

BACKGROUNDER

THE SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM OF THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA



NORTH AMERICAN VALUES INSTITUTE

Executive Summary

Philadelphia's 12th grade social studies curriculum replaces civic education with political activism. Designed around critical theory, the course teaches students to view American government, economics, and society exclusively through the lens of oppression and resistance. Every unit—on voting, economics, and financial literacy—steers students toward activism rather than critical inquiry. Instead of preparing students for civic participation, the curriculum undermines their ability to engage thoughtfully with complex systems and histories.

Introduction

This curriculum presents a one-sided, ideologically driven view of American society. It fails to present alternative perspectives and denies students the opportunity to weigh competing ideas about complex historical topics. It disregards the [Pennsylvania state education standards](#) which require instruction in “the principles and ideals of the American republican representative form of government as portrayed and experienced by the acts and policies of the framers of the Declaration of Independence, Constitution of the United States and Bill of Rights.” Instead of gaining the required foundational knowledge of civics and our nation’s founding, students spend their year focused on identity and activism.

Developed under the direction of Ismael Jimenez, Philadelphia's Director of Social Studies Curriculum, the curriculum draws heavily from the extremist educational resources [Rethinking Schools](#) and [Zinn Education Project](#), both of which embed the principles of critical theory. This framework, pioneered by [Paulo Freire](#), trains students to view themselves as oppressed and encourages political activism. Jimenez, a [noted radical and anti-Zionist activist](#), has [openly embraced](#) Freire's philosophy, prioritizing ideological indoctrination over balanced historical inquiry. As a result, the curriculum deprives students of a coherent and meaningful understanding of their nation's past at a time when academic outcomes in Philadelphia remain alarmingly low.

Educational Outcomes in Philadelphia

- 35% of students scored Proficient or Advanced in English Language Arts.
- 20% of students scored Proficient or Advanced in math.
- 66% of students attended 90% or more of enrolled days.

[The School District of Philadelphia, School Profiles 2023-2024](#)

Class Objectives: Antiracism, Intersectionality, and “Brave Spaces”

The title of the first lesson, “Foundational Framing for Civics and Economics,” suggests a traditional and appropriate starting point for a social studies course. However, the content that follows consists largely of questions rooted in ideology rather than civic or economics education:

- How will we use antiracism & intersectionality as lenses during our study of Social Science this year?
- How can we create a brave space that embraces antiracism and affirms the intersectional identities of everyone in the classroom community?
- What issues in my community am I passionate about?
- From the SDP Social Studies Curriculum

Calling itself an “antiracist curriculum,” the class sets for the following objectives:

- Define key terms: racism, antiracism, oppression, privilege, intersectionality
- Explore the history of racist and antiracist policies in the United States
- Analyze the ways oppression and privilege show up in various aspects of our identities
- Develop class culture that embraces antiracism and intersectionality.
- From the SDP Social Studies Curriculum

The class directs students to view complicated topics through a narrow lens of identity and oppression. It spends the first week “exploring the definitions of racism, antiracism, oppression, privilege, and intersectionality, and applying them to our city, classroom, and identities.” It then broadens those issues to discuss “how racism and antiracism have played out in policy in the United States,” while disregarding the many other factors that influence policy making in a democratic society.

Early in the course, students are directed to “discuss and plan how the classroom can be a brave space that embraces antiracism and affirms the intersectional identities of everyone in the community.” However, the “brave space” leaves no room for students to consider competing views or reach independent conclusions. Instead, the class embeds a fixed ideological framework that demands agreement and steers students toward a single prescribed answer. Intellectual disagreement and critical inquiry are effectively excluded from the classroom environment.

Lessons on Power

The curriculum reduces complex systems of governance to simplistic narratives of oppression and resistance. The section on “Government, Policy, & Civic Engagement” asks, “What is power? Why do governments have power? In what ways can people and communities build power? What is the purpose of government and laws?” This focus frames government primarily as an instrument

Ismael's posts

Ismael Jimenez

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Indeed, it is impossible to be neutral. In a world already moving in certain directions, where wealth and power are already distributed in certain ways, neutrality means accepting the way things are now. It is a world of clashing interests – war against peace, nationalism against internationalism, equality against greed, and democracy against elitism – and it seems to me both impossible and undesirable to be neutral in those conflicts.
-Howard Zinn

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of domination rather than as a system designed to balance competing interests. Concepts like checks and balances, separation of powers, and the protection of minority rights through democratic institutions are notably absent. Power is treated solely as something to resist, with no serious discussion of leadership, civic responsibility, or the legitimate purposes of governance. The curriculum explicitly states that power should be fought against:

- People and groups with power will alter policies to help maintain power.
- Opposition groups are at a disadvantage, but may organize collective action to build their power.
- By understanding how power works, people can better organize for policy change around issues that they care about.

- From the SDP Social Studies Curriculum

The curriculum further states that “racism is about power and policy” and includes a game in which “students trade slips in a number of rounds to win points. The student with the highest number of points gets the power to alter the rules of the game for the next round. Once students catch on, the winner will begin to make rules to hang on to their individual power. After a few more rounds, and with some discreet agitation by the teacher, students will typically start using collective action to seize power.” In the game, teachers are instructed to guide students toward seizing power, framing activism and organized resistance as the appropriate response to authority.

Shaping Student Voting

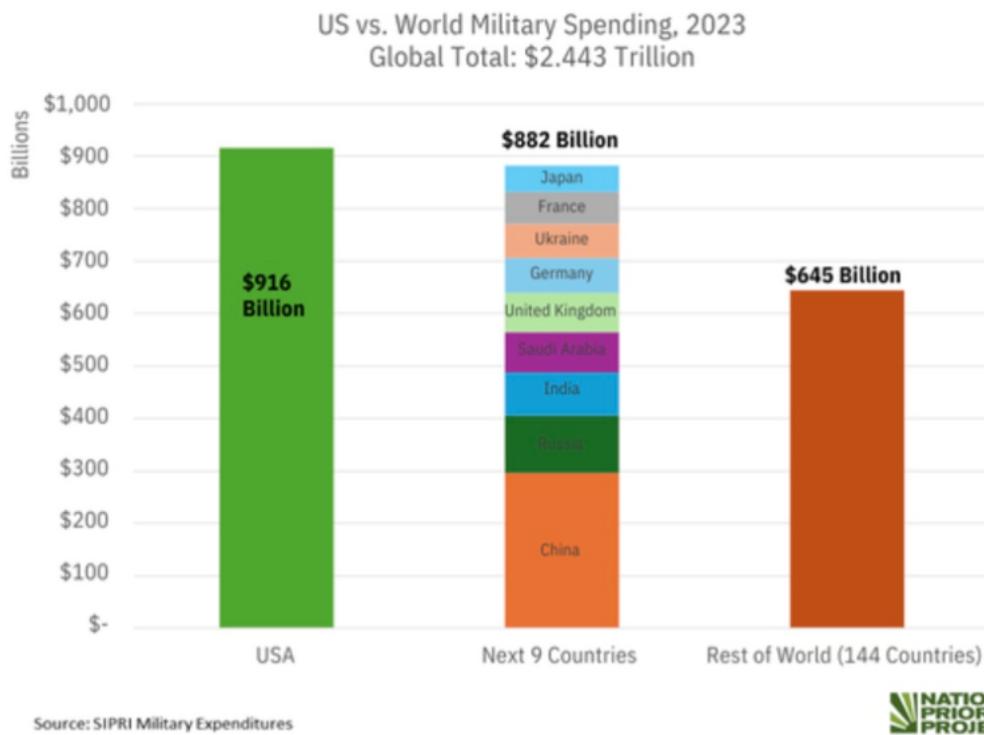
A section on voting starts with civics, including guidance on how to register to vote and research candidates, but it quickly shifts to an ideological direction. The lesson tells students to “[c]onsider where candidates stand on identified Civic Action Research Project issues,” which include “racism, antiracism, oppression, privilege, and intersectionality.” In effect, students are encouraged to fulfill their civic duty while also being told what issues should shape their voting decisions. Though the class includes some “light” lessons on ideology, parties, branches of government, and elected offices to help prepare voters,” the overall framing risks influencing students – many going to the polls for the first time – toward a specific political choice.

The curriculum also clearly instructs teachers to get involved in their students’ voting process: “It is essential for Social Studies teachers to help students register to vote by the deadline... and to provide information about offices and candidates to students.” Although the curriculum includes a resource for “Nonpartisan election information at Committee of Seventy and Ballotpedia,” the broader tone of the course and its focus on oppression raises concerns that students will feel pressure to vote for the political views favored by their teachers and framed in the course.

Prescribed Views on Military Spending

The curriculum’s treatment of “opportunity costs” frames American military spending in a negative light without a balanced examination of complex policy considerations. The unit begins by asking students to examine “how the US military budget compares to the next 7 nations combined.” Students are also tasked with analyzing the “relative military spending on the nations they researched” in the lesson on “Global Distribution of Well-Being.” Teachers are instructed to ask students “if they see a correlation between military spending and well-being indicators, or with spending in other areas such as education or health.” Students are directed to draw conclusions about the opportunity cost of military spending, but the conclusions have been predetermined.

Rather than encouraging independent analysis, the lesson steers students toward a specific political critique. Its framing oversimplifies a complex global reality in order to promote an ideological agenda.



The lesson instructs students to believe that we would be a happier country if we spent less on military expenditures like other nations. This approach fails to explore the historical and geopolitical context behind U.S. military investment, including the post-WWII international order and the role of the U.S. military in global stability. It does not mention that many allied countries maintain low military budgets because they rely on U.S. protection. A

more balanced and informative lesson would examine the costs and benefits of military alliances and diplomatic issues around intervention. Instead, the curriculum deprives students of a fuller understanding of military spending.

Politicizing Financial Literacy

A lesson on the basics of financial literacy would be a valuable addition to any social studies curriculum. This curriculum's unit on "Financial Literacy," however, includes "Economic Justice," pairing useful information like understanding credit, loans, and budgeting strategies with lessons focused on race and oppression. While discussions of historic or systemic barriers are important, their placement in this curriculum shifts the focus away from providing students with practical tools.

As part of the curriculum's performance tasks, students are asked, apparently referring to the school community and the students' community, "how are they able to control the wealth?"

- What are the causes of the racial wealth gap?
- What can individuals do to build generational wealth?
- What public policies could be implemented to close the racial wealth gap?

Financial Literacy and Economic Justice

- Budgeting to Achieve Financial Goals
- Consumer Decision Making Skills
- Understanding Credit and Loans
- Risks and Benefits
- Education and career choices
- Wealth Gap
- Racial Wealth Gap
- Case Study: Reparations throughout the history of Government
- Gender Wage Gap
- Redlining
- Authentic Performance Task: Examining the wealth in your school's community, and your community. How are they able to control the wealth? Create a proposal to keep the wealth of your school community or your personal community within your community.

- From the SDP Social Studies Curriculum

The curriculum includes a section on the racial wealth gap, linking it to historical patterns of institutional racism and economic inequality. It also introduces the concept of “white privilege” and presents resources that suggest students’ financial futures depend primarily on government subsidies like “baby bonds” or reparations:

Critical Financial Literacy Resources

- [Umbrellas Don't Make It Rain: Why Studying and Working Hard Isn't Enough for Black Americans \(Hamilton et al 2015\)](#)
- [Black and Latinos Will Be Broke In a Few Decades \(Josh Hoxie, Fortune 2017\)](#)
- [The Case for Reparations \(Ta-Nehisi Coates\)](#)

- From the SDP Social Studies Curriculum

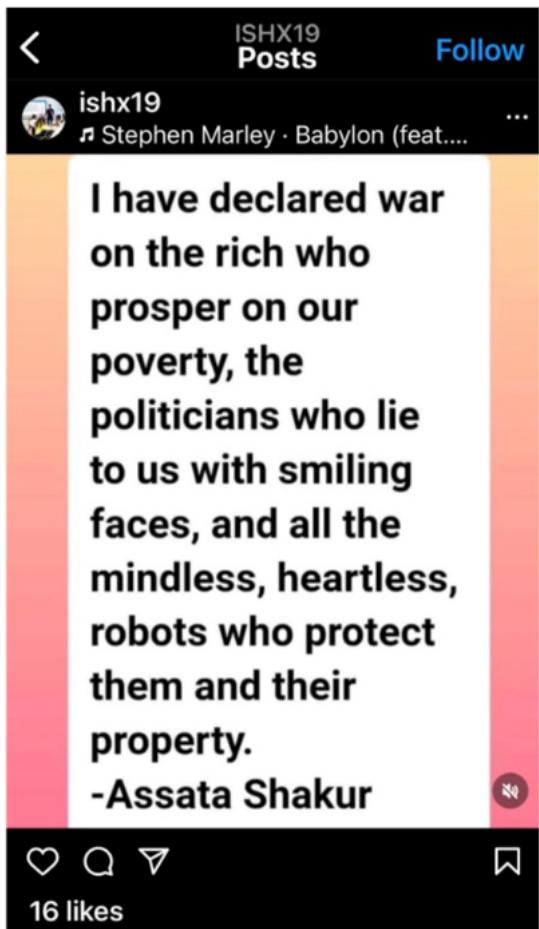
Framing Capitalism as the Enemy

The curriculum’s treatment of economics adopts an ideological, anti-capitalist bent. Students are “asked to take a critical view of economic assumptions common in the US and in most high school and college economics courses.” The course instructs both teachers and students “to question the ‘laws of economics’ that often mask the effects of extreme inequality among people and nations.” Students also “analyze different economic systems and how they promote individual and collective well-being.” Students are taught that, “[d]ifferent economic systems encourage people to act in different ways. Some are more conducive to individual self interest as an economic motivation, while other systems place more emphasis on providing for the common good of all people.”

To reinforce a critical view of capitalism, students participate in a class activity from Rethinking Schools called [“Ten Chairs of Inequality,”](#) which teaches them to view the U.S. economy as fundamentally unjust and in need of resistance. In the Rethinking Schools description of the activity, the facilitator asks students the explicitly anti-capitalist question, “why they don’t get organized to force a redistribution of the wealth.” The curriculum states the goal of the activity, which leaves no room for students to form their own conclusions: “Inequalities of wealth are becoming more extreme in the United States. While billionaires double their wealth every 3-5 years, we have by far the highest poverty rate in the industrialized world. No industrialized country has a more skewed

distribution of wealth. Students need information about this concentration of wealth — and the power that accompanies it — in order to become critical thinkers and aware citizens.” This lesson tells students exactly what to think about capitalism in order to further a political agenda.

A section on supply and demand reinforces its critique of market economies. Students are taught that “[m]arket prices reflect what consumers need and want only if those consumers have sufficient ability to pay” and that “[m]arket prices may have social disadvantages in unequal societies, do not incentivise public goods, may lead to negative externalities, and lead to instability.” The curriculum further states that although “competition can provide efficiency and lower prices to consumers in many cases,” these benefits “are not distributed to all people equally. Low priced clothing for some could mean sweatshop labor for others.”



While the curriculum does not explicitly endorse an alternative economic model, its critique of market systems suggests that it rejects a system of supply and demand in favor of redistribution and collective ownership. Nowhere in this unit is there any discussion of how alternative economic systems have functioned historically, nor any discussion of the human and economic costs of socialism. Instead, students are told that “modern markets are dominated by oligopolies” which are “affecting prices, and setting political and cultural agendas” through “extractive business models.” The material presents a one-sided critique without serious exploration of other systems or their real-world consequences.

The curriculum continues its emphasis on activism through a classroom simulation drawn from the Zinn Education Project called the [Organic Goodie Simulation](#). In this exercise, students are divided into owners, workers, and the unemployed. The owner “seeks to profit through playing on and creating divisions between workers and the unemployed. Can students overcome those divisions and unite for needed changes? This lesson lets students experience some of the pressures that lead workers to organize.” Rather than fostering critical analysis of economic systems, the simulation trains students to adopt a predetermined narrative of struggle and resistance.

The curriculum also suggests resources that reinforce activist training. One example is [We Live in an Extractive Economy, But Can We Make it Better](#), a YouTube video from an organization called [EDGE Funders Alliance](#) which “supports the broader global movement to dismantle extractive funding systems while working to align resources with the priorities and visions of social movements to drive systemic change and justice.” The video states that “capitalism has exploited people and often leaves out people of color, immigrants, minority communities, women.” However, it offers no explanation of how these groups are excluded from participating in capitalism. The goal is not to foster critical economic thinking, but to promote a particular ideological conclusion.

Final Project

The capstone assignment of the course requires students to translate ideological lessons into real-world action. The “Civic Action Research Project,” which aims “to make the curriculum more relevant to students,” asks that students “engage in a civic action” based on the guiding questions of “What issues and problems do we care about? What can we do about it?” It instructs students to “understand the ways that the issues they are passionate about in their communities connect back to racism, antiracism, oppression, privilege, and intersectionality.” It then instructs students to “understand that the issues they are passionate about can be addressed through civic action.” The curriculum directs students on the issues they should care about while denying them the opportunity to form independent questions and conclusions.

The assignment requires that students engage with an issue and delve into it “alongside the study and analysis structures of government and of systems of power.” They are asked to “develop their issue research into a plan of action and authentic activities to engage with public policy through the arts, media, and elected officials.” The curriculum explicitly states that this activity is based on Freire’s ideology which uses education to activate students: “The project begins with problem-posing in the traditions of Paolo Freire... People and communities have a stake in public policies, and through collective action can use strategies to influence public opinion and policy-makers to affect change.” Student learning is explicitly designed to advance political mobilization.

Conclusion

Philadelphia’s 12th grade social studies curriculum promotes an activist worldview that divides the world into oppressors and oppressed. Rather than equipping students with the skills for independent analysis and civic understanding, it trains them to become activists for their teachers’ political agendas. This course is a blatantly biased program of political indoctrination, evident in its framing through antiracism and intersectionality, its one-sided content, its exclusion of alternative perspectives, and its central assignment steering students toward activism. The curriculum presents students with ideological conclusions instead of developing their content knowledge or critical thinking skills.