Social Studies Classroom Observation Tool

Iowa is committed to supporting access and implementation of High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) across the state. HQIM is the foundation for excellent social studies instruction at scale. The use of these materials ensures grade-level rigor, builds content-rich knowledge and skills, and gives educators a shared anchor for collaborative planning, professional learning, and continuous improvement. Knowing the profound impact HQIM can have on student outcomes, the Iowa Department of Education is investing in a coordinated, statewide approach to ensure all classrooms have access to standards-aligned, evidence-based materials and that those materials are used effectively.

Purpose

The **Iowa Social Studies Classroom Observation Tool** communicates shared expectations for social studies instruction aligned to Iowa's vision and can provide trend-level data on how those expectations are showing up in classrooms. The tool is designed to support continuous improvement, not evaluation.

The tool available is designed for Tier 1 core instruction. The tool is not designed for intervention or any instruction outside of Tier 1. See the Section for Considerations of Special Populations.

Tool	Use For
K-12 Social Studies	Tier 1 social studies lessons aligned with grade-level standards, including the development of disciplinary skills and content for grades K-12.

Who Uses the Tool and How

The tool serves different users in different ways. Districts can adopt this tool as their primary walkthrough resource, or use it alongside an existing aligned tool as a shared reference for what strong HQIM-based instruction looks like across Iowa.

User	Primary User
State Education Agency Staff	Collect trend-level data across districts to inform statewide support, training, and resources.
District and school leaders	Identify implementation patterns and adjust professional learning, coaching, and conditions that support strong instruction.
Coaches and instructional support personnel	Shape collaborative planning, calibrate observations with colleagues, and provide teacher feedback.

How the Tool is Structured

Each tool examines three questions, in sequence:

1. **Instructional Materials.** Do students have access to high-quality texts and tasks aligned to grade-level standards?
2. **Instructional Practices.** Is the teacher delivering instruction in a way that maintains rigor and facilitates student learning?
3. **Student Engagement.** Are students doing the work of the lesson?

The sequence is intentional. **Start with the materials** to understand what students are expected to learn and do. **Then examine instructional practices** to see how the teacher uses those materials to make learning accessible. **Finally, look at student engagement** to see how students are responding to the instruction and tasks.

Recommended Observation Routines

The tool is designed for 15-30-minute classroom visits. Visits are most useful when they happen at varied points in the lesson and across the school year, rather than always at the same time of day or same stage of a lesson.

1. **Preview lesson materials when possible.** Reviewing the teacher guide or lesson ahead of time, or referencing it during the visit, can provide helpful context for the observation.
2. **Vary the timing of visits.** Observing different segments of instruction over the course of a year (e.g., beginnings, middles, and ends of lessons) builds a fuller picture of practice.
3. **Capture low-inference notes.** During the observation, record observable behaviors, not interpretations.
4. **Debrief and calibrate.** Connect evidence to the indicators after the visit. When observing with colleagues, discuss evidence before assigning ratings.
5. **Determine next steps.** Use what you saw to inform professional learning, collaborative planning, teacher feedback, or coaching priorities, depending on your role.

Ratings

Use the 1–4 scale to rate how fully the indicator is in place across the segment observed. Ratings should reflect the overall pattern of instruction, not a single moment.

- **1 (Not yet):** The indicator was an appropriate part of the lesson, but missed opportunities, misalignment, or inaccuracies kept it from being in place.
- **2 (Somewhat):** There is an attempt, but it is inconsistent or not yet successful.
- **3 (Mostly):** The indicator is generally present and aligned; some gaps keep it from fully meeting the vision.
- **4 (Yes):** The indicator is consistently and strongly in place and is a clear actualization of the vision.
- **N/A:** The indicator was not observed because it was not appropriate for the lesson or section of the lesson observed.

The distinction between “1 (Not yet)” and “N/A” matters: a “1” means the indicator should have shown up and didn't; N/A means it wouldn't be expected to show up in this lesson or segment.

Considerations for Special Populations

These tools are designed to examine Tier 1 core instruction. When observing classrooms that include students with disabilities, English learners (ELs), students receiving Talented and Gifted services, or other learners who may require additional supports, observers should consider how students are provided meaningful access to grade-level instruction while maintaining appropriate rigor. These questions are intended to guide reflection and discussion during the debrief, not to generate a separate rating.

Instructional Materials

- Are students accessing the same grade-level text or task as their peers, with supports, rather than working with lower-complexity material?
- When adaptations or modifications are needed, how is alignment to the intended grade-level learning maintained to the greatest extent appropriate?

Instructional Practices

- How does instruction provide meaningful access to learning for all students?
- What scaffolds, accommodations, language supports, or other instructional supports enable students to participate successfully in the lesson?
- Are the implemented scaffolds appropriate to students' individual needs, and calibrated to preserve productive struggle rather than eliminating it or allowing it to become a barrier to progress?

Student Engagement

- When appropriate or designated by a student's plan (IEP, EL plan, etc.), are students able to communicate their thinking and work using their preferred mode or language (e.g., verbal, written, assistive technology)?
- Are students, including those receiving paraeducator support, engaging meaningfully with peers rather than relying primarily on an adult?
- What accommodations allow students to access grade-level materials and participate meaningfully? If modifications to texts/tasks are necessary, how is grade-level alignment maintained as much as possible?

Supporting Resources

The following resources may be helpful when preparing for or conducting observations:

1. **Iowa Academic Standards for Social Studies.** Referenced when identifying the aspect(s) of rigor called for by the standard(s) being addressed.
2. **The lesson's teacher guide and student materials.** Provides context on the lesson's purpose and the intended student outcomes.

Social Studies Classroom Observation Tooll

Grade Level/Course: _____ Teacher: _____ Date: _____

I. Instructional Materials

Indicator / Observable Evidence	1 Not Yet	2 Some what	3 Mostly	4 Yes	N/A	Evidence / Comments
A. The teacher and students use grade-level, standards-aligned materials throughout the lesson/learning experience.						
B. Lesson materials intentionally target the aspect(s) of rigor called for by the standard(s) being addressed.						
C. The lesson involves an authentic disciplinary task that requires students to read, write, and/or speak in ways that are representative of evidence-based instructional practices in social studies.						

Describe the materials being used in the observation. Capture the name of the product, unit, and lesson, or if the materials come from a different website, source, or are teacher-made.

II. Instructional Practices

Indicator / Observable Evidence	1 Not Yet	2 Some what	3 Mostly	4 Yes	N/A	Evidence / Comments
A. The teacher utilizes evidence-based instructional practices in social studies (e.g. connecting to prior knowledge, explicit vocabulary instruction, use of primary sources, and substantive conversations) in the lesson.						
B. The teacher frames the unit around a compelling question and lessons around supporting questions to ensure the lesson is coherent within the larger unit.						
C. The teacher creates conditions for students to question, discuss, and critique their own learning, and/or collaborate and build on each other's thinking.						
D. The teacher checks for understanding and provides meaningful, academic feedback, grounded in social studies instructional practices, to students.						
E. The teacher provides opportunities for productive struggle, allowing students time to reason through complex texts.						
F. The teacher implements appropriate scaffolds for students who need additional support.						

III. Student Engagement

Indicator / Observable Evidence	1 Not Yet	2 Some what	3 Mostly	4 Yes	N/A	Evidence / Comments
A. Students do the majority of the work in the lesson.						
B. Students are actively engaged in disciplinary literacy- reading, writing, speaking, and thinking like social scientists (e.g. historical thinking, geographic thinking, etc.)						
C. Students are engaged in various kinds of discussion and discourse, explaining their reasoning based on the analysis of multiple sources.						