**Grade 8 Social Studies Homework Assignment**

1. **Show evidence of a close reading (highlighting key points and making notes in the margins – can be questions, thoughts, confusion, etc.)**
2. **Answer the question at the bottom of the article.**

[**EDUCATION**](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/)

**Boston Puts a Better Map in the Classroom**

The old Mercator world map, riddled with inaccuracies, has been replaced with a less Eurocentric version.

[**ARIA BENDIX**](https://www.theatlantic.com/author/aria-bendix/)

MAR 23, 2017

TYRONE SIU / REUTERS

Fans of *The West Wing* might recall the infamous “[Big Block of Cheese Day](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVX-PrBRtTY%20),” a fictitious day in which the show’s White House staffers honor the petitions of small interest groups. In the episode, Press Secretary C.J. Craig and Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman enter a meeting fully prepared to dismiss a request from a group of cartographers to put new maps in public schools. But the pair soon becomes fascinated as they learn more about how the map they studied growing up distorts the relative sizes of the continents.

“You’re telling me that Germany isn’t where we think it is?” Lyman asks.

“Nothing is where you think it is,” the cartographer responds.

This scene was more than plot device. It’s reflective of a real-life debate—one that is still going on in today’s public schools. The map familiar to most American students—the Mercator projection—has been a fixture of classrooms and world atlases for nearly 500 years. It is also, by no small coincidence, full of inaccuracies.

When the Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator created his projection of the world in 1569, his aim was to develop a guide for marine navigation along colonial trade routes. As a result, areas far from the equator appear dramatically large, while areas closer to the equator are truer to size. This makes Europe and North America seem bigger than South America and Africa—possibly stoking people’s unconscious biases. In reality, South America is about twice as large as Europe. Similarly, Africa appears to be the same size as Greenland on the Mercator map, despite being 14 times larger in real life. Another flaw in the Mercator projection is that it places Europe in the center. Critics [say](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/03/21/520938221/boston-students-get-a-glimpse-of-a-whole-new-world-with-different-maps)this promotes a Eurocentric worldview and dilutes the importance of the rest of the globe.

Last week, Boston Public Schools took these concerns to heart and introduced a new world map to their second-, seventh-, and 11th-grade social-studies classrooms. The revised map—known as the Peters projection—was introduced in 1974 by the German historian Arno Peters as a more accurate alternative to the Mercator. While the Peters projection is not without its own controversies (it has been criticized for distorting shapes), it presents a more realistic depiction of the size and relative scale of the continents. Some individual schools across the country have already begun to introduce the Peters projection in their classrooms, but Boston believes it’s the first public-school district in the nation to do so. So far, 600 laminated maps have been distributed to Boston students, [costing the district](https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/03/16/north-america-really-bigger-than-africa-this-map-sets-things-straight/lK52K7aKYFpQ3b8ujJj6LP/story.html)around $12,000.

“This is the start of a three-year effort to decolonize the curriculum in our public schools,” Colin Rose, the assistant superintendent of opportunity and achievement gaps for Boston Public Schools, [told](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/mar/19/boston-public-schools-world-map-mercator-peters-projection) *The Guardian*. Rose also offered some insight into the logic behind the decision: “When you continue to show images of the places where people’s heritage is rooted that is not accurate, that has an effect on students,” he said.  Indeed, this deviation from a Western portrayal of geography and history comes as welcome news in a district where [86 percent](http://www.wbur.org/edify/2017/03/16/world-maps-boston-public-schools) of students are non-white.

Rose informed *The Guardian* that Boston Public Schools will exclusively purchase Peters projections from here on out, with the ultimate goal of introducing the maps to the district’s remaining grades. In the meantime, educators have the pleasure of watching their students see the world through a new, and perhaps more critical, lens. “One of the things we teach students is, to become good historians, they must question and analyze,” Natacha Scott, the director of history and social studies at Boston Public Schools, [told](https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/03/16/north-america-really-bigger-than-africa-this-map-sets-things-straight/lK52K7aKYFpQ3b8ujJj6LP/story.html) *The Boston Globe*. It’s the same lesson C.J. and Josh learned on *The West Wing* some 15 years ago—one that bears repeating today.

**Answer the following question in the space below: Do you agree with Boston Public School’s decision to change the map projection used in its schools? Why or why not?**

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**Grade 8 Social Studies Homework Assignment (Adjusted)**

1. **Highlight what you think are the three most important points in the article.**
2. **Answer the question at the bottom of the article.**

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**Answer the following questions in the space below:**

1. **Why did the Boston Public Schools decide to use different maps in their classrooms?**

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1. **Do you agree with their decision? Why or why not?**

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