

IOWA'S SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHERS: BRIGHT LIGHTS ON A BLEAK LANDSCAPE

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Soon after accepting Lynn Nielsen's invitation to contribute an essay on the future of social studies, I decided to write about Iowa's teachers. I can only envision social studies's future through the everyday activities of those who work in Iowa's classrooms. In the midst of increasingly difficult circumstances, Iowa's social studies teachers will continue to help children understand great social issues spawned by global integration and increasing economic inequality. Now, and in the future, Iowa's teachers will orchestrate meaningful encounters with history, geography, political science, and other social studies. Under the direction of Iowa's teachers, our students will become active citizens and exercise social responsibility. Teachers, in short, are the keepers and caretakers of social studies's future. We are fortunate that this will remain true. The future looks bright.

When I lose focus on Iowa's teachers, however, I find myself thinking that social studies has a bleak future. Except within their own ranks, social studies teachers enjoy little support for their work. President Bush and the Congress of the United States would have them "teach to the test" in math, science and language arts. The Iowa legislature and Department of Education (DOE) have ceased acknowledging social studies as part of a core curricula necessary for our children's future. Most of Iowa's Area Education Agencies (AEA's) no longer have social studies specialists to support our teachers. In face of such developments I find myself asking: Will citizenship education continue to decline as an

educational priority? Is consumerism winning over critical thinking as a goal for children in Iowa's classrooms? Will teachers "give up" in the face of a depressing lack of political and financial commitment to the challenging, professional work they do?

To complicate answers to these abstract questions, I have to think about the concrete, everyday instructional activities of specific Iowa teachers. It seems clear that, in spite of crushing workloads, Iowa teachers will continue to help students attain high standards through critical evaluation of historical sources, geographical information, or sociological data. In Cedar Rapids, for example, a veteran social studies teacher presents photos of early twentieth century immigrant life to children whose parents only recently came to our State from other countries. Under this teacher's guidance, students from Bosnia, El Salvador, and twelve other countries analyze and interpret Jacob Riis's photographs of early twentieth century immigrant life. From study of these historical records, Iowa's newest citizens write perceptive, well-composed essays, connecting America's past with their present day experiences.

Another example of excellent social studies teaching comes quickly to mind. A brand new social studies teacher harnesses internet resources to offer students a remarkable array of historical encounters. This new teacher, on his own time of course, visits dozens of internet sites and saves onto CD-ROMs the incredibly rich material he locates. Later, in his classroom, this new teacher challenges students with a stunning assortment of primary documents. Students scrutinize such artifacts as a recruitment film from the Spanish-American War produced by none other than Thomas Edison. By saving such material onto CD-ROMs, and using a proximate projector, this new teacher provides a classroom of high school students with opportunities for critical evaluation of sources. He also circumvents the frustration of notoriously unreliable classroom internet connections. With the wealth of cyberspace now at their command, clever social studies teachers will increasingly connect students to resources and conversations in ways unimaginable just two years ago.

Such activities are a tribute to social studies teachers' professionalism, work ethic, creativity, and commitment to serve every child. Although most school districts simply threw computers at Iowa schools,

social studies teachers have actively pursued ways to mine the potential of computer-assisted instruction. When dozens of new citizens, with little or no English, enter social studies classrooms, Iowa teachers find strategies to simultaneously hook developing language skills to the study of problems in a democratic society. Everyday, throughout Iowa, one can find teachers who are grasping new opportunities to enhance social studies teaching and responding creatively to difficult new situations. To repeat, when one focuses on the brilliance of individual teachers, the future looks bright.

I must say, however, that some of my friends and colleagues think I'm naive about a bright future for social studies in Iowa. One good friend, who is deeply concerned about the future of our profession, tells me in no uncertain terms that Iowa's social studies teachers must get politically active. He tells me forcefully that social studies is rapidly disappearing off the "radar screens" of Iowa's citizens and political leaders. Unless Iowa's teachers get more active, he asserts, our best and brightest teachers will lose jobs to "teachers" who prepare students for standardized tests. He argues forcefully that teachers must form stronger unions and retain the option to strike. Otherwise, too many students, with too many different problems, will overwhelm the creative responses of even our most resilient teachers. With deteriorating working conditions, teachers will find it increasingly difficult to maintain their professionalism. Excellent teachers will continue to quit teaching. Others will psychologically retire while still on the job.

Although I agree with the logic of my friend's assertions, I return to thoughts of individual social studies teachers. While orchestrating several classes of thirty or more individuals, brilliant teachers will continue to help students approach worthy and ambitious national standards in history, civics, geography and other social sciences. Many of these teachers will attend meetings of the Iowa Council for the Social Studies (ICSS). At ICSS sessions, these professionals will share ideas and take new ones back to their colleagues and students. These teachers are the real caretakers of the future of social studies in Iowa. They will continue to grasp opportunities and creatively shape the contours of social studies instruction in their classrooms. They are in charge, and social studies will remain in the

hands of Iowa's teachers. So, the future is bright. With more organization and solidarity among them, however, the future would look even brighter!

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