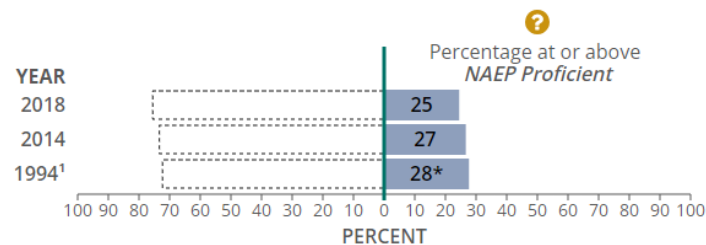
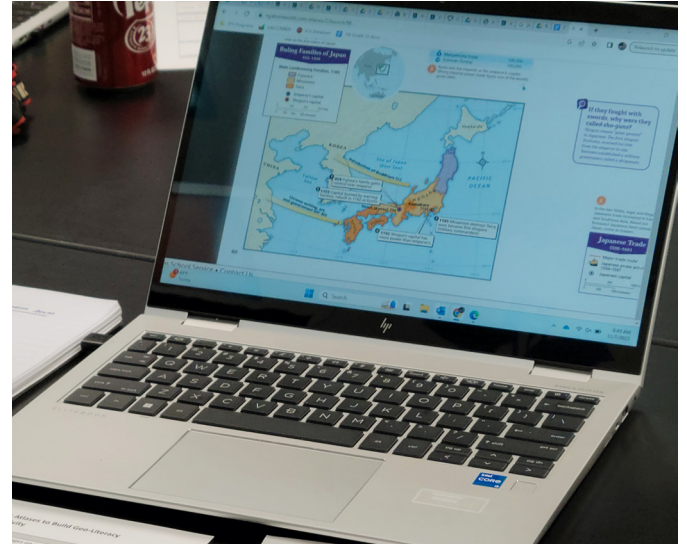


## “Eighth-graders’ U.S. history and geography scores decline; civics scores flat in new Nation’s Report Cards”

National Assessment of Educational Progress 2020

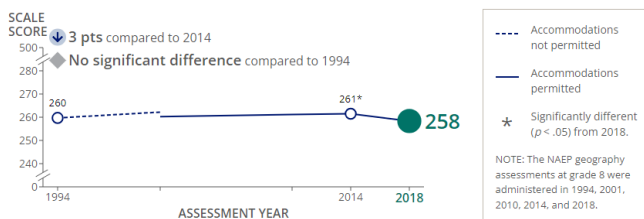
We are inundated with reports, headlines, and assessment data that suggest that we must focus our attention on the state of geographic literacy in our county. A 2016 article from National Geographic revealed that **young college-educated Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six years old with some college education averaged a score of 55 percent on a geographic literacy test.** Similarly, the National Geographic Society (2023) finds that adult Americans exhibit gaps in their knowledge about geography and world affairs. In 2018 the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) administered the geography assessment to a nationally representative sample of eighth-grade students. This is the most recent report provided, as it was the last time that geography was assessed. The geography measurement assessed students’ knowledge and skills in both content and cognitive areas.



Source: “NAEP Report Card: Geography.” National Center for Education Statistics. 2018.

This 2018 report revealed that only 25 percent of American students in the eighth grade performed at or above NAEP proficiency in geography. The 2018 assessment revealed that the average geography score for eighth-grade students was three points lower compared to 2014. The 2018 average score was not significantly different compared to 1994, the first assessment year. While not the complete story regarding the state of geographic literacy, the NAEP report provides educators, families, and policymakers with much-needed data regarding teacher practices and student knowledge and skills.

FIGURE | Trend in eighth-grade NAEP geography average scores



(\*) Significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) from 2018.

(<sup>1</sup>) Accommodations not permitted.

The NAEP geography assessments at grade 8 were administered in 1994, 2001, 2010, 2014, and 2018. NAEP achievement levels are to be used on a trial basis and should be interpreted and used with caution. Source: “NAEP Report Card: Geography.” National Center for Education Statistics. 2018.

There are a number of reasons for the above-mentioned reports, headlines, and concerning assessment data, the most obvious being the marginalization of social studies as a result of the No Child Left Behind legislation. This includes reduced instructional time for social studies and the allocation of resources both human and economic to subjects such as reading / English language arts and math.

Still another reason is a lack of appropriate materials and resources and the intentionality given to teacher training. A focus on the latter might move us toward a solution to addressing the geographic illiteracy of the United States.

### WHAT IS GEOGRAPHIC LITERACY, AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

As defined by the National Geographic Society (2023), geographic literacy is the ability to use geographic understanding and reasoning to make decisions. It describes the ways in which a person views, understands, and interacts with the world. This goes beyond knowing the states and capitals in the United States or the directions on a compass. There are three components of geographic literacy:

- Interactions: Understanding the world in terms of systems
- Interactions: Understanding how one place in the world is connected to another place
- Implications: Understanding how to make well-reasoned decisions

Beyond the fact that all social studies content has a geography strand and at least one process standard that calls for the reading and interpreting of maps, charts, and graphs, being geo-literate is also important for the following reasons:

- It equips a person to understand geopolitical realities to make informed decisions about local, national, and world affairs.
- It empowers people to compete successfully in a global marketplace.
- It gives individuals a critically needed understanding of the relationships between human activity and the condition of the world.

### LEVERAGING WEBB'S DEPTH OF KNOWLEDGE FRAMEWORK

There is more for educators to do than just teach students to “read” maps, graphs, and charts. Educators must also encompass all the critical thinking skills (such as interpretation and analysis) as we teach students these geographic tools. One way to make sure that we don't simply stay at lower-level thinking is to leverage Webb's Depth of Knowledge framework. In the 1990s, Norman Webb developed the Depth of Knowledge framework to help categorize expectations and tasks according to the complexity of engagement required. Here is an overview of each level of Webb's Depth of Knowledge framework for social studies instruction:

#### Level 1

Students recall facts, terms, or concepts. Often requires students to identify, list, or define.

Students recognize specific information contained in maps, graphs, charts, images, etc.

#### Level 2

Requires mental processing beyond recall or reproducing a response.

Students might compare, categorize, or identify cause and effect.

#### Level 3

Requires reasoning, using evidence, and a higher level of thinking.

Students justify their thinking using evidence from texts.

#### Level 4

Requires analysis and synthesis of information from multiple sources.

Students might develop a logical argument, connect ideas, or create a plan.

### WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM?

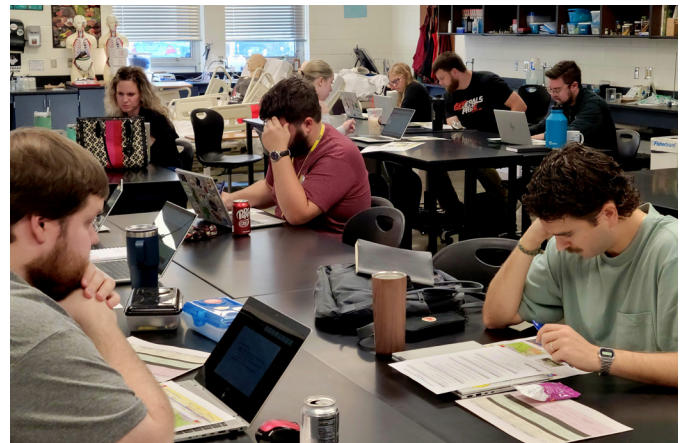
Bridges et al. (2023) tell us that incorporating an instructional framework has numerous benefits for both teachers and students, including the following:

- Uniting school leaders, teachers, and students with shared goals, a shared understanding of how to reach the goals, and a shared vocabulary for discussing progress
- Empowering teachers to plan and teach at their best and all students to reach their highest potential in every lesson

Social Studies School Service / Nystrom developed an instructional framework that supports teachers in moving instruction beyond level 1 of Webb's Depth of Knowledge framework for social studies instruction. It introduced this framework to teachers in a school district in the Midwest whose goal is to build teacher capacity in geography instruction. The school district secured a number of Nystrom resources to support this goal. The district's efforts are noteworthy because helping students to effectively use the tools of the geographer will increase geographic literacy: “Teaching with maps means using maps to help students learn key social studies concepts and relationships. Teaching with maps enables students to learn through maps—that is, to think spatially—in various reasoning and problem-solving contexts in the classroom and real world.” (Bednarz, Acheson, and Bednarz 2006)

The Social Studies School Service / Nystrom Partnerships and Instruction team facilitated a professional learning session. By the end of the training, participants had accomplished the following goals:

- Considered the importance and implications of geographic literacy
- Experienced an instructional framework that fosters geographic literacy development
- Planned for an upcoming lesson using Nystrom atlases



## AS THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS,

Jacob Brooks, a middle school social studies teacher in that Midwest school district, indicated that a framework ensures that he is intentional about how he uses geographic tools such as atlases, maps, graphs, visuals, etc. to provide instruction. The following outlines an explanation of the framework:

Instructional Framework for Building Geographic Literacy		
Activity	DOK Level	Description
Getting Started	N/A	This section will encourage students to read the summary and become familiar with maps, images, graphs, etc.
Locating Information	Level 1	Students will use information from a map, graph, image, etc. to answer fact-based questions. Questions should only have one correct answer.
Interpreting Information	Level 2	Students will use information from maps, graphs, images, etc. to answer open-ended questions. Questions should only have one correct answer.
Analyzing Information	Level 3	Students will use information from maps, graphs, images, etc. to answer higher-level open-ended questions. Questions will have various answers that should be supported by text evidence.
Applying Information	Level 4	Students will create, design, or write using information gained from previous levels of questions. This task should require students to use original thinking and historical evidence.

During the training, teachers were asked the following question: What skills would this instructional framework help your students develop? Nadia Clayton, a seventh-grade social studies teacher, responded that **this framework helps her students take risks**. She went on to say that they are able to **confidently make assertions and support those assertions with evidence from the maps, graphs, images, and other assets included in the atlas**. Another teacher, Andrea Brown, pointed out that her **students will sharpen their synthesis skills, as the application part of the framework challenges students to use the multiple sources presented in the atlas to think flexibly, determine alternatives, and create something new**.

Five years later, we are still inundated with reports, headlines, and assessment data that suggest that we must focus our attention on teaching and learning in social studies. This time the focus is on history and civics. As in the conversations surrounding the 2018 NAEP geography assessment, stakeholders have cited a number of reasons for the decline in history and civics. Of course, the marginalization of social studies is still ranked as a leading cause for the dip in NAEP scores. In addition, many point to the loss of instructional time during the pandemic and the current political climate. We are working hard to find solutions to these problems, but are we focused on the right work? A focus on aligned resources, exemplary instructional models, and purposeful teacher training is where we might leverage our resources to address concerns regarding social studies education in the United States.



**WRITTEN BY DR. MONTRA L. ROGERS,  
DIRECTOR OF PARTNERSHIPS & INSTRUCTION**

Using district priorities, narratives, talent, and potential, Montra works closely with stakeholders to plan and program for the implementation of Social Studies School Service resources, and services. She understands firsthand the power of viable partnerships. Such collaboration results in the increased capacity of educators at all levels ultimately producing the desired result, a literate citizenry. Montra has an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership, an MLA in Liberal Arts, and a BA in History.



Social Studies School Service is a publisher and distributor of high-quality educational materials.

Through our family of innovative imprints and partner organizations, we provide teachers and administrators with materials that promote critical thinking and informed action. From supplementary resources to core curriculum, our products focus on hands-on learning to help students understand their place in the world and their relationship to other people and places.

By partnering with districts to construct customized supports that align to their social studies curriculum and goals, we ensure that districts have personalized pathways for teachers and leaders that ensure the successful implementation of our products and services.

As we grow and adapt to meet students' evolving needs, we remain committed to helping educators give students the best possible social studies education.

## REFERENCES

- Bednarz, Sarah Witham, Gillian Acheson, and Robert S. Bednarz. "Maps and Map Learning in Social Studies." *Social Education* 70, no. 7 (November/December 2006): 398–404.
- Bridges, Michael W., Michele DiPietro, Marsha Lovett, Marie K. Norman, and Susan A. Ambrose. *How Learning Works: Eight Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2023.
- National Assessment of Educational Progress. "Eighth-Graders' U.S. History and Geography Scores Decline; Civics Scores Flat in New Nation's Report Cards." Press release. April 23, 2020.  
[https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/subject/\\_commonobjects/pdf/2018\\_geo\\_press\\_release.pdf](https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/subject/_commonobjects/pdf/2018_geo_press_release.pdf).
- — "NAEP Report Card: Geography." National Center for Education Statistics. 2018.  
<https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/geography/2018/>
- National Geographic Society. "What Is Geo-literacy?" Updated October 19, 2023.  
<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/what-is-geo-literacy/>.
- Webb, Norman. "Social Studies DOK Definitions." *WebbAlign*. Revised September 2014.  
<https://www.webbalign.org/dok-definitions-for-social-studies>
- Trivedi, Bijal P. "Survey Reveals Geographic Illiteracy." *National Geographic*. National Geographic Society. November 20, 2002.