History and Social Science MCUs Offer a Way to Prepare for Real Civic Engagement

There are 34 History and Social Science MCUs available to teachers; eight with a deeper and more specific focus on the critical concepts of Civic Learning and Engagement.

“These MCUs provide an opportunity for authentic learning inside as well as outside the classroom,” said Karen White, History and Social Science Content Lead with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. With topics such as Patriotic Songs and Symbols (1st grade), and the Story of Immigration to Massachusetts (4th grade), "Teachers and students bring their own experiences, personal histories, and ideas for the future into the study of civics, which makes the topic more personal and less intimidating."

MCUs that look closely at Civic Learning and Engagement are:

Grade 1 - National and Massachusetts Holidays
Grade 1 - Patriotic Songs and Symbols
Grade 2 - Civic Rights: Equality for All
Grade 4 - The Story of Immigration to Massachusetts
Grade 5 - Civic Change through Civic Engagement (Based on an iCivics)
Grade 8 - Words We Live By: The Fourth Amendment
US History I - Constitutional Rights
US History II - African American Civil Rights

In a Q&A, Karen White offered insights into the development, purpose, and importance of the Civic Learning and Engagement MCUs:

Q: Why did ESE decide to have a specific focus on civics units?
We asked our teachers to think about the standards in relation to what they address with their students in the course of the year, and if there were subjects they wished they could spend more time on or have deeper knowledge about but haven’t had the time to cover. And as educators from across the state were selecting their topics, civic engagement kept appearing, and what that said to me was that teachers thought this was really important.

Q: What makes these MCUs special?
I think that more than teaching straight history lessons, the teachers were thinking beyond this is what happened, and they were thinking about why, and helping students to make connections, and making things relevant for them. And thinking that way led them to see these topics and the critical element of civic engagement.

Q: How do you fit the context - civic engagement, social justice, etc. - into the larger frame of history?
As we teach for understanding, the idea is that educators go deeper, and think about how to make content relevant for students. First grade students are looking at the Pledge of Allegiance. But why do we say it, and where does it come from? And why is the symbol of an eagle everywhere? And in any historical period there are questions of social justice to be explored that are compelling to students. Civil Rights and Immigration units offer many, many opportunities. Teaching history and social studies provides limitless possibilities for students to learn about how others have engaged in civic life, to consider their own rights and responsibilities to engage, and importantly, to practice engagement on issues that matter to them.

Q: Why is civic learning and engagement so critical at every age?
Learning about and practicing civic engagement, students develop the skills to enter the larger world, and discover what it means to live in communities. These units help them understand what it means to have the...
kind of government we have, and how to engage. They provide a way for students to learn from an early age the importance of being part of a community, how to help others, and how we solve some of the issues and concerns of our communities. That's the true, core objective of our units.

These MCUs have the capacity to take students beyond the classroom into a more authentic life experience. They're practice for when students aren't getting up everyday and just going to school, but for their futures when they're going to work, college, careers, and everything else they'll do in their lives.

Q: Are particular skills learned or reinforced through these MCUs?
Yes. Writing to text, close reading, verbal and written communication, and analysis are all skills that are reinforced through these units. Another interesting perk of these units is that they introduce teaching techniques and instructional strategies, ways to include students in their own learning, and best practices. For example, if the teachers are unsure of how to instruct students on a certain subject, and they see it in a unit, the MCU guides them step by step, and even indicates where students can get up and move around the room, shifting between print and illustrative texts. It can be engaging for the students and very helpful for the teacher.

MCU Implementation Videos Support Learning: A Look at Massachusetts Holidays!

In this MCU implementation video, Springfield teacher Susan Gerardi demonstrates how students develop academic vocabulary as they observe primary source images and discuss the question, "Why do we celebrate Memorial Day?"

This exercise is part of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks History Social Science Unit on National and Massachusetts Holidays. Ms. Gerardi employs a variety of skills with her first grade students, including collaborative conversations, class shares, and "turn and talk," to assist them in developing a "global understanding of why it's important to study the past."