

Social Studies In Practice

What nine districts found when implementing K-5 inquiry-based social studies.

inquirED

Over the past year, inquirED worked with nine districts to document what Inquiry Journeys implementation looks like in elementary classrooms. We gathered their stories because we were curious about the themes that might connect them, even though they came to this work for different reasons and from different starting points. What we found was consistent enough across all nine to be worth naming, and that consistency is itself evidence of what K-5 social studies makes possible when it has the time and structure it needs.

FINDING 1

Before anything else worked, districts made structural decisions.

FINDING 2

Social studies outcomes showed up in places districts weren't expecting.

FINDING 3

Students were capable of more than the instruction had been asking of them.

Three findings surfaced across almost every story. First, districts that built consistency before pushing for depth found it easier to go deeper later. Next, teachers saw social studies instruction strengthen the literacy and writing work the district was already investing in. Finally, leaders who had doubted what K-5 students could handle with primary sources and complex historical questions kept finding their students could do more than they expected.

DISTRICT	STATE	SETTING
Skokie School District 68	IL	Suburban, multilingual
Iowa City Community School District	IA	Mid-size, 20 schools
Canby School District	OR	Rural/suburban
East Haven Public Schools	CT	Suburban
West Aurora School District 129	IL	Suburban
San Francisco Unified School District	CA	Urban, large
Oconomowoc Area School District	WI	Suburban
Waukee Community School District	IA	Suburban
Eastern Carver County Schools	MN	Suburban

FINDING 1

Before anything else worked, districts made structural decisions.

All kids in every single one of our classes are having similar experiences.

Patrick Snyder, Elementary Curriculum Coordinator
Iowa City Community School District

In every district where social studies became a consistent part of the schedule, three commitments came first: this subject matters, we're protecting time for it, and every classroom is doing it. The instructional growth followed from there.

In Iowa City, the structural move was formal. The district identified priority standards and embedded social studies into report cards across 20 elementary schools before professional development began. Eliza Proctor, Executive Director of Elementary Schools, described the logic: "As we prioritize those standards and find the ones that we think students must have mastery of, we've really tried to embed those into learning experiences." Teachers across 20 schools had a shared framework before anyone asked them to try something new.

In Canby, the question was simpler: was social studies actually being taught? Amanda Graber, Teaching and Learning TOSA, put the starting point plainly: "Social studies was the holidays, and that was about it." The district moved from irregular, holiday-centered instruction to consistent K–5 implementation before asking for depth.

In Oconomowoc, the problem was cross-school inconsistency. Teachers in different buildings were doing different things with no shared language for what they were doing. Elizabeth Schmock, Instructional Technology Coordinator, described what the district needed first: "Those inquiry standards are important. So having those live within the social studies curriculum was critical." Once teachers were working from the same foundation, professional conversations about instruction became possible.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Iowa City, IA

Embedded social studies in priority standards and report cards across 20 schools before professional development began.

Canby, OR

Moved from irregular, holiday-centered instruction to consistent implementation across all K–5 grades.

Oconomowoc, WI

Addressed cross-school inconsistency first; teachers developed shared language that then changed how they talked about student work.

Waukee, IA

Made a district-level decision to trust the curriculum's sequence before asking teachers to adapt or extend it.

FOR DISTRICT LEADERS

- ☐ Has K–5 social studies been identified as a district priority in your standards and reporting structures, or does it operate without formal accountability?
- ☐ Are teachers across your schools teaching social studies with similar frequency, or is coverage inconsistent?



WHAT WE LEARNED

None of these districts waited until everything was in place before protecting time for social studies. They protected the time and built structures to support it first. Implementation followed.

FINDING 2

Social studies outcomes showed up in places districts weren't expecting.

Academic Vocabulary	→ Showed up in ELA writing and classroom discussion.
Discussion Routines	→ Carried over into other subjects beyond social studies.
Inquiry Skills	→ Connected directly to districts' portrait-of-a-graduate outcomes.

These districts found that K-5 social studies connected to outcomes already on their radar: literacy growth, academic discourse, and the portrait of a graduate they'd already defined.

Vocabulary was the most visible point of transfer. Lindsay Hall, K-5 Science, Social Science, and SEL District Administrator at West Aurora, named what teachers noticed: "The academic vocabulary that they are using has just been amazing for teachers to hear and see." In Skokie, multimodal instruction, including video, images, discussion, and primary sources, helped multilingual learners build conceptual understanding around academic language, not just memorize terms.

Discourse followed. In Oconomowoc, the transfer moved in both directions. Elizabeth Schmocker described what happened once students were practiced at inquiry in social studies: "Teachers go into literacy now thinking, how are we having them ask questions? Our students are skilled with knowing how to do that."

In San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD), second-grade students at Lawton Elementary moved from inquiry about Lake Merced's environmental impacts to presenting at the San Francisco Youth Climate Justice Summit. Nikhil Laud described what that kind of work makes visible: "You could see students come to life with this project. They learn presentation skills. They learn research skills. All those things are really the interconnection of problems that don't just live in one subject area."

In East Haven, the connection was built into how the district defined student success. Adam Swinney, Curriculum Director, described the district's Vision of the Graduate: "That idea of being a responsible citizen, a resourceful problem solver, an informed thinker, and having powerful and effective communication skills really gave guidance to what we wanted our instruction to be within social studies."

IN THE CLASSROOM

East Haven, CT

Vision of the Graduate outcomes were directly addressed by the inquiry skills at the center of every unit.

West Aurora, IL

Teachers observed academic vocabulary showing up in how students spoke and wrote across the day.

Oconomowoc, WI

Inquiry questioning transferred into how teachers structured literacy instruction.

SFUSD, CA

Second-graders researching Lake Merced's environmental impacts ended up presenting at the San Francisco Youth Climate Justice Summit, leaving with presentation skills, research skills, and an understanding of how problems connect across subjects.

FOR DISTRICT LEADERS

- ☐ When students engage in structured discussion or academic writing in social studies, does that transfer appear in your literacy data?
- ☐ Does your portrait of a graduate include civic reasoning and discourse skills, and does your K-5 curriculum give students a path to develop them?



WHAT WE LEARNED

When social studies has protected time in the schedule, the effects don't stay in social studies. Academic vocabulary shows up in ELA writing, discussion habits carry over into other subjects, and inquiry skills connect directly to the Portrait of a Graduate districts had already defined.

FINDING 3

Students were capable of more than the instruction had been asking of them.

What I love is that we're asking so much more of our youngest learners, and they're doing it. It's powerful to see how they're interacting with the curriculum and materials. It's proving to our teachers that we can ask our students to do hard and complex things, and they'll rise to the challenge.

Adam Swinney, Curriculum Director
East Haven Public Schools

One finding showed up regardless of setting, grade level, or how long the district had been using the curriculum: students were capable of more than instruction had been asking of them. When teachers gave students access to primary sources, complex questions, and genuine inquiry tasks, students engaged with the work.

During their first year of implementation, instructional coaches in Eastern Carver County described the same realization. Ann Smith, Instructional Coach, put it plainly: "Students are way more capable than we think they are. And I love that your curriculum does that." When first-grade students wrote and presented petitions about playground accessibility, it was exactly the kind of capability Smith meant.

In Skokie, Director of Curriculum Diana Schmidt identified a design principle that kept the curriculum accessible while holding expectations high. "Low floor, high ceiling allows all students access, share thinking, exercise problem-solving, and expand beyond standards." By year three, junior high teachers were reporting that incoming students arrived with a different capacity for social studies thinking.

In West Aurora, the evidence showed up at the dinner table. A first-grade Inquiry unit asked students to build a survival plan, with explanations and visuals for their reasoning. One student took it home and presented it to her parents at dinner. Then she called her grandmother. Lindsay Hall reflected on what that moment revealed: the student was explaining her own thinking, using vocabulary she had built through investigation, to an audience she had chosen on her own. Nobody asked her to do that.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Eastern Carver County, MN

First-graders wrote and presented petitions; third-graders engaged with primary sources — in the curriculum's first year.

Skokie, IL

"Low floor, high ceiling" design kept expectations high; junior high teachers reported students were better prepared for complex content.

West Aurora, IL

A first-grader made a presentation outside of school, explaining her own thinking to an audience she chose herself.

FOR DISTRICT LEADERS

- ☐ What does your curriculum currently expect from your youngest learners?
- ☐ Where could you adjust conditions to let students engage in more complex work?



WHAT WE LEARNED

The surprise wasn't that high-achieving students rose to the challenge. It was that most students did. Across all nine districts, once teachers gave students access to primary sources, complex questions, and real inquiry work, students engaged with it. The bar hadn't been too high. It had just never been set there before.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR DISTRICT

The districts in this brief didn't set out to make a case for K-5 social studies. They were trying to solve real problems: schedule constraints, inconsistent implementation, or underserved students. The findings followed from that work. If you're working through any of the same things, we'd be glad to talk through what these districts did first.

Contact **inquirED**

ABOUT INQUIRY JOURNEYS

Inquiry Journeys is inquirED's K–5 social studies curriculum, designed around structured inquiry: investigating compelling questions, analyzing primary and secondary sources, and developing evidence-based conclusions. It holds an ESSA Tier IV "Demonstrates a Rationale" designation from LeanLab Education, and is aligned to the C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards.

READ THE FULL STORIES

Go deeper with any of the nine districts below.

Iowa City	IA	Canby	OR
East Haven	CT	West Aurora	IL
San Francisco Unified	CA	Oconomowoc	WI
Waukegan	IA	Eastern Carver County Schools	MN
Skokie	IL		

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