

Creating Effective Citizens  
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“Democracy needs to be reborn in each generation, and education is its midwife.” John Dewey

This column is a collaboration of NCSS President Gayle Thieman and Diane Hart, who co-chaired the NCSS Task Force on Revitalizing Citizenship Education.

What We Believe

NCSS defines social studies as the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote **civic competence**. The NCSS position statement, *Creating Effective Citizens*, asserts: “The core purpose of social studies education is to help students develop the knowledge, skills, and values that will enable them to become effective citizens. Throughout the curriculum and at every grade level, students should have the opportunities to apply their civic knowledge, skills and values, as they work to solve real problems, in their school, community, nation, and world.”

(1)

The characteristics of effective citizens enumerated in that position statement have powerful implications for curriculum and instruction. If we want our students to “embrace core democratic values and strive to live by them,” we must provide them with opportunities to experience democracy as a way of life in our classrooms and schools. If we want them to “develop informed opinions and creative solutions,” we must engage them in deep and disciplined inquiry. If we want them to “analyze and evaluate information and ideas,” we must emphasize higher order thinking skills. If we want to create tolerant citizens who can “collaborate effectively as a member of a group,” we must teach our students to work together and respect different points of view. And if we want our students to “actively participate in civic and community life”, we must link classroom learning to the public square.

What Concerns Us

Social studies, with its focus on civic competence, is disappearing from the elementary school curriculum. Consider these facts:

- Since NCLB was enacted, 36 percent of surveyed school districts reduced time for teaching elementary social studies. That percentage leaped to 51 percent in districts with “failing schools.” (2)
- Through its exclusive emphasis on standardized test scores, NCLB has also pushed many schools to focus on lower level intellectual skills as opposed to the higher-order thinking skills civic participation requires.
- The 2006 NAEP civics test reveals that, with the exception of a slight increase at the fourth grade, average scores remained unchanged from the abysmal levels reported in the 1998 assessment. Only about one in four students at any grade scored at or above proficiency. (3)

As former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, the Sunday keynote speaker at our annual conference, has observed, “This report should be interpreted as a wake-up call that we need to significantly strengthen the study of civics in our nations’ schools.” (4)

What We Can Do

Speak up! Join lobbying efforts by NCSS in urging your representatives in Congress to reverse the marginalization of social studies by:

- Supporting the use of multiple state-developed assessments for NCLB accountability that include social studies content
- Including the “core academic subjects” of civics and government, economics, history, and geography in all federally funded professional development programs
- Providing funds for expanded NAEP assessments of these core social studies subjects

In your communications, emphasize that social studies helps students develop key 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, including global awareness, civic and financial literacy, information and media literacy, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration. Visit the Advocacy section of [www.socialstudies.org](http://www.socialstudies.org) for more information on advocating effectively.

Finally, put creating effective citizens at the center of your work with students. For ideas and examples, attend the many civics related sessions at the NCSS conference, including Students Doing Social Studies. You may be amazed and inspired by what you see and hear.

### References

(1)*Creating Effective Citizens*. NCSS Position Statement, adopted, May 2001, available at [www.socialstudies.org/positions/effectivecitizens](http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/effectivecitizens)

(2)Center on Education Policy. July 2007. *Choices, Changes, and Challenges Curriculum and Instruction in the NCLB Era*. p.7

(3) *The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2006* available at [www.nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007476](http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007476)

(4)*NAEP Civics Test Shows Continued Weakness in Preparing Students for Citizenship*. Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools Press release. 5/16/2007