobbling could be a good thing. Future research might consider investigating why teachers are spending so

FIGURE 9

Elementary Teacher Profiles, by Use of Social Studies Curriculum Materials (2021–2022)



NOTES: This figure uses response data from the following survey items ($n = 721$):

- “Among the elementary social studies curriculum materials in this list, select (1) any materials you use regularly (once a week or more, on average) for your social studies instruction this school year (2021–2022) and (2) any materials provided by your school or school district this school year (2021–2022), either as a requirement or recommendation, whether you use them or not.”
- “Of all the social studies instructional materials you use, please indicate approximately what percentage of social studies instructional time you dedicate toward using them for a typical class of students over the course of a week.”

Teachers could select multiple curriculum materials. We reviewed teachers’ responses to these survey items and sorted them into mutually exclusive buckets using the criteria above. This figure includes responses from only elementary teachers. The total number of people figurines might not sum to total percentages because of rounding.

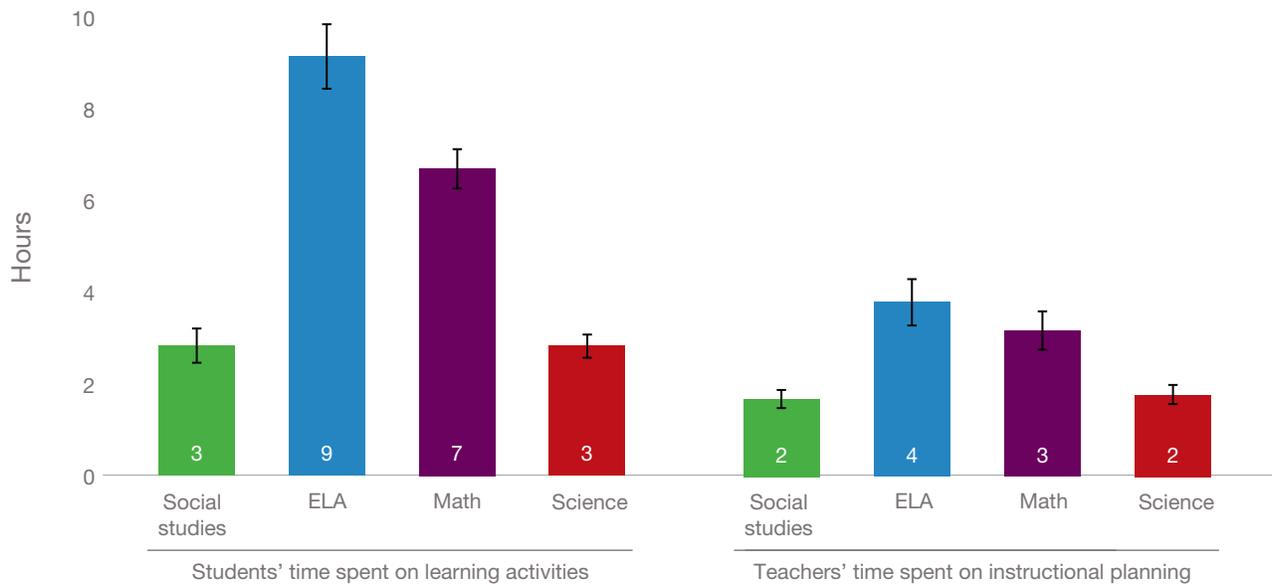
much time cobbling together materials. We suspect some teachers might be pulling in additional materials to give attention to diverse voices, perhaps voices that are often underemphasized in traditional textbooks. Exposure to such different types of resources as newspapers, museum factsheets, and videos can augment curriculum content. But, at the same time, overreliance on open-source material makes it difficult to build a consistent and coherent curriculum and also difficult for school and district leaders to ensure that teachers are using high-quality materials from reputable and trusted sources.

Elementary Teachers Spent Fewer Instructional Hours Per Week Focused on Social Studies Learning Activities Than ELA and Math Activities, but They Spent More Time Planning for Each Instructional Hour in Social Studies

We asked elementary teachers how many hours of learning activities the typical student was expected to undertake during a typical week in the 2021–2022 school year, restricting our sample to include those elementary teachers who reported teaching all four core subject areas. These teachers said the typical student was expected to undertake nine hours of learning activities per week in ELA, seven hours in math, and three hours in both science and social studies (see Figure 10).⁷ We observed this pattern of fewer hours of learning activities per week in social studies instruction than in ELA and math across teach-

FIGURE 10

Students' Hours of Learning Activities and Teachers' Hours of Instructional Planning in a Typical School Week in 2021–2022, by Subject



NOTES: This figure uses response data from the following survey questions ($n = 666$):

- “Approximately how many hours of learning activities is a typical student expected to undertake during a typical week of the 2021–2022 school year for the following subjects you teach?”
- “In a typical week this school year (2021–2022), approximately how many hours have you spent on instructional planning—including finding materials and creating lesson plans on your own or with others—for the following subjects you teach?”

This figure includes only those elementary teachers in our sample who reported teaching all four core subjects. Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

ers in all types of schools and among both teachers of lower (kindergarten through grade 2) and upper elementary (grades 3 through 5) grades. This pattern also comports with prepandemic data from federal surveys looking specifically at instruction time across subject areas (NCES, undated-a; Tyner and Kabourek, 2020) and with instruction time data from early in the pandemic (Kaufman and Diliberti, 2021).

In many ways, these instruction time data can be seen as a signal of lower emphasis in social studies than in other core subject areas. The fewer instructional hours per week spent on social studies instruction than on ELA and math is not surprising given that high-stakes assessment in ELA and math begins in grade 3. We do find some preliminary evidence that teachers in states in which social studies achievement is included as an indicator in the state’s school rating system (see Table 1) spend more time in this subject area: In the few states (i.e., Delaware, Kentucky, and Louisiana) where the subject of social

studies is factored into accountability formulas, teachers spent 3.8 hours on social studies instruction per week in 2021–2022 versus 2.8 hours in states where it is not. However, we caution overinterpretation of this data point, which is not statistically significant, because of the small number of elementary teachers in our sample who teach in states with social studies accountability. Furthermore, there might be some double-dipping occurring here, meaning that some of the hours that teachers spend on ELA learning activities might include some social studies or social studies–adjacent topics that we are unable to quantify in our data.

We also asked those elementary teachers who teach all four core academic subjects how many hours per week they spent on instructional planning in 2021–2022, including finding materials and creating lesson plans on their own or with others. General elementary teachers reported spending, on average, four hours per week on instructional planning for ELA, three hours

for math, and two hours for both social studies and science. Although general elementary teachers were spending less time on instructional planning for social studies overall, they were actually spending *more* time per hour on instructional time planning for learning activities in social studies than in other subjects. More specifically, general elementary teachers reported spending 0.53 hours of planning for every hour of ELA learning activities and 0.57 planning hours in math. In contrast, teachers reported spending almost a full hour of planning (0.96 hours) for every hour of social studies instruction on average.

We hypothesize a few reasons for why this might be the case. It may be that there are increasing marginal returns to every hour spent planning (i.e., that once teachers get in the zone planning for content in one subject area, they can create lesson plans more efficiently that cover more instructional hours). It may also be that teachers need to spend more time planning for social studies instruction because they have to spend their time cobbling together materials and activities more so than they do in other subject areas. Although we did not observe differences in instructional planning time across our different social studies teacher profiles, this may be because we suspect most teachers are using supplemental materials regularly.

In Determining Learning Activities for the Classroom, Teachers Overwhelmingly Prioritized Student Engagement and Alignment with State Standards over Other Objectives

We asked elementary teachers about 18 different objectives when deciding what tasks and activities to use from their materials for their instruction and asked them to prioritize their top five.⁸ In Figure 11, we display the percentage of teachers who selected each objective as among their top five priorities. Overall, the most common priority for social studies instruction—selected by 84 percent of teachers—was student engagement. The next most common priority—selected by 64 percent of teachers—was alignment with their state’s social studies standards. We interpret the high prevalence of consideration of state standards as a signal that states’ social stud-

ies standards are critical infrastructure that teachers take seriously when planning their instruction. Importantly, teachers’ priority to align to state standards was not related to the quality of these standards, as defined by Stern et al., 2021. That is, teachers in states with “exemplary” social studies standards were just as likely to prioritize aligning to state social studies standards in 2021–2022 as teachers in states with “inadequate” standards.⁹ Therefore, we conclude that teachers’ tendency to prioritize their states’ social studies standards is not necessarily an indication of higher-quality instruction.

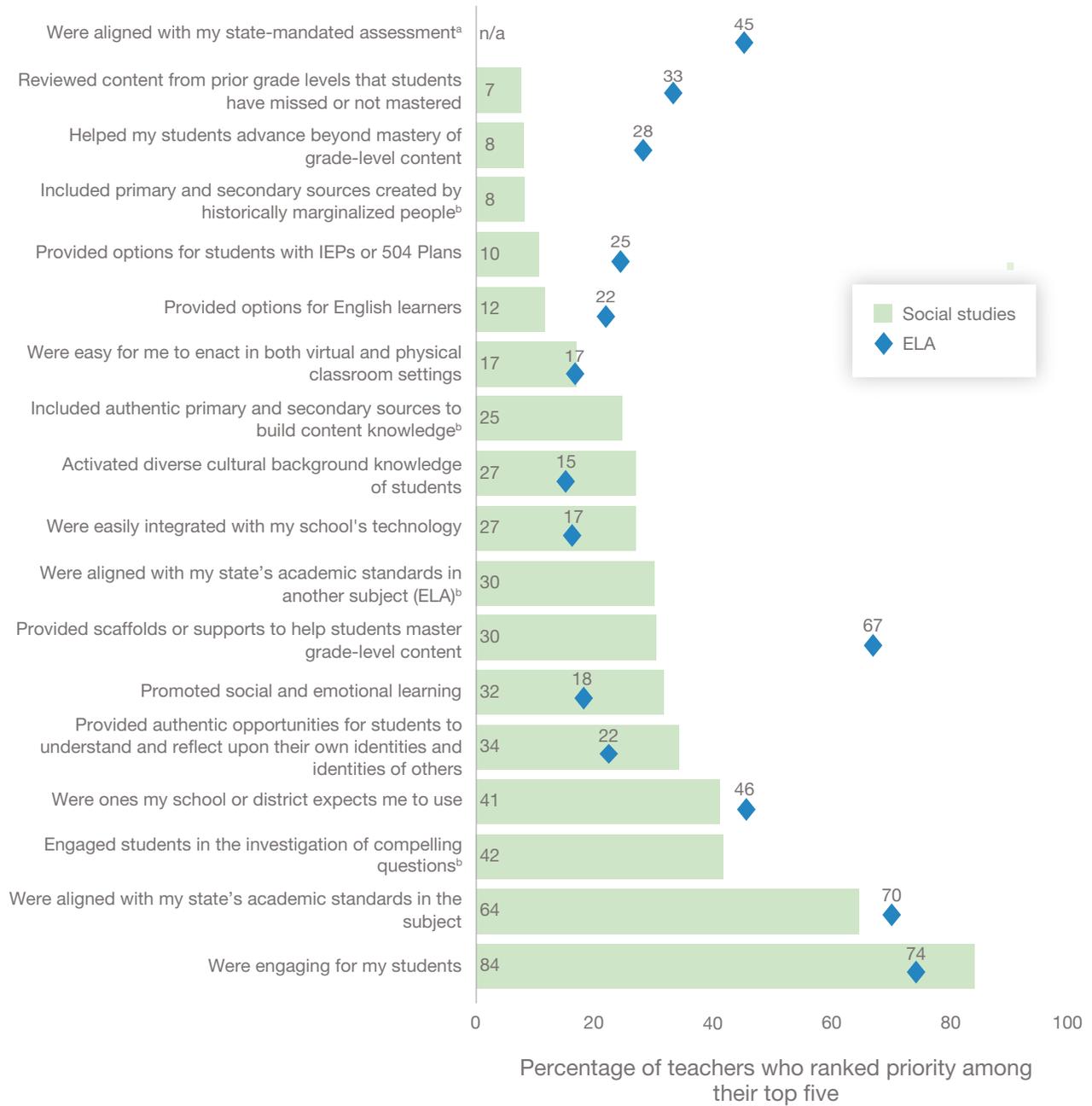
Beyond student engagement and alignment with state standards, elementary teachers did not overwhelmingly agree about priorities for social studies instruction. Roughly four in ten said they prioritized discussion of compelling questions and meeting district expectations. Roughly three in ten said they prioritized opportunities for students to reflect on their identities, promotion of social and emotional learning, provision of scaffolds or supports, and alignment with state standards in another subject (ELA). Two factors that teachers overwhelmingly did not select as priorities for their elementary social studies instruction were reviewing content from prior grade levels (selected by only 7 percent of teachers) and helping students advance beyond grade-level content (selected by only 8 percent of teachers).

To provide a reference point, we compare teachers’ prioritization of tasks for their social studies instruction against their prioritization of tasks for ELA. We find that elementary teachers’ priorities for their social studies instruction aligned somewhat with their priorities for ELA in 2021–2022. Teachers’ top two priorities when choosing tasks and activities for their ELA instruction were also student engagement and alignment with state standards. After this agreement, however, there was divergence in priorities for ELA versus social studies instruction. Teachers’ third-most prevalent priority for their ELA instruction—chosen by roughly two-thirds of general elementary teachers—was providing scaffolds or supports to help students master grade-level content. In comparison, only 30 percent of teachers ranked this among their top five priorities for their social studies instruction.

We hypothesize a few reasons for this divergence and note there may be additional alternate explana-

FIGURE 11

Teachers’ Priorities in Determining Which Tasks and Activities from Their Materials to Use in Their Instruction in 2021–2022, by Subject



NOTES: This figure uses response data from the following survey items ($n = 2,263$): “Rank the top five priorities that determined which tasks or activities from those materials you decided to use for your [subject] instruction. I chose those tasks or activities within my materials because they” Teachers’ responses indicated a similar pattern of priorities for ELA and math instruction, so we only include ELA data points in this figure for readability. We include teachers’ priorities for ELA instruction because they provide a useful benchmark against which to interpret teachers’ priorities for social studies instruction and because of the overlapping nature of ELA and social studies instruction at this grade level. IEP = individualized education program.

n/a = Not applicable because we did not ask social studies teachers about this priority.

^a Priority was not included among list of social studies priorities.

^b Priority was not included among list of ELA priorities.

Teachers’ priorities for their social studies instruction did not vary as much as we might have expected based on school and classroom demographics.

tions. For one, teachers may be less concerned about keeping students on track to meet grade-level proficiency targets in social studies, perhaps because most states do not assess in this area. Alternatively, teachers may not be certain what scaffolding looks like for elementary social studies, and, therefore, do not consider this a priority in their instruction.

Whatever the reason, it is likely that those students who are struggling in ELA are probably also struggling in social studies given that reading requirements are typically part of social studies instruction. Although we did not ask teachers whether they consider alignment to state assessments for social studies (because they largely do not exist) to be among their top five priorities, this was the fifth-most prevalent priority for ELA instruction—selected by roughly half of respondents—providing some indication that teachers would prioritize this more highly in determining tasks and activities for their social studies instruction if, in fact, there were social studies assessments.

Teachers’ priorities for their social studies instruction did not vary as much as we might have expected based on school and classroom demographics, with one exception: Unsurprisingly, those teaching greater percentages of English learners more often reported that they prioritize tasks and activities that provide options to support these students.

We also investigated whether teachers’ priorities for their social studies instruction differed based on whether they taught in a state with or without a content ban on race or gender topics in place in 2021–2022 (see Table 1), focusing on those priorities we hypothesized would be most affected by a content ban. We found that teachers in states without bans on discussing topics related to gender or race in the classrooms were more likely to rate “engaging students in the investigation of compelling questions” as among their top five priorities than teachers in states with bans (47 percent versus 31 percent, respectively). We also found a similar pattern for “providing authentic opportunities for students to understand and reflect upon their own identities and those of others”; 38 percent of teachers in states without content bans identified this as among their top priorities compared with only 26 percent of teachers in states with a content ban.

Broadly, these results comport with those from Woo et al., 2023, in which researchers found evidence that teachers in states with content bans are beginning to shift their instructional practices. More than one-quarter of teachers in states with bans reported that the limitations placed on the topics teachers can address have influenced their choice of curriculum materials or instructional practices to a small, moderate, or large extent, and the authors observed results suggesting that social studies teachers may be influenced by these limitations. Moreover, in describing the topics subject to restrictions, teachers often called out topics related to social studies and civics, such as historical events, immigration, or civil rights. To learn more about how these content bans might be influencing teaching and learning, see Woo et al., 2023.

Limitations

This report uses data from nationally representative surveys of teachers and principals to build a national picture of elementary social studies instruction in the 2021–2022 school year. There are a few things to keep in mind when interpreting the results. First, as noted previously, these surveys were fielded in 2021–2022, during a period in which schools were busy helping students recover from several years of pandemic-related disruptions to learning. Thus, 2021–2022 was

likely an atypical school year in which to understand how schools typically approach social studies education. In addition to concerns that the pandemic may have changed schooling conditions, over the past few years, debates have arisen regarding what role schools should play in youths' civic development, and numerous states have passed legislation limiting the extent to which instruction should address topics related to race and gender—topics that are most likely to arise in the context of social studies instruction. Social studies instruction may have thus been more limited in 2021–2022 than normal for all of these reasons.

Second, our teacher survey addressed social studies instruction only at the elementary level, although our principal survey asked about social studies instruction across grade levels. Ideally, we would have surveyed secondary teachers directly to investigate patterns in secondary social studies instruction. Further complicating matters, we know that ELA and social studies instruction can often overlap in elementary school in ways that are difficult to observe in our data. For example, professional learning activities targeted at social studies instruction might emphasize ELA content or a teacher might use a literacy curriculum (e.g., Core Knowledge) that also emphasizes social studies content knowledge. Thus, our analyses likely miss instances where teachers may be incorporating social studies content into their ELA instruction and vice versa and build an incomplete picture of social studies instruction beyond K–5.

Third, we have no way to know how the missing infrastructure we identified for social studies is related to the quality of instruction or student learning. We did not ask teachers questions about the extent to which they engaged in high-quality instructional practices for social studies, and—in any case—survey self-reports are ill-suited to measure teachers' instruc-

tion. Furthermore, as we have noted in this report, disagreement remains about the content that students should master. Therefore, there are likely more variations in what teachers are addressing in their social studies instruction than for ELA and math. Relatedly, in other AIRS reports focused on ELA and math (e.g., Kaufman, Doan, and Fernandez, 2021), we look at access to standards-aligned materials, or materials that EdReports has deemed meeting this threshold. We cannot do this for social studies because EdReports does not independently rate social studies materials. Likely related to their differing standards and requirements, states might have differing opinions about whether certain social studies materials are high quality. Because we do not have EdReports' ratings to establish a common definition of what constitutes high-quality social studies instructional materials, we are not able to investigate use of standards-aligned instructional materials for social studies as we are able to do for other subjects.

Implications

In this report, we provide evidence of missing infrastructure to support K–5 social studies instruction, with a focus on that missing infrastructure at the state level and the local (district and school) level. We then examine teachers' reports about their instruction and perceptions to understand how this missing infrastructure is impacting what teachers think and do. At the state level, we note significant variation in the quality of state standards and the lack of formalized accountability and assessment programs. At the local level, our nationally representative principal survey data provide evidence of significant underprovision of teacher evaluation, professional learning opportunities, and guidance around curriculum

Although our survey cannot provide evidence of causal relationships, our findings suggest this missing infrastructure may have affected what teachers did in their classrooms in 2021–2022.

materials for social studies compared with the level of supports seen in other core subject areas. Specifically, we found that in 2021–2022:

- Principals were less likely to conduct teacher evaluation in social studies than in ELA and math, particularly if they did not have a background in the subject, if they served in a high-poverty school, or if they served in a historically low-achieving school.
- Elementary schools rarely provided frequent professional learning opportunities to support social studies instruction, in a sharp contrast to what we observed for math and reading instruction.
- Roughly half of schools have not adopted published curriculum materials for elementary social studies instruction.

In sum, teachers' high level of autonomy likely results in significant variability in social studies instruction from classroom to classroom—one that district leaders and policymakers have no means of monitoring, raising concerns that students are likely not receiving equitable learning opportunities.

Although our survey cannot provide evidence of causal relationships, our findings suggest this missing infrastructure may have affected what teachers did in their classrooms in 2021–2022. Specifically, elementary teachers reported spending less instruction time on social studies topics than in other core subjects. Yet, they spent more time planning for each instructional hour devoted to social studies. These results are unsurprising, given that teachers reported considerable autonomy in this subject area and at this grade level as compared with ELA and math. In the absence of published curricula, teachers said they decided what materials to use. They frequently cobbled together materials from various places, often relying on self-created or district-created materials instead of published curricula.

Having such a high level of autonomy in this subject might be more concerning than in other areas. Because social studies content is often ill-defined, what content gets delivered in the classroom might be particularly susceptible to teachers' personal preferences. Even more concerning, because so few states assess in this area, district leaders and policymakers largely lack the necessary data to identify and monitor disparities in students' opportunities to learn. In sum, teachers' high level of autonomy likely results in significant variability in social studies instruction from classroom to classroom—one that district leaders and policymakers have no means of monitoring, raising concerns that students are likely not receiving equitable learning opportunities.

Furthermore, teacher autonomy might be particularly problematic in this era in which schooling is increasingly seen through a political lens. Our findings—from this report and our companion report (Woo et al., 2023)—imply that teachers may be largely on their own in wading through the proliferation of new legislation instructing teachers to limit discussion of race- and gender-related topics, which is typically more prevalent for social studies than other subjects. More-formalized infrastructure is one potential way to protect teachers from fallout because teachers can be supported by their schools or districts. Indeed, in our report about how limits on race- and gender-topics affect teachers, teachers expressed desire for school- or district-provided materials to help them address con-

troversial topics in an approved and protected manner (Woo et al., 2023).

Recommendations

In sum, our work implies a need to build a stronger, more coherent infrastructure to support elementary social studies instruction. Ideally, all infrastructure elements—state standards, accountability policies, assessment programs, teacher evaluation, professional learning opportunities, and guidance around materials—would work together to build a coherent instructional system to support student learning. This effort requires additional investments at all levels of the U.S. education system, from the state to school system level. In this spirit, we offer the following recommendations:

First, **state policymakers should work to make social studies academic standards not only more rigorous but also more consistent with national frameworks.** Although a national coordination strategy would be optimal, this seems unrealistic: A previous push to define a national set of standards collapsed (Diegmüller, 1995), and the current political environment makes it difficult for states to reach consensus. In the absence of a national effort, states with standards that have been rated as less comprehensive should be looking to national frameworks, such as the C3 standards and the EAD roadmap, to inform their revisions (EAD, 2021; National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). States might also look to their peers with exemplary ratings as models to guide their revisions.

More-rigorous and consistent state standards can then lay a critical foundation to improve other aspects of the instructional system, including the development and adoption of social studies curriculum materials and the crafting of professional development opportunities, teacher evaluation tools, and student assessments. To the extent that states can align their standards with such national frameworks as the C3, they might also be able to better leverage lessons learned and resources created across states.

State departments of education and other organizations should generate greater transparency around the quality of social studies instructional

Currently, insufficient information about the quality of materials might hinder teachers' access to and use of high-quality social studies instructional materials.

materials to support curriculum development and teachers' use of high-quality materials. Currently, insufficient information about the quality of materials might hinder teachers' access to and use of high-quality social studies instructional materials. State departments of education and organizations, such as EdReports, can play a critical role in establishing an objective measure of quality and identifying high-quality materials for the field. These groups might do this by creating review processes for social studies materials to (1) more strongly signal their visions for high-quality social studies instructional materials and (2) generate greater transparency around the quality of materials, as they have done in other subjects, in terms of providing clarity about how curriculum materials are aligned with standards and other measures of quality.

Greater transparency around the quality of materials may lead to two developments in the field. First, curriculum developers may know better what kinds of content and skills to include in their instructional materials to meet quality criteria. Moreover, they may be more strongly incentivized to create high-quality materials if they know that quality reviews on their materials will be made available to the public. Secondly, greater transparency may also help spur higher uptake of high-quality materials. This aspect is especially important given the political overtones of social studies instruction; objective reviews of

States should figure out how to hold schools accountable for improving student achievement in this subject area, and they need to identify mechanisms to signal they are serious.

social studies content and materials could further bolster and justify teachers' use of certain materials. Supporting the uptake of high-quality materials could also help teachers spend less time planning for social studies instruction because they would not have to spend as much time developing or finding their own materials.

Beyond materials, **district leaders should provide more supports (e.g., teacher evaluation, professional development) targeted to this subject area.** It is clear from our data that there is more room to evaluate teachers in social studies, particularly in certain school settings. Principals should consider intentionally observing social studies instruction and using content-specific tools to help them provide high-quality feedback on social studies topics. That said, principals might feel that they lack the expertise or content knowledge to identify high-quality social studies practices. If so, district leaders should provide training, professional development, resources, or staff to principals to help them do that work thoughtfully. Beyond evaluation, principals' responses indicate more teacher professional learning activities dedicated to social studies are needed.

Teachers should demand better supports in this underresourced and underemphasized subject. They cannot be expected to provide high-quality social

studies instruction if they are not given any clear messages about what instruction is supposed to look like or tools, such as curriculum, to support their teaching. Teachers and district and school leaders should consider advocating to departments of education and their state legislators for better standards and assessments. There is likely also a role for teacher preparation programs to help teachers better understand what quality instruction looks like in this subject area. Teachers might also create networks with other teachers in their school system or other school systems through social media and other paths to create a groundswell of support for more social studies infrastructure.

Finally, states should figure out how to hold schools accountable for improving student achievement in this subject area, and they need to identify mechanisms to signal they are serious. Inclusion of social studies in states' ESSA plans, indicators in accountability formulas, and summative assessments are some mechanisms to incentivize schools to invest in social studies to the same extent they are in other core subjects, especially ELA and math. We do hesitate to recommend additional standardized testing because many schools are already saturated with assessments. Louisiana is one state that is piloting an innovative approach to this problem by creating a single assessment to monitor student achievement in ELA and social studies (Louisiana Department of Education, undated). Alternatives (or additions) to summative assessments to monitor student learning at a larger scale might be end-of-course exams, projects, or other ways for students to demonstrate civic knowledge and engagement in their local communities.

Although policymakers will debate how much time in the school day should be dedicated to social studies instruction amid competing priorities, it is nonetheless important to make sure teachers are doing the best they can to provide the highest-quality instruction with the limited time available.

How This Analysis Was Conducted

In this report, we use data from the 2022 AIRS to take a national look at elementary social studies instruction. The 2022 AIRS was conducted with nationally representative samples of teachers ($n = 8,063$) and principals ($n = 1,598$) and was administered in the spring of the 2021–2022 school year. AIRS asked detailed questions about teachers’ use of instructional materials, principal supports for curricula and instruction, and prevalence of professional learning activities, among other topics. The teacher survey, in particular, used extensive skip logic to target survey items based on the subject(s) and grade(s) that teachers teach. Teachers who teach multiple subject areas and grade levels were randomized into subject- and grade-specific tracks.

After data collection was complete, responses were weighted to be representative of the national populations of K–12 public school teachers and principals. Statistics for each survey were produced using cross-sectional survey weights that are designed specifically to provide nationally representative estimates in the year that each survey was administered. (For more information about the AIRS development process, survey administration, and weighting process, see technical documentation in Doan et al., 2022).

The social studies analyses presented in this report primarily rely on subsets of teachers and principals who participated in the 2022 AIRS. Using the skip logic built into the survey, the social studies items were administered only to those elementary teachers who were randomized into the science track. Thus, all our social studies items were administered to 745 elementary teachers who taught at least social studies and science in the 2021–2022 school year. However, the overwhelming majority of these 745 social studies teachers (92 percent) were elementary teachers of all four core subjects (ELA, math, science, and social studies). Thus, throughout our analyses, we occasionally refer to the teacher population as *general elementary teachers*.

Among these 745 elementary teachers, 17 percent taught kindergarten, 26 percent taught grade 1, 23 percent taught grade 2, 18 percent taught grade 3, 16 percent taught grade 4, and 9 percent taught grade 5 in the 2021–2022 school year. Note that percentages do not sum

to 100 percent because of the small number of teachers who reported teaching students in multiple grades. We categorized 61 percent of our teachers as *lower elementary teachers* (i.e., those predominately teaching grades kindergarten through 2) and the remaining 39 percent of teachers as *upper elementary teachers* (i.e., those predominately teaching grades 3 through 5). We do not have a sufficient sample size to investigate differences by grade taught in this report.

Occasionally, we contrast survey responses from these 745 teachers with those from elementary teachers who were randomized into receiving items about ELA ($n = 1,581$) and math ($n = 1,279$), although these teachers also tended to be elementary teachers of all subjects. These data points are included in this report because they provide useful reference points against which to understand how social studies instruction looks different from instruction in the other core subject areas.

We supplement this teacher data with information from a survey of K–12 public school principals. When they began the survey, school principals were asked what grades their schools serve. According to their responses to this question, principals were assigned to an *elementary*, *middle*, or *high school* pathway if they taught only grades K through 5, 6 through 8, or 9 through 12, respectively. For cases in which schools spanned grade levels, participants were assigned to the middle grade path if they indicated leading a school serving any grade 6 through 8 to ensure a sufficient sample size of middle school principals. They were randomly assigned to the elementary school (K–5) or high school (grades 9 through 12) pathway if they indicated leading a school serving any of those grades but not grades 6 through 8. In our analyses, we used this pathway assignment to categorize principals as serving an elementary or secondary school. To align with the elementary teacher data, we subset our K–12 principal sample to primarily focus on responses from elementary school principals ($n = 634$). However, because we observed large and significant differences in principals’ responses based on whether they served in an elementary or secondary school, we occasionally include a sidebar contrasting results for elementary versus secondary school principals ($n = 964$).

These findings are not meant to be exhaustive, but instead merely illustrate how social studies instruction might be supported differently in elementary versus secondary schools.

In addition to examining differences by school grade level and subject taught, throughout our analyses we also consider differences by personal characteristics (e.g., certification in social studies), classroom (e.g., percentage of students who are English learners), and school (e.g., locale, poverty level, enrollment size) characteristics. We also consider differences in responses based on the state in which the respondent's school is located.

To obtain information on school demographics, we linked survey data files to the 2020–2021 Common Core of Data (CCD) issued by the NCES. However, because

of higher-than-normal levels of missingness in the CCD that are likely related to pandemic disruptions to schooling, we supplemented the 2020–2021 data with information from the last prepandemic school year (2019–2020). We feel comfortable with these data adjustments because of the high correlation of school demographics across school years.

Throughout our analyses, we conducted significance testing, with the statistical significance across subgroups tested using pairwise *t*-tests with critical values at the $p < 0.05$ level. Unless otherwise noted, all comparisons mentioned in this report are unadjusted for statistical controls. Because of the exploratory nature of these analyses, we did not apply multiple hypothesis test corrections.

Appendix

In this appendix, Table A.1 through Table A.5 provide basic frequency tabulations of specific social studies curricula and supplemental materials for interested readers.

TABLE A.1

Percentage of Principals Who Indicated Various Social Studies Curricula Are Provided by Their School or District as a Requirement or Recommendation to Support Their Elementary Social Studies Instruction

Curricula	Percentage
Social studies curriculum materials my school or district created	22
Social studies curriculum materials teachers create themselves	19
Studies Weekly (Studies Weekly, Inc.)	19
English language arts curriculum materials	14
Other curriculum materials not listed	10
Social Studies Alive! (TCI)	7
MyWorld Interactive (Savvas, formerly Pearson)	6
Into Social Studies (HMH)	5
IMPACT Social Studies (McGraw Hill)	3
Our World (Five Ponds Press)	2
Nystrom Atlas (Social Studies School Service)	1
Inquiry Journeys (InquirED)	1
Young Citizens (Social Studies School Service)	0
Active Classroom (Social Studies School Service)	0
N/A (no particular curriculum material is provided as a requirement or recommendation)	29

NOTES: This table depicts response data from the following survey item ($n = 624$): "Select the following social studies curricula that are provided by your school or district, either as a requirement or recommendation, this school year (2021–2022)." This table includes responses from elementary school principals. Respondents were instructed to "select all that apply."

TABLE A.2

Percentage of Principals Who Indicated Additional Materials Are Provided by Their School or District as a Requirement or Recommendation to Support Their Social Studies Instruction

Curricula	Percentage	
	Elementary	Secondary
BrainPOP	32	23
Scholastic News	29	18
Kahoot!	26	38
Newsela	22	26
TIME for Kids	18	10
Teachers Pay Teachers	16	14
Seesaw	14	6
Quizlet	12	27
Khan Academy	12	24
State department of education website	10	12
YouTube	10	17
Using a search engine (e.g., Google)	9	13
Edutopia	9	12
MobyMax	8	7
ixl.com	8	11
Study Island (Edmentum)	5	5
Resources obtained through social media sites	5	5
Teaching Tolerance (Learning for Justice)	4	5
Common Sense Education	3	3
CommonLit	3	6
Other	3	4
Smithsonian	3	6
The DBQ Project	2	15
National Archives	2	5
Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources	2	6
National Parks Service Teaching with Historic Places	2	1
Anti-Defamation League	1	4
Histories Mysteries	1	1
Center for Civic Education	1	4
Facing History and Ourselves	1	3
Read.Inquire.Write	1	0

Table A.2—Continued

Curricula	Percentage	
	Elementary	Secondary
Teaching for Change	1	1
Bill of Rights Institute	1	3
Teaching Hard History	0	0
1619 Project	0	2
Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History	0	3
Native Knowledge 360	0	0
Share My Lesson	0	0
Annenberg Classroom	0	1
Rethinking Schools	0	0
Choices Program at Brown University	0	0
iCivics	0	6
New York Times Upfront	0	2
ProCon	0	1
Social Justice Booklist	0	0
Stanford History Education Group	0	2
Zinn Education Project	0	1
1776 Unites	0	0
N/A (no additional materials are required or recommended)	31	24

NOTES: This table depicts response data from the following survey item ($n = 1,540$): “Beyond curricula, please select the additional instructional materials that are required or recommended by your school or district for social studies instruction this school year (2021–2022).” This table includes responses from elementary and secondary school principals. Respondents were instructed to “select all that apply.”

TABLE A.3

Percentage of Principals Who Indicated Various Social Studies Curricula Are Provided by Their School or District as a Requirement or Recommendation to Support Their Secondary Social Studies Instruction

Curricula	Percentage
Social studies curriculum materials teachers create themselves	25
Social studies curriculum materials my school or district created	22
US History (McGraw Hill)	18
World History (McGraw Hill)	17
US History (HMH)	12
Other curriculum materials not listed	12
History Alive! (TCI)	8
Government (McGraw-Hill)	8
World Civilizations (HMH)	8
Civics and Economics (McGraw Hill)	8

Table A.3—Continued

Curricula	Percentage
World Geography (HMH)	7
American History, Middle Grades (Savvas, formerly Pearson)	7
US Government (HMH)	6
Civics (HMH)	6
Economics (HMH)	6
English language arts curriculum materials	5
MyWorld Interactive (Savvas)	4
Social Studies Techbooks (Discovery Education)	4
Geography Alive! (TCI)	3
Macgruder’s American Government (Savvas)	3
Macgruder’s Economics (Savvas)	2
World History Interactive (Savvas)	2
Into Social Studies (HMH)	2
US History Interactive (Savvas)	2
Global Geography (HMH)	1
Big History Project (OER Project)	1
Social Studies School Service (Nystrom)	1
US History (Discovery Education Techbooks)	1
The American Yawp (Stanford University Press)	0
Project Imagine United States History (Savvas)	0
World History Project (OER Project)	0
Active Classroom (Social Studies School Service)	0
N/A (no particular curriculum material is provided as a requirement or recommendation)	20

NOTES: This table depicts response data from the following survey item ($n = 921$): “Select the following social studies curricula that are provided by your school or district, either as a requirement or recommendation, this school year (2021–2022).” This table includes responses from principals in secondary schools. Respondents were instructed to “select all that apply.”

TABLE A.4

Percentage of Elementary Teachers Who Used Social Studies Curricula Regularly (once a week or more, on average) in 2021–2022

Curricula	Percentage
Curriculum materials I create myself	51
Curriculum materials my school or district created	28
Studies Weekly (Studies Weekly, Inc.)	16
Other curriculum materials not listed	15
MyWorld Interactive (Savvas, formerly Pearson)	7
Social Studies Alive! (TCI)	4
IMPACT Social Studies (McGraw Hill)	4
Into Social Studies (HMH)	3
Our World (Five Ponds Press)	1
Young Citizens (Social Studies School Service)	1
Active Classroom (Social Studies School Service)	0
Inquiry Journeys (InquirED)	0
Nystrom Atlas (Social Studies School Service)	0
N/A (I do not use a particular curriculum material regularly)	18

NOTES: This table depicts response data from the following survey item ($n = 721$): “Among the elementary social studies curriculum materials in this list, select any materials you use regularly (once a week or more, on average) for your social studies instruction this school year (2021–2022).” This table includes responses from elementary teachers. Respondents were instructed to “select all that apply.”

TABLE A.5

Percentage of Elementary Teachers Who Used Additional Materials Beyond Curriculum Materials for their Social Studies Instruction Regularly (once a week or more, on average) in 2021–2022

Curricula	Percentage
Teachers Pay Teachers	70
BrainPOP	60
YouTube	48
Scholastic News	37
Kahoot!	32
Using a search engine (e.g., Google)	31
Seesaw	21
Newsela	17
Resources obtained through social media sites	16
TIME for Kids	15
Khan Academy	12
ixl.com	11
Other	8
Quizlet	8
MobyMax	6

Table A.5—Continued

Curricula	Percentage
Edutopia	6
State department of education website	5
Smithsonian	4
Common Sense Education	4
CommonLit	3
iCivics	2
National Parks Service Teaching with Historic Places	2
Teaching Tolerance (Learning for Justice)	2
Study Island (Edmentum)	2
The DBQ Project	2
Bill of Rights Institute	1
Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History	1
1619 Project	1
Read.Inquire.Write	1
Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources	1
Native Knowledge 360	0
Share My Lesson	0
Facing History and Ourselves	0
Histories Mysteries	0
National Archives	0
Teaching for Change	0
Social Justice Booklist	0
Center for Civic Education	0
Stanford History Education Group	0
Zinn Education Project	0
Annenberg Classroom	0
Anti-Defamation League	0
Choices Program at Brown University	0
Rethinking Schools	0
New York Times Upfront	0
ProCon	0
Teaching Hard History	0
1776 Unites	0

NOTES: This table depicts response data from the following survey item ($n = 721$): “Indicate which additional instructional materials—beyond curriculum materials—you or your students use regularly (once a week or more, on average) for social studies instruction this school year (2021–2022).” This table includes responses from elementary teachers. Respondents were instructed to “select all that apply.”

Notes

¹ We refer to the NAEP data because that information is the only source of national data on students' achievement in social studies. We note there has been some criticism of NAEP's proficiency levels, specifically that they are set at a higher level than grade-level standards, which is why so few students achieve this level. For more information, see Loveless, 2016. NAEP proficiency standards are set separately for each subject and grade level.

² Although we cannot discuss individual instructional materials in detail in our analyses because of small sample sizes, we include tables in the appendix that provide basic frequency tabulations of specific social studies curricula and supplemental materials for interested readers.

³ In addition to differences in standards, states also vary significantly in terms of their social studies–related graduation requirements (i.e., number of credits needed, specific courses required, service-learning minimums, exit or citizenship exams) (Hansen et al., 2018; Education Commission of the States [ECS], 2019; Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017; Shapiro and Brown, 2018). Because these requirements likely have more impact on secondary social studies instruction than elementary, we do not consider these differences in our report. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that these differences might have consequences for the content emphasized in lower grades.

⁴ These analyses are based on a survey item about principals' perceptions of their students' achievement prior to the pandemic as opposed to actual student assessment data. Principals were asked, "Please estimate the average achievement of students at your school in ELA and mathematics based on benchmark assessments administered in previous school years, prior to COVID-19."

⁵ We feel comfortable using 2021 data for the science comparisons because, historically, these percentages have been relatively stable from school year to school year (especially when we use the threshold of "at least once per school year"). Looking at data for ELA and math as an illustrative example, the percentage of elementary principals reporting professional development at least once in 2021 was 88 percent for ELA and 81 percent for math; the percentage reporting coaching at least once in 2021 was 86 percent in ELA and 80 percent in math; and the percentage reporting collaborative learning at least once in 2021 was 93 percent in ELA and 90 percent in math. The percentage of secondary principals reporting professional development at least once in 2021 was 82 percent for ELA and 80 percent for math; the percentage reporting coaching at least once in 2021 was 80 percent in ELA and 77 percent in math; and the percentage reporting collaborative learning at least once in 2021 was 93 percent in ELA and 91 percent in math. Thus, we anticipate patterns in the science data for 2022 would look very similar to those we observed in 2021.

⁶ Ideally, we would be able to examine whether teachers' access to school- and district-provided supports, such as principal feedback and professional learning opportunities, is related to teachers' instructional practices. However, because we only collected these data from principals and not from teachers, we are not able to make this association. Instead, to approximate this analysis, we use a survey item given to principals asking to what extent a shared set of teaching practices used by all is present in their schools to support instruction.

⁷ Some differences might be related to variation in the total number of hours of instructional activities each week for students.

⁸ We did not ask about all tasks and activities for all subjects. For social studies, we did not ask about alignment to state-mandated assessments because these largely do not exist in this subject area. For ELA, we did not ask about priorities likely commonly agreed to be unique to social studies instruction, such as "inclusion of primary and secondary sources created by historically marginalized people" and "inclusion of authentic primary and secondary sources to build content knowledge." Because we asked about a greater number of objectives for social studies than for ELA and because we asked teachers to select five for both subjects, we note that percentages for ELA will likely be greater than for social studies simply as a function of the way the survey was administered. However, we do not believe this difference is large enough to inhibit our interpretation of these data in this manner.

⁹ This pattern might be because ratings were done for elementary and secondary instruction together and combine U.S. history and civics. Thus, ratings might be too broad to pick up nuances.

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About This Report

In this report, drawing on the spring 2022 American Instructional Resources Survey via the RAND American Educator Panels (AEP), we examine the extent to which state-, district-, and school-provided infrastructure is present to support elementary social studies instruction. The AEP are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country. The panels are a proud member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative. If you would like to know more about the data set, survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting, see *American Instructional Resources Surveys: 2022 Technical Documentation and Survey Results* (RR-A134-14, available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A134-14). If you are interested in using AEP data for your own surveys or analysis or in reading other AEP-related publications, visit www.rand.org/aep or contact aep@rand.org.

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