

What is Social Studies

The purpose of social studies is the preparation of effective citizens. NCSS believes, as a recent forum (organized by CIRCLE and the Carnegie Corporation of America) on this topic concluded, that it is vital that schools produce citizens who are engaged cognitively, engaged in their community, engaged politically, and exhibit and promote attitudes that respect the public good.

Social studies integrates historical knowledge with content from political science, economics, and geography to prepare young people to understand their communities, nation, and the world so they can make informed decisions as citizens in a democracy. The vast majority of social studies content taught in schools is history.

The evidence from research in the field, poll results, NAEP performance, and anecdotal work all suggest that, while some signs of hope exist, the quantity and quality of civic education is in dire straits. The level of political efficacy is extremely low, voting turnout is abysmal, knowledge of how to impact public policy is lacking, and an intelligent grasp of the founding documents and principles of our democracy is wanting. The schools must address these needs.

Civic education is not just a local responsibility it is also national. Federally mandated performance requirements do not include civic knowledge. Research and development essential to improvement of the pedagogy used in the schools and teacher preparation institutions is not being adequately promoted or funded.

What About History

History serves the purpose of social studies well, but studying history alone is not sufficient preparation for citizenship. There is a false premise that history has been neglected in favor of social studies. Some history educators have created a red herring called social studies to account for the fact that kids don't know history (this is not a new phenomenon). In fact, it's the dreadfully boring way in which history is often taught that is the greater problem.

Theodore K. Rabb, a history professor at Princeton University and a founder of the NCHE was quoted in a recent Education' Week article as saying "social studies proponents have become about process, and we're about content." True teaching and learning, involves both. The real issue is not history and social studies competing for turf. The problem is a lack of communication between university history departments and schools of education.

There is an all-to-common misconception that both history and social studies are treated as separate fields of study in a competition within our schools. The truth is history is a discipline that falls within the general curricular area of social studies, just as astronomy is a discipline that falls within the general curricular area of science. Of course elementary school students take what is then called "social studies," (just as they take a

course called "science") but as they move from elementary into middle and high school, the courses are in the actual disciplines. There is no such thing as studying just history. Every event occurs at a specific place that has physical and human characteristics that affect what occurs. Many events have an economic connection, based on scarcity of resources and the need to make decisions about those resources. And what event occurs in isolation of citizen participation, that would not involve some role, right or responsibility? No teacher teaches history in isolation--every event involves at least one of the other disciplines in social studies and usually multiple ones.

What Is The NCSS Position

NCSS supports strong content knowledge and has sought to work with (not against) content groups in the development of standards. (e.g. NCSS was a member of the Bradley Commission). NCSS certification and NCATE standards are based on strong content knowledge. The lack of historical understanding by most Americans is not the fault of "social studies" but may reflect a lack of engaging pedagogy. The performance of students is directly related to the content knowledge and pedagogical talents of classroom teachers.

If many history teachers have neither a major nor minor in history, it's not because of what NCSS advocates. Rather it is the result of choices made by school districts in prioritizing their hiring needs. (Many social studies teachers are likely to major in secondary education, but then take the equivalent of a history major as well.) Curriculum development which would result in effective, stimulating, and interesting classroom materials often is not a priority, nor is it funded at an adequate level in many states. It is NCSS's position that assessment tests developed at the state level to meet state requirements should be primarily developed by classroom teachers who teach in the field.