

Samples of essential questions that have been compiled by Jay McTighe, coauthor of Understanding by Design as conveyed to Rich Frias by email.

Overarching Essential Questions in Social Studies

(examples)

History/Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- What happened in the past?
- How can we know if we weren't there?
- Why study history?
- What can we learn from the past?
- How am I connected to those in the past?
- In what ways is the past about me?
- How do we know what really happened in the past?
- Whose "story" is it?
- Whom do we believe and why?
- Is history the story told by the "winners"?
- Is history inevitably biased?
- Who were the "winners" and who were the "losers" in _____? (for any historical event)
- Was anyone at fault? (for examining any historical or literary event)
- What causes change?
- What remains the same?
- What can we legitimately infer about the artifacts we find?
- What should we do when the primary sources disagree?
- How does the legacy of earlier groups and individuals influence subsequent generations?
- How do patterns of cause/effect manifest themselves in the chronology of history?
- How has the world changed and how might it change in the future?
- Is it true that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it?

Civics/Government

- How are governments created, structured, maintained, and changed?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of government?
- How do the structures and functions of government interrelate?
- What would happen if we had no government?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of citizen's in a democracy?
- What kinds of things to "good" citizens do?
- How do personal and civic responsibilities differ?
- Can an individual make a difference?
- How do citizens (both individually and collectively) influence government policy?
- What is power?
- What forms does it take?
- How do competing interest influence how power is distributed and exercised?
- How is power gained, used, and justified?
- How can abuse of power be avoided?
- Who should govern/rule?

- Should the majority always rule?
- When should society control individuals?
- Why do we have rules and laws?
- What would happen if we didn't?
- Who should make the rules/laws?
- Is it ever o.k. to break the law?
- What are "inalienable rights"?
- How do governments balance the rights of individuals with the common good?
- Should _____ be restricted/regulated? (e.g., immigration, alcohol/drugs, media, etc.) When?

Who decides?

- How do different political systems vary in their toleration and encouragement of change?

Economics

- Why do we have money?
- What is the difference between 'needs' and 'wants'?
- How does something acquire value?
- What is it worth?
- How much should it cost? Who decides?
- Who should produce goods and services?
- What impact does scarcity have on the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services?
- How does the free market system affect my life? ...our community? ...our society? ...the world?
- Who should produce goods and services?
- Should government regulate business/economy or be its partner?
- Why do people work? Should everyone be expected to work?
- What does it mean to "make a living"?
- What is the 'best' job for you?
- How does technological change influence people's lives? ...society?
- What social, political and economic opportunities and problems arise from changes in technology?
- What goods and services should government provide? Who should pay for them? Who should benefit from them? Who should decide?
- How do different economic systems vary in their toleration and encouragement of change?

Geography

- Why is "where" important?
- Why is/was _____ located there? (e.g., capitol, factory, battle, etc.)
- What makes places unique and different?
- How does geography, climate and natural resources affect the way people live and work?
- How does where I live influence how I live?
- Why do people move?
- What do we mean by 'region'?
- What story do maps and globes tell?
- How and why do maps and globes change?
- How do maps and globes reflect history, politics, and economics?

Culture

- o What does it mean to be "civilized"? o What makes a civilization?
- How have civilizations evolved
- Are modern civilizations more 'civilized' than ancient ones?
- Why should we be interested in/study other cultures?
- Who are the "heroes" and what do they reveal about a culture?
- o How and why do we celebrate holidays? o Who and what do we memorialize?
- What are the significant symbols and icons of civilizations/cultures? What function(s) do they serve?
- Do the arts reflect or shape culture?
- What can we learn about a culture through its art forms?
- What happens when cultures collide?
- Why do people fight? Is conflict inevitable? ...desirable?
- What is worth fighting for? Is there such a thing as a "just" war?
- What is a revolution?
- What causes people to 'revolt'?
- Are revolutions inevitable?
- How are all religions the same?
- How does belief influence action?
- How and why do beliefs change?

Essential Questions from the

NATIONAL COUNCIL of SOCIAL STUDIES

CULTURE

- What is civic participation and how can I be involved?
- How has the meaning of citizenship evolved?
- What is the balance between rights and responsibilities?
- What is the role of the citizen in the community and the nation, and as a member of the world community?
- How can I make a positive difference?

TIME, CONTINUITY, CHANGE

- Who am I?
- What happened in the past?
- How am I connected to those in the past?
- How has the world changed and how might it change in the future? Why does our personal sense of relatedness to the past change? How can the perspective we have about our own life experiences be viewed as part of the larger human story across time?
- How do our personal stories reflect varying points of view and inform contemporary ideas and actions?

PEOPLE, PLACES, ENVIRONMENT

- Where are things located?
- Why are they located where they are?
- What patterns are reflected in the groupings of things?
- What do we mean by region?
- How do landforms change?
- What implications do these changes have for people?

POWER, AUTHORITY, GOVERNANCE

- What is power?
- What forms does it take?
- Who holds it?
- How is it gained, used, and justified?
- What is legitimate authority?
- How are governments created, structured, maintained, and changed?
- How can we keep government responsive to its citizens' needs and interests?
- How can individual rights be protected within the context of majority rule?

PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, CONSUMPTION

- What is to be produced?
- How is production to be organized?
- How are goods and services to be distributed?
- What is the most effective allocation of the factors of production (land, labor, capital, and management)?

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, SOCIETY

- Is new technology always better than that which it will replace?
- What can we learn from the past about how new technologies result in broader social change, some of which is unanticipated?
- How can we cope with the ever-increasing pace of change, perhaps even with the feeling that technology has gotten out of control?
- How can we manage technology so that the greatest number of people benefit from it?
- How can we preserve our fundamental values and beliefs in a world that is rapidly becoming one technology-linked village?

CIVIC IDEALS and PRACTICES

- What is civic participation and how can I be involved?
- How has the meaning of citizenship evolved?
- What is the balance between rights and responsibilities?
- What is the role of the citizen in the community and the nation, and as a member of the world community?