

SECTION ONE: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the fall of 2001, Alberta Learning embarked on the development of a new provincial high school social studies program by conducting a province-wide needs assessment survey. The purpose of this process was to gather data, input and suggestions to guide curriculum developers in the development of the new social studies program for grades 10–12.

A needs assessment questionnaire was the primary tool for gathering qualitative and quantitative data from educational partners and stakeholders. During the needs assessment process, respondents submitted 1526 questionnaires via consultation sessions, mail, fax and the Internet.

Recommendations from teachers, students and other respondents are analyzed separately in this report. Feedback from Aboriginal and Francophone respondents is included in the overall results. Differences between the Aboriginal responses and the overall responses are highlighted. Differing Francophone responses are analyzed in the same way as the Aboriginal responses.

Areas of Concern about the Existing High School Social Studies Program

The following summarizes areas of concern surrounding the existing high school social studies program, as identified by questionnaire respondents and consultation participants.

A. Program Content

- Curricular content needs to be updated after more than 20 years without a major overhaul to Alberta's social studies program.
- European and North American examples/case studies are overemphasized in the existing curriculum; too few examples are drawn from other parts of the world.
- Issues and perspectives of Aboriginal peoples are not adequately represented in the existing curriculum.
- The current program does not allow for the development of a genuine understanding of Canada's Francophone realities.

B. Program Rationale

- The rationale for what is being studied is not always adequately explained in the existing high school program.

C. Curriculum Overlap

- There is too much unnecessary repetition of subject matter from grade to grade within the high school social studies program.
- Content already covered in social studies in junior high school is unnecessarily repeated at the high school level.
- There is unjustified overlap between the high school social studies program and other high school programs; in particular, the social studies program needlessly repeats material covered in Science, Technology and Society (STS) components of the science programs.

D. Quantity of Curricular Content

- There is too much content for teachers and students to cover in the grades 10–12 social studies curriculum.

- The breadth of content results in superficial understanding of social studies topics and issues.
- The curriculum does not allow enough time for engaging activities and active learning.
- The curriculum does not allow enough time for the study of current events; in practice, teachers and students get bogged down in prescribed content and do not have time left for the 20% elective component of the high school curriculum.
- Curriculum creep—the expansion of the curriculum over time due to content inserts through program revisions—is making the two Grade 12 social studies courses (Social Studies 30 and 33) unmanageable for students and teachers; over the years, content additions have been made to the programs without proportional deletions.
- The Grade 12 social studies diploma examinations have exacerbated the problem of curriculum creep by prompting teachers to cover additional content; teachers perceive the need to teach new events and concepts that appear on diploma examinations, even when such items appear only as distractors in multiple choice questions.

E. Skills and Processes

- Skill development suffers due to the program's emphasis on knowledge objectives.
- The segregation of skill objectives at the back of the existing social studies program of studies does not facilitate the teaching and learning of social studies skills.

Input and Suggestions for the New High School Social Studies Program

The following is a summary of general advice and input provided by questionnaire respondents and consultation participants for the development of the new social studies program for grades 10–12.

A. Breadth of Coverage

- The new high school social studies program should have fewer topics of study than the existing program.
- The limited breadth of the new curriculum should be preserved over time. Alberta Learning should avoid expanding the number of knowledge outcomes by adding outcomes without removing others.
- Alberta Learning should ensure that the problem of curriculum creep—the de facto expansion of the curriculum over time due to real or perceived content inserts—does not re-emerge in the new Grade 12 social studies courses as a result of diploma examinations; diploma examinations should be carefully managed to limit the breadth of the curriculum and to preserve its integrity over time.
- The new social studies program should provide curricular space for the study of current events that are related to curricular outcomes.

B. Depth of Coverage

- Social studies topics and issues should be explored in more depth in the new program than in the existing program.
- The purpose of in-depth coverage should be the development of higher-order skills and depth of understanding, not the mastery of trivia.

C. Program Focus

- The exploration of issues should be emphasized in the new social studies program; students should explore diverse perspectives on issues; furthermore, they should formulate, discuss and defend their own informed positions on issues.

- A clear rationale for what is studied should be provided in the new curriculum. Comprehensive and concise rationales should be provided for the new high school program, for each course and for each unit of study within a course.
- The new high school program should be organized into thematic units; understanding of chronological development, however, should still be fostered within units and within each course.
- Each course should explore a central, unifying theme and several sub-themes; the overarching theme should be a significant, relevant and multifaceted theme that can sustain student interest throughout a course.
- Each of the three overarching course themes in the grades 10–12 program should be distinctive; all three themes, however, should be inter-related.
- The new program should examine highly-rated themes such as Democracy, Nationalism, Globalization, World War I and World War II, and Canadian History/Canadian Studies.
- The new high school program should be more interdisciplinary; concepts and methods of the disciplines that comprise social studies should be embedded in the curriculum.
- When examining history, the new social studies program should concentrate on historical developments that help students understand today's world and emerging issues.

D. Program Content

- The new high school social studies program should emphasize world history and global issues.
- In the new program, illustrative examples from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Central America, South America and other regions of the globe should be included alongside examples from North America and Europe.
- No course in the high school program should focus exclusively on Canada; instead, Canadian case studies should be included in studies of global forces and issues throughout the high school program; each course should contain at least one unit that examines the Canadian dimension of a global trend or issue.
- Canadian case studies should include a thorough look at Francophone presence, influence and contributions on a countrywide scale.
- Aboriginal topics and issues, such as treaty rights, land claims, self-determination and globalization's impact on Aboriginal peoples, should also be examined in the new program. The new curriculum should foster appreciation for the contributions of Aboriginal peoples to the development of Canada.
- The new high school social studies program should avoid topics covered in previous social studies courses or in other subject areas; needless repetition should be avoided.

E. Skill Development

- The new high school program should be conceived as a multi-year sequential program in which a concerted effort is made to develop skills at successive levels.
- Curriculum developers should avoid developing low-level (content-centred/ comprehension) outcomes; high-level outcomes involving higher-order competencies, such as critical thinking and judgement, should predominate in the new curriculum.
- The new high school program should emphasize skill development more than content coverage. Curricular space should be provided for the fostering of critical thinking, creative thinking, social participation and inquiry skills.
- Through the use of primary and secondary source materials, students should learn how to critically evaluate interpretations of history and current events.

F. Two Course Sequences

- The new social studies program should be offered in two course sequences for students of differing ability levels; both sequences should examine the same subject matter but

should employ differing skill expectations and differing standards for assessment; specialized resources, with appropriate readability levels, should be developed for each course sequence.

- Attitude outcomes in both course sequences should be identical; both routes should prepare students to be active, responsible and discerning citizens.
- Plans for a common Grade 10 social studies program should be reconsidered; equivalents of Social Studies 10 and Social Studies 13 should continue to be offered at the Grade 10 level.

G. Learning and Teaching Resources

- Learning and teaching resources should include diverse perspectives on issues; basic learning resources should contain excerpts from primary and secondary sources.
- Ample resources should be allocated for implementation of the curriculum; substantial implementation guides should be provided for each of the six high school courses; basic and support resources should be available in both English and French.

H. Stakeholder Participation

- Each stage of curriculum development should continue to involve key stakeholder groups; e.g., high school teachers, high school students, post-secondary educators, parents/guardians, Aboriginals, Francophones.