

4. Many of the strongest concerns of teachers were related to aspects of teaching and learning conditions.

Teachers expressed substantial frustrations with an array of conditions that prevented them from doing their best work with students and achieving the goals of social studies with all students, including the following:

- class sizes are too large,
- standardized testing gets in the way of learning,
- insufficient support for inclusion and diversity of learning,
- too much administration and too many administrative tasks, and
- simply not enough time to properly deal with the many demands of being a social studies teacher.

5. There is a need for a systematic, comprehensive and inclusive review and revision of the social studies curriculum consistent with the principles and evidence for creating great social studies teaching and learning.

Teachers believe strongly in the fundamental elements of Alberta’s curriculum, but they want to see changes to the content and structure of the program of studies to improve the curriculum that is at the core of their work with students. Such a process in social studies should be part of a broader process of review and renewal in curriculum, teaching and learning based on the principles articulated in the ATA’s *Renewing Alberta’s Promise: A Great School for All* (ATA 2015).

6. There is a further need to systematically address improving the teaching and learning conditions in Alberta’s social studies classrooms.

One of the important conclusions that can be drawn from this study is the realization that curriculum goals and purposes and the conditions for teaching and learning are integrally related. Clearly curriculum reform is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for improving teaching and learning in social studies. Teachers have made it clear that it is equally important to address the many and growing concerns about the conditions under which social studies teachers try to meet the goals of the curriculum and develop the full potential of all of their students, and the implications for improvement. To do so will involve generating political will, cooperation and resources, and should focus on the following elements:

- Changes in the conditions of teaching related to class size, and support for inclusion and administrative tasks with which teachers can be burdened
- More adequate resources, including technology and support for the use of technology and resources
- Greater support for professional development and autonomy with a program of studies that supports teacher judgment
- More time to engage in the work of a professional teacher—to innovate, collaborate with colleagues and actively engage in curriculum development
- Minimizing the impact of standardized testing and creating opportunities to develop and implement assessment strategies consistent with the goals of social studies learning

The Future of Social Studies—  
The Voices of Alberta Teachers

As the professional association representing Alberta’s teachers, the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA) has a responsibility to ensure that teachers’ voices and views play a key role in curriculum revision. To that end, over the past year the ATA’s Social Studies Council has worked with ATA staff, researchers and academic advisors in designing and implementing a process to seek the advice of social studies teachers across the province and across all grade levels. The survey and study examined the complex interrelationships between curriculum and instruction, assessment, teachers’ capacity to achieve the goals of the program and the influence of ongoing changes in teaching and learning conditions. Larry Booi and Hans Smits were the lead authors of the report. They considered the input of the 498 teachers who participated in the survey and performed a comprehensive review of the literature on social studies teaching.

The key findings of this report, summarized in what follows, offer important insights into the current state of social studies teaching in the province. The findings are especially timely in the context of the yet unfulfilled promise of curriculum renewal and the reconsideration of the current approaches to student assessment and accountability—all strategic priorities for the Association.

As with all Association research efforts, completion of a study such as this is only a first step. In the months and years ahead, this report will contribute to our ongoing efforts to advance progressive reform in curriculum and assessment so that Alberta continues to be a world leader in meeting the learning needs of all students. In this respect the study contributes to the broader policy conversation presented in *Renewing Alberta’s Promise: A Great School for All*, which outlines a comprehensive framework for educational development in Alberta.





This report not only delivers an analysis of the state of social studies teaching in Alberta but also considers the broader contexts of teaching and learning across the province. This study has already generated national interest. In May 2016, the Association cohosted, along with the Canadian Association of Foundations of Education (CAFE), a pan-Canadian expert panel of researchers who reviewed the findings from this report in the context of social studies across the country. As well, in reviewing the final report, the Association and Provincial Executive Council cosponsored an invitational symposium, held in Red Deer on November 6, to provide comments and insights for the research team to consider in their next steps. The day began with a brief review of the aspirations of various iterations of the social studies programs of study since 1971 and their groundbreaking commitment to citizenship development through an inquiry- and values-based curriculum. A panel of experts offered their insights and initial impressions of the study’s findings. Panel members included Robert Twerdoclib (PEC liaison to the Council), David Scott (University of Calgary), Carla Peck (University of Alberta) and Joel Westheimer (University of Alberta).

This symposium was designed both to help inform the final report, including key implications and recommendations, and to offer a broader strategic view of the future of social studies in the province. This executive summary, drawn from the full report, is part of an action plan that will advance Association efforts to advocate for a responsive approach to curriculum renewal in Alberta on behalf of Alberta teachers.

The survey of social studies teachers in Alberta was initiated on the basis of two assumptions. First, given the length of time the current program has been in place, it is necessary to make changes to Alberta’s program of studies in social studies, changes that would take into account historical, cultural and demographic changes in the province and address substantively the important issues identified in this study. Second, it is essential to take into account the insights and suggestions of Alberta’s social studies teachers in making decisions about how to change the curriculum and the context of teaching and learning in Alberta’s K–12 classrooms. The study provides ample testimony to the principle that changing curriculum should start from “the ground up” (Evers and Kneyber 2016).

The responses and comments of the nearly 500 teachers who completed the survey indicate clearly that it is indeed time for change. The broad range of teachers’ generous responses to the survey questions provides a rich source of insights into the important questions and issues that will guide curriculum and classroom changes.

While there is clear disagreement among these teachers on some issues, there is also a strong sense of agreement on many important aspects of how to improve curriculum and instruction in our classrooms, including what to keep and what to change in our current program of studies, as well as what needs to happen in our classrooms and schools in order to create the conditions in which the goals of the social studies curriculum are fulfilled and teaching and learning can flourish for all.

The following points summarize the major insights, conclusions and recommendations that emerge from the report. They are offered as key points of focus for the necessary discussion about the future of social studies curriculum in Alberta, and for including in that discussion the critical link between the possibilities for good social studies learning and the conditions in classrooms and schools that impact the achievement of teaching and learning.

## 1. There is broad support from teachers regarding the need for curriculum change in social studies.

Survey participants were clear that the time has come for change and improvement, with 40 per cent of respondents even calling for “a major transformation.” In addition, they collectively made hundreds of suggestions about how to improve the program of studies, ranging across grades and levels including elementary, junior high and senior high schools. The recognition of the need for curriculum change reflects many years of experience that teachers at all grade levels have with the current program and therefore offers a legitimate and necessary perspective on the directions and possibilities for change.

## 2. There is a high level of support for fundamental elements of Alberta’s current program of studies in social studies.

While teachers were in favour of making improvements to the curriculum, they also made it clear that major elements of the current curriculum’s approach to social studies are highly valued and should be preserved and enhanced, including the following:

- the central focus on the development of active and engaged citizens of a democratic society in local, national and global contexts;
- the emphasis on multiple perspectives in all components of social studies courses, including a special focus on Aboriginal perspectives and experiences;
- the issue-centred and inquiry-based approach;
- the importance of the role of skills, values and critical thinking;
- the interdisciplinary approach, drawing on history, geography and a wide range of social science disciplines;
- the emphasis on helping students to become more adept at dealing with complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty; and the important role played by current affairs and controversial issues.

## 3. There are significant concerns with some aspects of the curriculum.

A number of areas of concern emerged with a range of aspects, some related to specific grades, others ranging across grades and levels. The central concerns of teachers are not with the goals and purposes that are outlined in the “front matter” of the program of studies, but rather with the way the program does or does not support the realization of those goals and purposes.

The following areas were often mentioned:

- There is “too much content to be covered,” and too many knowledge outcomes specified, which limit the teacher’s ability to focus on the broader and more important goals.
- There are concerns related to “developmental appropriateness” of some outcomes, especially at the elementary level.
- A range of concerns were expressed related to the negative impact of various aspects of assessment policies and practices.
- A significant number of concerns were raised about issues of scope and sequence; for example, the repetition across grade levels, the appropriateness of some content at the grade levels and the logic of how topics are distributed from grade to grade.
- Many respondents identified concerns about the adequacy, sufficiency and appropriateness of resources for teaching and learning.
- While there is support for the use of technology in teaching and learning, many respondents identified problems with the access to and availability of technology.