

# The South Dakota Social Studies Standards Debate

*Arguing from Authority or from Evidence?*

## Benjamin F. Jones

South Dakota and state social studies standards were the subjects of several articles in a recent *Social Education*, vol. 87, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 2023). While it was gratifying to see interest in what South Dakota is doing, the article by Stephen Jackson was disappointing. While there were ill-informed arguments, it mainly suffered from assumption that inquiry-based standards succeed and content-based standards do not. No real examination of the efficacy of inquiry-based state standards took place anywhere in the issue, despite articles on the C3 Framework. Instead, the issue was built on the assumption that skills-based standards, such as those based on the C3 Framework, work.

Due to limited space, my response to Jackson will focus on key issues. He complains that the South Dakota Social Studies Standards Commission in 2022-23 didn't "revise the existing standards," that were skills based, but went with the content rich and very detailed standards. That's correct. Content rich standards were the point. In *Social Education's* Nov/Dec issue, there was a lot of discussion of the C3 Framework and inquiry-based standards, but nowhere did I see any research as to its efficacy. In contrast, content-based (or knowledge rich) instruction and the scholarship around its efficacy is substantial.<sup>1</sup> Our commission understood that teachers, particularly K-5 teachers, are often cast adrift as to what they should be teaching and would be well served having clear content-based standards. When provided with skills-based standards, teachers are bereft of vital clarity about the subject matter. Now, with explicit content, South Dakota's teachers know exactly what to focus on. K-5

*A False Binary*

## Stephen Jackson

Dr. Benjamin Jones accuses my recent article in *Social Education* of committing the logical fallacy of "argument from authority."<sup>1</sup> He suggests that content-rich pedagogy is overwhelmingly supported by scholarship and derides inquiry-based learning as a failed educational experiment. I will focus my response on addressing these claims rather than on the specific events involved with the South Dakota case (except to say that I stand by what I wrote, which readers can evaluate for themselves). Throughout his letter, Jones supports his claims by dismissing or distorting scholarship to create a false binary between content knowledge and inquiry skills in history and social studies education.

If you ask a philosopher, you'd learn that appealing to recognized authorities in their established field is not a fallacy at all.<sup>2</sup> If I were writing about a new cancer treatment, for instance, and pointed out that the American Cancer Society opposed it, that would be an important piece of evidence. To state the obvious, scholarly associations including the American Historical Association (AHA) and the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) support inquiry as a key to high-quality social studies education *because there is a voluminous body of evidence that substantiates its efficacy.*<sup>3</sup> Jones is either unaware of this scholarship, or simply dismisses it out of hand.

By contrast, Jones touts the research record of his content-rich pedagogy, especially through the work of Daniel Willingham and E.D. Hirsch. Neither Willingham nor Hirsch are experts in history or the social studies, and despite its popularity with policymakers over the past 30



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teachers, especially, can tailor their instruction using materials selected based on the ELA and Social Studies standards. During South Dakota's lengthy public feedback period, no one offered any evidence that content-based standards have been shown to fail, or that C-3 based standards led to success. Several made mention of Bloom's Taxonomy and that "knowledge" is the lowest form of critical thinking. But as standards proponent David Steiner of Johns Hopkins pointed out, in his public testimony, "You cannot think critically about nothing in particular. I would invite you to try it. You have to know content in order to think critically about it."<sup>2</sup> Further to this point, noted history education scholar Sam Wineburg has become "... concerned with Bloom-in-Practice, how his Taxonomy has taken on a life of its own as a poster on a schoolroom wall. Given that pyramids point in one direction, placing knowledge at the bottom sends the wrong message."<sup>3</sup> The South Dakota Social Studies Commission was aware of the relevant scholarship, saw no reason to continue with skills based-inquiry standards and, seeking to reverse the national trend in poor outcomes, approved knowledge-rich standards, so that teachers could determine for themselves the appropriate level of inquiry for their students.<sup>4</sup>

Also missing from Jackson's article is South Dakota's significant investment to prepare teachers for this new challenge. In the 2021 legislative session, Governor Noem proposed and the legislature approved a \$900,000 appropriation for history and civics supports (total South Dakota public school teachers number just over 10,000). Additionally, her current budget, is requesting \$6 million for a literacy initiative that was developed on the heels of the Social Studies Standards approval and will support parallel knowledge and other research validated reading initiatives.<sup>5</sup> Lastly, the president of the South Dakota Board of Regents publicly committed to making the changes to state college educator preparatory programs so that future teachers are prepared and current teachers are supported.<sup>6</sup>

Jackson and many of the opposition asserted



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years, Hirsch's Core Knowledge program has failed to show significant benefits in independent peer-reviewed analyses.<sup>4</sup> Jones's appeal to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores as proof that inquiry-driven standards lead to poor outcomes is also flawed. He notes that declines in eighth grade U.S. History began in 1994, but this was well before the creation of the C3 Framework or the widespread adoption of inquiry-based standards across the United States. Establishing causation is always difficult, but a much more likely culprit is that schools, to prioritize subjects associated with standardized testing, steadily diminished instructional time in the social studies.

Jones's letter relies on a series of distortions of scholarly evidence. At one point, Jones dismisses the concept of age-appropriateness by citing a personal email exchange as definitive proof. Perhaps most egregiously, he includes Sam Wineburg in a list of scholars who question the value of inquiry-based standards. As readers of *Social Education* will likely know, Wineburg is one of the founders of the Stanford History Education Group and one of the leading figures in the field of inquiry-based instruction for the social studies. As Jones points out, Wineburg does not support an approach dominated by Bloom's Taxonomy (nor does the C3 Framework or scholarship in the field), but his body of work is firmly rooted in support of historical inquiry in the social studies.<sup>5</sup> It is hard to see how suggesting otherwise can be anything other than a deliberate misrepresentation of his work.

Jones's depiction of the evidence paints a stark picture: you can have inquiry, which he suggests is a failed strategy, or you can have content-rich pedagogy, which he champions. This is a false binary: learning in the social studies requires both content *and* skills.<sup>6</sup> Jones's interpretation rests on a fundamental misreading of the C3 Framework itself, which asserts that both inquiry and content are necessary. Content standards are not included within the C3 Framework by design, since the C3 "intended to serve as a frame for organizing curricular content, rather than a prescription for

the standards were not, “age appropriate,” but never defined what that meant. Dylan Wiliam replied to my search for a definition saying, “The phrase ‘not age appropriate’ is thrown around all the time, and it is basically meaningless. I suspect it has its origins in the stage theories of cognitive development proposed by [Jean] Piaget and [Lev] Vygotsky, but since most psychologists today place little faith in stage-based theories of development, the idea of age- or developmental appropriateness doesn’t make much sense.”<sup>7</sup> There you have it.

Jackson also failed to mention that South Dakota’s knowledge-rich standards were endorsed by a variety of administrators and researchers, including faculty and leadership from Johns Hopkins School of Education, the former Chancellor of New York City Public Schools, the University of Virginia, and other education policy organizations.<sup>8</sup> Which further illustrates my point. Jackson rests his argument on a logical fallacy and uses tendentious language while hoping readers assume that the other side is biased. He refers to how professional and “major teacher organizations” opposed the standards. But he doesn’t use any scholarly argument about the C3 Framework or anything resembling a scholarly examination comparing the efficacy of the two schools of thought. Instead, Jackson rests his opposition on the use of the logical fallacy often referred to as the “argument from authority.” It’s long past time we get out of our ideological corners and have open minded debate about this vital matter. We need to rely on high quality research, evidence and relevant experience. To that end, I encourage readers to join the growing discussion about knowledge-rich instruction and decide the matter guided by evidence, not fallacies. ■

### Notes

1. The following are some of the relevant articles and books by scholars demonstrating this point: Christodoulou, Daisy, “Minding the Knowledge Gap: The Importance of Content in Student Learning,” *American Educator* (Spring 2014): 27–33; Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool,

the particular content to be taught.”<sup>7</sup> This was not out of an attempt to deprioritize content knowledge, but rather a recognition that states make varied content choices in the K-12 curriculum. In other words, the purpose of the C3 was to guide state standards committees to include valuable disciplinary skills *in addition to* (not instead of!) the important content knowledge necessary for a quality education in the social studies.

A central problem with the content-rich pedagogy advocated by Jones is that, rather than strive for a more harmonious balance between skills and content, it leaves inquiry skills out of the equation entirely. But inquiry is a key method by which the social studies can support higher-level thinking that students will need in their lives as citizens and participants in a dynamically evolving economy. The Hillsdale-inspired content-rich approach approved for the schools of South Dakota deprives social studies students of the opportunity to develop vital skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and information analysis and synthesis that they will need as they enter the twenty-first century workforce.

There is one point on which Jones and I wholeheartedly agree: that educators must “rely on high quality research,” and engage in “open minded debate” as we develop standards in history and the social studies. In that spirit I would encourage Jones to consult the preponderance of peer-reviewed studies written by experts in history and social studies education that support inquiry as essential to a high-quality education in the subject. ■

### Notes

1. Stephen Jackson, “The Hillsdale Effect: South Dakota’s Troubled New Social Studies Standards,” *Social Education* 87, no. 6 (2023): 355–360.
2. It is only a fallacy if the figure is not an authority or is not discussing matters within their established area of expertise. For a quick overview, see Hans Hansen, “Fallacies,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023), Section 1.9, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/fallacies>. For a

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- Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016); Heidi Glidden, “Common Ground: Clear, Specific Content Holds Teaching, Texts, and Tests Together,” *American Educator* (Spring, 2008); E.D. Hirsch, *Why Knowledge Matters: Rescuing Our Children from Failed Educational Theories* (Harvard Education Press, 2019); E.D. Hirsch and L. Hansel, “Why Content is King,” *Educational Leadership* 71, no. 3 (2013): 28-33; K.S. Krahenbuhl, “The Problem with the Expanding Horizons Model for History Curricula,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 100, no. 6 (2019): 20-26; Dylan Wiliam, *Creating the Schools our Children Need* (Learning Sciences, 2018); Daniel T. Willingham, *Why Don't Students Like School?: A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2021). Daniel T. Willingham, “Ask the Cognitive Scientist: What Will Improve a Student’s Memory?” *American Educator* (Winter 2008-2009).
- SD Board of Education Public Hearing, Public Comments, Dr. David Steiner, 1:39 to 1:43. Nov 21, 2022. Which can be found at <https://sdpb.sd.gov/streamarchive/BOE11212022.mp3>
  - Sam Wineburg, *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)* (UK, University of Chicago Press, 2018), 100.
  - Often called “the nation’s report card,” the National Assessment of Educational Progress has shown low results and no progress in history or civics since it began testing large samples of American students in 1994. The latest scores, which came out a month after the SD Board of Education Standards approved the new standards, show further decline in eighth grade U.S. History. The opposition to the standards refused to recognize these persistent results and the civics crisis, [www.nationsreportcard.gov/ushistory/results/scores](http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ushistory/results/scores).
  - 2024 South Dakota Legislature, HB 1022. <https://mylrc.sdlegislature.gov/api/Documents/257359.pdf>.
  - SD Board of Education Public Hearing, Public Comments, Regent Tim Rave, Apr 17, 2023. Minutes 1:06:26 to 1:09:30. [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/)
  - Dylan Wiliam to author, April 5, 2023.
  - See formal letter of endorsement of the Standards: <https://doe.sd.gov/pressroom/documents/2023/0223-Support.pdf>

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- more in-depth overview, see Douglas N. Walton, *Appeal to Expert Opinion: Arguments from Authority* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).
- For good introductory overviews, see: S.G. Grant, “Teaching Practices in History Education,” in *The Wiley International Handbook of History Teaching and Learning*, eds. Scott Alan Metzger and Lauren McArthur Harris (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 419-448; S.G. Grant, Kathy Swan, and John Lee, *Inquiry-Based Practice in Social Studies Education: Understanding the Inquiry Design Model*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2023); Peter Seixas, “A Model of Historical Thinking,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, no. 6 (2017), 593-605; for more, see the work of scholars including (but not limited to!) S.G. Grant, Sam Wineburg, Bob Bain, Kathy Swan, Eric Claravall, Bruce VanSledright, Jean-François Rouet, Bruce Lesh, Susan De La Paz, Peter Hillis, Whitney Blankenship, Shu Ching Yang, and Jill Gradwell.
  - For an evaluative analysis of the evidence, see Stephen Gorard, Beng Huat See, and Nadia Siddiqui, *The Trials of Evidence-based Education: The Promises, Opportunities, and Problems of Trials in Education* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 102–105.
  - Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Sam Wineburg, *Why Learn History (When it's Already on Your Phone)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). See also the voluminous work of the Digital Inquiry Group (Formerly Stanford History Education Group): <https://inquirygroup.org>.
  - See, for instance, Scott Alan Metzger’s concept of historical significance, explored in Metzger, “Magna Carta: Teaching Medieval Topics for Historical Significance,” *The History Teacher* 43, no. 3 (2010): 345–356.
  - National Council for the Social Studies, *College, Career & Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013) 29.

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