

# The Hillsdale Effect: South Dakota's Troubling New Social Studies Standards

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When social studies standards adopted in 2023 go into effect during the 2024-2025 school year, the state of South Dakota will implement a curriculum inspired by the conservative Hillsdale College model. Over the past few years, the small Christian institution in Michigan has been making a big impact on national debates over social studies.<sup>1</sup> To date, the Hillsdale curriculum has mostly been adopted by small private schools or so-called classical academies. The South Dakota standards, therefore, provide an important case study in applying the Hillsdale social studies model to state standards. Through an analysis of the core principles of the new standards, as well as a comparison to the current South Dakota standards (adopted in 2015), this article examines the challenges that the new standards pose for social studies teachers. These include serious problems of implementation, pedagogy, and content that teachers will face as they prepare to meet the state's new requirements.

The South Dakota Board of Education Standards approved the controversial set of curricular standards for K-12 social studies following a tendentious two-year process.<sup>2</sup> As a member of a 2021 work group composed primarily of educators, I was a participant in the beginning of this undertaking. The work group drafted a revised set of standards that wove in elements of the C3 Framework and more intentionally brought in content and information about South Dakota's indigenous peoples using the Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings.<sup>3</sup> After our work was completed, the South Dakota Department of Education made significant revisions that undermined both of

those objectives.



Originally published in Morgan Matzen, "Oceti Sakowin March for Our Children demands Indigenous history education for all of South Dakota," *Argus Leader*, Sept. 13, 2021.

With criticism of Governor Kristi Noem's handling of the standards revision process mounting, the governor tossed aside the 2021 social studies proposal and started over with a new Social Studies Content Standards Commission in 2022. That process involved a much smaller group, with far fewer educators. William Morrissey, a professor Emeritus from Hillsdale College, facilitated the work of the 2022 Commission.<sup>5</sup> Rather than revising the existing standards from 2015, Morrissey wrote a draft from scratch that resembled the 1776 Curriculum championed by Hillsdale College.<sup>6</sup> The new standards passed with only minor revisions despite receiving an onslaught of criticism during the public review process overseen by South Dakota's Board of Education Standards. Major teacher organizations in the state, the Native American tribes of South Dakota, the American Historical Association, and

the vast majority of public respondents opposed the standards.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most obvious challenge posed by the 2023 South Dakota standards is the expansion of content requirements. The document states as a guiding principle that standards must not indicate a specific curriculum, and yet the large number and specificity of the new standards blurs the distinction between the two.<sup>8</sup> Simple counting tells part of this story. In the 2015 standards, first-grade teachers were expected to cover 9 standards with a total of 13 sub-elements. In the 2023 version, that number jumped to 11 standards with 62 sub-elements.<sup>9</sup> Within each standard, the 2023 version typically requires students to memorize a large amount of factual content information, even at a very young age. Table 1 compares a sample geography standard for the first grade between the 2015 standards and the newly approved 2023 version, illustrating the much larger amount of content now needed to be covered.<sup>10</sup> But no other changes have been made to the overall curriculum that would make way for this increase in social studies content. Since social studies is not included in state testing, teachers have in recent years placed more emphasis on reading and math. Teachers are therefore faced with the difficult prospect of teaching significantly expanded content with no additional space provided in the daily timetable.

Whereas the 2015 standards utilized elements of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework, the 2023 standards adopted a philosophy proponents call a “content-rich pedagogy,” which prioritizes content memorization.<sup>11</sup> The leading advocate for these standards, state historian Dr. Ben Jones, claimed that a content-rich pedagogy would ensure a common basis in factual knowledge. Jones argued that immersing students in factual memorization would decrease achievement gaps for less affluent students who might not have access to quality information in the social studies.<sup>12</sup> He further argued that critical thinking would naturally follow from a teaching technique centered on memorization.

Though Jones portrayed content-rich pedagogy as settled scholarship, extant research and national organizations such as the American Historical Association and the National Council for History Education soundly reject this approach.<sup>13</sup> The emphasis on rote memorization treats the social studies as merely a list of authoritative facts to transmit to young people. This approach risks undercutting fundamental aspects of a high-quality social studies education. Leading scholarship in the social studies instead supports an active process that involves assembling sources, interpreting them, grappling with alternative perspectives, and coming to conclusions about the society in which we live.<sup>14</sup> Far better to use precious class

Table 1. **2015 and 2023 Sample Geography Standards for First Grade**

2015 Geography Standards for First Grade	2023 Geography Standards for First Grade
K-12.G.1: Students will apply geospatial resources, including data sources and geographic tools to generate, interpret, and analyze information.	1.SS.2: The Student Demonstrates Knowledge of American and South Dakota Geography.
1.G.1.1: Construct simple maps of the classroom.	A. The student locates each of the following on a map: North America, South America, Africa, Europe, Asia, Australia, Antarctica, Atlantic Ocean, Pacific Ocean, Indian Ocean, Arctic Ocean, Southern Ocean, Mississippi River, Gulf of Mexico, Washington, D.C., Pierre, Sioux Falls, Rapid City, Canada, Mexico, Central America
1.G.1.2: Use maps, globes, and other simple geographic models to identify absolute location.	B. The student explains the following geographic features: coast, valley, prairie, desert, bay, harbor, peninsula, island.
1.G.1.3: Distinguish between landmasses and bodies of water using maps and globes.	

time to teach students the process of developing good questions, finding trustworthy sources, and developing their own argumentative voice.

Since the 2023 standards focused so heavily on memorization, they intentionally removed inquiry-based learning. The introduction claims that “inquiry-based learning is a pedagogical approach that lies outside the scope of a standard.”<sup>15</sup> Students are not asked to evaluate primary sources, analyze diverse perspectives, or use the critical method to activate higher-level thinking skills. Instead, the action verbs ask students to explain, name, tell of, describe, tell the story of, list, locate, tell the biography of, read, and write.<sup>16</sup> Inquiry is not forbidden in the new standards, and teachers are free to incorporate inquiry as is appropriate at all levels of the social studies curriculum. But given the dramatically increased content coverage expectations, and the purposeful removal of inquiry from the 2023 document, it will be difficult for teachers to meaningfully engage with inquiry-based learning.

Another significant concern with the new social studies standards is their developmental inappropriateness. The 2015 standards were designed to facilitate the gradual development of skills over time as students moved from grade to grade.<sup>17</sup> The 2023 standards, by contrast, require content mastery at a similar level throughout all grades, meaning that the youngest K-12 students are

asked to memorize historical information in much the same fashion as high schoolers. Take the example standard from first grade shown in Table 1. It requires first graders to identify all of the continents, oceans, as well as specific cities, countries, and regions of the Americas. Another standard for the same grade level asks students to explain “the meaning of ‘consent of the governed.’”<sup>18</sup> This is advanced level work for children aged six or seven. Table 2 shows that this standard for the first grade is repeated with few changes in the fourth, seventh, and high school grades, indicating shared expectations for students throughout their K-12 experience. In its statement opposing the South Dakota standards, the National Council for History Education wrote that the standards were “not developmentally appropriate, nor are they reflective of the historical content training that K-5 teachers receive.”<sup>19</sup> The issue of developmental inappropriateness will be most acute for younger students, but will also present issues in the higher grades, where the new standards do not incorporate action-words or directives activating advanced critical thinking skills.

The 2023 South Dakota social studies standards also raise serious concerns related to the content knowledge teachers will be expected to provide. The document is history-centric, but despite the stated goal of avoiding the temptation to “cherry-pick facts to fit a preconceived ideology

Table 2. **2023 South Dakota Social Studies Standards on “Consent of the Governed”**

1st grade	4th grade	7th grade	High school
1.SS.10.E: The student explains the meaning of ‘the consent of the governed,’ including the founders’ argument that a government can only tell people what to do if the people have a say over who in the government gets to make those decisions, which is called ‘self-government.’	4.SS.7.E: The student explains the meaning of ‘the consent of the governed,’ including the founders’ argument that a government can only tell people what to do if the people have a say over who in the government gets to make those decisions, which is called ‘self-government.’	7.SS.7.F: The student explains the meaning of ‘the consent of the governed,’ including the founders’ argument that legitimate government derives its just powers from the consent of those that are governed, who in turn have delegated limited powers to government in order to secure their rights.	9-12.C.4.H: The student explains the meaning of ‘the consent of the governed,’ including the founders’ argument that legitimate government derives its just powers from the consent of those that are governed, who in turn have delegated limited powers to government in order to secure their rights.

or narrative,” there is good reason to question the presentation of history within the new standards.<sup>20</sup> In American history, the new standards mention issues such as slavery but, overall, embrace an exceptionalist interpretation that views the principles of the Founding Era as universal truths that were and are consistently a positive force in the world. The new standards also espouse a Eurocentric worldview. Content called “world history” is noted throughout, but it is dominated by a traditional view of the human past that privileges the continent of Europe. Non-western peoples are sprinkled in at various points, but it is clear that the architects of the 2023 standards envisioned a Western-dominated social studies curriculum. Table 3 shows the main elements of the ninth grade World History course.

Similarly, though the standards reference events and issues relevant to the indigenous peoples of South Dakota (known as the Oceti Sakowin Oyate), these references are not woven throughout the standards in a meaningful way. The South Dakota Education Association described the inclusion of Native American history as “mostly an afterthought or lumped in with other standards.”<sup>21</sup> An exceptionalist and Eurocentric curriculum that

does not effectively integrate the history of indigenous peoples will make it difficult for teachers to serve the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, many of whom do not trace their origins to Western Europe. This approach also will not effectively prepare students for the highly interconnected economic, cultural, and political world in which they live.



Photo by Erin Bormett. Used with permission.

From Morgan Matzen, “Oceti Sakowin March for Our Children demands Indigenous history education for all of South Dakota,” *Argus Leader*, Sept. 13, 2021.

Table 3. **2023 South Dakota Social Studies Standards for 9th Grade World History.**

9-12.WH.2: The student demonstrates knowledge and understanding of ancient civilizations in Asia, the Middle East, northern Africa, and the eastern Mediterranean Sea.
9-12.WH.3: The student demonstrates knowledge and understanding of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire.
9-12.WH.4: The student demonstrates knowledge and understanding of the Middle Ages.
9-12.WH.5: The student demonstrates knowledge and understanding of the Late Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Reformation.
9-12.WH.6: The student demonstrates knowledge and understanding of the Age of Exploration, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution.
9-12.WH.7: The student demonstrates knowledge and understanding of the French Revolution and the 19 <sup>th</sup> Century.
9-12.WH.8: The student demonstrates knowledge and understanding of the world wars and the interwar years.
9-12.WH.9: The student demonstrates knowledge and understanding of the world since World War II.

Beginning in the 2024/2025 school year, South Dakota teachers will need to expand their content coverage without the benefit of additional instructional time; find ways to teach young students content that is developmentally inappropriate; base their content coverage on American exceptionalist and Eurocentric standards that marginalize indigenous peoples; and focus on rote memorization rather than on inquiry as a core premise of the social studies. These features—the rejection of inquiry, the promotion of rote memorization, and an embrace of exceptionalist representations of the past—are key features of the Hillsdale College approach to history and the social studies.<sup>22</sup> This approach presents significant challenges to teachers seeking to promote the kind of rigorous and developmentally appropriate curriculum advocated by leading social studies organizations such as the National Council for the Social Studies and the American Historical Association. Though this article presented a specific case of South Dakota, the profound influence of the Hillsdale curriculum is gaining steam across the country. If a major goal of social studies education is to teach students *how* to think, not just *what* to think, teachers must find ways of going above and beyond what politically motivated standards like these require. 🇺🇸

## Notes

1. On the significance of Hillsdale, see Emma Green, “The Christian Liberal Arts School at the Heart of the Culture Wars,” *The New Yorker* (April 3, 2023); Stephen Groves, “Conservative College’s Curriculum Gets Foothold in South Dakota,” Associated Press (Sept. 12, 2022); Mary Harris, “A Tiny Christian College in Michigan is Infiltrating Florida’s Schools,” *Slate* (Sept. 7, 2022).
2. Laura Dimock, “4/17/2023 SD Board of Educational Standards Meeting,” (April 17, 2023), SDNet.Archive, [www.sd.net/blogs/archive/4172023-sd-board-of-educational-standards-meeting](http://www.sd.net/blogs/archive/4172023-sd-board-of-educational-standards-meeting).
3. National Council for the Social Studies, *College, Career & Civic*



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- Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013); Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings & Standards, March 19, 2018. <https://doe.sd.gov/contentstandards/documents/18-OSEUs.pdf>.
4. Morgan Matzen, "Oceti Sakowin March for Our Children Demands Indigenous History Education for all of South Dakota," *Argus Leader* (Updated Nov. 18, 2021).
  5. Jacob Newton, "Noem Helped Select Social Studies Commission Members," *Kelo News* (April 27, 2022), [www.keloland.com/keloland-com-original-noem-helped-select-social-studies-commission-members](http://www.keloland.com/keloland-com-original-noem-helped-select-social-studies-commission-members).
  6. Samantha Walder, "Prepared Statement by Dr. Walder for SD BOES 9/19/2022," (Sept. 19, 2022); see also Cooper Seamer, "Social Studies Commission Members Weigh in on Concerns," *Dakota News Now* (April 14, 2023). [www.dakotane.wsnow.com/2023/04/14/social-studies-commission-members-weigh-concerns-proposed-standards](http://www.dakotane.wsnow.com/2023/04/14/social-studies-commission-members-weigh-concerns-proposed-standards); Hillsdale College, "The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum: American History and Civics Lessons for K-12 Classrooms," <https://k12.hillsdale.edu/Curriculum/The-Hillsdale-1776-Curriculum>.
  7. James Grossman, "AHA Sends Letter to South Dakota Board of Education Opposing Social Studies Standards," (Sept. 15, 2023); Morgan Matzen, "South Dakota Social Studies Standards Pass, Despite Opposition from Educators, Tribes," *Argus Leader* (April 17, 2023); [www.argusleader.com/story/news/education/2023/04/17/south-dakota-social-studies-standards-adopted-board-of-education-standards-despite-opposition/70121700007](http://www.argusleader.com/story/news/education/2023/04/17/south-dakota-social-studies-standards-adopted-board-of-education-standards-despite-opposition/70121700007); South Dakota Education Equity Coalition, "South Dakota Tribes Unite Against Governor's Inadequate Social Studies Standards," (April 4, 2023); <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23743297/sdeec9tribes.pdf>; National Council for History Education Board of Directors, "The NCHE Board of Directors Statement Regarding the South Dakota Social Studies Standards," (April 21, 2023), <https://ncheteach.org/post/The-NCHE-Board-of-Directors-Statement-Regarding-the-South-Dakota-Social-Studies-Standards>.
  8. SD Department of Education, "South Dakota Social Studies Standards," Adopted April 17, 2023, 4.
  9. SD Department of Education, "South Dakota Social Studies Standards," Adopted April 17, 2023, 14-19; South Dakota Department of Education, "South Dakota Social Studies Content Standards," Adopted August 24, 2015, 12-13.
  10. SD Department of Education, "South Dakota Social Studies Standards 2023," 15.
  11. SD Department of Education, "South Dakota Social Studies Content Standards," Adopted August 24, 2015, 7-8. For more on content-rich pedagogy, see testimony provided by proponents in Nov. 2022 public testimony. Laura Dimock, "11/21/2022 SD Board of Education Standards," SD.net Archive, [www.sd.net/blogs/archive/11212022-sd-board-of-education-standards](http://www.sd.net/blogs/archive/11212022-sd-board-of-education-standards).
  12. Testimony by Dr. Ben Jones at 45:00 to 49:14 in webcast: "11/21/2022 SD Board of Education Standards," SD.net Archive, [www.sd.net/blogs/archive/11212022-sd-board-of-education-standards](http://www.sd.net/blogs/archive/11212022-sd-board-of-education-standards).
  13. Grossman, "AHA Sends Letter to South Dakota Board of Education Opposing Social Studies Standards"; National Council for History Education Board of Directors, "The NCHE Board of Directors Statement Regarding the South Dakota Social Studies Standards."
  14. National Council for the Social Studies, *C3 Framework For Social Studies State Standards*.
  15. SD Department of Education, "South Dakota Social Studies Standards 2023," 4.
  16. Ibid.
  17. SD Department of Education, "South Dakota Social Studies Content Standards," Adopted August 24, 2015, 3.
  18. SD Department of Education, "South Dakota Social Studies Standards 2023," 19.
  19. National Council for History Education Board of Directors, "The NCHE Board of Directors Statement Regarding the South Dakota Social Studies Standards," (April 21, 2023).
  20. SD Department of Education, "South Dakota Social Studies Standards 2023," 4. See also statements by Education Secretary Joe Graves and South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem after the passage of the 2023 standards. Austin Goss, "South Dakota Board of Education Standards Pulls New Social Standards across Finish Line," *Dakota News Now* (April 17, 2023).
  21. SD Education Association, "Six Reasons Educators Reject the Proposed Standards," [www.sdea.org/blog/5453/why-sdea-rejects-the-proposed-social-studies-standards](http://www.sdea.org/blog/5453/why-sdea-rejects-the-proposed-social-studies-standards).
  22. Hillsdale College, "The Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum."



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