

# DO THE SOCIAL SCIENCES HAVE A FUTURE IN IOWA?

By

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*M*y grandparents met in Iowa. They came from Germany and were married in Dubuque in 1895. A decade later they moved to the western Pennsylvania town where I was born and raised. Many of my closest friends live in Iowa, and several AEAs have brought me in to work with schools in their areas. I feel that I have a stake in Iowa.

I was a social science teacher at the high school level for 17 years. I taught all of the social science disciplines: history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, geography, political science, economics, and contemporary issues, not to mention an elective course on the future. Some readers may be familiar with the two social science textbooks I authored. In past years, the Iowa Council for the Social Studies graciously invited me to speak at your conferences. So I feel that I have a stake in the social sciences as well as a stake in Iowa.

I am frankly concerned about the future of the social studies in Iowa. Although state law still requires instruction in the social sciences, the Iowa Department of Education no longer has a full-time social science specialist on staff. AEA services in support of the social sciences have been de-emphasized as well. In the AEA accreditation system, social sciences have been removed from "core" to "discretionary" service status. This movement away from the social studies is not specific to Iowa. It is a growing trend in every part of America, one that I find to be deeply troubling.

Without active social science representation at the state and regional levels, there is no one to present the case for the social studies, to lobby for adequate funding in an era of tighter and tighter budgets, or to do the right thing by making sure that social studies are included as a "core" subject, along with math, science, and reading.

The ability to read is absolutely essential for success in school and in life. Young people who read well are more easily able to develop their capacities to write well and to speak well. Success in the American economy requires high levels of competency in reading, writing, and speaking in standard American English. Fluency in reading the printed word also adds immeasurable richness to our lives, enabling us to enjoy good stories and to appreciate one another's ideas and perspectives.

For our students, science and mathematics provide enriching and practical fields of study. But the truth is that very few of our young people will go on to make mathematics and science their life's work. We do, however, expect all of our young people to become enlightened, responsible, contributing participants in our nation's democratic experiment. Good citizens are not born. They develop their civic competencies through guidance, practice, and study in history and the other social sciences.

It's high time that we spoke out in one voice, to advocate what we know to be good for our young people and for the future of Iowa and our entire country. It's up to us to contact our state legislators, our local AEA leadership, and the state department of education to impress upon them the benefits of the social sciences, benefits that our students will not be able to derive from any other discipline or field of study.

History brings to life the glories and challenges of our collective past for young people. By engaging our students' curiosity through interactive programs such as History Alive, History Day, and the opportunities provided by the Iowa Historical Society, we cultivate their interest in making our country and our world a better place for themselves and for future generations. Iowans are justifiably proud of their rich heritage and the special place Iowa holds in America's heartland and in America's heart. What a shame it would be to deprive our young people of a deep appreciation for our history. Philosophers have warned that those who are

unaware of their history are condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past. History gives us the tools to discover our triumphs and tragedies, so we are able to build upon what we have already achieved. A well-developed sense of history in young people's formative years will help them to cultivate a rooted sense of place, to better understand their own personal and family history as they grow into adulthood.

Our students are constantly exploring their own behavior and the behavior of others. They want to know why they do what they do — and why absolutely everyone else refuses to understand them. The behavioral sciences of Psychology and Sociology can be useful here. In another behavioral science, Anthropology, our young people can discover that their own personal needs and wants are not so different from those of people who live in distant parts of our world, as well as those who lived and died centuries ago. Iowa's demographics, like it or not, are changing. As migration into the state transforms Iowa's demographic landscape, will our young people be prepared to live in a more diverse environment? Will they welcome newcomers as their own families were welcomed to this land in generations past? Will they help new Iowans to learn our language and customs so they can more easily assimilate and contribute to the richness of Iowa's culture, as they share in the fruits of our combined efforts?

Our young people want to learn where they are and what their environment has to offer. Geography can open their eyes to the wonders and the challenges of the world around them, broadening their naturally self-consumed perspectives to encompass the wider world. When we tap into their natural idealism, young people develop the capacity to treat our land, water, and air with respect. Through Geography and organizations such as 4-H and Seedsavers, they can learn to be stewards of our planet and its abundant but finite natural resources. They learn that the world is in their hands, to trash it or to treasure it.

When our young people study Political Science and Government, they learn how people use power to make a difference in their own lives and in the lives of others. Those young people who become actively involved in service learning, civic organizations, and projects through the

political parties and ISPAC (the Iowa Student Political Awareness Club) will have a better chance to grow up to be more well-informed citizens who take pride in their personal investments of time and energy for the success of our democratic experiment.

Economics can help our young people to understand that, because our resources are limited and our wants are limitless, we need to exercise good judgment. Financial responsibility is a good character trait to develop at any age, and the sooner the better. The emerging global economy will require our students to develop their entrepreneurial abilities, to make the most of opportunities for their own good and for the benefit of others.

The social sciences — all seven of them — invite our young people to discover themselves and the world around them in a way that math and science cannot do. Social studies are the heart and soul of the curriculum because young people (and not-so-young people) are social creatures who cannot live alone. If we are to live with others, we must understand them and ourselves. If we are to live responsibly on our fragile planet, we must understand our place in it. If we are to make a future for ourselves and for the generations to come, we must develop an appreciation for our past.

What is lost when an entire generation of young people grow up knowing the intricacies of science and mathematical theorems, but are not well-schooled in the essential curriculum of life and living?

If we truly believe in the value of the social studies, then let this be a call to action. We have seen Iowa's state budget shrinking year by year. Educational priorities that are vigorously promoted by well-organized and vocal advocates will continue to be well-funded, even in the face of dwindling resources, while marginalized fields of study will find it difficult to survive. If we are to prevent the social sciences from extinction in our schools, there is no time to waste. We must act now.

If your Area Education Agency does not provide adequate support services in the social sciences to you and your school, and does not give the same emphasis to social sciences as to reading, math, and science, write or call the leadership of your AEA and work diligently toward this result.

If advocates for the social sciences are absent at the state level, it is up to every social studies educator to contact the governor's office and the state department of education to press for full-time social studies specialists at the state level.

Show your state legislators this article. Ask them why the social sciences are not currently included with "core" subjects at the AEA level. Ask them why funding for the social sciences is so low. Let them know why we deeply believe that the social sciences are crucial for our young people's success and for the future of Iowa and our nation.

There is a narrow window of opportunity for us to save the social studies. Soon it may be too late. What will you do?

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