

SOCIAL STUDIES IN WESTON

A SNAPSHOT—June 1, 2009

Submitted by:

The K-12 History/Social Studies Program Review Committee

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INTRODUCTION

On Thursday March 19 and Friday March 20, 2009, a visiting team of six visited the Weston Public Schools to conduct a K-12 History/Social Studies Program Review. The team visited each Weston Public School, met with teachers, administrators, students, and parents, observed classes, reviewed materials, and discussed the role of Social Studies in Weston from K-12. This report is a summary of the snapshot of the Social Studies Program in the schools.

CHARGE

The Program Review committee received the following charge:

1. Do the current Weston Public Schools History and Social Studies Learning Standards and Big Ideas support the goals of preparing students to be lifelong learners, active citizens of the world, and successful students in post-secondary education and beyond to career challenges?

Do course outlines and units of study reflect these goals?

Do the Benchmark Assessment Tasks assess student progress toward these goals?

To what extent does our curriculum promote understanding of diverse points of view and different ways of living?

How well does our curriculum prepare students to be politically and economically literate and to become socially responsible, globally-aware citizens?

2. To what extent does Weston's K-12 Social Studies curriculum provide a well-articulated, balanced scope and sequence of instruction in the areas of History and Social Studies?

Does the curriculum reflect an effective balance of Global Education, Economics, Civics, Geography and other areas inclusive of Social Studies?

Does the curriculum achieve an appropriate instructional balance between skills, content, and civic engagement?

3. To what extent does classroom instruction reflect curricular goals and best teaching practices?

How well do teachers make use of authentic experiences, technology, and primary sources in their classroom instruction?

How effectively does the instructional model afford students opportunities for deeper study of people, issues, and events in History and Social Studies?

Are resources to students who require extra support equitably provided to History/Social Studies classes?

Are instructional and assessment differentiation evidenced in the Social Studies classroom?

Is adequate time and institutional support given to the study of History and Social Studies from K-12?

The Committee

The Visiting Committee consisted of:

Steve Cohen, Chair, Lecturer, Tufts University Department of Education

Jane Hundley, K-8 Curriculum Coordinator in Social Studies, Burlington Public Schools

Ben Kendall, Social Studies Teacher at Concord-Carlisle Regional High School and a Weston High alumnus

Karen McCarthy, Curriculum Specialist for Science and Social Studies, K-8, Sudbury Public Schools

Scott Nelson, Yale University Junior and an alumnus of Weston High

Dr. Anne Watt, Founder of Primary Source in Watertown, Former Teacher and Administrator in many school systems.

Procedure

When we got to Weston on March 19, we had the chance to meet with Dr. Cheryl Maloney, the Superintendent of the Weston Public Schools, Amber Bock, the Assistant Superintendent of Schools who helped coordinate our visit, Pam Bator, the Interim Elementary Science and Social Studies Specialist for the 2008-2009 school year, and James Murphy, the Department Chair of Middle and High School Social Studies who was the other coordinator of the visit. Steve Cohen, the Chair of the committee, had come to Weston on March 18 to meet with Amber Bock, Jim Murphy, and Pam Bator in order to ask questions and clarify the process.

Each of the committee members had a schedule of classes to visit, faculty, administrators, and students to interview, and materials to read. Ben Kendall, Scott Nelson and Anne Watt spent their time at the Middle and High School buildings, although Anne Watt did get to visit briefly in the schools for younger children. Jane Hundley and Karen McCarthy spent the majority of their time in the Field, Country, and Woodland Schools. Steve Cohen visited each school and spent time in classrooms in all of them.

Two General Observations

From the beginning, it was very clear to the committee that “global connections” meant a great deal in Weston. From our first meeting on Thursday to our last visits on Friday, our group recognized that, as a system, Weston was committed to creating a

curriculum from K-12 in which an understanding of the wider world would be emphasized. We believe that this has been impressively instituted. Education is, of course, never static, and we know that curricula and personnel change over time. But we thought it was very important to note at the beginning of our report that the effort to connect Weston to the wider world begins at the Country and Woodland Schools and continues through the senior year of high school. This was an impressive achievement and one of which the system can be proud.

The other clear picture that emerged was the general satisfaction and commitment of the teachers and administrators in every school. Teachers felt supported and trusted by the administrators with whom they worked, and the latter saw the teachers as continuing to grow as professionals. While this could, in some settings, lead to a satisfaction with the *status quo*, we felt that in Weston, at this time, it was part of a process by which teachers continued to develop professionally while they worked with their students. We felt confident, therefore, that this was not a system content to rest on its laurels, but, rather, that it was one that continued to challenge the teachers to provide classroom experiences of quality for the students of Weston.

Country, Woodland, and Field Schools

Most of the observations from these schools came from the notes of Jane and Karen with some additional thoughts from Anne and Steve. We had the opportunity to meet with the principals of all three schools as well as with Pam Bator and many teachers.

We were in and out of many classrooms and will not critique the work of individual teachers. We recognized that we were taking a snapshot of the schools and were not there to offer pedagogical tips, to ask questions about specific lesson plans, or to evaluate individual teachers. What we feel more comfortable discussing, therefore, is the ways in which the Learning Standards and Big Ideas appear to visitors who had a chance to look, listen, and reflect on three schools in the middle of a week in March.

Maps were everywhere. Not only were they in every classroom, but also they were the focus of many of the lessons that we stopped in to see. A kindergarten class at the Woodland School, where students were drawing maps of their bedrooms, also had maps of Weston, Mattapan (where the Metco students in the class lived), and Uganda prominently displayed. Maps of Japan were evident in the Country School's first grade classes. A second grade class was eagerly following the trip of their student teacher through China. A map followed her route and email allowed the students to ask her questions about what she was seeing. The emphasis in classes on Japan at the Woodland School was on "what was the same and what was different" about life in Japan. Similar questions about Australia were in evidence in second grade classrooms.

The use of the Open Circle Curriculum was everywhere in evidence. Students were clearly used to the routines, games, and songs in the classroom and were comfortable with it and excited by it. The teachers successfully used it to bring about

many successful social interactions in the classroom—from welcoming friends in a free play situation to moving from one activity to another.

We were all impressed by these efforts. The connection between Weston and Uganda was present in an excellent slide show that the principal, Steve Shaw, presented to students at the Country School. We were pleased to see the message of global connections coming right from the principal himself, and Steve Shaw is clearly committed to the mission and message of this work. He told us later that this wasn't his slide show, and that explained why his narration itself was less effective than most of the instruction that we witnessed during our time in Weston. Perhaps this was just to show us what was being done.

The second grade at the Country School focuses on “People Who Make a Difference.” The teachers and administrators spoke of it often. It is a core unit at Woodland School as well, but did not appear to be carried out in the same way. While we felt that it was fine that each school developed units with their own emphases, we did wonder whether both teams of teachers shared the same core goals. In our brief two days, we heard about the “People Who Make a Difference” emphasis and imagine that the teachers use it to inspire and help the students think about their own place in the world.

The Course Outlines and Teaching Guides in the K-3 schools differed at the K-1 and 2-5 levels. While the K-1 guides were rather vague and without a great deal of detail, the older elementary grades provided suggested lessons from a variety of sources and more specific units were described. It would seem that a teacher new to the system at these grade levels would have a clearer guide than a new teacher in the kindergarten or first grade classrooms.

One highlight for us was the number of Weston elementary teachers who have had the opportunity to travel to Uganda, Japan, and Australia. We understood how important the WEEFC grants and the generous Schoen Travelships were in providing support for these trips. It was very clear to all visitors to the elementary schools that the teachers brought back a great deal from their travels and that the students of Weston were the ultimate beneficiaries of these trips. We only wish that all systems were able to help teachers with professional development opportunities like these. Perhaps Weston teachers will be able to share the benefits of this travel in meetings with their colleagues throughout the Commonwealth.

Maps of the United States flourished in the classrooms in Grades 3, 4, and 5 in accordance with the Frameworks for those grades. It is, of course, more difficult to sustain the global connection theme in those grades because of the content demands of US history and geography. At a lunch meeting with the three elementary principals-- Steve Shaw of the Country School, Debra Dunn, Principal of the Woodland School, and Matt Lucey, Principal of the Field School--we raised the question of sustaining Global Connections in those years. Matt Lucey sent us a copy of a memo he had recently written that demonstrated one effort to keep Global Connections omnipresent:

“Congratulations to the Global Readers at Field School

“To expand the understanding of the world we live in, over the past two months all fourth and fifth grade students took part in a global reading initiative that focused on books whose author, characters, or setting takes place outside of the United States. We are thrilled to report:

The students read a grand total of **374** books.

Students read

122 books set in **Asia**

119 books set in **Europe**

72 books set in **Africa**

38 books set in **North America** (in cultures other than our own)

7 books set in **South America**

10 books set in **Australia**

6 books set in **Antarctica**

16 field School students read books in languages other than **English**, including:

Russian

Iranian

Korean

Hebrew

Dutch

Spanish

Australian

German

Greek

Gaelic

French”

When interviewing some students at the High School, many students, when asked what they remembered about social studies from elementary school, immediately mentioned the Oregon Trail unit in Grade 5. They recalled in great detail some of the activities that had gone into that unit and the work they had done. At a Parents’ Forum at the High School during our visit, many parents clearly remembered it as well!

We found the Country, Woodland, and Field Schools to be warm, inviting, dynamic learning communities. There was a sense of calm in the buildings, in classrooms, and in the meetings that we held. Students and teachers appeared happy and proud of the work they are accomplishing. It is obvious that the teachers in Weston have what is needed to do their job. Matt Lucey, Principal of the Field School, put it well, when he said, “as principal, my job is to remove the roadblocks so that teachers can teach.” The teachers with whom we spoke felt respected, supported, and allowed to work creatively.

Grade level meeting times are built into the weekly schedules, and that supports curriculum conversations and consistency among the teachers. A stable teaching staff

has enabled a comfort level to develop within the staff and great content knowledge as well. Grade leaders and their teaching colleagues were on the same page.

Classes were well staffed and aides were present in all the classrooms we visited. In a visit like this, we did not really get the opportunity to see assessments or get anything but a general sense of classroom instruction. Our impressions were, however, quite positive. Social Studies was a part of every classroom that we saw, and clearly the elementary schools have made global connections come alive.

Weston Middle School

Ben Kendall, Scott Nelson, and Anne Watt were the prime observers of Weston Middle School. Steve Cohen also had the opportunity to spend half a day there.

The transition from fifth grade to sixth grade is a significant one. At the Parents Forum it was a matter of quite a bit of discussion. The significant increase in homework was noted. Some parents were pleased to see it; others were not. While some parents felt that the elementary schools did not give enough homework, we found that the Middle School teachers seemed very satisfied by the preparation of the students who entered sixth grade at Weston Middle School. They were prepared to do the work that did increase at that grade. In Social Studies, World Geography is the main focus for grade six. Ancient and World Cultures are the focus of seventh grade, and the History of the United States up to the Civil War is the subject of eighth grade Social Studies. While global connections, as the Weston theme, were mentioned in both the Middle and High Schools, the content specific frameworks really meant that particular courses rather than more overarching themes dominated the classes. The foundation of the global connections plays through secondary school, but, truthfully, and, perhaps, ironically, it is at the elementary rather than at the secondary level that it is most apparent.

The major question in Grade 6 Social Studies was the number of times per week that the class meets. At present, Grade 6 Social Studies meets four times per week. The course, which looks at world geography, systems of government (the lesson which we saw), and economic systems, was very popular with the students with whom we talked. They talked about doing more work than they ever had to do before, but they didn't think it was onerous or unfair. They didn't think that social studies was the reason for the great increase in homework at this level. This course was perfect for the global connections theme, and maps were everywhere. In addition, we saw the use of the Smartboard technology at this level. Teachers had made a very speedy adjustment to their use and looked forward to learning even more about how to use them better. The teachers also took it upon themselves to be very explicit about introducing their students to the world of middle school. Very clear instruction about studying, writing down assignments, and using the school website to help keep up-to-date is very much a part of sixth grade social studies.

While the sixth graders and their teachers felt that the class worked well, the seventh grade teachers felt that their course suffered because their students had had less

social studies the year before. That increased their need to “cover content.” The seventh grade curriculum is very full. After starting the year with a study of the “Foundations of Civilizations,” the students travel through Mesopotamia, Egypt and Israel, Arabia, India, China, Greece, and Rome. While there is no problem seeing the obvious global connections (!) here, both teachers and students (but particularly the latter) expressed concerns about the need to cover so much material. With that being said, there were some excellent lessons on display in the seventh grade, and observers noted that the teachers were particularly able to choose their language with care and intelligence. Classes on the European settlements in the Americas and on trade along the Silk Road were thoughtfully presented in all their complexity.

One can easily imagine the seventh grade teachers looking at the four days per week in sixth grade and imagining that twenty per cent more material could be discussed by students if more time was devoted to social studies in sixth grade. An increase in content in the sixth grade would, of course, reduce the pressure the seventh grade teachers feel to get through all of these civilizations in one year. There does seem to be good reason for the sixth and seventh grade teachers to meet to think through the sixth and seventh grade social studies curricula. In the classic struggle between depth and breadth, breadth has won out in the seventh grade, and it isn't clear that that works the best for the students in Weston.

The small sample of students whom we interviewed clearly enjoyed sixth and eighth grade much more than seventh. In that grade, they complained that test taking was the skill that was emphasized. In other grades, projects were frequently referred to when students were asked what they remembered from that year in school. That doesn't mean that there were only tests in the seventh grade. In fact, two seventh grade classes that we visited were doing skits on different roles in Ancient China. But it was telling that many students remembered seventh grade in that way.

The content area of grade eight is US History through the Civil War. The course has a number of activities and projects that many students found memorable and helpful to their learning. The course material laid out questions that differentiated between a “fundamental,” an “essential,” and an “advanced” understanding of the same content area. In class that played itself out as teachers worked with heterogeneous mixtures of students and seemingly did so with a great deal of expertise. Students whom we met at the High School mentioned the eighth grade Boston Massacre trial as a highlight of their social studies education in Weston. When asked why, they remarked that it was especially interesting and that they loved the opportunity to work together with their classmates on it.

Across the middle school grades, the teachers often presented the same lessons when we visited. That can only happen well if the teachers have the time to meet and plan and talk about teaching. While it isn't difficult to give another teacher a lesson plan, unless a teacher can make that plan her own, it rarely has the same degree of effectiveness. No two teachers (or students!) are alike, so we were pleased to see that the teachers were working together to create lessons that they believed in. Across the Middle

School social studies curriculum, we felt that the teachers were pleased to be teaching in Weston and to be working effectively together.

We continued to be impressed by the world focus, particularly in grades six and seven when the Frameworks encouraged it as well. The study of the Silk Road was but one example of this. But even in grade eight we were struck by the discussion on European settlement of the Americas as one where three worlds intersected—European, African, and Native American.

We did think that there might be room for more clear discussions between the fifth grade Field School teachers and the sixth grade Weston Middle School social studies faculty. That same discussion might be helpful if it were extended to the seventh grade teachers as well. There seems to be a little room for fine tuning at that juncture. We also wondered whether there was any room for discussion between the English Language Arts and Social Studies faculties as the students learn to write more analytic papers in both classes. Is there any attempt to connect novels and short stories with historical content? Could there be any conscious reference to the global connections upon which Weston prides itself at this level?

Weston High School

The same committee members who visited Weston Middle School on Friday had spent Thursday at Weston High School. On both days and in both sites, Jim Murphy, who is in charge of secondary social studies was an invaluable resource and guide. None of us got lost, and when we asked for materials to read and teachers and students with whom to talk, Jim was immensely helpful and, of course, knowledgeable.

The ninth grade curriculum at Weston High School is World History—Part I. The second part of World History follows in Grade 10. US History is the course of study in the junior year. Seniors can take a social science course, an AP European History course, or a government course.

The most outstanding feature at the high school level is the block schedule. For over ten years the High School has featured academic blocks of one hour and twenty minutes. What was very noteworthy for us was the good use of the time in the classroom. A block schedule can only work effectively if the teachers are creative and able to use the time so that the students are working. The “student as worker, teacher as coach” idea, popularized by Ted Sizer and others, shows us that effective instruction in a long block is rarely demonstrated by long lectures. Group work, discussion, projects, analysis of primary source materials, films, audio, and cartoons—the possibilities are endless, and the existence of Smartboard technology can give teachers access to an inexhaustible supply of material. But the teacher must be willing to plan in advance and be able to meet the students where they are. Both of those needs were met in Weston. The High School classrooms that we visited were uniformly impressive.

It is at the high school level that different levels of the same subject are taught. “Tracking” has all sorts of baggage, and this isn’t the place, I suspect, to thoroughly discuss the philosophical dimensions of the issue. We did note, however, that while there were heterogeneous classes through grade eight in social studies, in the High School, there were CP (college prep) and honors classes, and, in some grades, AP (Advanced Placement) classes. Jim Murphy noted that these weren’t tracks because students had a great deal of choice about which section of the course to take. Nobody was automatically shut out of a more difficult level, and students were encouraged to take AP courses. Jim told us that he had met with David Fuller, the METCO coordinator in Weston, to try to find ways to increase the numbers of Boston students in the AP track. One of the social studies teachers, Ms. Young, in fact, had taught a one-week summer workshop to help prepare those students from Boston who were interested in AP courses. There was, however, a significant difference in the demographics in the different levels of social studies classes at the High School. The contrast with Weston Middle School’s heterogeneous groupings was marked. We can see by efforts like Ms. Young’s that that is recognized by the social studies faculty and that further efforts will be made along those lines.

METCO Director David Fuller described the program in Weston, which has existed since 1967, as “very strong.” 165 METCO students are enrolled in the Weston Public Schools. Children only enter the program in Kindergarten, and the group does experience some attrition by the time the students reach the High School. By coincidence, during the week that we visited Weston, over one hundred Weston students and teachers were part of a pro-METCO demonstration at the State House. This was a clear indication of strong support for METCO in Weston.

Speaking with seniors about their experience with their social studies classes only underscored Weston’s success at making global connections. Indeed, the word “connection” came out of the mouths of nearly every student I met with. They used it when describing a study of Haiti in the tenth grade, a ninth grade unit on the “human psyche,” another ninth grade unit on stereotypes and prejudice, and one on the Renaissance as well. Virtually every student spoke about the importance of relating history to current events. Many of them had a strong appreciation of the efforts of their teachers to include current issues in their classrooms.

The one level of history instruction that students criticized at the High School level was twelfth grade electives. Some lobbied for a psychology elective. They thought that the government elective was great for a presidential election year, but, in a non-presidential election year, that would have been less interesting. There was also some sentiment among the students for a class above the “CP” level that wasn’t AP for US History. They took the AP for the purpose of their college admissions profile, because they didn’t want to have taken “CP.” Those students claimed that they would have taken an “honors” level so that they could show that they were challenging themselves but avoid all of the work that the AP course demands.

The social studies faculty was very comfortable talking about the curriculum. They enjoyed the team approach in ninth grade in which four different teachers divide the grade. Some bemoaned the disappearance of the joint “World Studies” curriculum—where some students took an interdisciplinary course taught jointly by a history and an English teacher. That course has, of course, disappeared and reappeared at different moments, so it may, like a phoenix, return. Some teachers desired more of an opportunity to talk with their English colleagues about their expectations for writing. Are both departments, for example, defining a “thesis statement” in the same way? Should they? Some faculty spoke of the need to know their Middle School colleagues a bit more. With US History divided between grades 8 and grade 11 that probably would be quite worthwhile. As they learn more and more how to use their Smartboards, some teachers thought about new media and its implication for teaching and learning. Are the new generations of students going to be changed as learners by their immersion in technology? Shouldn’t we think about this proactively? We also brought up the question of AP courses with the faculty. Ben Kendall’s department at Concord-Carlisle doesn’t offer any APs. While some faculty were ambivalent about the APs, most felt that the students wanted to take them for college, and that they were here to stay.

The High School social studies classes that we saw were places of intellectual engagement. The global connections were evident—even if we missed some of the student work that is always on the wall in the elementary years. The teachers were uniformly impressive, committed to their students, thoughtful about their practice, and engaged with the issues raised in their classrooms and the connections to ideas outside of those rooms.

Recommendations

1. Elementary course outlines and teaching guides lacked consistency in the K-5 schools. They should be reviewed to create a format that would more easily support teachers new to the system or those who might be changing grade levels.
2. The curricula in the sixth and seventh grade would profit from a series of meetings for the faculty. In the struggle between depth and breadth, breadth has won out in the seventh grade, and it isn’t clear that that works the best for the students in Weston.
3. Continue the fine work to make the Global Connections theme, that works so well at the elementary level, explicit at the Middle School as well.
4. Collaboration between fifth and sixth grade teachers would be very helpful to ease the transition to Middle School social studies. Since we hope that sixth and seventh grade teachers would also work together, it would, we think, be useful to have teachers in grades 5-7 to make sure that the curricula they are teaching reinforce and build upon each other.

5. In order to help students write more effective papers, we urge the social studies and language arts faculty at the middle school level to meet to see if they could combine forces to help support student writing.
6. We urge the High School Social Studies Department to continue and even expand upon their efforts to encourage greater diversity in the students enrolled in higher level courses in the department.
7. Senior year electives in social studies should be revisited. It is, of course, impossible to keep up with all of the changes in the world, but updating senior electives can be one way to do so.
8. As in point four, it would, we think, be worthwhile to encourage some summer workshop times for the Middle and High School faculties to discuss secondary social studies. With US History crossing both schools, that is one obvious thread. The installation of Smartboards in both schools would also serve as a common subject of interest.

Final Comments on the “Charge”

One of the most striking aspects of our visit to Weston was that in this “age of accountability and MCAS,” we were not asked to look at whether Weston was meeting that specific objective. We think that that speaks to Weston’s strengths as a system. Rather than merely preparing students for a test that does not yet exist, the Weston social studies curriculum has set out to inform students about “Global Connections” and to emphasize the skills that students need to be successful lifelong learners.

In a constantly changing world, Weston has set up a curriculum that will bring students to all parts of the globe. We were very impressed with the attention to content and to process among the Weston Social Studies teachers. Courses were intellectually challenging and students used a variety of skills to demonstrate their understanding of the issues under investigation. In addition, the commitment to professional development for faculty helped them to continue to learn and to develop their sense of what students should know and be able to do as they progress through the Weston Public Schools.

Some Suggestions for Next Time

As you can see from this report, we were quite impressed by our snapshot of social studies in Weston. But, like a good picture, it has whetted our appetites for more. Some of our questions went beyond the scope of our charge. Some aspects of the charge we weren’t really able to comment upon because our visit to Weston was so brief. Here are some suggestions to enable the next group of outside eyes (in whatever department) to be able to be a bit more focused on the issues within Weston.

1. Our schedules on Thursday and Friday emphasized many classroom observations. A majority of those lasted less than a class period. We didn’t,

therefore, think it was fair or appropriate to talk about individual teachers whom we saw. Since this view of curriculum was not really about instructional practice, we probably would have been better off with more time to talk to teachers or groups of teachers rather than visiting as many classes. That is, of course, the classic “breadth *versus* depth” dilemma. We recommend more talking with teachers and administrators and less peeks into classrooms.

2. We could have been asked to do some pre-visit preparation. This would have enabled us to ask more thoughtful questions when we arrived. We think that we got the hang of it pretty quickly, but we would have been able to hit the ground running with some homework before we arrived.
3. Since the question of levels of classes and tracking was so significant at the High School level, it would have been helpful to have selected a wide range of students in advance. In that way, we could have heard from those in “CP,” “Honors,” and “AP” classes. We would also have liked to have spoken with METCO students, Special Ed students (we didn’t get any sense of the ways in which SPED students navigate the High School academic scene), and a clear cross-section of the student body. The students whom we talked to were terrific, but that aspect of the visit seemed a bit hit-or-miss.