



Lesson Plan

The Dawes Act and Native Sovereignty Secondary

AIM

How did the Dawes Act use land ownership to promote assimilation, and where should a government draw the line when promoting assimilation of another people?

GUIDING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Understand the major provisions of the Dawes Act and how the allotment system worked.
- Examine the differences between Native systems of land use and ownership and the dominant American system of individually owned property.
- Understand how allotment changed Native people's relationships to land, community, and political power.
- Analyze how the Dawes Act contributed to the transfer of enormous amounts of Native-controlled land to non-Native ownership.
- Understand that assimilation was a broader federal policy goal and that the Dawes Act used land ownership as one means of promoting assimilation.
- Distinguish between **assimilation** and **acculturation**.
- Consider the difference between voluntary cultural change and that promoted or imposed by a government.
- Understand that Native nations were **sovereign peoples with their own governments, societies, territories, and systems of landholding** before and during U.S. expansion.
- Examine whether the arguments used to promote assimilation of immigrants should also apply to sovereign Native nations.
- Consider the relationship among government power, culture, land, and sovereignty.
- Develop and explain a position about where government-sponsored assimilation should stop.

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT AT END

KEY VOCABULARY

Assimilation — The process by which a cultural group adopts the language, customs, values, and practices of a dominant society, often becoming less distinct as a separate cultural group.

Acculturation — The process of adopting some cultural practices, ideas, or customs from another culture while retaining important elements of one's own culture.

Allotment — The division of reservation land into individual parcels assigned to individual Native people or families.



Collective Ownership — A system in which land is held, managed, or controlled by a community or group rather than being treated primarily as the private property of individuals.

Individual Ownership — A system in which a particular person or family has recognized legal rights to a specific piece of property and can generally inherit, sell, or transfer it.

Sovereignty — The authority of a people or government to govern itself and make decisions about its own affairs.

Survivance — The active continuation and adaptation of Native identity, culture, and community despite efforts to suppress or eliminate them.

ACTIVITIES

1. OPENING: WHERE DO YOU DRAW THE LINE? (4 minutes)

Begin by defining **assimilation**:

Assimilation is the process by which a cultural group adopts the language, customs, values, and practices of a dominant society, often becoming less distinct as a separate cultural group.

Tell students: ***"I'm going to read a series of statements. For each one, give a thumbs-up if you agree, a thumbs-down if you disagree, or stand up if you strongly agree. Don't worry about getting the 'right' answer. We're going to come back to these questions later."***

Read the following:

1. **People who move to a new country should be expected to learn the country's dominant language.**
2. **Schools should teach only in the dominant language, rather than also teaching or supporting students' family languages.**
3. **Government agencies should provide important information in languages other than the country's dominant language.**
4. **People should be free to maintain their cultural traditions even when those traditions are different from those of the majority of society.**
5. **People should be free to practice their religion even when it is different from the religion or beliefs of the majority of society.**
6. **A government may encourage people to adopt the dominant culture if it believes doing so will help people succeed and make society function more smoothly and effectively.**
7. **A government may pressure people to change cultural practices if it believes assimilation will benefit society.**
8. **A government may require a cultural group to abandon important aspects of its culture if it believes doing so will benefit the larger society.**

Do not resolve or debate the questions yet.



2. NATIVE ED VIDEO (5 minutes)

Before viewing, tell students:

“As you watch, pay particular attention to two things: what the government hoped assimilation would accomplish, and what happened to Native land.”

Show the **Native Ed Dawes Act video**.

After the video, briefly ask:

- Why did the government believe individual ownership of land would help assimilate Native people?
- What did allotment actually do to Native land?
- What happened to land that was not allotted?

Keep this brief; the following activities will explore these questions in greater depth.

3. TWO DIFFERENT IDEAS ABOUT LAND (7 minutes)

NOTE: This section and the next can be done either in groups/pairs or in a class discussion

Explain that **Native nations had many different systems for understanding and managing land**. They were not all the same. However, in nearly all Native communities, land was understood through **community relationships, responsibilities, and use** rather than primarily as private property that one individual could simply buy and sell to anyone.

Individuals and families could have recognized rights to use particular areas of land. But those rights generally did not mean that a person could simply sell community land to an outsider whenever they wished.

The dominant American system was different. An individual owner generally had recognized legal rights to a specific parcel and could **inherit, sell, or transfer** that property.

Explain: ***“The Dawes Act took land that had been held under Native nations’ existing systems and divided it into individual allotments.”***

The federal government believed that individual land ownership and farming would help assimilate Native people into American society. The policy therefore attempted to change **both how land was controlled and how Native people lived**.

Ask: ***Why might changing the way land is owned affect an entire community, rather than just the individual who receives a piece of land?***



Briefly discuss:

- family and community relationships
- economic security
- cultural practices
- sovereignty
- inheritance
- political authority
- control of territory

Emphasize: **Allotment was not simply a change in paperwork. It changed the relationship among Native people, their communities, and their land.**

4. WHAT HAPPENED TO NATIVE LAND? (4 minutes)

USE HANDOUT IN APPENDIX.

Students examine three maps:

- **Map 1: Native land holdings in 1865 at end of Civil War**
- **Map 2: Native land holdings in 1880's, when the Dawes Act was passed**
- **Map 3: Native Land holdings today**

Ask:

- What major change do you see?
- What does the change suggest about the effect of allotment and related federal policies?
- Why does losing control of land affect more than a person's wealth?

Then explain: **The dramatic loss of Native land was NOT an unintended consequence of assimilation policy.**

Federal policymakers believed individual land ownership and farming would transform Native people into farmers and assimilate them into mainstream American society. Yet much of the land allotted to Native people was poorly suited to farming, and many Native people did not have the farming equipment, resources, or experience to succeed..

The system also created other ways for Native people to lose their allotments. As restrictions on allotment lands were removed, land could be sold or transferred. Taxes and debts could also put land at risk. Many Native people had limited access to the cash economy and struggled to pay taxes and other expenses associated with their land.

At the same time, land that remained after allotments was declared “**surplus**” and opened to non-Native settlement.

Emphasize:

The government was not simply surprised that Native land was being lost. The transfer of land away from Native control was built into the allotment system and was consistent with the broader goals of the policy.



5. ASSIMILATION OR ACCULTURATION? (5 minutes)

Explain:

Assimilation means adopting the dominant culture in ways that can weaken or replace important elements of one's original cultural identity.

Acculturation means adopting some practices, ideas, or customs from another culture while maintaining important parts of one's own culture.

Use two familiar metaphors:

MELTING POT = ASSIMILATION

Different cultures are combined into one dominant culture.

SALAD BOWL = ACCULTURATION

Different cultures interact and adopt elements from one another while remaining distinct. Give examples:

- **Learning English while continuing to speak a family's Native language** → Acculturation
- **Adopting American clothing or technology while maintaining cultural traditions** → Acculturation
- **Adopting the dominant culture while gradually losing important elements of one's original cultural identity** → Assimilation
- **Adopting individual American-style land ownership in place of a traditional Native system of landholding** → Assimilation

Ask: **Is cultural change always assimilation?**

Establish that it is not. People and cultures can change without completely losing their distinct identity. Assimilation can also be **voluntary**, particularly in the experience of many immigrants, rather than something government imposed.

6. SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSION: HOW FAR SHOULD ASSIMILATION GO? (10 minutes)

USE HANDOUT IN APPENDIX.

Place students in pairs or small groups. Tell students:

“There are no predetermined right answers to these questions. Your job is to explain your reasoning and listen carefully to the reasoning of others.”

A. LANGUAGE

- Should immigrants be expected to learn the dominant language?
- Should schools teach only in the dominant language?
- Should government agencies provide important information in other languages?
- When does providing language support help people participate in society, and when might someone argue that it slows assimilation?



B. CULTURE AND RELIGION

- Should a government encourage people to adopt the customs of the larger society?
- Should people be free to maintain cultural traditions that differ from those of the majority?
- Should a government ever try to change a cultural or religious practice because it believes doing so would benefit society?
- Are there cultural or religious practices that a government should not try to change?

C. GOVERNMENT POWER

Consider this continuum:

SUPPORT → ENCOURAGE → INCENTIVIZE → PRESSURE → COERCE → FORCE

Discuss:

- What is the difference between these actions?
- At what point does encouragement become pressure?
- At what point does pressure become coercion?
- Is there a point at which a government should no longer be involved in changing people's culture?

D. IMMIGRANTS AND NATIVE PEOPLES

Consider this question:

If you believe a government may encourage or promote assimilation among immigrants, should the same principle apply to Native peoples? Why or why not?

Before students answer, make sure they understand the following, especially the concept of sovereignty:

Native nations were not immigrant groups. They were sovereign peoples with their own governments, societies, territories, and systems for managing land before the United States expanded across their territories.

Then ask students to consider:

- Does it matter that Native nations already had their own governments?
 - Does it matter that they were sovereign peoples?
 - Does it matter that the United States was asserting authority over peoples who were already living on and governing their own territories?
 - Does it matter that assimilation policies also changed Native people's control of their land?
-



7. FULL-CLASS DEBRIEF (6 minutes)

Bring the class together. Begin with the language questions:

“Should people who move to a country be expected to learn its dominant language?”

Move to the continuum:

SUPPORT → ENCOURAGE → INCENTIVIZE → PRESSURE → COERCE → FORCE

Ask:

- Where would you draw the line?
- Does it matter whether the government is offering an opportunity or threatening a consequence?
- Does it matter whether the person has a genuine choice?

Then return to Native peoples. Ask:

If you believe some government-sponsored assimilation is acceptable for immigrants, should exactly the same principle apply to sovereign Native nations?

If students say no, ask: ***What is different about the government's relationship with these two groups?***

Guide students toward the central distinction:

Immigrants move into a political society that already exists, although the reasons for migration and the degree of choice vary. Native nations, by contrast, were already established peoples with their own governments, societies, territories, and relationships to the land going back thousands of years. The United States then asserted authority over those peoples and used policies such as allotment to change both their cultures and their control of land.

End with the more concrete question:

If a people is sovereign and has its own government and culture, what authority, if any, should another government have to change that people's culture or land system?

8. EXIT TICKET (3 minutes)

Have students respond individually:

Where should a government draw the line when promoting assimilation?

A. When dealing with sovereign Native peoples

B. When dealing with immigrants

C. Should the line be the same or different? Explain why.

OPTIONAL ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY—SIMULATION AT END



APPENDIX—STUDENT HANDOUT

DAWES ACT—LAND, ASSIMILATION & GOVERNMENT POWER

PART I — TWO DIFFERENT IDEAS ABOUT LAND

Native nations had many different systems for understanding and managing land. They were not all the same. However, in many Native communities, land was understood through **community relationships, responsibilities, and use** rather than primarily as private property that one individual could simply buy and sell to anyone.

Individuals and families could have recognized rights to use particular land, but that did not necessarily mean that one person could simply sell the land to an outsider.

The dominant American system was different. Individual owners generally had recognized legal rights to specific property and could **inherit, sell, or transfer** it.

Discuss

1. Why might changing the way land is owned affect an entire community, rather than just the individual who receives a piece of land?

Consider:

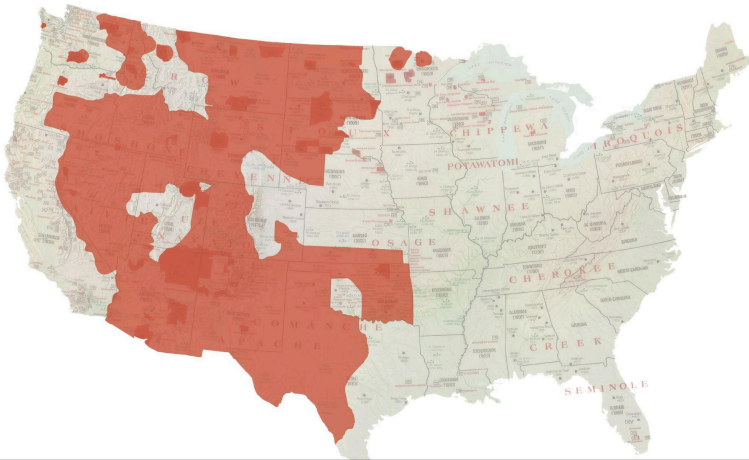
- family and community relationships
- inheritance
- economic security
- political power
- cultural practices
- control of territory
- sovereignty

2. Why might a government that wants to assimilate a people believe that changing its system of land ownership could help accomplish that goal?



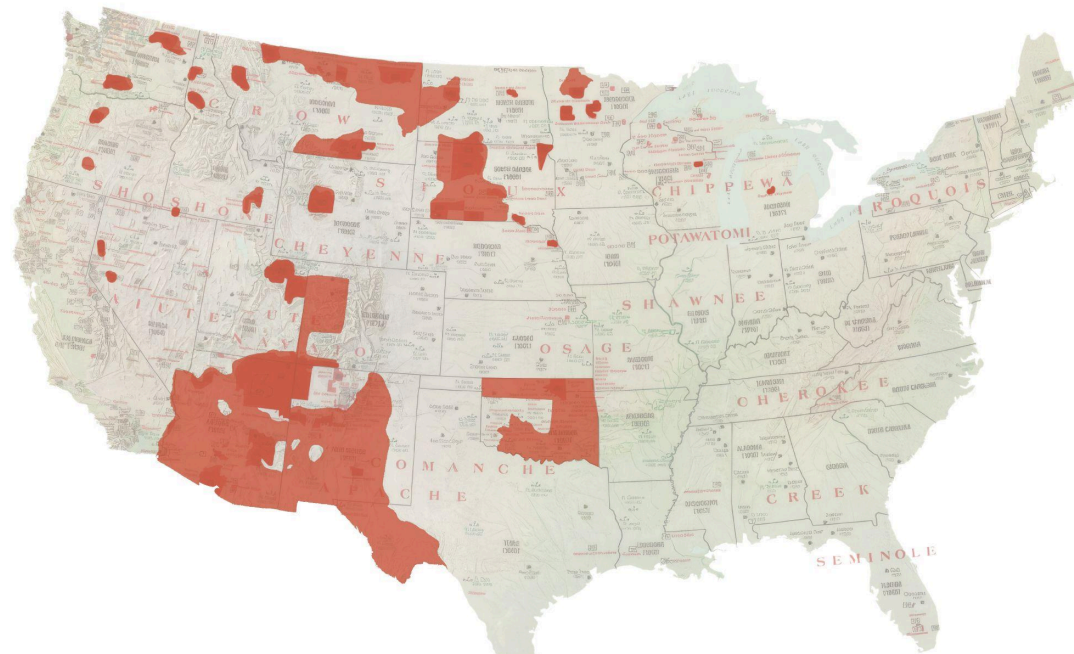
Native Ed

MAP 1–Native Land Holdings at the end of the Civil War 1865



MAP 2

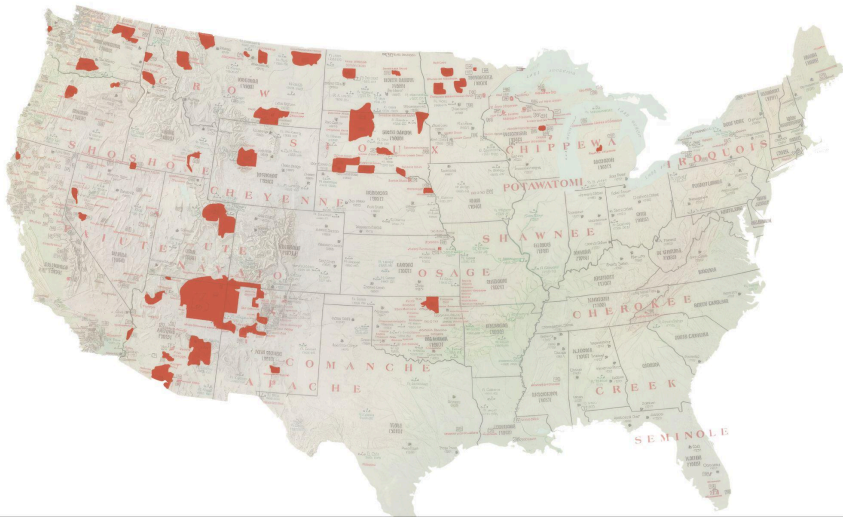
Native Land Holdings in the 1880's when Dawes Act was passed





MAP 3

Native Land Holdings Today



Compare the Maps

1. What major changes do you see?
2. What does the change suggest about the effects of the Dawes Act and related policies?
3. Why does losing control of land affect more than a person's wealth?
4. What happens to a community's power when it loses control of much of its land?

PART III — ASSIMILATION OR ACCULTURATION?

Assimilation

Adopting the dominant culture in ways that can weaken or replace important elements of one's original cultural identity.

Acculturation

Adopting some practices, ideas, or customs from another culture while maintaining important elements of one's own culture.

MELTING POT

Assimilation

Different cultures are combined into one dominant culture.

SALAD BOWL

Acculturation

Different cultures interact and adopt elements from one another while remaining distinct.



Discuss

1. Is learning another language necessarily assimilation? Why or why not?
2. Is adopting another culture's food, clothing, technology, or customs necessarily assimilation? Why or why not?
3. When does cultural change become assimilation?

PART IV — HOW FAR SHOULD ASSIMILATION GO?

Work with a partner or small group. There are no predetermined right answers. Explain your reasoning and listen carefully to the reasoning of others.

1. LANGUAGE

Should immigrants be expected to learn the dominant language?

Should schools teach only in the dominant language?

Should government agencies provide important information in other languages?

Explain your reasoning.

2. CULTURE AND RELIGION

Should a government encourage people to adopt the customs of the larger society?

Should people be free to maintain cultural traditions that differ from those of the majority?

Should a government ever try to change a cultural or religious practice because it believes doing so would benefit society?

Explain your reasoning.

3. GOVERNMENT POWER

Consider this continuum:

SUPPORT → ENCOURAGE → INCENTIVIZE → PRESSURE → COERCE → FORCE

What is the difference between these actions?

Where does encouragement become pressure?

Where does pressure become coercion?

Where should a government draw the line?



4. IMMIGRANTS AND NATIVE PEOPLES

Before answering, remember:

Native nations were sovereign peoples with their own governments, societies, territories, and systems for managing land before the United States expanded across their territories.

Now consider:

If you believe a government may encourage or promote assimilation among immigrants, should the same principle apply to sovereign Native peoples? Why or why not?

Consider:

- Did Native nations already have their own governments?
 - Were they sovereign peoples?
 - Were they already living on and governing their own territories?
 - Was another government asserting authority over them?
 - Did assimilation policies affect their control of land?
 - Did assimilation policies affect their sovereignty?
-

EXIT TICKET

Where should a government draw the line when promoting assimilation?

A. When dealing with sovereign Native peoples

B. When dealing with immigrants

Should the line be the same or different? Explain why.



OPTIONAL ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY FOR TEACHER

DAWES ACT LAND COUNCIL SIMULATION

USE HANDOUT IN APPENDIX.

Students work in groups representing different perspectives connected to the Dawes Act.

Each group receives a brief description of its assigned perspective and discusses:

Should the government adopt this land policy? Why or why not?

Each group then gives a **30–45 second persuasive statement** to the class.

After the presentations, ask:

- What assumptions about land ownership did different groups make?
- How did different groups connect land ownership to culture or assimilation?
- Who gained power under the proposed system?
- Who lost power?

FOR STUDENTS

DAWES ACT LAND COUNCIL SIMULATION

USE ONLY IF YOUR TEACHER DIRECTS YOU TO DO SO.

Your group will receive a description of a particular perspective on the Dawes Act.

Discuss:

Should the government adopt this land policy? Why or why not?

Prepare a **30–45 second persuasive statement** explaining your position.



OPTIONAL ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

STUDENT HANDOUT

DAWES ACT–LAND COUNCIL SIMULATION

YOUR TASK

It is **1887**. The U.S. government has proposed a new policy for Native reservation lands.

The government wants to:

- divide reservation land into individual pieces called **allotments**;
- give individual Native families their own allotments;
- declare some remaining land “surplus”;
- make that land available to white settlers.

The government says the plan will help Native people become farmers, individual landowners, and U.S. citizens.

Your group has been asked to give its opinion on the proposal.

IMPORTANT

You are **role-playing**. Your job is not to give your personal opinion. Your job is to make the strongest argument you can from the perspective of your assigned group.

GROUP 1



NATIVE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

You are leaders of a Native community living on a reservation.

Your community has traditionally made decisions about land together. Land provides food, homes, and places connected to your community's history and culture.

You believe people have responsibilities to the community and to future generations.

The government wants to divide your community's land into individual allotments. Some land would then be considered "surplus" and sold to white settlers.

YOUR POSITION

Your group **OPPOSES** the proposal.

You believe dividing the land will weaken your community and take away your ability to control your own land and future.

PREPARE YOUR ARGUMENT

Discuss:

- Why does your group oppose the proposal?
- What is your biggest concern?
- What could happen to your community if the land is divided?
- What do you want the government to do?

Prepare a **30–60 second persuasive statement**.

GROUP 2



U.S. GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

You are U.S. government officials who support **assimilation**.

You believe Native people should adopt more of the customs and practices of white Americans.

You believe individual land ownership and farming will help Native people change their way of life and become U.S. citizens.

You also believe that land not being used in the way you consider productive should be available to settlers.

YOUR POSITION

Your group **SUPPORTS** the proposal.

You believe it will encourage assimilation, promote individual land ownership and farming, and open additional land to white settlement.

PREPARE YOUR ARGUMENT

Discuss:

- Why does your group support the proposal?
- Why do you think individual land ownership is important?
- Why do you think Native people should change their way of life?
- What do you want the government to do?

Prepare a **30–60 second persuasive statement**.

GROUP 3

NATIVE FAMILIES & YOUNG PEOPLE



You are Native families and young people living in a community where people share relationships, traditions, and responsibilities.

You are concerned that dividing the land could separate families and weaken the community.

You are also concerned about other assimilation policies, including sending Native children away to boarding schools and punishing them for speaking their languages or practicing their cultures.

YOUR POSITION

Your group **OPPOSES** the proposal.

You believe it threatens your family's community, culture, and future.

PREPARE YOUR ARGUMENT

Discuss:

- How could dividing the land affect your family?
- How could it affect your community?
- What could happen to your culture?
- What do you want the government to understand?

Prepare a **30–60 second persuasive statement**.

GROUP 4

WHITE SETTLERS



You are white settlers who want land for your families, farms, and businesses.

You believe that if the government makes land available for settlement, you should have an opportunity to acquire it and develop it.

The government plans to declare some reservation land “surplus” and make it available to white settlers after Native land is divided into individual allotments.

YOUR POSITION

Your group **SUPPORTS** the proposal because it creates opportunities to obtain land.

However, you should also think about an important question:

Where did this land come from, and what happens to the people who already live there?

PREPARE YOUR ARGUMENT

Discuss:

- Why does your group support the proposal?
- Why do you want land?
- What might you do with the land?
- What questions should you consider about where the land came from?

Prepare a **30–60 second persuasive statement**.

GROUP 5

FUTURE GENERATIONS

You represent people who will live **50 or 100 years from now**.



You care about what today's decisions will leave behind.

Land is not only something that can have economic value. It can also provide homes, resources, community, history, and connections to culture.

YOUR POSITION

Your group must decide whether the proposal protects or harms the interests of future generations.

Think carefully about:

- What happens if land is divided and sold?
- Who will control the land in the future?
- What might future generations gain?
- What might they lose?
- What responsibilities do people today have to people who come after them?

PREPARE YOUR ARGUMENT

Decide whether your group **SUPPORTS** or **OPPOSES** the proposal.

Prepare a **30–60 second persuasive statement** explaining your position.



COMMUNITY HEARING

When your group presents:

1. State your position.

We support / oppose the proposal because...

2. Give at least TWO reasons.

3. Explain what is most important to your group.

4. Tell the government what you want it to do.

LISTENING QUESTION

As you listen to the other groups, think about:

How does each group think land should be used and who should control it?

What does each group think is most important: individual ownership, community, economic opportunity, culture, or future generations

Individuals and families could have recognized rights to use particular land, but that did not necessarily mean that one person could simply sell the land to an outsider.

The dominant American system was different. Individual owners generally had recognized legal rights to specific property and could **inherit, sell, or transfer** it.

Discuss: Why might changing the way land is owned affect an entire community, rather than just the individual who receives a piece of land?

STANDARDS



COMMON CORE ELA — LITERACY IN HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1 / RH.11-12.1 — Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 / RH.11-12.2 — Determine central ideas or information from primary and secondary sources and provide accurate summaries.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6 / RH.11-12.6 — Compare the point of view and purpose of historical sources and analyze how perspective influences interpretation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1 / W.11-12.1 — Write arguments to support claims using valid reasoning and relevant evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9 / W.11-12.9 — Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis and reflection.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 / SL.11-12.1 — Initiate and participate effectively in collaborative discussions, building on others' ideas and expressing one's own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4 / SL.11-12.4 — Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly and logically.

C3 FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

D2.His.4.9-12 — Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

D2.His.5.9-12 — Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.

D2.His.14.9-12 — Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

D2.His.16.9-12 — Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

D2.Civ.14.9-12 — Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

D4.1.9-12 — Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses.