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Experts Say Social Sciences Are 'Left Behind'

By **Sarah D. Sparks**

Washington

As the majority of states implement common-core content standards, some experts are arguing that that the focus on mathematics and language arts leaves out the social and economic studies that can help students connect content to their daily lives.

Researchers at a National Research Council forum on social sciences in Washington last month suggested that the expansion of testing in math and reading under the No Child Left Behind Act has led to a piecemeal approach to teaching social and behavioral science subjects in the states. While all but four states have adopted the common-core standards in mathematics and language arts and the NRC has proposed a framework for voluntary national science standards, social and behavioral sciences have failed to gain a significant presence in either set of guidance, despite protests last year from the field.

"No Child Left Behind frankly left us behind, and the common core gave us a footnote," said S.G. Grant, the education dean at Binghamton University in Binghamton, N.Y.

The discussion caps a year of dismal news on the social studies front for U.S. students: National Assessment of Educational Progress reports out this year found mostly mediocre performance for students in geography, civics, and history.

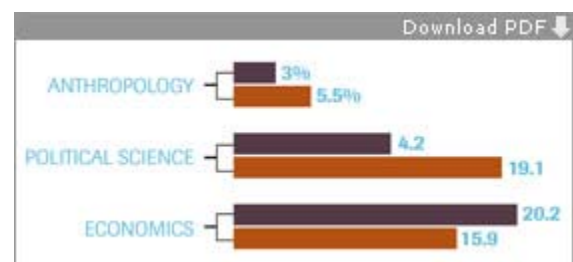
The NRC meeting was intended to help policymakers and school officials discuss ways to use social and behavioral studies to tie together content in the common core. The forum mirrors a separate conversation launched last May by state school chiefs over the development of social studies standards, but experts at the NRC forum argued that social sciences should not be taught only within a stand-alone subject course.

"It is the integration of sciences, not the separation, that moves science forward," said Martha Zaslow, the policy and communications director for the Society for Research in Child Development, in Washington,

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9-12 Social Studies Standards For Delaware and Minnesota

States can differ dramatically in the amount of attention they require schools to devote to specific topics in the social and behavioral sciences.



arguing that schools should begin teaching students from the elementary grades on up to use an “integrated approach” to content.

SOURCE: Survey of Enacted Curriculum, University of Wisconsin

Incorporating perspectives from social sciences can help students connect otherwise-separated core subjects, like reading and science, to the interdisciplinary uses of those lessons in real life, according to Mr. Grant.

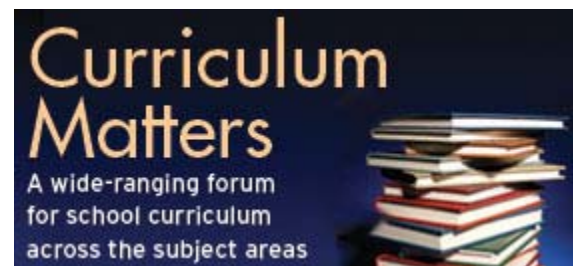
Making It Real

“I can’t think of a social problem that has a disciplinary focus,” Mr. Grant said. “What social problem has only a political solution, or for which only history can give a lens on? The value of the social sciences is in the ways we can think about social problems through multiple lenses.”

In a [study](#) released at the forum and commissioned by the National Academy of Sciences, of which the NRC is a part, researchers at the University of Michigan, working with the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, analyze the social and behavioral studies—including anthropology, economics, geography, history, political science, psychology, and sociology—in states’ K-12 content standards from 2007 to 2010. The study looks at content standards from eight states: Delaware, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Minnesota, Ohio, Oregon, and Wisconsin.

Co-authors Diane Massell, a senior research associate at the consortium, and Carol A. Barnes, an assistant research scientist, found that states gave the most attention to political science, economics, and geography. But “there was a lot of variation in what was given attention and where,” Ms. Massell said. “The standards don’t have legs on their own—they’re not going to walk into a classroom and be used.”

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For example, history topics made up nearly a third of all state social studies standards, and anthropology popped up sporadically across states, but sociology and psychology content was “almost negligible” in all but Idaho’s standards.

Accountability is even more sporadic for social studies topics, researchers found. For example, 21 states now require an economics course for high school graduation, up from only 13 in 1998, but only 19 states require students to be tested in the subject, down from 25 in 1998, according to William D. Bosshardt, a senior adviser for program development at the Council for Economic Education, based in New York City.

Opportunity Gap?

Experts voiced concern that the lack of time spent on social and behavioral topics in the main curriculum may be creating opportunity gaps for students planning to take honors courses in high school. The University of Michigan study analyzed the nearly 600,000 Advanced Placement exams taken in Massachusetts, Michigan, Texas, and Virginia in 2010 and found 25 percent to 40 percent of all exams were in the social- and behavioral-science fields, from psychology to micro- and macroeconomics—suggesting students interested in advanced coursework need more preparation early on in social-science content.

Moreover, even if students have access to social and behavioral courses, they may not be schooled in the skills they need to succeed in that work. In the University of Michigan's analysis of K-3 and 9-12 standards in Delaware and Minnesota, the researchers found more than 60 percent of elementary content standards in social and behavioral topics and more than a third of those at the high school level required only basic skills of memorization and information processing. By contrast, less than 3 percent of high school standards in those fields and less than 1 percent of elementary content standards required students to synthesize, evaluate, and make connections among concepts—the most advanced cognitive skills.

Shirley M. Malcom, the director of education and human-resources programs at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in Washington, said prior attempts to boost social-science topics in the curriculum have failed because teachers and administrators already have too much to cover in a given year. "If you took every standard and stacked them up, they'd end up being thigh-high," she said.

Ms. Massell of the research consortium agreed.

"States are already struggling to cogently and coherently add content" to comply with common-core standards, she said. "We need to consider integration in nontraditional subjects."

Felice J. Levine, the executive director of the American Educational Research Association, in Washington, also agreed. She noted that schools could use basic psychology instruction, for example, to help students reflect on day-to-day issues such as bullying or social networking. "It is how we develop a deeper and richer curriculum," she said.

