



## Supporting Sociocultural and Sociopolitical Curriculum through Teacher Professional Development in New Jersey

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Over the past 30 years, New Jersey has repeatedly signaled the importance of recognizing the diversity of the state and its students. Often following grassroots organizing campaigns, the state has passed a series of curriculum requirements emphasizing skills, histories, and knowledge important to its citizens. However well-meaning the mandates, the mandates have failed to provide guidance, support, or resources for teachers to implement them. If these mandates are to be anything more than symbolic, there must be concerted effort to equip educators, schools, and communities with the resources, preparation, and knowledge to carry them out effectively. The state's signaling has not led to real curricular change.

### Scope of the Problem

New Jersey stands among few states that have taken steps to mandate schools include the histories and contributions of historically oppressed groups in its public school curricula. These mandates include the Holocaust/Genocide Education Mandate (1992, 1993), Amistad Mandate (2002, 2021), History of Disabled and LGBT Mandate (2020), Climate Change Mandate (2020), Asian American and Pacific Islander Mandate (2022). Collectively, these curricular mandates can be referred to as sociocultural and sociopolitical curriculum mandates.

The mandates aim to (1) recognize the diversity in experiences and perspectives of different racial, ethnic, and religious groups in our society, (2) affirm students' identities and help them understand their individual experiences and (3) provide youth with the skills and awareness to improve the world they live in.

Although some of the mandates are decades old, there is little publicly available evidence suggesting that the standards have been enforced or that implementation has been assessed. The exception is that, in 2023, New Jersey required districts to complete a survey on their adherence to the Holocaust and genocide mandate with the hope of assessing the kinds of resources schools needed to ensure efficacy. Despite many districts acknowledging the mandates through posts on their websites, this is not sufficient evidence that the mandates are being effectively integrated into the classroom. Several studies on the mandates have reported inconsistency in mandate uptake both across districts and within schools.

Part of the challenge of implementation is that many teachers across the state are not familiar with the content that the mandates prescribe. This unfamiliarity is understandable given that the mandates are meant to fill gaps in the existent standard curriculum. However, discomfort or lack of experience with the content should not be a long-term excuse for under compliance.

Several of the mandates note that relevant content should be included “in the appropriate place.” While this allows for educator discretion, it also is an open-ended directive that can lead to confusion or provide an avenue for negligence. The vagueness around how to meet the expectations of the mandates means that classrooms can participate in very shallow ways. For example, a school may celebrate a heritage history month without meaningfully integrating that history into the standard curriculum. Additionally, several of the mandates are meant to be integrated across academic subjects, but a school without guidance may expect that only engaging the mandate in social studies curriculum is enough.

## **Finding a Solution**

Relevant research on New Jersey’s mandates stress ongoing professional development as a key lever in ensuring educators understand and are prepared to meet the requirements of sociopolitical curriculum with efficacy. Scripting curriculum is not a solution, not only because it cannot ensure deep engagement and understanding, but also because it disempowers teachers. Instead, ongoing professional development encourages teachers as learners and professionals that are continuing to develop their craft and expertise. Importantly, time and guidance in how to integrate the mandates will also support teachers in considering their specific classroom context and the needs of their particular students.

Only a few of the policies have been bolstered by commissions and funding. Even for these, the funding allotted is not enough to meet the demand of supporting the entire state. Providing financial support will encourage district engagement while allowing schools to explore new resources, train educators, and hire experienced professional development providers. Professional development should provide teachers with the time as well as material and technical support to integrate and prepare to implement the mandates in their classrooms.

Funding and targeted professional development will also signal the state’s commitment to the constituents that fought for the continued expansion of sociopolitical curriculum in the first place.