

State Board of Education Core Social Studies Knowledge Proposal

Alaska Department of Education and Early Development
Deena Bishop, Ed.D., Commissioner
December 3, 2025



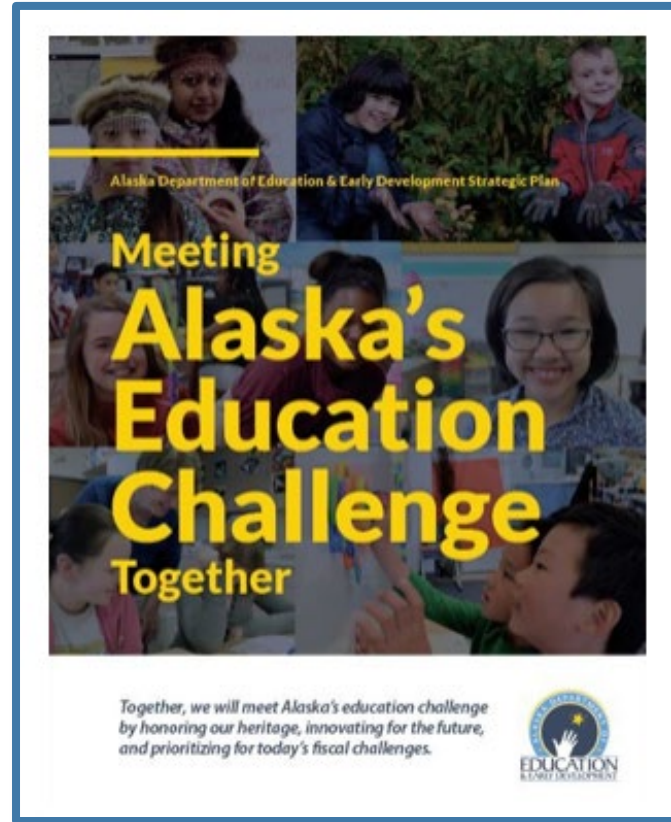
Purpose of Today's Presentation

- Share a proposal to strengthen core social studies background knowledge through the SBOE Closing the Achievement Gap Committee
- Address recent social studies concerns regarding specificity in our standards

Mission, Vision, and Purpose

Mission	Vision	Purpose
An excellent education for every student every day.	All students will succeed in their education and work, shape worthwhile and satisfying lives for themselves, exemplify the best values of society, and be effective in improving the character and quality of the world about them. - Alaska Statute 14.03.015	DEED exists to provide information, resources, and leadership to support an excellent education for every student every day.

Alaska's Education Challenge



Five Shared Strategic Priorities:

1. Support all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade.
2. Increase career, technical, and culturally relevant education to meet student and workforce needs.
3. **Close the achievement gap by ensuring equitable educational rigor and resources.**
4. Prepare, attract, and retain effective education professionals.
5. Improve the safety and well-being of students through school partnerships with families, communities, and tribes.

Recent Criticism

”
Alaska’s social studies standards don’t mention the Nome Gold Rush...the Trans-Alaska Pipeline system...William Egan...

”
There is hardly any historical content...

David Randall, 10/22/2025
The Federalist

”
“The [AIR] presenters insisted that standards must have an equity focus and touted a shift from learning about social studies to...action civics.

Jacob Wehmeyer, 11/17/2025
Claremont Institute

Where is it coming from?

AIR (American Institutes for Research)

- A large, nonpartisan social-science research organization founded in 1946.
- Works mainly in education, workforce, health, and public-sector program evaluation.
- Uses empirical, data-driven research, often informing policies associated with center-left priorities (e.g., equity initiatives, public-program improvement).
- Focuses on producing evidence and analysis, not ideological advocacy.

Claremont Institute

- A conservative political-thought institute founded in 1979.
- Promotes ideas rooted in the American founding, natural rights, and limited government.
- Produces philosophical and ideological arguments, not large-scale empirical research.
- Functions openly as a right-of-center think tank influencing political and cultural debates.

What are Content Area Standards?

Content standards outline the skills and knowledge expected of students from grade to grade and subject to subject. Content standards establish a framework for teaching and learning, outlining how knowledge acquisition progresses across grade levels and builds from one grade to the next. By setting clear learning benchmarks, content standards guide educators in developing effective learning experiences for all students across Alaska.

Why do we need Social Studies Content Areas Standards?

- Setting Expectations for Student Learning throughout Alaska
- Understanding Strengths and Gaps in Student Learning
- Ensuring all Students are Presented with Diverse Perspectives and Knowledge
- Establishing Rigorous Expectations and Setting High Standards in All Schools
- Promoting Alaska-Wide Educator Collaboration

State and Local Roles in Adopting Standards and Curriculum

State Board of Education

Sets statewide goals and adopts statewide content standards

4 AAC 04.010 – Purposes and Responsibilities

- Establishes statewide goals for public education
- Adopts content standards by reference
- Provides standards the public, districts, teachers, and students can use to measure educational quality
- Defines content standards as broad indicators of mastery
- Allows districts to tailor curriculum to local conditions and expectations

4 AAC 03.030 – Subjects

- Identifies the subject areas in which students should gain a working knowledge

4 AAC 04.020 – Skills for Graduating Students

- States that graduates should possess a broad knowledge base

Local School Boards

Adopts curriculum, instructional materials, and local educational plans

4 AAC 04.010 – Purposes & Responsibilities–District Obligations

- Work with the public, teachers, and students to tailor curriculum to community needs
- Adopt textbooks and instructional materials consistent with district curriculum and state standards
- Choose and implement teaching strategies so students achieve high performance
- Reflect these strategies in district policies, curriculum, assessments, and instructional materials

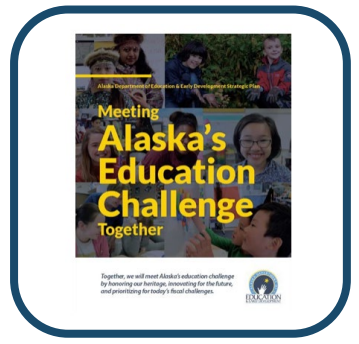
4 AAC 05.080 – School Curriculum and Personnel

- Requires each district to develop and adopt a K–12 curriculum
- Curriculum must identify goals, content, and a plan for evaluating effectiveness
- Districts must implement curriculum that reflects local needs, community expectations, and state content standards
- Governing boards approve curriculum/instructional materials

What Are We Seeing Across District Websites?

Potential Path Forward through the Alaska Education Challenge

Connection to the Alaska Education Challenge



- The recent AEC review recommended keeping the five strategic priorities and developing clear goals to guide DEED's work
- Limited background knowledge disproportionately affects disadvantaged students
- This work directly supports the AEC priority of Closing the Achievement Gap

Why Background Knowledge Matters



- Students with stronger knowledge learn new information more easily
- Students with limited knowledge face greater challenges
- Comprehension and long-term memory depend on prior knowledge
- Negative compounded effect - the knowledge gap widens over time
- Disproportionally impacts our disadvantaged students

The Old Adage

The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer



- The Matthew Effect: Early strengths lead to faster growth, while early gaps compound and widen over time because knowledge accelerates learning
- Background knowledge functions as the “currency” that allows students to access new learning

Connection to the Science of Reading



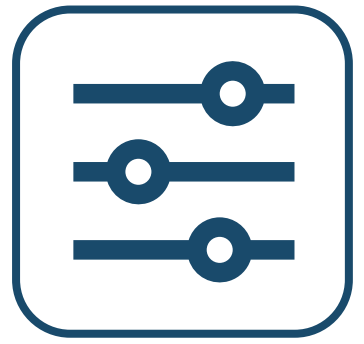
- Background knowledge is central to comprehension
- Vocabulary grows faster with content-rich instruction
- New learning attaches to what students already know and enables long term memory
- Critical for closing the achievement gap

Connection to the ELA Standards



- Alaska's ELA standards require students to read a balance of literary and informational texts, with informational text making up fifty percent of student reading beginning in kindergarten
- When students regularly engage with well-selected informational texts, they build the background knowledge needed to read increasingly complex texts
- High-quality social studies informational sources can reinforce this work and help students meet the expectations outlined in the ELA standards

Alaska's Social Studies Standards



- The 2024 standards outline expectations civic understanding, historical thinking, and geographic literacy
- Emphasize disciplinary skills, inquiry, and analysis of primary sources
- Broad by design to allow for local flexibility
- Lack specificity - do not include a detailed outline of core social studies knowledge

Proposed Path Forward



- Work through the SBOE Closing the Achievement Gap Committee
- Establish a clear goal focused on strengthening background knowledge through the development of a Core Social Studies Knowledge companion document

Core Social Studies Knowledge Companion Document



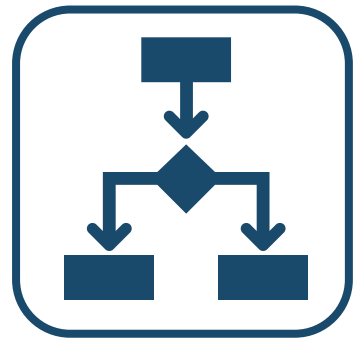
- A companion document would provide added specificity and function alongside the standards
- Identifies essential content all students should know
 - Major events, foundational historical figures, essential primary sources, structure of the U.S. Government, and/or core geographic concepts
- Developed with educators and content experts

Further DEED Resource Development



- DEED develops exemplar supports for districts
 - Scope and sequence
 - Pacing guides
 - Model units
- Shows how standards, content knowledge, and instruction work together
- Supports small districts with limited capacity

Anticipated Outcomes



- Greater consistency across districts
- Stronger comprehension and vocabulary
- Increased support for small districts
- Clearer links between standards and instruction
- Progress toward closing the achievement gap

Board Questions and Discussion



Contact Information



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