

Race, Racism, and Culturally Responsive Teaching in History and Social Science in Massachusetts: Frequently Asked Questions

What are the state’s requirements and guidance about how history and social science should be taught in Massachusetts?

In Massachusetts, decisions about curricula and instructional materials are largely a matter of local control. The state provides guidance documents and resources to inform district planning. State Curriculum Frameworks for each content area are a central resource, which lay out the content and skills that educators should teach at each grade level as well as the guiding principles that should shape their instruction.

In 2018, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education released a revised state [History and Social Science Curriculum Framework](#). The Framework revision process was a two-year endeavor that drew extensively on input from educators, content experts, and community members before the final document was ultimately unanimously approved by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. Prior to 2018, the Framework was last updated in 2003; there are no current plans to revise it again in the near future.

Accompanying the Framework are several additional state guidance documents. The [Supplement to the 2018 Framework](#) provides teachers with a list of resources for teaching particular themes and topics in the Framework’s content standards, including perspectives which are often missing from existing curricular materials. Furthermore, in Fall 2020, DESE published a [Quick Reference Guide to Guiding Principle 2](#), which expands upon the Framework’s call for inclusive, critical, and responsive history and social science instruction.

In 2021, Massachusetts was [commended by the Fordham Institute](#) as one of only five states with “exemplary” history and civics standards. In their review, Fordham sought to find standards that “give America’s core principles and many achievements the respect they are due and that ...[do] not whitewash, downplay, or neglect the many painful chapters in our nation’s history.” Describing the Framework, the reviewers commented that “Massachusetts’s U.S. History standards are exemplary, with an impressive emphasis on America’s founding principles and Americans’ long struggle to make those principles a reality.”

Does the Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework promote the teaching of diverse perspectives?

The Framework is rooted in ten Guiding Principles. Guiding Principle 2 states:

An effective history and social science education incorporates diverse perspectives and acknowledges that perceptions of events are affected by race, ethnicity, culture, religion, education, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, and personal experience. The traditional motto of the United States is “E pluribus unum” – out of many, one. A history and social science education that does justice to the remarkable diversity of our country must tell

the histories of individuals and groups, and honor a plurality of life stories while acknowledging our ongoing struggle to achieve a more perfect union. Teaching how the concepts of freedom, equality, the rule of law, and human rights have influenced United States and world history necessarily involves discussions of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other characteristics. Effective instruction challenges students to value their own heritage while embracing our common ideals and shared experiences as they develop their own rigorous thinking about accounts of events. Effective instruction celebrates the progress the United States has made in embracing diversity, while at the same time encouraging honest and informed academic discussions about prejudice, racism, and bigotry in the past and present.” Race and racism are part of America’s complicated history, and a complete history and social science education must include an honest examination of prejudice, bigotry, and oppression in the past and present (*Massachusetts 2018 History and Social Science Curriculum Framework, page 13*).

In addition, the Framework states that “an effective history and social science education builds students’ capacities for research, reasoning, making logical arguments, and thinking for themselves.” Thus, in an effective history or social science classroom in Massachusetts, teachers present students with diverse sources and nurture their critical thinking skills, so that each student develops their own richly informed and historically accurate understanding.

What does the Massachusetts History/Social Science Framework say about how race and racism should be taught?

Guiding Principle 2 of the Framework states that effective history and social science instruction “celebrates the progress the United States has made in embracing diversity, while at the same time encouraging honest and informed academic discussions about prejudice, racism, and bigotry in the past and present.” To this end, the Framework’s content standards not only address instances of racial oppression and prejudice in age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate ways, but also highlight the individuals and movements who have challenged it. These standards also address the way in which diversity has been and continues to be a strength of our nation. Some representative examples of content include:

- **Grade 1:** Students learn about ways in which people in the United States are both united and diverse, and how people from different parts of the world have different customs.
- **Grade 3:** Students examine how the interactions of Native Peoples, Europeans, and enslaved and free Africans shaped the development of Massachusetts.
- **Grade 5:** Students learn about the prevalence of slavery in the early U.S. Republic as well as the ways in which enslaved people sought their freedom; they study both the oppression of African-Americans after the Civil War as well as the role of the Civil Rights movement in challenging these limitations.
- **Grade 8:** Students analyze key laws and Supreme Court decisions that have expanded civil rights for all citizens.
- **High School:** Throughout a two-year U.S. History sequence, students examine topics such as the role and treatment of immigrants during industrialization, the way in which the Civil Rights

movement was a model for later movements, and issues related to race relations in the late 20th century.

Additionally, the Framework urges history and social science teachers of all grade levels to include discussions of current events, which may include issues of race and racism, as part of their instruction. As emphasized in Guiding Principle 8, history and social science teachers “have a unique responsibility to help students consider events—including current events—in a broad historical, geographical, social, or economic context.”

What does the History/Social Science Framework say about how the study of race and racism should look in the classroom?

The vision of history and social science education laid out in the Framework is one focused on the process of historical inquiry, in which students use evidence to construct their own understanding of the past. Just as the concepts that students learn about race and racism become more complex over time, so too does the way in which teachers engage them in that learning. Starting in elementary school, students should be asked to gather information about the past from age-appropriate sources; contrast points of view in multiple sources; and identify key information about the maker, date, place of origin, and audience of these sources. As students get older, they begin to put multiple sources into dialogue with each other, consider their usefulness and possible limitations, and identify and pursue directions for further inquiry.

Throughout students’ history education, teachers should present them with sources that depict a multitude of perspectives and experiences and support them in examining the sources closely and critically, rather than relying on a textbook or lecture to convey preconceived narratives about historical events. This is true of any event or historical development students might study. As a result, in learning about past and present injustices, students within a single classroom may well come to competing conclusions about the causes of, and best way to remedy, these injustices. The Framework encourages students and teachers to grapple with this complexity, emphasizing that whatever conclusions students draw must be historically accurate and justified by the sources available.

Discussions about inequality, prejudice, and oppression can often be challenging or uncomfortable for both teachers and students. It is crucial that educators take the time to create a respectful classroom culture that encourages productive discomfort and facilitates deeper, more meaningful engagement with these topics. The Department refers educators to [Learning for Justice’s Let’s Talk! guide](#) and [Facing History and Ourselves’ Fostering Civil Discourse](#) as useful resources to support this work.

Does teaching an honest account of the past conflict with preparing students to be active, engaged citizens in our American democracy?

DESE believes that the mission of history and social science education is to prepare students for civic life, empowering them to make sense of, deliberate about, and take action on complex and controversial issues in order to continue the legacy of democracy. In order for students to be thoughtful and active participants and leaders in our diverse democratic society, they must develop essential civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. This includes developing an understanding of democracy’s potential and

achievements while at the same time recognizing its challenges and inherent dilemmas – and learning about those who have worked to make our democracy more inclusive and just.

When teaching American history and civics, educators should provide students the opportunity to grapple with both the promise and the shortcomings of our democracy. According to a consortium of leading scholars and educators, teachers must “offer an account of US constitutional history that is simultaneously honest about the wrongs of the past without falling into cynicism, and appreciative of the founding of the country without tipping into adulation.”¹ The Framework, and its supporting documents, aim to support educators in thoughtfully navigating this tension as it relates to issues like racism, gender bias, religious bias, and other historical instances of oppression.

How are schools and districts ensuring that the required student-led civics projects are truly nonpartisan?

Chapter 296 of the Acts of 2018, *An act to promote and enhance civic engagement*, requires that schools provide students with a nonpartisan, student-led civic action project once in eighth grade and once in high school. The law stipulates that civics projects may be individual, small group or class wide, and designed to promote a student’s ability to: (i) analyze complex issues; (ii) consider differing points of view; (iii) reason, make logical arguments and support claims using valid evidence; (iv) engage in civil discourse with those who hold opposing positions; and (v) demonstrate an understanding of the connections between federal, state and local policies, including issues that may impact the student’s school or community.

It is essential that these projects are student-led; while teachers may set boundaries on the topics that can be addressed (e.g., working with a science teacher to engage students in action around an environmental policy issue), the choice of topic and action plan should ultimately be student-generated. Although these projects can and likely will lead to discussion of pressing and contemporary issues, as explained in the [Civics Project Guidebook](#), action plans should not be directed at electoral politics, nor should they be developed in support of candidates in particular elections. Furthermore, the law requires that if classes engage in a project collaboratively, students must have the option of doing an individual project instead.

What is culturally responsive teaching, and what does it look like in a history/social science classroom?

As defined by scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings in her seminal article “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy” (1995), culturally responsive teaching is teaching that promotes:

- **Academic achievement:** Holding high, transparent expectations for all students, and supporting the development of students’ academic skills and identities as learners.
- **Cultural competence:** Affirming students’ backgrounds and identities -- including but not limited to racial and ethnic identity, gender identity and sexual orientation, religion, home language, and nationality – and fostering their ability to understand and honor others’ cultures and identities.

¹ [Educating for American Democracy Roadmap](#)

- **Sociopolitical awareness:** Partnering with students to identify, analyze, and work to solve systemic inequities in their communities and the world.

DESE firmly believes that [culturally responsive teaching is great teaching](#). Research shows that when educators are responsive to students' cultures and identities in this way, it leads to better learning experiences and ultimately to better outcomes and achievement. To this end, in Spring 2021, the Department released a [rubric](#) and [video calibration library](#) intended to deepen educators' understanding of what culturally responsive teaching can look like in practice.

Culturally responsive teaching is closely connected to the emphasis, in both the 2018 History/Social Science Framework and civics project legislation, on developing students' capacity to be active and informed participants in a diverse democratic society. The practice standards include both demonstrating civic dispositions like respect for others as well as taking informed action based on students' classroom learning; these skills foster students' cultural competence and sociopolitical awareness, respectively. The [Quick Reference Guide to Guiding Principle 2](#) offers a set of planning questions that history and social science teachers can use to make their instruction more culturally responsive, and the [Civics Project Guidebook](#) includes a section on centering students' identity and lived experience in their civic action work.