

Celebrating our Centennial

Stefanie Wager



What is social studies? What are best practices and pedagogy for teaching students social studies? How will we ensure that all students are educated and inspired for lifelong civic learning? At a recent NCSS Leadership Forum, these were some of the questions on the minds of NCSS leaders. Using the Question Formulation Technique (QFT), we asked participants to think about and generate

questions on their minds as NCSS celebrates its 100th anniversary and looks towards the next 100 years.

March 3, 2021, marked the 100th anniversary of the National Council for the Social Studies. This is monumental. Think about how our field has both changed and stayed the same in the past 100 years! Think about the amazing social studies educators who have inspired our youngest citizens in the past 100 years! Anniversaries are times of celebration, but also a time to reflect and visualize the future. These questions seem simple, but they represent the mission NCSS set out to fulfill over 100 years ago and still seeks to fulfill in our current mission:

The mission of National Council for the Social Studies is to advocate and build capacity for high-quality social studies by providing leadership, services, and support to educators.

In doing research in preparation for our 100th anniversary, I came across this quote:

It seems to me that a persistent problem of social studies education is our search for focus.... In my opinion, that problem is still with us in 1994. We aren't focused. We aren't clear on our purpose. And we have all kinds of problems dealing with that lack of clarity. (John Haefner, president of NCSS in 1952–1953 speaking in an interview in 1994 at the 75th anniversary of NCSS)

Stumbling across this statement caused me to pause and reflect. As we think about NCSS on our 100th anniversary, are we still unclear on our purpose? Can we answer the questions NCSS leaders generated? And, can we simultaneously have this lack of clarity yet thrive as a field?

I'm not so sure. As we think about the marginalization of social studies and the impact of that marginalization, I don't think we can have a lack of clarity and thrive in the next 100 years. Abraham Lincoln once said, "The philosophy of the school room in one generation will be the philosophy of government in the next." I firmly believe high-quality social studies instruction has the ability to help our democratic republic thrive and fulfill our larger mission of creating a "more perfect union."

I envision a future in which social studies is seen as such a critical discipline, that all students are guaranteed access to it in PK-16. A future in which students learn at high levels and actively dig into the complexities of the world around them, embrace inquiry and disciplinary thinking, learn "hard history," discuss current and controversial issues, conduct research, and feel empowered to take action to impact issues in their community and the larger world. This is so critical because, "Democratic societies rely on high-quality social studies instruction, cultivating students who delve deeper into issues and problems that vex humankind."¹

I envision a future in which social studies educators speak truth to power, understanding our unique role in educating our youngest citizens and embracing the impact a high-quality PK-16 education in social studies can have not only on our individual students, but on the world.

However, in order to work toward this we must ensure there's clarity—about our mission as an organization and as a field—and actively work toward that mission with unrelenting persistence. We must view our role and titles not just as social studies educators, but as active advocates for our discipline and for our students.

I have profound hope that over the next 100 years we can work toward this vision in order to ensure social studies matters, not just to us but to the world we live in, in order for students to be democracy ready. 🌍

Note

1. John Hattie, Julie Stern, Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, *Visible Learning for Social Studies, Grades K-12: Designing Student Learning for Conceptual Understanding* (Corwin Teaching Essentials, 2020)

STEFANIE WAGER is a Senior Technical Assistance Consultant at the American Institutes for Research. Prior to this, Stefanie worked for the OER Project and served at the Iowa Department of Education providing leadership and guidance at the state level for social studies education. She is Past President of National Council for the Social Studies.