

The Common Standards Movement and the Role of Social Studies on the Internet

C. Frederick Risinger

The national common educational standards and the role of citizenship education is an important issue for all social studies educators—preK through college. While I'm sure that some teachers will include information about this in discussions with their students, most will not likely include it as part of classroom instruction.

Doing the research for this column prompted me to complete a task that's been on my "things to do" list for several months—write a letter to President Obama. I sincerely believe that the marginalization of social studies/citizenship education in the U.S curriculum is not only a disaster for all social studies educators, but is also a danger to the future of American democracy. I realize that this may seem dramatic—like Chicken Little fearing that the sky is falling—but I believe that competent participatory citizenship in our democracy requires effective social studies/citizenship education throughout the preK-12 school curriculum.

I'm ambivalent about the common standards movement in the United States. Sure, it would be nice to have a common curriculum throughout the nation *if* the standards did more than focus primarily on content. Evidently, most English/Language Arts teachers and specialists believe that the set of standards released on June 2, 2010 does provide a balanced curriculum combining content along with skills, understandings, and activities. On the same date, the national Mathematics standards were released. The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) was formed by a merger of panels from The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers in 2009. Of course, the idea of a set of national curriculum standards has been around for about three decades. In the past several years, many curriculum areas have developed a set of national standards for

their area. Usually, these efforts have been spearheaded by organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics—sister organizations of NCSS.

NCSS began work on a set of national standards in 1991-92 that culminated in the volume titled *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies*. It recently published an updated and revised volume, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning and Assessment*. I believe that these standards are well balanced between social studies content and development of student skills and citizenship competencies.

Currently, NCSS is working with the Civic Mission of the Schools Campaign, a coalition of 40 organizations "committed to improving the quality and quantity of civic learning in American schools." Hopefully, this partnership will be a major player in the development of national social studies/citizenship standards for the Common Core Standards Initiative. I believe that NCSS will be able to provide specialists in each history/social science area that will ensure that content doesn't dominate the standards and the Civic Mission of the Schools folks have the fervor and clout to emphasize the citizenship focus that I think we have to rely on to bring social studies back from the curriculum margins.

The websites that I've selected for the column include those that examine the

Common Core Standards Initiative's work and plans for the future and some that focus more specifically on the social studies/citizenship efforts and achievements. Many have links to documents that you will find useful in understanding who's pushing the common curriculum standards movement, who's resisting (Texas and Alaska lead that effort), and how common social studies standards might affect you. You may not use much of this information with your students, but it might lead to some interesting discussions in departmental meetings. Incidentally, if you want to read my letter to President Obama. It is published on p. 338 of this issue.

National Council for the Social Studies/Common Core

www.socialstudies.org/CommonCore

This webpage provides the latest information on NCSS's planning and scheduling for working with many other groups. While you are on the NCSS site, look around. There's a preview of the Annual Meeting scheduled for Denver on November 12–14 and other information about the profession and field.

Fifteen state agencies are collaborating with fourteen organizations representing civics, economics, geography, and history, to begin discussions about common standards. This important effort is in the early planning stages and NCSS will be providing updates as the process evolves.

Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools—Educating for Democracy

<http://civicmissionofschools.org/index.html>

This great organization is one of NCSS's partners in leading the way toward national

standards. There are great resources available on its website. Click on the “Resources and Strategies” tab and look these over. I was especially impressed with the “Advocacy Toolkit,” containing strategies and materials to help be effective with legislators, policymakers, parents, and the public. From the main page, you can download a complete copy of their latest publication, titled *Case Studies of Eleven Schools and Districts that Make Civic Learning a Priority*. This is a great book. It details how specific schools across the nation have succeeded in keeping the goal of effective citizenship education high on their agenda. Another report that you can download is *Paths to 21st Century Competencies Through Civic Education Classrooms*. It reveals that social studies students who experienced interactive discussion-based instructional methods had higher scores on the 21st Competencies test than those taught with traditional lecture-based methods.

Common Core State Standards Initiative

www.corestandards.org/

This is the website of the organizing group (the Chief School Officers/National Governors) for the Common Core State Standards Initiative, so it’s one that you should look at to find out the latest information and news about the movement. You can click on the map and see the states that have agreed to adopt the English/Language Arts and Mathematics standards. There is a mixed set of figures. Texas and Alaska have refused to even send representatives to work on common standards, but the states that show up on the map are the ones who have agreed to adopt the two curriculum areas that were released June 2. Interestingly, of all the states that were in the final group for the “Race to the Top” money, Delaware was the only state that had not approved the standards at that time. Delaware

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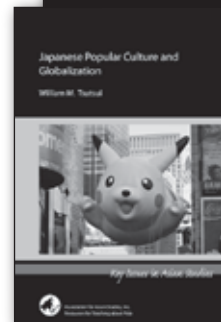
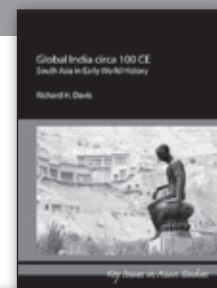
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adopted the standards on August 19; just a few days after the awards were announced. According to several commentators, adherence to the Common Standards Initiative was closely aligned with the winners of the Race to the Top funds. You can check out the model being used for the standards by clicking on the box at the bottom left and see “key points” of the English/Language Arts and Mathematics standards. The full standards are also downloadable.

The Center for Public Education

www.centerforpubliceducation.org
This is one of the better sources of those who oppose the Common Standards Initiative. Of course, Texas Governor Rick Perry maintains that only Texans will decide what Texas students will study, or something like that. But this source also has several links to other national common standards detractors.

This issue’s column is somewhat atypical. My goal is to raise awareness among social studies professional at all grade levels, in administration, and at the college/university level. I also want to point out how NCSS is working hard to be a major factor in the development of social studies standards. Finally, I hope that some of you will take some action with your colleagues and perhaps with policymakers, state legislatures, Congress, and others to bring awareness of the dangers of the continued marginalization of social studies/citizenship education for our nation. ☞

C. FREDERICK RISINGER retired as director of professional development and coordinator of social studies education after 31 years at Indiana University, Bloomington. He currently is working on two social studies writing projects, is developing a new website, and works two shifts a week as a bartender at a local microbrewery.

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