Social Studies Advisory Committee DRAFT RECOMMENDATION
January 9, 2026

Members

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Aryana Bhatt, Vice Chair

Staff Liaison: Christine Joy, Social Studies Supervisor

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Recommendation 1: Adhere to Policy I-6, PIP 1 to Strengthen K-5 Social Studies Instruction

Alignment to Strategic Plan

Priorities: Student Academic Growth and Success · Student Well-being

Performance Objectives: SOL Proficiency · Growth in Reading & Math · Inclusion

Strategies: Deliver APS curriculum, materials and strategies through rigorous, differentiated, evidence-based, and culturally responsive instruction aligned to the Virginia Standards of Learning.

SUMMARY

APS' instructional time Policy Implementation Procedures (PIPs) must be adhered to in elementary school (K-5) to allow for Social Studies to be taught with fidelity.

This recommendation aligns with APS's Strategic Plan because without adequate instructional time for social studies, we cannot expect any child — especially those from historically marginalized communities — to learn and retain social studies content, pass SOLs, and meet PBA benchmarks in elementary school.

This recommendation is endorsed by the ACTL English Learners (on 11/19) and Science (11/20) Advisory Subcommittees. Student Services discussed this recommendation in December.

Budgetary Implications: Aside from staff time, this cost would be budget neutral.

Committee vote: 10 in favor, 0 opposed **Date:** 11/17/25

Detail

SSAC first advocated for dedicated social studies instructional time in the 1989-90 school year. From recommendations past:

> *"Complaints are also heard from elementary school teachers in Arlington about an overcrowded curriculum packed into a short school year. Core subjects such as social studies are feeling more and more pressure as new subjects and topics are added to an already crowded curriculum, examples being drug awareness and prevention, family life, sex ed, personal health, and computer education. Concerned about this problem, the citizens Social Studies Advisory Committee this year recommended to the School Board that social studies be allotted a definite period of [instructional] time…" (pg. 12-13).*

Times have not changed. Nationally, state academic testing and accountability policies essentially deprioritize instructional time for social studies compared to other core subjects (ELA, math, and science). A recent analysis indicates that elementary teachers spend less time teaching social studies than other subjects and receive significantly less professional development in social studies compared to other content areas.

Currently, APS Elementary Schools follow a 6-hour and 50-minute day (or 32-hour and 50-minutes per week schedule). Per I-6 PIP-1, ELA and Math each require 75 minutes of daily instructional time. For Social Studies and Science:

> ***"... All elementary students receive regular social studies instruction on a daily basis. Arlington Public Schools elementary history and social science instruction is recommended to be scheduled in every classroom:***
> ***1. daily for at least 30 minutes Grades K-3 and at least or 45 minutes Grades 4-5; or***
> ***2. weekly overall for 150 minutes Grades K-3 or and for 225 minutes Grades 4-5.***

In total, in K-3, core content instruction (ELA, Math, Science and Social Studies) takes place for 17.5 hours per week, in grades 4-5, 20 hours/week. The additional 12 to 15 hours of the school week are filled with electives (PE, Arts, Music), each having its own instructional time requirements, as well as lunch, recess, and transitions. Elementary school time also includes SEL, counseling, assemblies, field trips, and remediation or enrichment (Advanced Academics), all of which must be incorporated into the schedule. Furthermore, option schools such as Dual Language Immersion (DLI), ATS, and Campbell have their own instructional requirements. SSAC acknowledges that building an elementary school master schedule is a complicated process with many moving parts.

But unfortunately, like other divisions, APS' Social Studies program is minimized by other competing interests. Currently, in many elementary schools, science and history are combined into a single period called "Content Time," with history essentially taught in fourth grade and science in fifth grade due to SOL test schedules. Furthermore, school-based staff report that both science and social studies are being squeezed out during the day because of the extended instructional time required for ELA and Math. What occurs in practice does not align with APS's policy.

SSAC is aware that:

- Some schools use Content Time blocks to "pull out" English Learner (EL) students for English Language Development (ELD) instruction. One SSAC member noted that during Elementary Back-to-School Night at one school, EL parents expressed particular concern about the frequency of their children's absences during Content Time. However, ACEL informed us that most schools now pull out EL students during the English Language Arts (ELA) block due to co-teaching initiatives. The EL Office does not currently endorse pulling students from social studies or science classes; however, this practice, which was common years ago, still occurs.
- At many schools, assemblies, standardized assessments, and even "band practice" are held during Content Time.
- Teachers were informed that they could count "SEL time" when counselors "push in" as Social Studies instructional time, which further reduces instruction. The Student Services Advisory Committee chair informed SSAC that Wakefield has implemented SEL innovatively by integrating it across all four core content areas: Science, Social Studies, Math, and ELA. SSAC wonders whether this approach could also be applied in elementary school settings.
- During the 2023-24 Social Studies/Science program evaluations, external evaluators faced challenges observing instruction due to unclear scheduling and the use of "content time" for other priorities. When a focus group was conducted in 2024 to further analyze the situation, elementary teachers identified the main issue as "pull out time."
- Moreover, the implementation of 5th-grade U.S. History I will begin in fall 2026. For it to succeed, the course must be taught uniformly across all elementary schools. APS must ensure adequate social studies instructional time throughout the system so that students are prepared to continue with U.S. History I/II in the sixth grade.

Despite our concerns, SSAC does not oppose "content time" in itself. In some elementary schools, science and social studies are "chunked," with these subjects taught alternatively — for example, science taught for one or two weeks, social studies the next – which has yielded promising results. While we appreciate that Content Time provides teachers with flexibility to deliver social studies in blocks, it also leads to a lack of accountability. Unfortunately, at APS, standardized testing appears to be the only measure used to ensure that elementary social studies instruction is delivered with some fidelity, at least in 4th grade.

SSAC questions how children are expected to succeed in class, let alone pass their SOLs/PBA benchmarks, if they are not physically present when social studies is taught. According to APS's Statistical Dashboard, in SY 2024-25, APS faces a 12.5% gap in closing the 4th Grade Virginia Studies SOL pass rate — an even wider gap when data is disaggregated by subgroup: Black students (30% gap), Hispanic students (37% gap), low-income students (38% gap), EL1-4 students (43% gap), and students with disabilities (46% gap) [see Appendix 1]. SSAC strongly believes that teachers need adequate instructional time to ensure students learn the SOL content for each grade, reinforcing concepts multiple times. How can teachers build on what students have already learned if they are not engaged with the material?

Moreover, students need to learn "how to learn" in elementary school to succeed in secondary education. They can only achieve this by mastering the basics early. Math and ELA are the foundational building blocks, but science and social studies are where these basics are APPLIED; not to mention where most careers lie when students graduate.

One way APS can address SOL opportunity/achievement gaps is by acknowledging them in each school's Action Plans. Each school should develop annual and three-year social studies goals, just as they already do for the other core content areas (ELA, Math, and Science). Although this action may not be a ESSA/VDOE mandate, it should be required by APS.

Other Considerations
The authors of the study, "How Social Studies Improves Elementary Literacy," analyzed the effect of instructional time on literacy in all four content areas. Surprisingly, for students of lower socioeconomic status (SES) as well as English learners (ELs), an additional thirty minutes of daily social studies instruction in elementary school resulted in reading improvements ranging from 17 to 21 percent of a standard deviation for low-income students. For ELs, the increase was about a quarter of a standard deviation in reading ability—almost double the gains observed in other core content areas. Additional English Language Arts (ELA) instructional time had an insignificant effect on reading outcomes for lower SES students, ELs, and English-speaking cohorts. This study strongly suggests that reducing social studies instruction exacerbates longstanding literacy gaps for lower-resourced students and ELs. Therefore, to ensure equitable learning outcomes, APS must adhere to our Instructional Time Policy and PIPs (see Appendix 2).

SSAC is also concerned about recent state efforts to address public accountability across divisions. During the last legislative session, SB855 (which failed in committee) was introduced. SB 855 proposed changes to the state assessment process by allowing Permissive Local Alternative Assessments as an option for Virginia Studies (4th grade), Civics (7th grade), and all End-of-Course Social Studies courses. This change would have eliminated state-required Social Studies SOL testing. While acknowledging that there is excessive standardized testing in public schools, SSAC also recognizes that without these requirements, many school divisions would deprioritize their Social Studies programs. Currently, Social Studies faces a competing dilemma. In November 2025, the Virginia Social Studies Leaders Consortium (VSSLC) raised concerns about new proposals to standardize locally developed performance-based assessments (PBAs) across divisions. This proposal conflicts with legislation that allows for permissive local alternative assessments; and may even prohibit teachers from creating their own instructional resources. Any of these proposed changes would put Social Studies out of alignment with APS's Strategic Plan. Given Content Time constraints and the challenges mentioned above in implementing dedicated Social Studies instruction, SSAC wants to ensure that APS's Social Studies program is taught with fidelity.

Our recommendation is three-fold:

1. **Follow APS' own Policy/PIP by allocating dedicated instructional time in the elementary school master schedule for both Social Studies AND Science instruction;**
2. **Include Social Studies achievement goals in each School Action Plan; and**
3. **Encourage the Office of English Learners (OEL), Office of Special Education (OSE) and the Office of Student Services to collaborate with the Science and Social Studies Offices to work with school-based leadership to mutually find alternate times within the elementary school master schedule to provide specialized services. This approach aims to minimize the amount of content instruction time students lose when pulled out of class.**

EVERY SINGLE ONE OF APS' INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS ARE IMPORTANT! We don't want to compete with Science… or SEL… or English or Math… or band practice for instructional time. We want APS to follow their PIPs, which are already in place.

APS can improve learning outcomes for all students, but they must attend class first.

Staff Response Staff supports this recommendation.

Citations:
Nathaniel Cline. (10, November 2025) . "*Virginia social studies leaders warn proposed testing shift could sideline critical thinking."* Virginia Mercury, https://apple.news/A9PBMBLS5RXmX3JSYzv39jA

Melissa Kay Diliberti, Ashley Woo, and Julia H. Kaufman. (2023). "*The Missing Infrastructure for Elementary (K–5) Social Studies Instruction: Findings from the 2022 American Instructional Resources Survey*." Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA134-17.html.

Adam Tyner and Sarah Kabourek. (2021). "*How Social Studies Improves Elementary Literacy*." Social Education 85(1), pp 32-39. https://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/view-article-2021-02/se-85012132.pdf

Madeline Will. (2023). "*When it comes to social studies, elementary teachers are on their own."* Education Week. https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/when-it-comes-to-social-studies-elementary-teachers-are-on-their-own/2023/03

Appendix 1: APS SOL Data

APS SOL Data: 4th Grade Virginia Studies

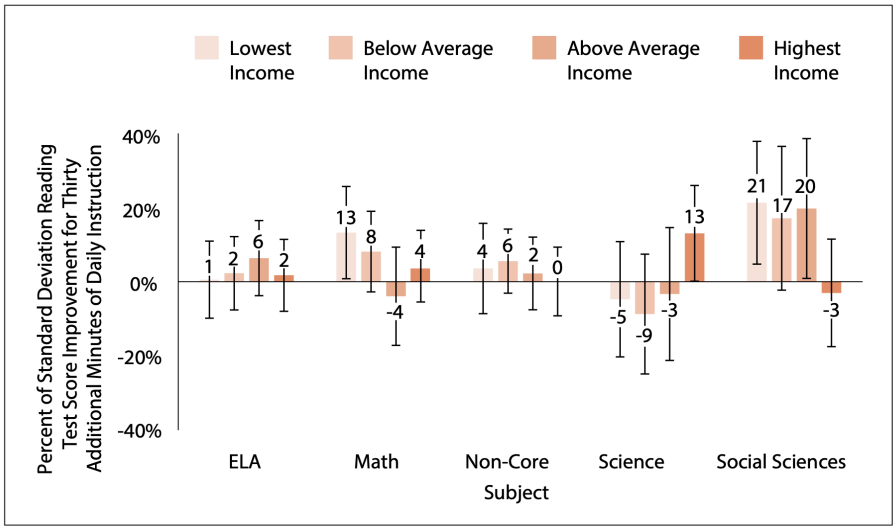
Student Academic Success - APS SOL Pass Rate % (ES Virginia Studies)				
	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	GAP (to 90%)
% Pass Rate	79.8%	77.3%	77.5%	12.5%
% Asian	85.6%	81.8%	86.8%	3.2%
% Black	54.8%	55.2%	60.1%	29.9%
% Hispanic	59.9%	51.8%	53.2%	36.8%
% Other	90.4%	84.2%	89.5%	0.5%
% White	89.8%	89.7%	87.5%	2.5%
Disadvantaged	53.9%	52.9%	52.5%	37.5%
% ELs (1-4)	55.7%	43.2%	46.7%	43.3%
% SWDs	54.7%	48.8%	44.1%	45.9%
% GenEd <80%	22.4%	17.1%	6.7%	83.3%
% GenEd 80%+	81.6%	78.9%	79.3%	10.7%
% Gifted	93.9%	92.8%	93.3%	0.0%
% Gifted Social Studies	95.6%	96.6%	96.4%	0.0%
% Young Scholars	49.1%	63.2%	62.6%	27.4%

Source: Arlington Public Schools SOL Analysis Dashboard

Appendix 2: Instructional Time Spent on Social Studies and Greater Reading Growth by Income and EL Status

Figure 6. Time Spent on Social Studies and Greater Progress in Reading for Students from Families with Different Income Levels

More instructional time in social studies is related to greater reading growth from first through fifth grade for all students except those whose families are in the top income quartile.

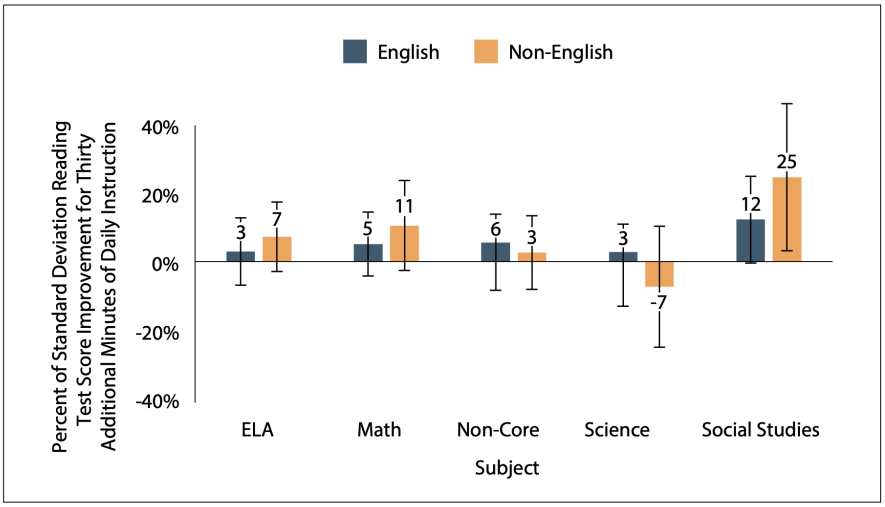


Note: The analytic sample includes 6,731 students. Indicators of socioeconomic status (for example, "affluent") reflect quartiles of the family income distribution. Effects are in standard deviations of fifth-grade assessment scores. Note that the 17 percent of a standard deviation effect for students in the "below average income " quartile is only statistically significant at the 90 percent confidence level. Error bars (I) represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Adam Tyner and Sarah Kabourek. (2021), pg. 37

Figure 7. Time Spent on Social Studies and Greater Reading Growth for Students in English-speaking and non-English-speaking Homes

Additional social studies time is tied to greater progress in reading regardless of students' home language, although the effect is stronger for students in non-English-speaking homes.



Note: The analytic sample includes 6,731 students. Effects are in standard deviations of fifth-grade assessment scores. Error bars (I) represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Adam Tyner and Sarah Kabourek. (2021), pg. 38