

SOCIAL STUDIES IS THE FUTURE

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National Council for the Social Studies looks toward a future in which social studies and the social studies profession play a vital and dynamic role in our nation's education. The triennial NCSS strategic planning process, which is now underway, includes a governance study that will examine what organizational structure will enable us to lead the profession effectively into that future.

As part of our study, we have surveyed a sample of our members inviting them to imagine the future realistically. As a result, they have highlighted some of the most important trends in demographics, legislation and regulation, the business and economic climate, technology and science, social values, and politics.

To carry out the survey, we first identified the key stakeholders in our professional community and then chose educators who represented these groups:

- K-12 teacher members—elementary, middle, secondary
- people in state departments of education responsible for social studies
- college and university instructors
- social studies supervisors
- international members
- affiliated council leadership
- committee chairs
- new teachers—members
- new teachers—non-members
- state council members who are not NCSS affiliated

In previous planning cycles, we conducted a mail ballot with statistically valid numbers from these groups. For our purposes this time, we chose the more in-depth approach of conducting detailed phone interviews with

very small samples from each group. The questions were designed to elicit participants' ideas about trends and events affecting social studies education and themselves as educators. The NCSS board of directors and governance task force used these survey results to develop a vision of the future within which social studies teachers will be operating. Here is the future they saw.

Students in many communities will be increasingly more racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse and in some areas ethnic minorities will comprise the majority. The teacher population will be less diverse and as teachers retire in great numbers, persons coming into teaching will be significantly younger and less experienced. This situation will create a tension between the interest of states in higher standards for teacher certification and pressure for alternative means for teacher preparation prompted by a larger demand than supply. Consequently, teachers may increasingly come from non-traditional preparation programs to fill shortages. Finally, the general population is growing older with a large cohort of aging baby boomers whose needs will increasingly compete with education for resources.

Education will be in the forefront of the legislative agenda. The movement for greater accountability for students, teachers, and schools will increase and teachers will be held accountable for ensuring students master subject matter. At the elementary level, the emphasis on math and reading in assessments will diminish resources and time designated for teaching social studies. As students move into middle school and high school, assessments will include history, geography, and civics while other areas of social studies are less likely to be tested.

Businesses will more clearly articulate their expectations in terms of work skills and critical competency skills and there will continue to be dialogue around the primary purpose of education, dealing with such questions as who is the consumer of education and whether the goal is to provide good employees or good citizens in a wider world.

Our respondents all agreed that technology would play a significant role in shaping both instruction and school culture. As technology becomes the common way to access information and knowledge, technology use and skills will be integrated across all subject areas and be more available to all students. Technology will enable students to work in a variety of learning environments beyond the traditional classroom and enable teachers to enliven instruction as access to archival documents, museums,

and a full array of high quality materials becomes available with a click of the mouse.

When asked about the social values and the political environment in which social studies teachers will live and be employed, they envisioned a world characterized by a continued tension between individual rights and the common good. School choice will accelerate and more students will be able to attend any public school of their choice. There will be some increased moral ambiguity as people in our schools embrace increasingly diverse perspectives and values.

How does NCSS provide leadership and address the challenges confronting social studies and social studies teachers in the future just described? The mission statement approved by the NCSS board of directors in 1998 states, "Social studies educators teach students the content knowledge, intellectual skills, and civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy. The mission of National Council for the Social Studies is to provide leadership, service, and support for all social studies educators." I believe that this mission is sufficiently powerful and descriptive of our core values to lead us through the future. But I will choose two areas of organizational focus to consider specific ways we strengthen social studies and support teachers: teacher preparation and advocacy for social studies.

Every student deserves a qualified teacher, so the present and anticipated teacher shortage cannot be an excuse for lowering standards that assess who is appropriately prepared for a social studies classroom. NCSS has been formulating and announcing standards for the preparation of social studies teachers for several decades. As a member of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), NCSS created standards by which schools applying for NCATE certification are evaluated. NCATE requires that professional organizations review these standards on a regular five-year cycle and we are beginning the review process this November for the 2002 update. The most recently published version of these standards represents a shift from analysis of programmatic input (syllabi) to a greater emphasis on academic social studies content and toward performance-based assessments. This evolution is "consistent with general trends in teacher education; the national move toward greater accountability for schools, teachers, and teacher education programs, and parallel efforts of state teacher licensure offices, the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the National

Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), and other subject matter professional teacher associations.”¹

As we envision the decades looming before us, it does not serve students, teachers, or our society to back away from rigorous standards for those entering our profession. NCSS stands firm in its commitment to ensuring that this strategic direction continues.

What then about the status of social studies itself? In recent NCSS House of Delegates sessions, our affiliate leaders have raised concerns about the devaluing of social studies as evidenced by the disappearance of social studies supervisors positions at the district, county and, in some cases, state levels; the exclusion of social studies disciplines in state assessments; inequities in funding for professional development opportunities; and the diminished attention to social studies in the elementary curriculum.

If the future we anticipate is one where our society is more diverse, our work places more complex, and our economy more knowledge-based, the role of social studies is more vital than ever. It is incumbent upon social studies educators and their organizations to communicate to students, parents, administrators, school board members, legislators and the business community that social studies is essential to maintaining a vibrant democracy and a healthy economy. Students who have the knowledge, skills, and values that are found in a K-12 social studies program as outlined in the NCSS Curriculum Standards will leave school prepared to be engaged and effective citizens. The recently revised NCSS Position Statement on Creating Effective Citizens states, “Citizens in the 21st century must be prepared to deal with rapid change, complex local, national and global issues, cultural and religious conflicts, and the increasing interdependence of nations in a global economy. For our democracy to survive in this challenging environment, we must educate our students to understand, respect, and uphold the values enshrined in our founding documents. Our students should leave school with a clear sense of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. They should also be prepared to challenge injustice and to promote the common good.”²

Our task as a profession is to communicate the absolute necessity of social studies at all K-12 levels. The NCSS public relations theme adopted by our board of directors in May 2000, is “Today’s Social Studies...Creating Effective Citizens.” The NCSS Public Relations Tool Kit outlines activities that will make each of us a spokesperson for social studies.³ We have a compelling message. Although students will choose a variety of paths for their future occupations, each and every one of them will assume

the office of citizen. Like other roles they will undertake throughout their lives, this one requires thoughtful and deliberate preparation guided by a thoughtfully and deliberately prepared professional. The future of social studies is tied to our ability as a profession to communicate the essential nature of what we do. Our effective citizen:

- 1) Embraces core democratic values and strives to live by them.
- 2) Accepts responsibility for the well-being of oneself, one's family, and the community.
- 3) Has knowledge of the people, history, and traditions that have shaped our local communities, our nation, and the world.
- 4) Has knowledge of our nation's founding documents, civic institutions, and political processes.
- 5) Is aware of issues and events that impact people at local, state, national, and global levels.
- 6) Seeks information from varied sources and perspectives to develop informed opinions and creative solutions.
- 7) Asks meaningful questions and is able to analyze and evaluate information and ideas.
- 8) Uses effective decision-making and problem-solving skills in public and private life.
- 9) Has the ability to collaborate effectively as a member of a group.
- 10) Actively participates in civic and community life. ⁴

Social studies creates effective citizens. This role is our past, our present, and our future.

REFERENCES

1. National Council for the Social Studies, National Standards for Social Studies Teachers, (Washington, DC: NCSS, 2000), p. 6.
2. A position paper on citizenship education will soon be published by NCSS in its journal Social Education.
3. For details, contact the NCSS website at www.socialstudies.org/toolkit
4. NCSS position paper on citizenship education referenced in note 2.