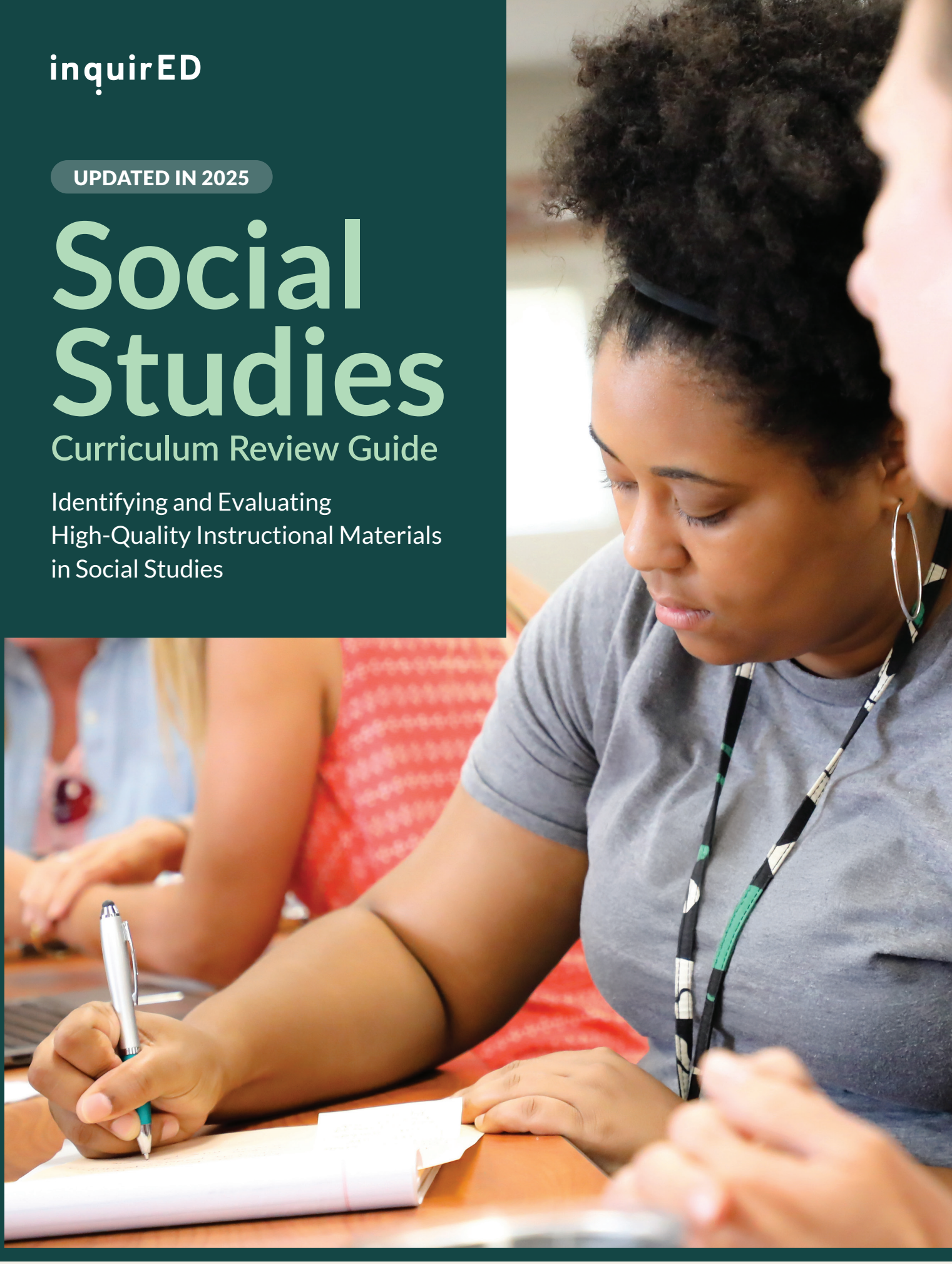
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UPDATED IN 2025

Social Studies

Curriculum Review Guide

Identifying and Evaluating
High-Quality Instructional Materials
in Social Studies





Strengthening Social Studies Through High-Quality Instructional Materials

Too often, K–12 social studies is treated as an afterthought, particularly in the elementary grades. But social studies is foundational. It builds the civic knowledge, historical awareness, and critical thinking students need to participate fully in our democracy.

It supports college and career readiness by strengthening analysis, communication, and problem-solving skills. And increasingly, research shows it may be a powerful lever for improving literacy outcomes, especially for students who face persistent opportunity gaps (Tyner & Kabourek, 2020).

Despite its importance, social studies frequently lacks the comprehensive, high-quality instructional materials available in other subjects. This gap matters: research shows that access to high-quality instructional materials leads to stronger student outcomes and greater equity across classrooms and schools (Steiner et al., 2019). Yet in social studies, educators are often left to cobble lessons from disconnected sources without the standards, guidance, or curricular infrastructure they need (Diliberti et al., 2023).

Designing high-quality social studies instruction requires the careful sequencing of content and tasks, thoughtful scaffolding, and an integration of explicit instruction and student-led learning. It also demands time and expertise to collect, vet, and integrate diverse sources, all while supporting students in building knowledge and developing disciplinary skills. These are not responsibilities any single educator should have to shoulder alone.

That's why this guide exists. The Social Studies Curriculum Review Guide is designed to help educators, districts, and curriculum developers create, evaluate, and select social studies instructional materials that meet the demands of today's classrooms. It provides clear, research-aligned criteria for what high-quality social studies instruction looks like – and what materials must do to support it.

What's Been Updated?

The original Curriculum Review Guide emphasized inquiry, but did not fully articulate what type of inquiry leads to deep, transferrable knowledge and skills. This updated version begins with a clearer premise: social studies is fundamentally about helping students build disciplinary knowledge and skills in history, civics, geography, and economics – and structured inquiry is the instructional approach that makes knowledge and skills meaningful, memorable, and transferable.

This version strengthens expectations for both content and disciplinary skills, offering a more coherent vision of rigorous, consistent instruction. It reflects what we now know about how students build knowledge through schema, develop conceptual understanding, and transfer learning to new contexts, and what materials must do to support that process. Key updates include:

- Clearer focus on structured inquiry as the foundation for knowledge-building and transfer
- Stronger integration of content and inquiry, aligned to how students learn and retain knowledge
- Refined criteria and indicators that emphasize coherence, scaffolding, and support for disciplinary thinking
- Expanded focus on multiple perspectives, ensuring instructional materials support critical thinking, respectful engagement, and nuanced understanding of complex topics
- Improved clarity and usability to guide adoption, implementation, and instructional decision-making
- Addition of literacy integration as a core domain, evaluating how materials build students' reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills within social studies

How to Use This Guide

The Social Studies Curriculum Review Guide provides a practical, research-aligned framework for evaluating instructional materials across five essential domains:



Each domain includes clear criteria and indicators that define what high-quality social studies instruction should look like – grounded in cognitive science, disciplinary best practices, and principles of equity.

Use this guide to determine whether materials are aligned to standards, support knowledge-building and inquiry, and meet the diverse needs of your students. Whether you're conducting a full-scale curriculum adoption or assessing the quality of your current materials, let your instructional priorities and student outcomes guide your review.

The guide is designed for flexible use, helping you evaluate depth, rigor, relevance, and usability in ways that support meaningful, inclusive learning.

Domains of High-Quality Social Studies Instruction



Depth of Knowledge and Skills

Supports students in developing disciplinary understanding across history, geography, civics, and economics. Emphasizes both factual content and disciplinary thinking to ensure knowledge is retained, connected, and transferable.



Structured and Coherent Inquiry Design

Guides students through a coherent progression that captures attention, builds schema, and supports transfer to new, meaningful contexts. Builds background knowledge, deepens understanding through compelling questions, and reinforces learning through aligned instruction and assessment.



Balanced Representation and Multiple Perspectives

Ensures that instructional materials present diverse perspectives with accuracy, nuance, and care. Emphasizes diverse narratives, source evaluation, and respectful engagement to support critical thinking and deeper understanding of social studies topics and themes.



Literacy Development

Builds students' literacy skills by integrating reading, writing, speaking, and listening into social studies. Emphasizes complex texts, evidence-based writing, structured discussion, and authentic research to support clear, effective communication.



Usability and Educator Support

Ensures the curriculum is accessible and designed for everyday classroom use. Incorporates clear structure, embedded guidance, and professional learning to reduce prep time, support strong, consistent instruction, and foster teacher growth.

DOMAIN

Depth of Knowledge and Skills

Supports students in developing disciplinary understanding across history, geography, civics, and economics. Emphasizes both factual content and disciplinary thinking to ensure knowledge is retained, connected, and transferable.



CRITERION	
Historical Knowledge and Thinking Does the curriculum provide a comprehensive exploration of past events, people, and societies to help students understand human experiences and their influence on the present and future?	• Covers a wide range of historical topics and concepts appropriate to students' developmental levels • Engages students with primary and secondary sources, enabling them to investigate events and differing perspectives • Explicitly teaches and provides opportunities to practice historical thinking skills such as sourcing, corroboration, contextualization, chronological reasoning, etc.
Geographic Knowledge and Thinking Does the curriculum support students in exploring Earth's physical features, human-environment interactions, and the spatial distribution of people and resources?	• Treats geography as an interdisciplinary field, guiding students to explore key concepts such as location, place, human-environment interaction, movement, and region • Incorporates tools of a geographer – such as maps, globes, and spatial data – to develop skills like map reading, spatial reasoning, etc. • Supports students in analyzing the dynamic relationships between physical and human geography, including how geography shapes human behavior and how human activities impact natural systems
Civic Knowledge and Thinking Does the curriculum provide a meaningful exploration of the rights, responsibilities, and roles of individuals in a democratic society?	• Helps students understand how individuals and groups influence government, contribute to civic life, and participate in democratic processes • Builds deep understanding of key concepts related to government structure, function, and the creation and enforcement of laws • Supports student engagement in civil discourse and collaborative decision-making, with an emphasis on understanding and respecting differing perspectives
Economic Knowledge and Thinking Does the curriculum help students build an understanding of economic concepts and relationships, and apply them to historical events, real-world situations, and personal decision-making?	• Develops students' understanding of core economic concepts and relationships, such as scarcity, opportunity cost, trade-offs, labor, and exchange • Connects economic concepts to historical and/or contemporary examples • Applies economic thinking to real-world situations, including budgeting, saving, and planning

DOMAIN

Structured and Coherent Inquiry Design

Guides students through a coherent progression that captures attention, builds schema, and supports transfer to new, meaningful contexts. Builds background knowledge, deepens understanding through compelling questions, and reinforces learning through aligned instruction and assessment.



CRITERION

Inquiry-Based Knowledge Building

Does the curriculum develop students' understanding through a purposeful learning progression that builds background knowledge, connects facts to broader concepts, and deepens learning over time?

- Sequences knowledge-building through a researched-backed progression that includes explicit instruction, guided practice, and student-driven exploration
- Emphasizes background knowledge as the foundation for investigation and critical thinking
- Encourages schema development through tasks that connect facts to broader concepts and enduring understandings
- Revisits core ideas and vocabulary across lessons to deepen and refine understanding over time

Compelling and Supporting Questions

Does the curriculum engage students in sustained inquiry by centering their investigations around authentic, standards-aligned questions that build knowledge and deepen understanding?

- Uses compelling and supporting questions to organize learning and build toward standards-aligned objectives
- Supports student-generated questions and connects investigation to students' experiences, perspectives, and prior knowledge
- Frames compelling questions to be open-ended and free from predetermined or moralizing perspectives
- Guides students to revisit, revise, and build on questions across lessons to support deeper exploration

Coherent Learning Progression and Assessment

Does the curriculum build knowledge and skills through a developmentally appropriate, intentional sequence that uses aligned assessments to monitor understanding, promote reflection, and support growth?

- Sequences instruction in a developmentally appropriate and coherent order, building on prior knowledge across lessons, units, and grade levels
- Uses aligned formative and summative assessments to monitor progress, measure mastery, and guide instructional decisions with clear, observable criteria
- Promotes metacognition and reflection through opportunities for students to revisit ideas, assess their growth, and engage in self- and peer feedback
- Supports transfer of learning by providing structured opportunities for students to apply learning to new and meaningful contexts

Evidence-Based Conclusions and Real-World Applications

Does the curriculum support students in using evidence and disciplinary thinking to draw conclusions and transfer their learning to authentic, real-world contexts?

- Positions factual knowledge as the foundation for higher-order thinking, guiding students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information
- Supports students in drawing their own conclusions using evidence and disciplinary tools, rather than restating predetermined answers
- Prompts students to reflect on key insights and consider how their learning connects to issues, challenges, or opportunities beyond the classroom
- Engages students in authentic tasks – such as creating projects, communicating findings, or proposing solutions – that require the transfer of knowledge to real-world contexts

DOMAIN

Balanced Representation and Multiple Perspectives

Ensures that instructional materials present diverse perspectives with accuracy, nuance, and care. Emphasizes diverse narratives, source evaluation, and respectful engagement to support critical thinking and deeper understanding of social studies topics and themes.



CRITERION

Factual Accuracy and Source Integrity Does the curriculum maintain factual accuracy, ensure the integrity of sources, and include a clear process for ongoing content review and updates?	• Distinguishes between historical fact, interpretation, and perspective • Reviews sources for accuracy, bias, and instructional relevance • Maintains a documented process for regularly reviewing and updating content based on educator, student, and expert feedback
Multiple Sources and Perspectives Do instructional materials and activities present diverse perspectives with complexity and nuance, emphasizing contributions and challenges while exploring historical and contemporary issues?	• Presents multiple, diverse perspectives and lived experiences across geography, civics, economics, and history • Guides students in evaluating issues with complexity and nuance, avoiding oversimplification • Highlights the strengths and contributions of diverse communities – not solely their struggles – to present a fuller, more accurate picture of their experiences
Critical Thinking Without Bias Does the curriculum promote critical thinking while guiding students to engage respectfully with differing viewpoints, use evidence-based reasoning, and navigate complex topics without ideological bias?	• Avoids ideological bias, leading questions, or embedded assumptions that impose a political perspective • Guides students to evaluate sources and construct interpretations using evidence-based reasoning • Encourages perspective-taking and empathy while addressing complex topics with accuracy and ensuring that instruction does not assign blame or create divisive narratives
Criterion: Collaboration and Discourse Does the curriculum cultivate a rich collaborative learning environment where students engage in meaningful discussions, co-construct understanding, and participate in shared decision-making to deepen their learning?	• Embeds structured collaboration and peer discussion to support reflection, idea exchange, and shared learning • Provides protocols and guidance for engaging students in thoughtful, purposeful discourse that avoids unstructured debates and one-sided conversations • Offers opportunities for students to share their voice, listen to others, and navigate differing perspectives to reach shared decisions

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Literacy Development

Builds students' literacy skills by integrating reading, writing, speaking, and listening into social studies. Emphasizes complex texts, evidence-based writing, structured discussion, and authentic research to support clear, effective communication.



CRITERION	
Reading Comprehension Does the curriculum support students in building literacy by integrating complex texts and providing structured support for reading, analysis, and comprehension?	• Integrates complex, content-rich texts with scaffolds and supports that ensure accessibility and deep understanding • Develop students' ability to analyze key ideas, details, craft, and structure • Engages students in close reading of primary and secondary sources through annotation, summarization, and text-dependent questioning • Scaffolds comprehension using discussion protocols and graphic organizers that support deep understanding
Writing Proficiency Does the curriculum support students in developing clear, evidence-based writing through explicit instruction, guided practice, and varied writing opportunities?	• Scaffolds students' use of evidence through guided practice and modeling to support the development of clear claims and explanations • Provides explicit instruction in the structure and use of claims, evidence, and reasoning • Provides regular opportunities for students to analyze and synthesize sources, organize their findings, and communicate their thinking through well-structured explanations, arguments, narratives, and other written responses
Collaborative Discussion and Speaking Skills Do lessons and activities integrate opportunities and scaffolds for evidence-based discussion and presentation?	• Provides structured discussion protocols to develop speaking and listening skills, promote evidence-based reasoning, and foster respectful dialogue • Offers opportunities for students to present research and findings to an audience, building public speaking and presentation skills • Incorporates peer collaboration and feedback to strengthen communication and deepen understanding
Media Literacy and Research Do instructional materials support students in building media literacy and research skills through structured opportunities to evaluate sources, gather evidence, and draw informed conclusions?	• Follows a structured progression that includes generating questions, evaluating sources, analyzing evidence, and synthesizing findings • Supports students in evaluating the credibility, utility, and limitations of diverse sources through considering how origin, type, and purpose shape the narratives and evidence they provide • Selects and sequences diverse sources – including texts, videos, images, and interactive media – to scaffold content understanding and develop media literacy over time

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Usability and Educator Support

Ensures the curriculum is accessible and designed for everyday classroom use. Incorporates clear structure, embedded guidance, and professional learning to reduce prep time, support strong, consistent instruction, and foster teacher growth.



CRITERION	
Clear and Easy-to-Navigate Materials Does the curriculum provide well-organized, user-friendly materials that minimize preparation time and support efficient planning?	• Follows a consistent and predictable format, with clear lesson overviews, objectives, and assessments • Includes detailed unit planning resources – such as unit outlines and learning progressions – to support long-term planning • Provides pacing guidance and suggested time allocations for lesson components, with flexible options to adjust as needed • Features a user-friendly design and organization that streamline navigation and support efficient planning and instruction
Digital Tools and Customization Does the curriculum effectively utilize digital tools to enhance instruction, support teacher flexibility, and integrate with widely used learning platforms?	• Features a clear, engaging visual design that enhances usability and supports student learning without distractions • Aligns source type and format with specific learning goals, ensuring that media choices support both engagement and skill-building • Balances genre and subgenre variety to connect with learners' interests and build disciplinary thinking through multiple modalities • Supports district-level customization to align with local priorities, pacing, and instructional frameworks
Embedded Instructional Guidance Does the curriculum embed clear, practical supports within lessons to guide daily planning, differentiation, and instructional decision-making?	• Provides step-by-step lesson guidance – including facilitation strategies, suggested teacher language, and sample student responses – to support effective instructional delivery • Explains how lessons build on prior learning and connect to future content, with embedded tools to assess understanding and adjust instruction through scaffolds, extensions, or reteaching strategies • Offers practical resources to differentiate instruction and meet varied student needs, embedding scaffolds that maintain rigor and ensure accessibility • Includes tools and recommendations to foster family and community engagement aligned with lesson content or unit goals
Embedded Professional Learning and Educator Growth Does the curriculum offer structured, ongoing professional learning to strengthen teacher practice and support long-term implementation success?	• Offers asynchronous and live PD resources – such as videos, workshops, and tools – for instructional leaders and professional learning communities • Includes stand-alone guides or training modules to deepen understanding of inquiry-based pedagogy, culturally responsive instruction, and disciplinary thinking • Provides implementation support, including onboarding plans, pacing guides, and check-ins with curriculum specialists • Supports reflective teaching practice and professional growth through coaching tools, self-assessments, and collaborative learning structures

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inquirED supports teachers with high-quality instructional materials that make joyful, rigorous, and transferable learning possible for every student. Our social studies curricula – Inquiry Journeys (K-5) and Middle School World History – are used across the country to help students build deep content knowledge and develop inquiry skills essential for a thriving democracy.