

NCSS: Building A Century-Old Bridge

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All education disciplines seek to define what they are. Practitioners want to establish best practices and tenets to guide the teaching of a field. Social studies has had an identity crisis of sorts over the last century as members of the various social science disciplines and outside interest groups have sought to control the message for what social studies is or is not, based on their competing interests.¹ One consistent force for social studies education throughout these tides of change over the last century has been the steady presence and guidance of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS).

In this article, we discuss the educational reform initiatives that influenced the period leading up to the founding of NCSS in 1921. We review the contributions of educators like John Dewey and the initial leaders of NCSS to the social studies movement. The main focus of this article is to chronicle the founding of NCSS and examine its initial mission statement.

The United States in the 1910s

Change was afoot in American society during the years leading up to the founding of NCSS. World War I had ended in 1918. Congressional Republicans had thwarted Woodrow Wilson's attempts to involve the United States in the League of Nations. The Republican Party recaptured the presidency with Warren Harding and would maintain a hold on the White House throughout the decade.²

It could be argued that the political changes of the 1920s paled in comparison to the social and cultural changes underway. Different groups in U.S. society were expressing themselves in new ways. After a 70-year struggle, women were finally able to exercise the right

to vote in the 1920 elections in many parts of the country due to the passage of the 19th Amendment. A newfound prosperity fueled by rapid industrialization and business growth led to a period of intellectual, artistic, and political awakening. African American communities such as New York City's Harlem were one of the many areas around the country where this renaissance occurred. Fledgling labor unions were taking shape, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which was founded in 1909, was increasingly active, and there was an expansion of public education systems to meet the needs of growing urbanization and the development of factory towns.

Along with these changes, the social and cultural norms of U.S. society were challenged by several developments. The Russian Revolution of 1917 fueled the "Red Scare," fear about the spread of Communism and anarchism. The 1920s witnessed a second wave of Ku Klux Klan activity. The U.S. temperance movement won a major victory through Prohibition in 1920, only to see the rise of bootlegging and speakeasies during the rest of the decade.³

During the 1920s, technological developments reshaped American life. Automobiles were mass produced thanks to Henry Ford's assembly line. The average American could actually dream of owning a car. The film industry and radio shows started to form a mass information and entertainment medium.⁴ Changes in U. S. society were visible everywhere, especially in the field of education with the social science disciplines.

A Sea of Change in the Teaching of Social Science Disciplines

The concept of social studies was novel at the beginning of the twentieth century. Historians dominated the teaching of the social science disciplines because they were the writers of textbooks and played an instrumental role in developing the sequence of the social science curriculum in K-12 schools.⁵ The American Historical Association (AHA) had been created in 1884 (historians.org). The American Economic Association (AEA) was born in 1885 (aeaweb.org), the American Political Science Association (APSA) in 1903 (apsanet.org), the American Sociological Association (ASA) in 1905 (asanet.org), and the National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE) in 1915 (NCGE.org). The Progressive education movement spawned a demand for more public schools. John Dewey published his book, *How We Think*, in 1910.

On top of these changes, the National Education Association (NEA) released a significant report on secondary educa-

tion in 1916, in which it defined social studies as “those whose subject matter relates directly to the organization and development of human society, and to man as a member of social groups.”⁶ This report is often credited for introducing the concept of social studies and adding courses into the secondary curriculum such as community civics, world history, and contemporary issues. The goal of the social studies was to integrate the teaching of the social science disciplines in order to examine the multiple layers of a topic.⁷ The NEA report played a pivotal part in the rise of the social studies curriculum and opened the door for new ways of teaching the social science disciplines.

The 1916 NEA report did not happen in a vacuum. It was a byproduct of the changing intellectual currents in best teaching practices within the social science disciplines. One person who is often credited with heavily influencing the direction of this report is John Dewey, who had a different vision for the structure and purpose of schools in the broader sense that also applied to the teaching of the social science disciplines. Dewey’s vision for the teaching of social science disciplines was adopted and enhanced by Earle and Harold Rugg. It would take volumes to fully articulate the contributions of Dewey and the Ruggs to the formation of the social studies movement, but we will provide a brief overview in the following paragraphs.

John Dewey criticized the direction of education at the beginning of the twentieth century. For Dewey, the schools of his time were places where students’ imagination, creativity, and inquisitive nature were left unfulfilled as a result of the unquestioned approach by which social science content was taught through rote memorization. In place of this rigid approach to teaching social science content, Dewey advocated for envisioning a different way of teaching the social science disciplines. While Dewey did not provide a concrete definition for the social studies, he argued for the tenets of

social studies outlined in the 1916 NEA report, with an emphasis on connecting the past to the present while also concentrating on the interdisciplinary connections among the social studies disciplines. He stressed that the emphasis should be on using the past to inform the present by examining contemporary issues that students encountered. In his view, the past was shaping and influencing the present. Thus, social studies classes should add a level of relevancy, pique students’ interest about their world, and prepare them for living in a democratic society.⁸

If Dewey and other progressive educators with similar views offered the vision for what the social studies classroom could be, Harold Rugg took massive steps to make this vision a reality through his textbooks and pamphlets. Rugg, who was a professor at Columbia University from 1920 until 1951, argued that the social science disciplines should be one unified curriculum through which students could analyze the many components working in harmony and in opposition to each other to gain a comprehensive understanding of the uniqueness of American society. A core tenet for Rugg’s curriculum was that students needed to examine contemporary issues that were vexing society and construct solutions to these challenges. These learning processes would prepare students to replicate the same type of thinking as future democratic citizens. In this way, schools would become laboratories for democracy where students researched, discussed, and hypothesized solutions to contemporary issues. Rugg’s arguments repositioned the purpose of schools through the social studies curriculum to prepare students to be democratic citizens.⁹

The National Council for the Social Studies is Born

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) was founded by the National Education Association and the American Historical Association. The NEA had been created in 1857

as the National Teachers Association (NTA). In 1870, the NTA absorbed the Negro American Education Association to become the National Education Association (nea.org). As NCSS grew into a powerful voice for social studies education and educators, it remained under the NEA’s wing serving as the NEA’s Department of Social Studies from 1925 through 1969.¹⁰ Like any good parents, both the NEA and AHA watched over and supported their offspring.

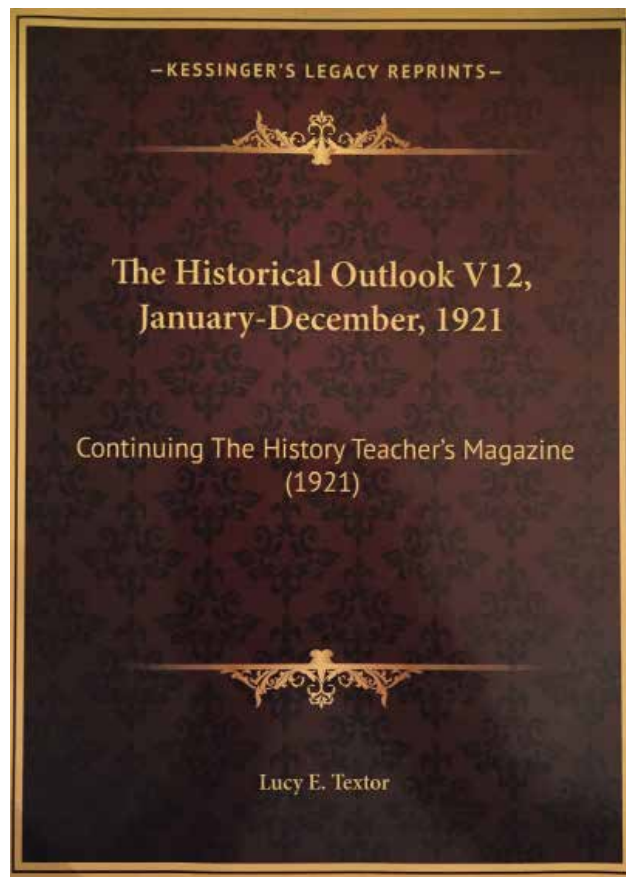
The birth of any entity requires a gestation period. The discussion giving rise to the new organization continued for over 20 years within both the NEA and the AHA. Regional organizations arose, with the goal of creating a journal that would foster growth within the field, but funding was always a limiting issue. The American Historical Society’s *The Historical Outlook* resolved that problem. The 12th volume, published in 1921, described the early organization and structure which gave rise to the NCSS.

There had been very uneven responses to the NEA’s 1916 curriculum recommendations. NEA’s 1916 report had urged the creation of new social studies content courses, breathed life into the pedagogical approaches of intertwining the social science disciplines, and focused on connecting the past to the present by emphasizing current event issues. On the other hand, for ideological and epistemological reasons, many AHA historians opposed the concept that social studies should place an emphasis on connecting the past to the present with contemporary issues. Within the ensuing years, only a third of the schools adopted the NEA recommendations with about a third of schools remaining loyal to the AHA. The remaining third were very independent in their curricular approaches. Consensus building takes time, and the result of the 1916 NEA report was to establish a large tent in which these discussions could be conducted. The communications of the time period were conducted mainly in

print or in person, which made consensus building a slow and difficult process. The chaos was complicated by disagreements among the social science disciplines concerning time constraints, course content, teacher certification requirements, and conflicts between university teaching methods professors and their discipline-specific colleagues. Local school superintendents, administrators, and K-12 teacher educators began to demand some type of consistency.¹¹

College professors and public school teacher educators played a central role in the birth of NCSS. In the midst of these changes, a group of college professors and graduate students gathered at Teachers College at Columbia University in New York City in the fall of 1920, to create a “National Council of Teachers of Social Studies” later to be known as the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). This new organization was “an association of administrators, supervisors, teachers of education, and others interested in obtaining the maximum results in education for citizenship through social studies.”¹² The annual dues for this fledgling organization were \$1. The organization’s first president was Albert Edward McKinley, a prominent member of the AHA who was the publisher and managing editor of *The Historical Outlook*, which was the initial NCSS journal (replaced by *Social Education* in 1936). The first NCSS vice president was Professor R.M. Tyron, of the University of Chicago. The secretary-treasurer was Professor Edgar Dawson of Hunter College in New York City. Earle Rugg, a graduate student at Teachers College, who was a former high school teacher, was named assistant secretary.

The first ever NCSS conference was held on March 3, 1921, in Atlantic City, New Jersey, as part of the NEA’s



Albert McKinley

Department of Superintendence meeting. It is important to note that even though college professors created the organization, the impetus came from a high school teacher. In 1919, Earle Rugg, who was at that time a high school teacher from Oak Park, Illinois, had called together a group of social scientists and high

school teachers at the Chicago YMCA. Rugg called this group the Northeastern Illinois Social Science Roundtable. The following year, Rugg went to Teachers College as a graduate student. Once there, Rugg contacted other social studies professionals, including Daniel Knowlton, Roy Hatch, J. Montgomery Gambrill, and Rugg’s older brother, Harold Rugg. These were the five who gathered together at Teachers College in the fall of 1920 and agreed to form a new group based on Rugg’s Roundtable concept.¹³

The early organization was dominated by institutions in the Northeast and North Central areas of the country. Of the 790 NCSS members in 1922, 577 came from the Northeast and North Central. Although by 1923, NCSS members came from every state and Canada,

the heavy influence of NCSS leaders in the Northeast and North Central regions, specifically with educators in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago, caused key functions of the organization to also be based in the Northeast.¹⁴ The early tensions over control of policy among interest groups, professors, and public-school educators, the social sciences and social studies advocates, and disagreements over the most effective types of pedagogy continue to this day.

After the initial meeting in March 1921, NCSS met again in February 1922. Starting in 1923, NCSS began to hold in-person meetings three times per year, in February, June/July, and the end of December through 1935. These meetings were always in conjunction with either an AHA or NEA meeting. During November 1935, NCSS increased the number of meetings to four per year, convening a solo meeting on the weekend after Thanksgiving. The NCSS annual meeting continues to be held at a time close to Thanksgiving. By 1934,

NCSS was able to take over control of *The Historical Outlook*, changing the name to *The Social Studies*. In January 1937, NCSS launched its own journal, *Social Education*, which had editorial offices in Columbia University under the supervision of AHA. From January 1936 to May 1940, the headquarters offices of NCSS were at Harvard University, where Howard E. Wilson, who taught at Harvard's Graduate School of Education and had been NCSS President in 1934, was the NCSS secretary-treasurer. In a major change in 1940, after NEA provided space and financial support, the NCSS offices officially moved from Harvard University to the NEA headquarters in Washington, D.C.¹⁵



Howard E. Wilson

The Original NCSS Purpose

The statement of purpose adopted at the March 1921 meeting was “to bring about the association and cooperation of teachers of social studies (history, government, economics, sociology, etc.), and of administrators, supervisors, teachers of education, and others interested in obtaining the maximum results in education for citizenship through social studies.”¹⁶

Education for citizenship was now a primary NCSS function. To avoid controversy and to bring about the association of these diverse groups within the social studies field, NCSS followed the concept of the social studies that had been articulated by NEA's 1916

Commission. The issue of defining the social studies in more concrete terms would later be taken up by other scholars and NCSS leaders and would be the focus of continuing discussion throughout the organization's history.¹⁷ In the face of the significant social changes resulting from the rapid pace of U.S. industrialization, increased migration from rural areas to the cities, and the influx of immigrants fleeing depressed European economies, the U.S. public school system faced increased challenges in meeting the need to provide education for citizenship through social studies. School administrators and teacher educators were demanding support.

NCSS has been fulfilling its stated purpose for over a century. With slow, gradual steps, NCSS has become a leader in curriculum innovation, offering an arena in which educators can come together to discuss the central concepts in their disciplines, and discover ways to work together to carve out and maintain a niche for social studies instruction in the K-12 educational system. Disagreements concerning curriculum standards, the scope and sequence of curriculum, time allotments, testing, graduation requirements, teacher certification standards, and credentialing are still being pondered and discussed in publications and in person, and continue to be negotiated, argued, and mediated today.

NCSS as a Bridge

The formation of NCSS was an attempt to bridge multiple controversies. While the social science disciplines were competing for time and space in the scope and sequence of curricula, their time demands were also challenged by the need to teach the English language, science, math, the arts, and the vocations in the K-12 school curriculum in public schools. At the same time, teacher educators were demanding order and direction for teacher preparation institutions.

The term “social studies” was a large umbrella that covered a wide range of constituent disciplines. For a brief time during the mid-1930s, there was

The Friends of NCSS Community, in conjunction with the NCSS Archives Committee, will contribute a series of articles in *Social Education* this year to mark the Centennial of the founding of NCSS in 1921. We hope in this series to offer a brief look back, considerable emphasis on the present, and a view again to the future.

On previous occasions, NCSS has paused to look back after its 50th and 75th anniversaries. In 1995, it published two 75th anniversary commemorative publications: a bulletin edited by O.L. Davis, *NCSS in Retrospect*, and the November-December issue of *Social Education*. This article has benefited from the work of Stephen J. Thornton who summarized the early years in *NCSS in Retrospect* and Murry Nelson who analyzed NCSS operations between 1921 and 1937 in an article in *Social Education* in November-December 1995.

Recommended sources: O.L. Davis (ed.), *NCSS in Retrospect* (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1995); Stephen J. Thornton, “NCSS: The Early Years,” in *NCSS in Retrospect*, 1–7; “A History of NCSS,” Ben A. Smith and J. Jesse Palmer (guest editors), *Social Education* 59, no. 7 (November–December, 1995), 387–454; Murry R. Nelson, “The Early Years, 1921–1937,” *ibid.*, 399–407.

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a requirement that the NCSS Board include two members from each of the disciplines (American Historical Association, American Economic Association, American Political Science Association, and the American Sociological Society), but by 1937, the composition of the Board had changed again. The nomination committee was no longer required to include representatives for all other social science disciplines. However, a range of stakeholders is still apparent within NCSS leadership today. The details of the conflicts may have changed over the years, but the pressures remain. NCSS has been both a clearinghouse for ideas and a repository of responses to these balance and inclusion challenges. NCSS conferences have been filled with progressive ideas, research, course content, and teaching methodology. Over the past century, NCSS has been a consensus organization that has worked to balance multiple interests, groups, ideologies, disciplines, and camps in what has been a contentious field since its creation. As a result, “NCSS was swiftly accepted as an objective broker of the issues of social science teaching in schools.”¹⁸

NCSS as a Platform for Progressive Educators Preparing Democratic Citizens

Many progressive educators have found a home and a support network within NCSS and have gone on to become some of the organization’s most supportive leadership. Isidore Starr, who has been called “the Father of Law-Related Education,” was only 10 years old when NCSS was born. As a new teacher at Brooklyn Technical High School in 1930, Starr was determined to make civics education relevant for his students. This goal led to the intertwining of Starr’s life work and the NCSS mission as he sought to go beyond the parroted type of patriotism encouraged by the civics textbook assigned to his class. Students were expected to learn and recite back the lessons. Much like Dewey, Starr

began his crusade to challenge traditional teaching models and make civic education more interactive by defending his methods in articles written for *Social Education*. His first article appeared in 1951. Starr described his strategy during an American Bar Association documentary. He used the columns of *Social Education* during the 1950s to confront McCarthyism. He began a series of articles over 13 issues of *Social Education* between October 1951 and November 1963 focused on using Supreme Court decisions to teach controversial issues.¹⁹ By 1964, Isidore Starr was NCSS president. The last time Isidore Starr spoke at NCSS (at the age of 101) was in 2012. His life story illustrates how NCSS has continually provided an outlet where social studies educators could professionally grow and shape their educational philosophies.

Advocacy

NCSS has always been an advocacy organization. The organization was born out of that need and continues to serve that function today. Through its publications, conferences, and today through new forms of communication with social media, NCSS has been connecting K-12 educators with the emerging issues researched in universities. NCSS has also served as a reflective sounding board for new teaching methods and strategies and has maintained a network bridging multiple divides. 🌍

Notes

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3. Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* (New York, N.Y.: Harper Collins, 1931), 216–219; George Mowry, *The Twenties: Fords, Flappers, and Fanatics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963), 136–137, 173; Ronald Allen Goldberg, *America in the Twenties*, 92–93.
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5. William H. Cartwright, *Evolution of American History in the Curriculum* (Washington D.C.: NCSS 17th Yearbook, 1946), 31.

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7. Ronald W. Evans, *The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children?* (New York, N.Y.: Teachers College Press, 2004), 27.
8. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York, N.Y.: Macmillan, 1916), 223–225, 364; Ronald W. Evans, *The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children?*, 22.
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19. Simon Fraser University Center for Education, Law, and Society, www.sfu.ca/education/cels/isidore-starr-film-project/isidore-starr-leading-a-revolution-in-civics.html.



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