

The Essential Role of Social Studies:

NCSS President Steve Goldberg and Past Presidents Syd Golston,

Social Studies is Essential for Literacy Steve Goldberg

The words of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan about the need for renewed emphasis on social studies and citizenship education are certainly good to hear.

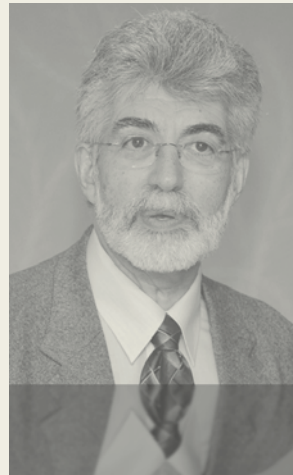
We would welcome educational policies that support his words.

The events of early May bring home the importance of restoring social studies to the forefront of the curriculum, where it rightfully belongs. The NAEP Report on Civics shows clearly that our students are not as well versed in the knowledge of our political system and its operations as we would like. Although the fourth graders in that assessment performed better than older students, will that be the case in the future, when instructional time in the elementary grades has been sharply reduced to allow increased time for literacy and numeracy? At the upper grades, especially in high schools that haven't made Adequate Yearly Progress [AYP], students are pulled from the "unnecessary subjects" (that is, those not federally mandated for testing, like social studies) to prep for the high stakes tests of accountability. This is a travesty because it increases the ignorance of our students, our future voters and our future leaders, in the vital area of civics! What further proof do we need to restore social studies as a critical subject?

The Secretary writes of the essential subjects of reading and mathematics as providing the critical foundations of reading and computation so that our students can read documents and comprehend social scientific concepts. But what is the **context** for the skills instruction provided by our colleagues in these "more essential disciplines"? One cannot teach skills in an academic vacuum. In speeches at both NCSS in Denver and at state social studies conferences across the country and in my written articles in *The Social Studies Professional* throughout the year, I have stressed that social studies is an essential discipline for literacy. Through *our* efforts, students can analyze historical

text; they can interpret graphs and charts of data relating to stock market fluctuations or election results; they can *read* a photograph or a historical painting; they can measure distances on maps. These are the literacy and numeracy skills that are necessary to function in the real world. We are much more than a core discipline essential to a well-rounded curriculum. We are as critical as reading and mathematics, because our charge is much greater.

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In our classrooms, we provide a forum for discussion of the world in which we live, both the microworld of our communities and states and our nation, but also the macroworld that enables students to learn about the complexities of the human experience. The killing of Osama bin Laden and the revolutionary events in North Africa and the Middle East require social studies teachers to make sense of the world order. Who can provide the historic framework so that students can make informed decisions about

their place in this ever-changing world? How old were they on September 11, 2001? Do they understand that the very social networking tools that define their daily lives provided the "under the radar infrastructure" for ongoing events that reverberate in the Islamic world?

We cannot relegate these discussions about geopolitics to high school classes. In our growing pluralistic society, children in the early grades need to be made more aware of the world in which they live so that they will be able to assume major decision-making roles as well informed citizens. A pervasive lack of knowledge in this country about foreign cultures and political occurrences threatens the very security of the United States as well as our ability to compete in the global marketplace and produce an informed citizenry. How ironic that the limited resources for education often result in the elimination of the very courses that instruct our students about opportunity costs!

There will have to be a real change in the mindset of our educational policy makers, who need to recognize that through their actions in local school board meetings, in sessions of state assemblies and senates, and in meetings in the chambers of the

Reflections on Arne Duncan's Article

Michael M. Yell, Gayle Thieman, and Peggy Altoff

Capitol in Washington, they have unwittingly relegated social studies to a secondary and oftentimes tertiary role in the pantheon of the curriculum. We all believe in the humanist notion of a well-rounded Renaissance person, but until monies are restored to allow professional development and specialized programs such as Teaching American History (TAH) grants, Citizenship grants, Fulbright fellowships, and new federal funds for the promotion of geographic literacy and perhaps global studies, we will remain frustrated as we watch our students become less informed in the areas that are vital for the preservation of our free market economy, our participatory democracy, and our cultural literacy. Yes, we hold the key, and yes, we have the potential to really make a difference, but unless the educational climate in this country improves, unless the priorities for educational spending are adjusted, then we will remain impotent to effect the kinds of changes that are critical for our survival.

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line of work. In adulthood, few of us will dissect a crayfish or solve a quadratic equation or quote Macbeth, but every year our country asks us to use our school skills and especially our social studies education to go into a voting booth and help to run our cities, our states, and our nation. Citizenship: it's the ultimate academic application.

Like poetry, Duncan's words sound lyrical yet need critical interpretation so that true implications are revealed. The Secretary has called for testing that is deeper and more inclusive, but he has failed to mention excellent tests in social studies areas (civics, economics, geography, U.S. history, and world history) that already exist. The NAEP batteries are performance-rich tests—just the kind Duncan seems to support here. We have long requested that these valuable assessments be extended so that they test a much larger number of students, that they be repeated more often in social studies subjects, and that the results be reported state by state. This would require a relatively modest expenditure, an embodiment of the kind of small, targeted spending that this administration has said that it champions, that could really make a difference.

Other limited expenditures that are on the chopping block that mean a great deal to civics education aren't mentioned in Duncan's article: Teaching American History grants, Academies for American History and Civics, National History Day, and Close-Up Fellowships are some of these. These are programs with proven track records for student achievement in civics education. They merit support from this administration.

In all, we are gratified to see Duncan's words...but also hoping that the administration can stand up for excellence in civics education where it already exists and is in peril.

SYD GOLSTON was NCSS President in 2009–2010. She is an educational administrator, curriculum writer, and historian who has taught at all grade levels from 7th to college.

STEVE GOLDBERG is President of NCSS. He is social studies department chairperson at New Rochelle High School in New Rochelle, NY.

Citizenship: The Ultimate Academic Application

Syd Golston

Duncan's essay reads like poetry to the ears of a civics teacher—and by that we mean any teacher who brings politics and social issues and current events to her classroom, whether to small children or to high school seniors.

We love seeing the words “engaged and thinking citizens who are prepared for college and careers”—although we always want to expand that expression to read “engaged and thinking students who are prepared for college, careers, and citizenship.” We at NCSS have often made the case that all of our students will be citizens, whether or not they go to college or into any specific

Where the Rubber Meets the Road

Michael M. Yell

Social studies is at the center of a good school curriculum because it is where students learn to see the world—its peoples, places, cultures, systems, and problems; its dream and calamities—now and long ago. Social studies needs to be set deeply within the school curriculum from the earliest grades.¹

—Walter Parker

This administration has stated that education is a priority in these turbulent times. Reading Secretary Duncan's article, I believe that his heart is in the right place

Unfortunately, I am not certain the same can be said about the administration's Race to the Top program.

As a social studies teacher who has primarily taught history for much of my career, I am concerned with the effects of No Child Left Behind/Race to the Top on all of the disciplines of social studies, and history in particular.

I've wrestled with disappointment over the educational policies of this administration, which I do not see as significantly differing from the previous administration. I have to wonder how Race to the Top will help social studies teachers meet the goal of

creating tomorrow's active citizens when, as a consequence of NCLB/Race to the Top, social studies is being squeezed out of the curriculum?

Although Secretary Duncan obviously understands the narrowing problem, I do not see how Race to the Top changes this situation. In his article, the Secretary's recommendation is for "social studies teachers to work together to encourage states and local school boards to develop high social studies standards..." Mr. Secretary, I have been involved in my state with the development of standards, as well in my district, and it is clear that such involvement really matters little when Adequate Yearly Progress and sanctions still remain for our schools. The view down here, where the rubber meets the road, unfortunately, is that *what is tested is what is taught*. What has been imposed from the top must be rectified from the top. So I would respectfully point out to Secretary Duncan that to rectify this narrow-

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ing phenomenon, we need leadership at the highest levels of this administration.

Whether talking to teachers in my district or those in other districts across our land as a past president of NCSS, the extent of that squeezing out, or narrowing, comes into focus: teachers who can no longer engage their students with long term creative projects, teachers who can no longer work between content areas and the arts to create exciting interdisciplinary educational opportunities for their students. This narrowing will weigh heavily upon the students of today, as it has the effect of denying them a vital foundation in the social studies. That foundation is, as Walter Parker writes, where students learn to see the world. From the perspective of the history teacher, the historical imagination can be kindled early with projects and interdisciplinary activities on such things as biographies, songs, and beginning to delve into the past. As good history teaching promotes reasoning about human affairs, questioning, understanding other perspectives, and interpreting evidence, is this a foundation on which we wish to skimp?

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Finally, I, as many in the social studies field, have been struck by the apparent disregard of the relationship between poverty and educational achievement. There can be little doubt that children born in poverty begin school far behind their middle class cohorts in almost every conceivable area, and they continue to fall behind. Is it conscionable to punish schools in low performing/high poverty school districts because the teachers and principals in those schools cannot perform educational miracles with these children? Will this change because of Race to the Top? When President Obama spoke approvingly to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce about the mass firing of the teachers in the Central Falls High School, it certainly didn't appear likely.

Note:

1 Walter Parker (ed) *Social Studies Today*, Routledge, New York, NY, 2010.

MICHAEL M. YELL was NCSS President in 2008–2009. He is a National Board Certified Teacher who teaches social studies at Hudson Middle School in Hudson, Wisconsin. He is also a blogger for teachinghistory.org

The Need for Authentic Assessments

Gayle Thieman

As state and local policymakers develop valid assessments, as proposed by Secretary Duncan, I suggest they incorporate criteria of “authentic assessment.” Unlike traditional tests of factual recall, authentic assessments are designed to examine students’ performance on real-world tasks. Authentic assessments require active learning and involvement on the part of students who construct their own understanding and apply what they have learned. Students may use digital tools to interpret and evaluate complex information while considering multiple perspectives and alternative solutions. Students use ideas and methods of inquiry that are central to the discipline, e.g., doing the work of policy makers, historians, geographers, and economists. Tasks are open-ended and allow for collaboration and divergent thinking so that students may use multiple strategies to arrive at varied conclusions. Authentic assessments may require students to share their learning in global or cross-cultural contexts. As students submit work for feedback and revision, they reflect and set goals for their own learning.

The Connected Learning Coalition¹ has developed Principles for Learning that offer a good foundation for authentic assessments linked to each principle. Successful models for authentic assessments already exist, such as National History Day, Project Citizen, and Washington State Classroom-Based Assessments (CBA’s). Each year secondary school students conduct research, analyze and interpret primary and secondary sources related to the annual National History Day theme, and present their conclusions through written papers, websites, performances or documentaries at the local, state, and national level to professional historians and educators. An independent evaluation of the program found that NHD students outperform their non-NHD peers on state standardized tests in multiple subjects, learn 21st century college- and career-ready skills, collaborate with team members, and are critical thinkers who can digest, analyze and synthesize information.²


Project Citizen, sponsored by the Center for Civic Education, helps middle and high school students learn how to influence public policy by working cooperatively to identify a local issue.³ They conduct research, evaluate alternative solutions to develop

their own public policy solution, and create a political action plan to enlist support. Students develop a portfolio and present their project in a public hearing showcase to a community panel.

Washington state educators developed classroom based assessments and scoring rubrics, which require K-12 students to apply understanding of content and skills in civics, geography, economics, and history.⁴ Students use critical thinking skills as they investigate an issue or event, and develop a position, providing evidence for their conclusions. CBA’s are embedded in instructional units taught as part of the social studies curriculum; while teachers report the number of students who complete the assessments, they are not required to report students’ scores

To encourage states and districts to develop policies and implement authentic assessments in social studies, the U.S. Department

of Education should provide incentives similar to those for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). These incentives should reward states and districts which have already developed and require authentic performance assessments, such as Washington and Maine, and Oregon, which requires students to “demonstrate civic and community engagement and global literacy.” Consider allowing adequate performance on projects such as National History Day, Project Citizen, Mock Trial, Model UN, and Geography Bee to be included as valid evidence of students’ mastery. High-stakes



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multiple choice testing inhibits teachers’ adoption of innovative instruction and assessment strategies. Federal policy should redefine the expectations of a “highly qualified teacher” to include the capacity to design authentic means for students to demonstrate and apply their knowledge and skills. Furthermore, the assessment definitions in NCLB should be revised to accept assessments which use authentic demonstration of student work that is reliably scored with standards-based criteria. The challenge will be to bring the innovative authentic social studies assessments that already exist to scale; to accomplish this will require a partnership of federal and state policy makers and local educators. It CAN BE DONE!

Notes:

1. The Principles for Learning were developed by the Connected Learning Coalition, representing National Council for the Social Studies, Association for Career and Technical Education, Consortium for School Networking, National Council of Teachers of English, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and National Science Teachers Association.

2. The information on National History Day evaluation details has been retrieved from <http://www.nhd.org/images/uploads/NHDExecutiveSummaryfinal.pdf>
3. Information on Project Citizen is available at http://www.civiced.org/index.php?page=program_information
4. Washington State Classroom-Based Assessments in Social Studies retrieved from <http://www.k12.wa.us/SocialStudies/WhatAreCBAs.aspx>

GAYLE THIEMAN was NCSS President in 2007-2008. She is an associate professor in the Graduate School of Education at Portland State University, specializing in social studies methods and instructional design and technology.

The Key Does Not Fit All The Locks

Peggy Altoff

As social studies teachers, we may “have the key,” as Arne Duncan says, but our problem is that there is more than one lock, and the key does not fit them all.

Secretary Duncan’s article speaks of the importance of the core contents of social studies in students’ lives, and of the role of social studies teachers, who have the key to preparing future citizens. However, social studies is being “locked out,” and one reason for this is that it is not included in the accountability measures or funding priorities of the Department of Education.

Current DOE programs and regulations discourage states and districts from including all four core content areas of social studies. Why, for example, do grant opportunities for states through Race to the Top fail to incorporate the core contents of social studies? Why has there been no support from DOE and major funders for the completion of Common State Standards for Social Studies, as there was for the Common Core Standards for ELA and Math? Why are states allowed to omit social studies from accountability programs if, as the Secretary states, “Educators and policymakers need to recognize that social studies is a core subject, critical to sustaining an informed democracy and a globally competitive workforce”?

Geography is one of the four core content areas of social studies, for which NCLB requires a teacher to be “highly certified.” But this content—along with history, civics, and economics—is omitted when the topics of funding and assessment are raised. Until these “locks” are addressed more substantively, the contents of social studies will continue to be marginalized by districts, states, and by the only national assessment that purports to measure progress in our content areas, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). One example of the funding issue is the failure of Congress to pass the Teaching Geography is Fundamental Act, a bill that would expand geographic literacy among K-12 students through grants for geography teacher training. The bill was introduced in 2005 and has yet to reach the floor for consideration, despite co-sponsors in each house. Other content areas have managed to secure some congressional funding but must fight for it each year during the annual “budget cut” debates. Under the most

recent plan, funding for the Teaching American History grants program, which has supplied more than \$1 billion over the past decade for school districts and their nonprofit partners, is being reduced from \$119 million in fiscal year 2010 to \$46 million in the current year.¹

So, having a key to help prepare students for their role as citizens has always been in our hands, but until the government supports social studies by including it in regulations, legislation, funding, and accountability measures, the key will not be able to open the locks. We need more than rhetorical and

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moral support from our state and national leaders. We need the substantive support required to assure the success of our citizens in maintaining our democratic republic in the future. 🌐

1. Erik W. Robelen, “Federal History Grant Program Takes Budget Hit for Fiscal 2011,” *Education Week*, April 20, 2011.

PEGGY ALTOFF was NCSS President in 2006–2007. She taught in Baltimore City, MD, and worked as social studies supervisor in District 11 in Colorado Springs, CO, and Carroll County Public Schools, Westminster, MD.