



## TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION

# WHAT IS THE BEST ACADEMIC MODEL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES INSTRUCTION?

### **Q: What is the best way to approach learning history?**

A: Lasting learning comes from revisiting ideas like freedom, leadership, innovation, and justice — not just memorizing names and dates. Students should encounter the same themes repeatedly, using each pass to compare, contrast, and connect, so history becomes a living story, not a forgotten list.

### **Q: Why is it better to learn history in shorter time periods?**

A: Learning history in shorter time periods allows students to dive deeper into the events, people, and ideas of an era instead of skimming the surface. This focus makes it easier to see cause-and-effect relationships, connect themes across regions, and understand the context that shaped decisions. It transforms history from a blur of centuries into a series of vivid, memorable stories that stick.

### **Q: What is the benefit to learning about themes in history?**

A: Learning about themes in history, like the evolution of freedom and justice across time and place, gives students the context that isolated events can't provide. Right now, history is too often taught as a disconnected list of dates and facts, leaving students without a framework to make sense of it. Themes tie events together, showing how ideas grow, change, and influence the world, making history meaningful and memorable.

### **Q: When should difficult topics like genocide be taught?**

A: It is appropriate to begin laying the groundwork for understanding genocide in the early grades by focusing on foundational themes such as human dignity, equality, justice, the value of life, and the responsibility to stand against injustice. When students first learn how ideas like freedom, democracy, and the protection of individual rights have developed over time, they build the moral and historical framework needed to grasp complex and painful topics. By the time they study genocide in the upper grades, they can connect it to these enduring themes, making the lessons deeper, more empathetic, and more meaningful.

### **Q: Don't kids need repetition to retain knowledge?**

A: What they really need is schema, a mental framework that lets them hook onto new learning, to retain what they already know. In K–2, students build the foundations of Texas and US History and the ideals that inspired them. In grades 3–7, they explore the stories of Texas, the United States, and the world through the lens of humanity's progress and the timeless journey of striving, struggle, and triumph. Then, in grade 8, a capstone year of Texas history brings these themes together again — the story of how the very ideas that made America great also made Texas great: freedom, justice, and free enterprise.



**Q: The current model seems fine. Why change what isn't broken?**

A: By almost every measure, students are not receiving an effective history education. On the 8th grade Social Studies STAAR exam (the only time we assess social studies before high school), only 33% of Texas students met grade level in 2024. In a nationwide assessment, only 13% of 8th graders were proficient in U.S. History in 2022. Alarming, according to a survey conducted this year, 62% of Americans between the age of 18–29 have a favorable view of Socialism and 34% feel the same way about Communism. Clearly, Social Studies instruction has failed to provide knowledge of basic historical facts or to instill the values of Texas and America into students.

**Q: What is an example of how an idea can be developed through historical themes?**

A: In most early civilizations, kings ruled and people had no voice or choice. Ancient Greece and Rome were rare exceptions, where ideas of freedom and self-government were discussed and tested. Even in medieval Europe, these ideas remained limited. It was not until the Enlightenment that concepts of individual rights, democracy, and liberty gained momentum—ideas that inspired the Founding Fathers, fueled the American Revolution, and, in turn, sparked movements for freedom around the world, including the abolition of slavery and the fight for civil rights. As a capstone in Texas history, this arc is clear: Texas began as a republic influenced by the ideals of Ancient Rome, shaped by Enlightenment principles, and reflected in leaders like Barbara Jordan, the first Black woman elected to the Texas Senate and later to the U.S. Congress, who championed equality and justice for all.