

Agency, Advocacy, Activism: Action for Social Studies



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This article, which was completed in January 2020, expands the author's presidential address, which was delivered at the NCSS Annual Conference in Austin, Texas, on November 22, 2019.

As president of the National Council for the Social Studies it is an honor to welcome you to Austin, Texas, for the 99th Annual Conference and the first co-located conference of the National Council for Geographic Education, the Texas Council for the Social Studies, and NCSS. It is an honor to stand before so many exceptional social studies educators who passionately share the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of history, geography, civics, economics, and the humanities. On behalf of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), I celebrate you and applaud your personal and professional investment in education of our children and youth. The energy and excitement of this convening of over 4,000 national and international educators committed to the teaching of social studies and geography in PreK-16 schools reinforces the value of professional learning, networking, and engagement. In the spirit of this year's conference theme, the title of my presidential address is: *Agency, Advocacy, Activism: Action for Social Studies*.

In the fall of 2018, the NCSS Board of Directors created a new vision for the association, *A world in which all students are educated and inspired for lifelong inquiry and informed civic action*. To achieve this vision, it is imperative that we consider

our shifting educational context. The ecology of social studies is changing in an era of activist voters; rising fear, anger, and isolation; issues-focused advocacy; purpose-driven engagement; digital civic spaces; and globally diverse interests. In the spirit of democracy, we must honor the champions of human rights, civility, diversity, equality, inclusion, and justice. And we must recognize the critical role that social studies educators need to embrace in humanizing the curriculum, educating for empathy and action, and empowering children and youth agency, advocacy, and activism.

The New Ecology of Social Studies

The 2016 presidential election campaign underscored some very troubling trends in the present state of American democracy:

1. Extreme political polarization of the electorate;
2. Galvanizing divisions between urban and rural geographic regions;
3. The dismissal of people with opposing views;
4. Racial distrust and racialized communities;
5. The failure of many voters, and quite often, political

- candidates, to focus on substantive policy issues;
6. The widespread acceptance and circulation of erroneous information;
 7. Escalating fear, anger, and isolation created in social media echo chambers;
 8. The devaluing of deliberation and civil democratic literacies;
 9. The routine assault on journalists by politicians; and
 10. An all-time low in civic knowledge and public engagement.

According to the Annenberg Public Policy Center, only one quarter of Americans can name all three branches of government.¹ Public trust in the government is near its historic low of only 18%² and voter engagement in 2016 reached its lowest level since 1996.³ Americans are far more politically polarized on topics like immigration and healthcare than in the early 2000s.⁴ This political and geographical polarization has been reflected in the rise of fake news in what some refer to as the post-truth era. There have been calls for schools to restore the basis on which our public schools were founded: to promote the civic engagement and deliberative skills that our democracy needs to survive and thrive.⁵

Concerns over the civic health of our nation have been exacerbated by evidence suggesting the fragility of democracy and the failure of systems and institutions to safeguard democracy.

In 2019 Freedom House authored a report, *Democracy in Retreat*, which pointed out that there are signs of a reversal of the trend toward an increase in freedom across the globe that took place between 1988 and 2005, when the proportion of countries that are free grew from 36% to 46%, and the proportion that are not free dropped from 37% to 23%. However, between 2005 and 2018 the proportion of free countries declined from 46% to 44% and the proportion of countries that are not free rose from 23% to 26%.⁶ The report demonstrates a retreat of democracy and the rise of authoritarian regimes across the globe. Peter Levisky and Daniel Ziblatt in *How Democracies Die* reason that the lessons of history and civics reveal the fragility of democracy and weaknesses of democratic institutions. They contend that democracies do not die in darkness; they falter in plain sight with the consent of the governed.⁷ As Justice William Hastie once observed, “democracy is a process, not a static condition. It is becoming, rather than being. It can be easily lost, but is never finally won.” Thus, the actions of individuals are key to securing the promise of democracy for all—especially at a time like today, when rising political and social tensions have heightened the fragility of democracies around the world.

Recognizing the vulnerabilities of democratic institutions, Kenneth C. Davis, in a recent issue of *Social Education*, has argued that democracy is not a spectator sport and social studies has a responsibility to safeguard it.⁸ The real safeguard of democracy is education, and the ability of our schools, colleges,

and universities to fulfill that role will largely depend on the social studies teaching profession. Knowledge of social studies must serve as an anchor at a time when fake news and lies assail us. Social studies must be a laboratory for studying the changes that are occurring, as well as a vehicle for establishing a common bond when social divisions are deep and polarization pervades public discourse. What social studies we teach, how we teach it, and to whom matters. The chronic dysfunction of social studies knowledge has reached a new critical mass in American schools. This is our Sputnik moment. In the context of history, a Sputnik moment is a trigger mechanism, an event that makes people collectively say that they need to do something, and set a course in a new direction. The current state of affairs and decades of neglect demand a new course of action to center social studies in the PreK-12 curriculum for all students, no matter what school they attend, and more specifically to uplift the attributes of social studies learning such as mutual respect, forbearance, civic engagement, and deliberative skills—skills that our democracy depends on to survive and thrive.

It is a common claim in the media that Americans do not possess the social studies knowledge they need to be informed and engaged citizens in a globally diverse society. This “knowledge gap” was recently chronicled by author Natalie Wexler.⁹ Yet recent trends have promoted a culture of testing and neglect of social studies subjects that has weakened the ability of our schools to provide this knowledge.

At a conference I recently attended, a state representative who was participating in a keynote panel stated that testing should not be a mandate for teaching a content area. His view was that “teachers had succumbed to a culture of testing,” and consequently diluted content taught in schools. He shared concerns that his time in school only reinforced the experiences he observed through his children’s education—social studies as an endless series of dates and facts. He said that, “if social studies was not taught [a point expressed by many teachers in his audience] and if it was taught but taught ineffectively [as his experience affirmed], it was teachers who were responsible.”

When social studies is referenced in schooling, it is often in a transactional sense—teaching the collection of skills, behaviors, and attitudes (e.g., how to shake hands, speak properly, and be punctual) that will help students to be college and career ready.¹⁰ Sadly, decades of marginalization in the elementary grades exacerbated by standardization and accountability in middle and secondary schools have diluted the complexity of social studies and eroded students’ capacities as decision-makers and thinkers.

Many educational scholars contend that social studies suffers from legacy practices and persistent traditional instruction based on lectures, textbooks, and teacher direction,¹¹ as well as the cumulative effects of the crowding out of social studies.¹² Under the tyranny of coverage,¹³ social studies is made boring and robbed of its capacity to make sense of an uncomfortable past, a chaotic present, and inchoate future. Longitudinal data

on the effects of policy on social studies have documented a statistically significant decline in the past three decades in the time that teachers report allocating for social studies each week in elementary school grades K-5.¹⁴ Between 1987 and 1993, the amount of time remained constant at just over three hours per week reported for social studies. Between 1993 to 2016, there were precipitous drops in social studies time. These drops aligned first with curriculum standardization, then No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and now the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Although ESSA repositioned educational control more locally and allowed for the inclusion of civics and the broader social studies, federal funding associated with the law remained tethered to achievement in the sacred subjects.

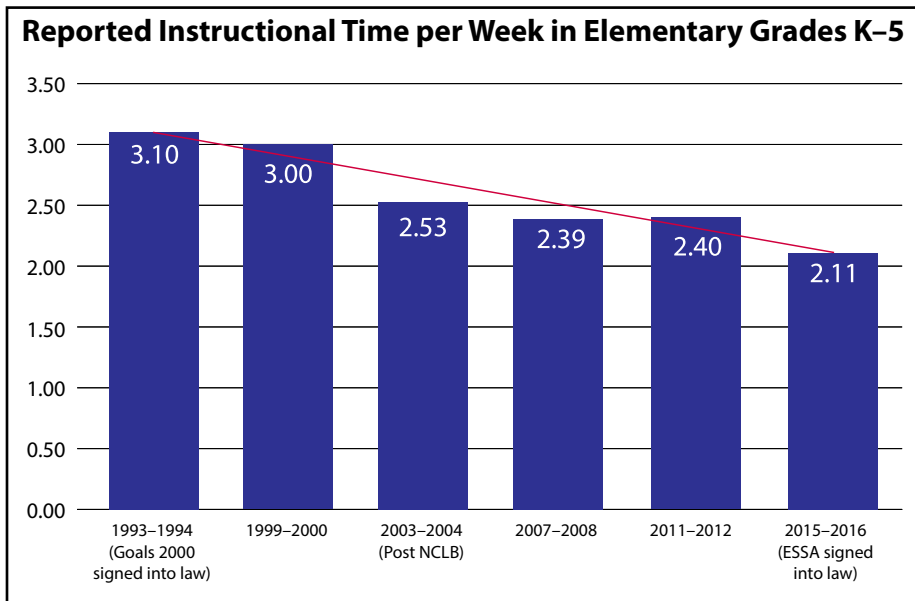


Figure 1. Reported Instructional Time per Week in Elementary Grades K-5.

Trends and indicators of changes for social studies at the middle school and high school levels show decreased course and graduation requirements for social studies as well as the reduction or elimination of district and state assessments in social studies.¹⁵ Moreover, civic empowerment gaps¹⁶ become more pronounced in the upper grades, when achievement and opportunity gaps widen.¹⁷ A “snowball effect”¹⁸ magnifies the cumulative learning differences of minority children and youth as well as students who attend schools in low-wealth communities.¹⁹ As Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor stated, “We are failing to impart to today’s students the information and skills they need to be responsible citizens.” There is also profound, incontrovertible evidence that poor and non-white students, in addition to those who identify as immigrants, receive demonstrably fewer opportunities and inferior civic education as compared to middle-class and wealthy white students.²⁰

Promoting the Culture of Equity and Inclusion

The shifting demographics of American schools create new

educational challenges that require a response from the field. For almost two centuries after the first official census in 1790, the population of the United States was between 80–90% White.²¹ Now the country is on a path towards an unprecedented level of demographic diversity. In 2013, the nation hit a tipping point, where for the first time in history most of the infants born were members of minoritized groups. In 2014 the number of White students fell below 50%, marking the first year of majority-minority enrollment in U.S. public schools.²² By 2043, the nation is projected to become majority-minority.²³ The demographic landscape continues to shift as its racial and ethnic composition is fueled by metropolitan urbanization. This shift in the nation’s racial and ethnic makeup poses challenges for American public schools and the society at large. These

challenges include more students living in poverty and in segregated neighborhoods, particularly for the country’s rapidly growing Latin@/Latinx school-aged population. For the first time in at least 50 years, a majority of public school students across the country are considered low-wealth.²⁴ While children living in poverty are spread across the country, concentrations are highest in the South and in the West.

The tensions over using the naturalization test as a measure of students’ social studies or civic knowledge and/or the creation of new social studies standards are partly explained by the rapidly changing demographics of schools. What is at stake are the underlying values that define the purpose of social studies: What defines American

thought and action? What can students take pride in? Who makes up a nation? How are refugees or immigrants part of a nation? Who can be called a citizen?

This ongoing diversity explosion should be greeted with optimism. It provides opportunities for revitalizing our country and providing greater connectivity to the global economy and society. Yet, many unmet curricular and learning needs stem from the demographics or unique character of diverse communities. For too long social studies educators have been complicit with an educational system that has responded to the minority experience with either active suppression or chronic apathy. NCSS can lead in defining a new vision for social studies in American schooling and creating a society that offers students more access to a culturally responsive and relevant social studies education. Recognizing the cultural assets and racial differences of students and communities requires rethinking traditional practices and consciously developing culturally responsive visions of inquiry. NCSS can offer direction in providing recommendations for educators to develop a deeper understanding of sovereignty,

diversity, equity, and inclusion in praxis and practice.

Our land acknowledgement at the 99th Annual Conference is one of many ways we can lead in reconceptualizing our ideological underpinnings. This year we opened our 2019 NCSS/NCGE/TCSS Annual Conference by recognizing that we were gathering together in a place on the shared lands and waters of many Indigenous and Native Peoples. Dr. Mario Garza and Ms. María F. Rocha from the Indigenous Cultures Institute in San Marcos, which preserves the cultures of Native Americans indigenous to Texas and northern Mexico and maintains their covenant with sacred sites, and Elders of the Miakan-Garza Band of the Coahuiltecan people, a tribe of Texas recognized by the state legislature, offered NCSS's first Land Acknowledgement.

“Given that all education in the United States takes place on Indigenous lands, National Council for the Social Studies recognizes the responsibility of social studies education to respect and affirm Indigenous peoples, nations, and sovereignty.”²⁵ On behalf of NCSS, I acknowledged that our conference met on stolen land where for hundreds of years there have been repeated violations of sovereignty, territory, and water rights perpetuated by settlers like me. NCSS also “recognizes the diversity of Indigenous lands, languages, cultures, governments, and religions, and takes seriously the responsibility of social studies education to respect and affirm Indigenous lives and sovereignty.”²⁶ As president of NCSS, I affirmed that this acknowledgement is woefully inadequate because it does not undo the harm that was done and that continues to be done against Indigenous peoples and their land. I also recognized that land acknowledgements are a small step toward redressing the stories and practices that erase Indigenous histories and the ongoing presence of Indigenous peoples today. As social studies teacher educators, many of us are complicit in this erasure, and it is imperative that we recognize, support, and advocate for the sovereignty of Native nations in our work. As Brayboy and Castagno suggest, “Educators must pay more attention to the ways colonization, racism, and power matter in educational settings and work towards more effective and longer-term pre-service and in-service training that helps educators understand and strategize about their role as agents for social change and greater educational equity.”²⁷

NCSS advocates for social studies and social studies educators through position statements and responses to issues that affect membership. Recent examples include: “Affirming Support for Alternatives to the USCIS Naturalization Test as a Measure of the Civic Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions of Students”; “A Response to Mass Shootings from NCSS”; “Contextualizing LGBT+ History within the Social Studies Curriculum”; and “Advocacy for Social Studies: The Need to Respond to the Updated NAEP Schedule.” The Word Cloud in Figure 2 shows the frequency of words found in the position statements published by NCSS in the last three years. Students’ civic education and learning are key terms that are emphasized.

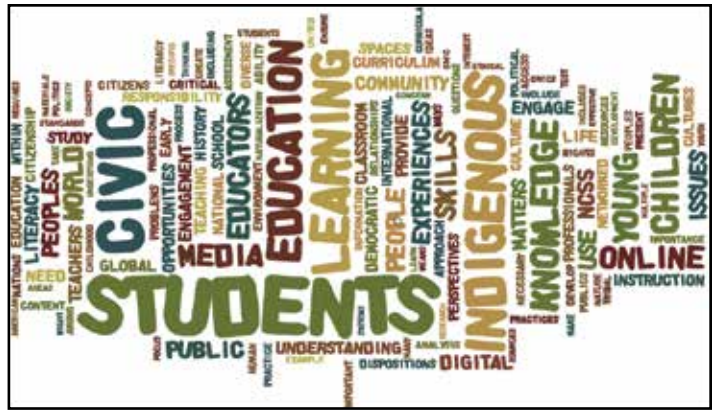


Figure 2. Word Cloud of NCSS Position Statements since 2016.

Seventy percent of the position statements published on the NCSS website were passed in the years from 2016 to 2019. The frequency of words used in these statements can be measured in a Word Cloud count that provides evidence of the topics and issues that NCSS has emphasized within the last two years. In these seventeen position statements, equity, inclusion, and the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples are emphasized, but NCSS has made no official statements on race, race education, poverty, or socio-economic inequalities as these relate to social studies.

The NCSS College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework mentions advocacy four times and is silent on race until the appendices. The word “race” first appears on page 73 and “racism” on page 77; both are in the Sociology appendix. Racism, sovereignty, equity, inclusion, injustice, and LGBT+ issues are not present in the document. The principles of equality and human rights are expressed as civic aims, while stratification and inequality are identified as objectives of sociology (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Word Cloud of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework.

In 1998, social studies educators asked if the social studies can be a national leader on matters of race.²⁸ Approximately twenty years later, NCSS has not undertaken an intentional look at its curricular content, publications, structure, operations, membership or underlying purpose in an effort to address matters of racial diversity, equity, and inclusion. With the formation of the Race, Equity, and Inclusion Task Force this year, NCSS seeks

intentionally to examine current organizational practices and structures from a race equity approach while pushing the social studies field in a direction to more adequately serve and lead in national conversations on race. Social studies, more than any other subject area, has the capacity to reveal structural racism, inequality, and exclusion that endures in U.S. society, and is deeply rooted in our nation’s history and perpetuated through policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages. Critical inquiry in the social studies can initiate transformative understandings that are foundational to shifting the mindsets of students and promoting the culture of equity and inclusion.

The reluctance to acknowledge our racialized identities, to confront injustice, and to dismantle racism in social studies suggests neutrality; yet, “there is no neutrality in the racism struggle.... One either endorses the idea of a racial hierarchy as a racist or racial equality as an antiracist.”²⁹ NCSS contends that presentations of hard and difficult “topics within the ideals of academic freedom are fundamental to the advancement of truth and understanding of humanity.”³⁰ As Ibram Kendi reasons in *How to Be an Antiracist*, “the basic struggle we’re all in, [is] the struggle to be fully human and to see that others are fully human.”³¹ Social studies content bears the responsibility to “explicitly present and emphasize accurate narratives of the lives, experiences, and histories” of all people³² and to unsettle a curriculum that ignores and forgets institutional, structural, and individual racism of the kind that ensures inequality and *de jure* segregation.³³ If we do not confront the truth in our social studies classrooms, the foundations of democracy will further be eroded. Racism yields racial inequities and disparities in every sector of private and public life. Social studies educators can no longer avoid studying race or confronting the dueling consciousness of racism and antiracism in America and around the world. An unwillingness to risk the reproach of communities has silenced curricular topics such as racial injustice and #BlackLivesMatter, LGBT+ history, immigration, human rights, and sovereignty. Sentiments of lack of expertise have stood in the way of teaching topics (e.g., teaching about religion) that are essential to understanding human interaction. Fears of political censure and being accused of partisanship should not be barriers to candid discourse in social studies classes that can lead to antiracist understanding and a more civil, democratic society. Social studies can be an educational space to teach antiracism; to confront the history of racist ideas associated with harmful social, economic, cultural and political disparities; and to champion human rights and anti-racist policies through informed civic action and purposeful engagement in civil society.

Advocacy of Social Studies

In 2007, Katherine A. O’Connor, Eric Groce and I published an article in *Social Education* articulating the importance of using data to advocate for the social studies.³⁴ My early advocacy efforts emphasized the trends toward marginaliza-

ADVOCACY SPELLED OUT

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|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| A wareness: | Define the Problem |
| D ata: | Know the Research |
| V isit: | Contact your Legislatures |
| O ptimism: | Solution-Oriented Thinking |
| C ommunicate: | Convey your Purpose |
| A udience: | Be Relevant to the Listener |
| C hallenge: | Question the Norm |
| Y ou: | Be the Role Model |

tion that I and colleagues had documented in our research. The messages I heard from policymakers still resonate over a decade later. Social studies educators continue to be tasked with not only raising awareness of the state of social studies in PreK-12 schools, but also with taking action for change.

At the meeting I mentioned earlier, the state representative remarked in his panel talk, “Policymakers are not the problem.... If you are not satisfied with the current state of social studies, schools or education, then social studies teachers need to be far more active in communicating with legislators and advocating for social studies.” Adding evidence for the call to action, the previous day’s legislative session at this conference included other state officials and members of the State Board of Education who, when asked directly by teacher participants, confessed to not realizing or knowing that social studies was rarely taught in elementary schools, or understanding the opportunity gaps experienced by low income and minority students. As a researcher who has studied for almost two decades the marginalization of social studies and the effects of the standards movement, high stakes testing and accountability, and instructional decision-making, I am concerned by the limited awareness of policymakers of the crowding out of social studies in PreK-12 education and the constraints of administrative and local governance decisions that bar or inhibit the teaching of social studies, controversial issues, and hard history, which are central to a democratic education and preparation for citizenship.

In the fall of 2018, the NCSS Board of Directors revised the association’s mission. *The mission of the 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.* The NCSS Board of Directors intentionally positioned advocacy as the first verb in the statement and thus, the first action necessary for the association to achieve its vision of *a world in which all students are educated and inspired for lifelong inquiry and informed civic action.* As the 2019–2020 NCSS president, I established three priorities for the organization’s work in fulfillment of the new vision and mission statement. These include: (1) Advocacy; (2) Race, Equity, Inclusion; and (3) Learning, Connecting, and Leading. To offer evidence of these goals in action, let me share a few specific examples.

National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) is in the

business of connecting people—connecting people to ideas, to resources, to professional networks, to policymakers. NCSS amplifies our collective voice as social studies educators through personal connection, professional collaboration and a shared mission to educate all students for lifelong inquiry, and to inspire them to act with compassion, intentionality, and forethought as engaged citizens in American democracy and our global society.

NCSS has organized and joined advocacy coalitions to promote the social studies. In September 2019, NCSS co-sponsored with the Religious Freedom Institute a Religion and Education Summit in Washington, D.C. Forthcoming are a white paper to offer perspectives on the state of religion and education in PreK-12 schools, and recommendations for action to elevate the importance of religious studies, particularly for social studies education. As an example, the NCSS Board of Directors is considering revising the NCSS National Standards for Teacher Preparation Programs to include religious studies, which were included in an addendum to the C3 Framework after the publication of the C3 standards. The NCSS Board of Directors created an Advocacy Task Force to: (a) define our association's definition of advocacy; (b) create an organizational advocacy plan that also includes advocacy networks with State Affiliated Councils; and (c) develop advocacy strategies so that NCSS is nimbler and more flexible in its responsiveness to contemporary issues and national policy influence. NCSS is leading the efforts of a coalition of professional organizations to address concerns created by the National Assessment Governing Board's recent changes to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) testing schedule. NCSS has also joined the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources program, which will expand the scope of professional resources available to social studies educators.

NCSS has worked to establish a learning partnership with the European Union, including Webinar and annual conference speakers, to strengthen educators' understanding of the EU and its commitment to democratic principles and collaboration. This relationship is also the seed of curricular ideas for elevating the teaching of the European Union in secondary social studies classrooms. Awareness of EU innovations and foresight through international programs and online materials has also served as a critical resource in content development in the C3 Inquiry and Engagement Task Force and in conference planning.

NCSS offers policy support to Affiliated State Councils. The association leverages the influence of the largest professional organization of social studies educators in the nation to communicate the advocacy efforts within states and to build networks for grassroots change. We offer official letters of support, and talk with state policymakers in support of standards and curriculum changes that align with the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework. As a specific example, recent collaboration with Nebraska resulted in the successful approval of the new Nebraska Social Studies Standards. Congratulations

to Harris Payne on this important accomplishment!

Robert Shiller, a 2013 Nobel Laureate and American economist, articulates the need for an integrated study of disciplines. In his book, *Narrative Economics: How Stories Go Viral and Drive Major Economic Events*, he describes from his own experiences the differences in learning about significant events in his history and economics classes.³⁵ He identifies the disconnect between economic principles and stories about how people behave—faddish, vulnerable to cracks, and new ideas. Shiller suggests that reality is lost when content is segmented and separated out. Disciplines themselves polarize and compartmentalize the events we are trying to unpack. Shiller contends that disciplines may carry understanding for a while but these segmented realms of thought will miss the big picture and fail to adequately explain the human condition—why people do what they do. We need all disciplines and disciplinary perspectives to create understanding. If we are going to single out significant events for study, we should keep in mind that important events are usually the result of the confluence of many factors, and that changing narratives are often at work in those factors. What Shiller advocates is the intersectionality of disciplinary learning. For this type of thinking, we must be comfortable with ambiguity and build tolerance for complexity. We—social studies educators and NCSS—need to do a better job of communicating and advocating for the value of multi-disciplinary understanding that social studies affords. Social studies is more than civics education; it is education for informed civic action in civil society. In essence, social studies promotes knowledge of and involvement in civic and civil affairs, and because civic issues—such as health care, crime, and foreign policy—are civil society issues and multidisciplinary in nature, understanding these issues and developing resolutions to them require multidisciplinary education. These characteristics are the key defining aspects of social studies that need to be more effectively communicated to policymakers, parents, and other influencers who drive the role social studies plays within the PreK-12 curriculum. The message we need to deliver is that social studies creates civically-minded, deliberative decision-makers, who are action-oriented individuals. They champion justice, safeguard democracy, promote civility, and participate in civil society to become more compassionate collaborators, leaders, and citizens.

Civic Engagement among Youth

The young French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville, observing the United States in the nineteenth century, commented that “Nothing is more wonderful than being free, but nothing is harder to learn how to use than freedom” (*Democracy in America*). Democracy requires continuous effort to thrive, and a constant commitment to broadening and deepening the application of democratic principles through a willingness to face our history, to be unsettled by the past, to ensure that all students' voices are honored, and to empower students with reason-

ing, agency and intellectual capacities to take informed action. Social studies educators must also ask: how can I change? Even the language we use, the beliefs we express about students' abilities, and the behaviors we exhibit in our teaching must be examined. Social studies educators have a responsibility to learn and to act. We must deepen our knowledge and confront our own histories and biases so that we can create a more accurate learning experience and embrace our roles as agents for social change. As Christine Stanton reminds us, "...now that you know about this, you can't just do nothing."³⁶

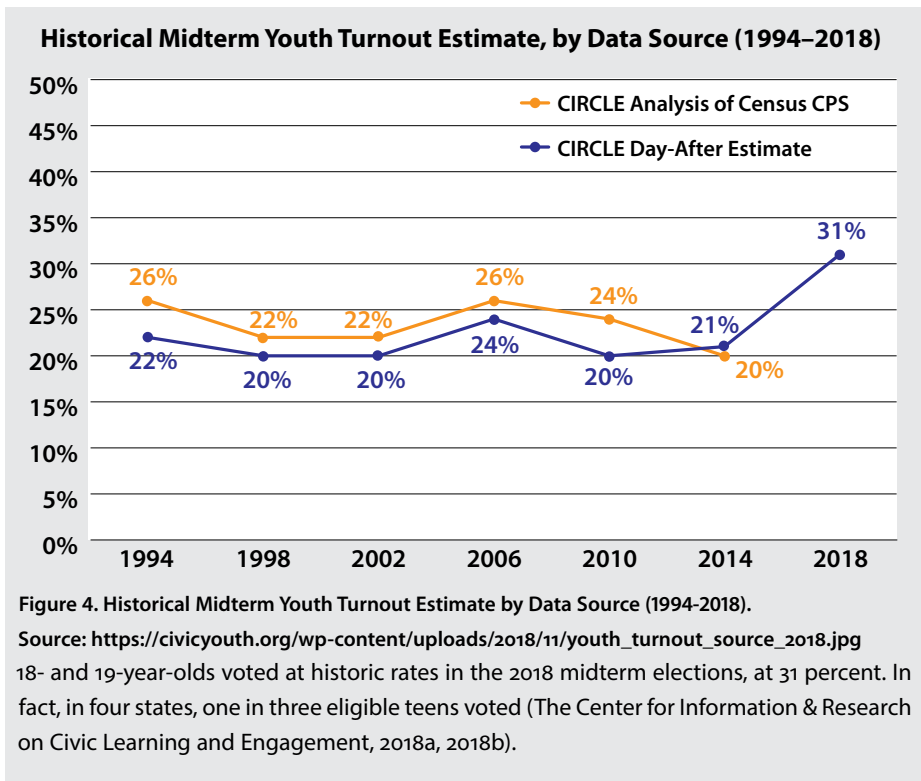
The truth is that the diagnosis of what is wrong in the world around us starts with us, and it also starts with the children and youth around the world. Greta Thunberg's youth climate activism has captured the attention of policymakers across the globe and inspired other youth to take informed action. Young people have always been at the forefront of most major social movements in American life. The political philosopher Danielle Allen suggests that "If there's any message I could drive home most forcefully today it would be namely this: that young people really see the shape of our world presently."³⁷ They have a better understanding of it than any other generation, but we are not letting young people set the agenda for the issues we pay attention to in social studies classrooms.

[Listening to children and student] diagnoses, activating them as diagnosticians, is the first and most important thing to do. And then, policy experts can come in and help think about the specific diagnoses that have been put on the table and listen to ideas about solutions and work with young people, and work with other people, about those solutions and bring their expertise to bear. But that diagnosis is most powerful when it is a truly democratic process, really bubbling up, and when the voices of youth are heard.³⁸

Today's young activists find themselves enmeshed in something larger, smarter, more diverse and ultimately more powerful than movements of the past. Youth activism is booming post-Parkland, but many schools have struggled to connect it to formal civics preparation. Sadly, the largest wave of student activism since the late 1960s remains divorced from classroom learning, and students often feel as though their experiential learning is not mirrored in social studies instruction. In fact, public schools frequently undercut the civic messages that they are expected to be inculcating in students. Strict disci-

pline regimes, a lack of youth voice in decision-making, and a Supreme Court that has curbed students' constitutional rights all exacerbate the problem.³⁹

The rise of youth activism and the power of youth voice has been formally recognized by the decision of Fairfax County, Virginia, one of the largest school districts in the nation, to offer students a civic engagement day as an excused absence from school.⁴⁰ This recognizes the right of students to participate in activities such as marches, advocacy and protest in support of issues, volunteerism and youth leadership, meetings with local delegates, senators, or congressmen, and other types of involvement in civil society. This policy move goes beyond President Obama's promotion of a National Day of Service (e.g., remembrance of 9/11), to elevate the significance of youth agency, advocacy, and activism. The acknowledgement of civic engagement as a productive and meaningful use of student learning time formalizes the value of youth involvement and student voice in their communities and beyond. Like Fairfax County, NCSS has an opportunity to advocate for youth activism and



civic engagement as valuable educative experiences relevant to civic understanding and critical in shaping civil society.

Leading in supporting more authentic intellectual work and pedagogy,⁴¹ NCSS has created educative opportunities for grassroots and social studies in action within local communities. The National Social Studies Honor Societies, Rho Kappa and Junior Rho Kappa, are spaces for cultivating student agency, advocacy, and informed action. Capitalizing on the growing political and civic engagement of young adults,⁴² social studies educators are forming Rho Kappa and Junior Rho Kappa

chapters across the nation, and student interest in these organizations is growing exponentially. Democracy is a combination of ideals and institutions that work to put power in the hands of ordinary people, and the essence of democracy is the active involvement of all people, including children and adolescents. Empowering student agency and voice is an important initiative of the National Council for the Social Studies. If you haven't created a chapter in your middle or high school, consider doing so!

The C3 Inquiry and Engagement Task Force is defining social studies inquiry in digital civic spaces. NCSS seeks to offer guidance to PreK-16 social studies educators on the development of curriculum that integrates inquiry, civic engagement, and the related use of technology and social media. NCSS recognizes that what characterizes digital civic engagement is still emerging and that the best methods for the use of social media as a space for informal learning are under development. Nevertheless, we see the association playing an important role in leading the field's understanding in bridging research to practice so that social studies educators can more effectively prepare students for civic life in a ubiquitous, media-rich and digital society. As research suggests, "integrating social media in learning and teaching environments may yield new forms of inquiry, communication, collaboration [and] identity work."⁴³

Social studies is the only content area that takes as its primary mission to develop the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for young learners to become effective citizens. However, the 1994 NCSS definition of social studies as "...the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence..." does not capture the purpose of social studies today. Civic life needs rigor and deep intellectual reasoning and it is not enough simply to prepare students to eventually function productively as civic participants. The purpose of social studies education is not only to develop vocational capacities, but also civic agency and the intellectual civilities to take informed action. Students need to be skilled in how civil society works towards the common good, particularly when we are working across many policy domains, political ideologies, and the systems that affect citizens within a pluralistic society.

Social studies is learning, doing, being, growing, and acting. The questions we pose, the inquiries we pursue lead us to understand ourselves and others more deeply, to appreciate the complexity of the world in which we live, to grapple with difficult topics, and to speak out against systemic injustices. The study of social studies enables us not only to have a voice, but to actively engage in our local, national, and international communities as informed, educated, and compassionate citizens. Our collective civic engagement is not simply about advocacy or action, but also about listening, questioning, respectful dialogue, and seeking common ground around shared democratic values. Social studies teaches us that knowledge is not neutral; it is socially constructed. Thus,

the real value of knowledge is what one can do with that knowledge in pursuit of inquiry. Examining how we communicate and act upon our knowledge compels us to realize the importance of critical inquiry. Critical inquiry is at the heart of social studies and it leads to informed action through agency, advocacy, and activism.

To achieve a world in which all students are educated and inspired for lifelong inquiry and informed civic action, we also must recognize the need for a responsive approach to social studies education that understands and incorporates contemporary cultural realities. Social studies shapes society. Through civic agency, advocacy, activism, and informed action, the guardrails of democracy, social studies can fulfill its promise of critical inquiry for civic life. For social studies to succeed, we must create an educative environment that:

1. Harnesses diversity and individualism;
2. Provides equal educational opportunities and confronts racialized narratives;
3. Forges common contemporary civic values and social harmony in a pluralistic society;
4. Adopts pedagogical approaches that promote antiracism, civility, inclusion, collaborative reasoning and deliberation, critical inquiry, and participatory experiences in civic spaces and civil society.
5. Capitalizes on the positive possibilities of the internet and social media, while also educating students about threats to democracy and human rights.

Democracy thrives when informed, active, and humane citizens coexist with institutions that uphold the rule of law, civil discourse, and shared democratic values. When social studies and civics education are taught effectively, they can equip students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to become informed and engaged citizens in a pluralistic and democratic society. 🌍

Notes

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