



## Opinion/Commentary: Connecting concepts: It's crucial for our students to 'get it'

Chris Bunin  
Nov 27, 2016

I teach high school social studies. If you remember high school at all, then you know that my days are mixed with laughter and learning — and, of course, the occasional frustration. But I get that part: Being invested in the education of our nation's young people means that the day-to-day challenges come with the territory.

What I have a harder time getting is why we sometimes fail to make things easier for teachers on a larger scale — and better for students over a longer term — by embracing a cross-curricular, data-driven approach and using the many tools within our reach to do so. Let me explain.

Once, during a unit on the civil rights movement, a student asked, “Wait, what do the numbers in this graph mean?”

My heart sank. Knowing how to interpret data is crucial not only in classrooms beyond math (like mine), but, more important, in a society where information is king. It was clear my students were not prepared for success in either.

Turning this and other similar moments into my own learning experience (I am a teacher after all), I have come to recognize a simple truth: Real education can only occur when concepts in my classroom are reinforced elsewhere, and vice versa. Connecting seemingly disjointed ideas — like a graph in a history textbook with a graphing exercise in math class — helps strengthen academic concepts, allowing students to develop a fuller, broader picture of the world.

While this cross-curricular, data-driven approach is not new, it is not put into practice enough. Some teachers argue the method is unrealistic — requiring preparation, collaboration and schedules that are hard to accommodate. But I believe the stakes are too high for us not to try.

And now there is no excuse: Teachers (myself included) and subject matter experts from across the country worked with the U.S. Census Bureau in 2016 to revise its Statistics in Schools program to meet the needs of the modern student. Available online as of August, the program offers free, classroom-ready K-12 activities that use real-world data in the context of history, social studies, geography, sociology and, of course, math. The activities invoke compelling themes and tag specific topics and skills to help teachers make easy connections among subjects.

For example, a team could focus on educational attainment trends as one cross-curricular theme. Using the downloadable activities, students could explore U.S. maps of census data on education levels in geography class, discuss how historical events relate to African-American education trends in history and compare and analyze graphs about education's role in career advancement in math.

Parents can also help by reinforcing classroom concepts at home, through, for example, reading a relevant book with their child or starting a discussion on a thematic concept.

If I have learned anything from my time in the classroom, it is that teaching concepts in isolation does not work. A cross-curricular, data-driven approach is necessary for today's students to truly grasp the material.

While achieving this goal is not always easy, a clearinghouse of resources like the Statistics in Schools web site makes it easier. With the click of a mouse, teachers can now make education more relevant, engrossing and fun. For my students and for me, that means less frustration, more laughter and more real learning — so we can all finally “get it.”

Chris Bunin is a social studies and geospatial technologies teacher at Albemarle High School. He was named Outstanding Secondary Social Studies Teacher of the Year for 2016 by the National Council for the Social Studies. For more information, visit [www.census.gov/schools](http://www.census.gov/schools).

[http://www.dailyprogress.com/opinion/opinion-commentary-connecting-concepts-it-s-crucial-for-our-students/article\\_a7da35bc-b4a3-11e6-96bb-37ba78c31ee7.html](http://www.dailyprogress.com/opinion/opinion-commentary-connecting-concepts-it-s-crucial-for-our-students/article_a7da35bc-b4a3-11e6-96bb-37ba78c31ee7.html)