

3RD AND 4TH-GRADE TEACHERS PILOTING THE INVESTIGATING HISTORY CURRICULUM

Educator Brief

Fall 2025

Background

During the 2024-2025 pilot of the Investigating History curriculum for 3rd and 4th grades, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) contracted The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) — a non-partisan research center at Tufts University to understand these two questions:

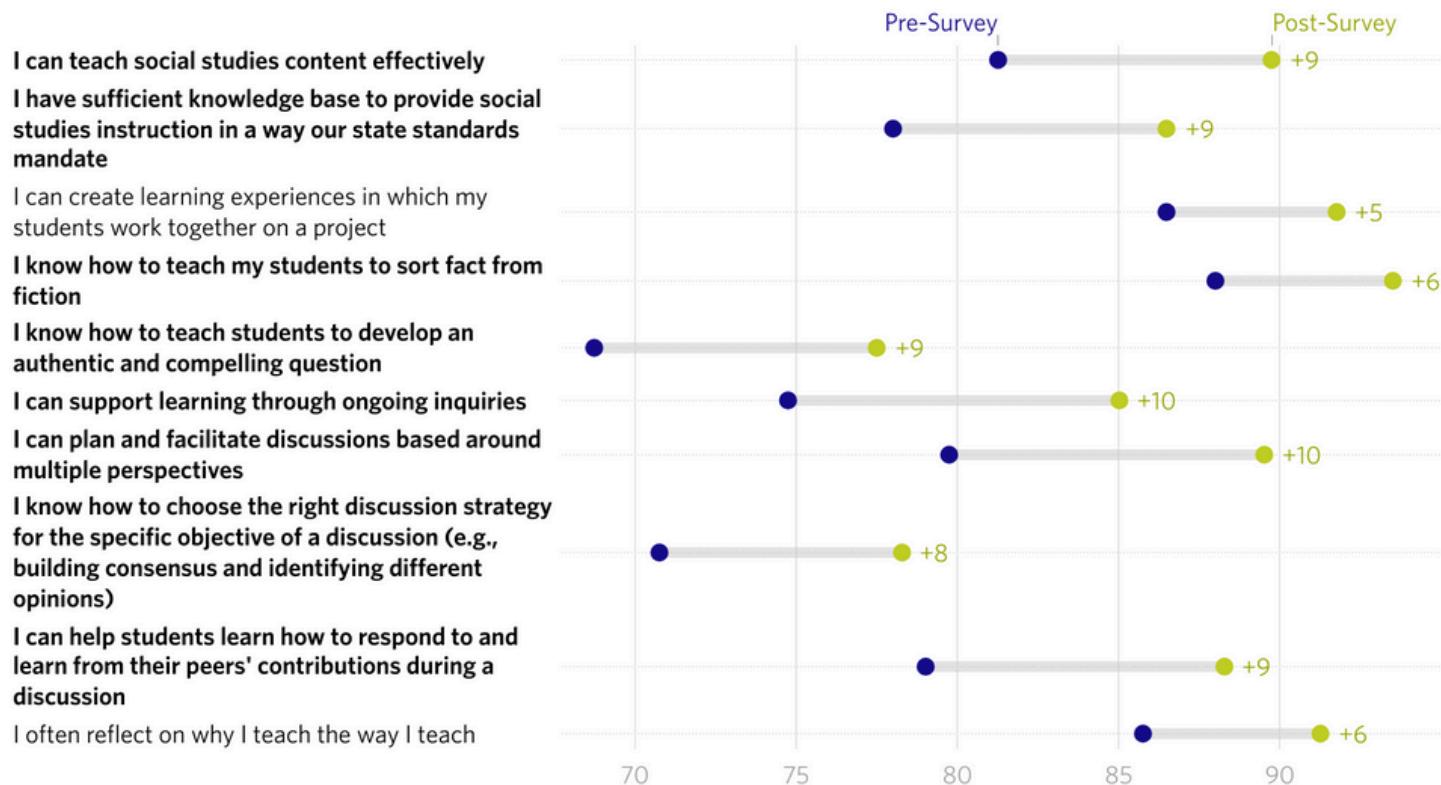
1. How teachers and students experienced and felt about the curriculum
2. How the curriculum impacted key outcomes in classrooms including transitioning to inquiry-based learning, student engagement, and development of social studies practice standards

Highlights

- Overall, **teachers (93%) and administrators (81%) reported having a positive experience** in the 3rd and 4th grade pilot of the Investigating History curriculum.
- 89% of teachers also reported that the **professional development** received was effective at helping them to implement the Investigating History curriculum pilot.
- Teachers reported **growth in their usage of inquiry practices and culturally responsive practices, as well as in their efficacy in using the curriculum** over the course of the academic year.
 - Specifically, teachers reported positive shifts in their efficacy in using the curriculum across multiple domains (see below)

Teachers' self-reported shifts in efficacy, Spring 2025

(Question: For each of the following, please indicate whether or not you agree with each of the statements about your social studies teaching)



Bolded items indicate statistical significance at $p < .01$ using a two-sided t-test

- On average, across 3rd and 4th grade teachers, 94% reported **that students were at least somewhat engaged with the curriculum**. While teachers reported that a lack of adequate background knowledge inhibits student engagement with the curriculum, teachers also reported that **connections to students' own lives or experiences tended to increase levels of student engagement**.
- Teachers across both 3rd and 4th grade generally reported high levels of confidence and perceived effectiveness with the following strategies and inquiry routines: Think-Pair-Share, Investigating Sources, vocabulary routines, and Notice and Wonder.
- In a pilot skills-based assessment for 3rd grade, students demonstrated strength in skills such as determining perspectives in sources and identifying relevant inquiry questions.

Challenges & Opportunities

- **Background Knowledge:** Teachers reported that about 2 in 5 students across 3rd and 4th grade students have the background knowledge necessary to engage with the curriculum.
- **Inquiry Routines:** Although teachers rated most of the instructional strategies and inquiry routines relatively highly, about 1 in 5 teachers reported the Question Formulation Technique, Inquiry Charts, and Launching the Question as “somewhat ineffective,” and reported they are challenging to implement.
- **Assessment:** 3rd grade students struggled with map reading skills and supporting their opinions with reasoning in a pilot skills-based assessment.
- **Timing and Pacing:** Teachers reported several issues with pacing including not having enough time in their planned schedule to teach social studies, too much content condensed in lessons, and too many lessons per unit.

Recommendations for Educators

Student Engagement

- Use the curriculum's opening routines to surface and activate background knowledge. Routines like Notice and Wonder and vocabulary previews may help students connect to new content and build understanding from the start.
- Create space for student-led thinking. Use Think-Pair-Share, Putting it Together, and student-generated questions to promote ownership. Teachers report that student-led learning is a key driver of engagement, so lean into these routines even if responses are simple at first.

Teacher Efficacy & Inquiry Routines

- Continue to practice inquiry. Students improve as they become more familiar with inquiry. Consider modeling questions and providing background context to scaffold inquiry.
- Chunk routines into smaller steps when students are new to inquiry-based work. For example, start with factual questions, then move to more interpretive or analytical questions.

Approaching Assessments

- Prior to teaching, review the key skills students are expected to demonstrate in the summative assessment to better understand how students' learning should build over time.
- Collaborate with other educators to use assessments as opportunities to support and observe skill development throughout the unit.

Timing and Pacing

- For administrators, build instructional time for social studies into elementary schedules. Protect this instructional time so teachers can complete social studies lessons.
- When making changes to lessons or clusters, avoid removing important elements of the inquiry routines, such as inquiry charts to prompt students' questioning skills or end-of-lesson reflections to help students process and connect their learning.



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The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) is a non-partisan, independent research organization focused on youth civic engagement in the United States. We conduct extensive research on youth participation, and we leverage that research to improve opportunities for all young people to acquire and use the skills and knowledge they need to meaningfully participate in civic life. CIRCLE is part of the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

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