

The Time is NOW!

Stefanie Wager



This speech was given as the opening address at the NCSS Virtual Conference on Friday, December 4, 2020.

Before I begin my opening remarks, I want to take a moment to first thank all of those who have been involved in making this year's conference a success:

- Conference Co-Chair, Beth Ratway
- Local Arrangement Chairs: Sandy Pope, Anthony Hiller, and Wesley Hedgepeth
- Representatives of NCGE (National Council for Geography Education) and the ABA (American Bar Association)
- Associated Groups Program Chairs of CS4, CUFA, IA, and NSSSA
- The dedicated NCSS staff and Board of Directors
- Gayle Thieman and Melissa Collum for organizing the First Timers Scholarship
- The many who brought ideas, stepped up to help us transition to a virtual conference, evaluated conference proposals
- And finally to my family who have been so supportive of my work.

I also want to take a moment to honor all of the educators we've lost this year due to COVID-19 and all the friends of social studies such as John Lewis and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Please join me in a moment of silence to honor their memory.

Finally, I want to acknowledge that this is by far the hardest year of teaching in recent history. Be easy on yourself. I know this is sometimes easier said than done, but you matter and taking care of YOU is what is most important. We salute you and all that you are doing to impact the lives of our youngest citizens.

For me, social studies is not just what I do in my “day job.” Social studies is a calling. A feeling that our role is so much “more,” as the work we do every day literally impacts the future of our democracy. I know each of you feels this too.

The time is NOW to advocate for social studies like our democracy depends on it—because it does.

In my first message as NCSS President, I started off with a story about my son. A story I want to come back to because it is a microcosm of what many of us see each day—the very real marginalization of social studies.



Earlier this year, as I picked up my seven-year-old son from school, we discussed the normal parent questions about the day: How was today? Did you have fun? What did you learn? After answering these questions, he let me know that yet again, he hadn't had any social studies that day. He paused, and then asked, “Mom, does that mean that people don't care about the world?” His question astounded me. He knows I am passionate about social studies and knows what I do for my “day job,” but his question was beyond knowing these facts. It got to the core of what all social studies educators also wonder. And, it struck me because he clearly recognized that a lack of attention to social studies meant something. He perceived that other things were prioritized instead of social studies and this sent him the message, intentional or not, that people might not care about the world. My now eight-year-old son has internalized the marginalization of social studies.

Think of all our students who experience this marginalization every day and the impact this has not only on them, but on the world we all live in. The marginalization of social studies is not new, it has been well-documented.¹ Instructional time devoted to social studies has declined significantly since the enactment of No Child Left Behind, particularly in elementary classrooms. Students in marginalized communities also tend to have the least access to social studies. This is an

issue of equity. Students cannot experience high-quality teaching and learning in social studies if time is not prioritized to include it.

So, I wanted to mention this marginalization (not that you needed a reminder), but I want to focus today on what we can do to ensure social studies is no longer marginalized.

Social studies educators across the country are working to eliminate this marginalization and highlight the importance of social studies and civic education. Just this last summer Adina Goldstein, a teacher for Philadelphia Public Schools, wrote an article in which she said,

“Until social studies is a protected learning period for students, until the state decides it must update and develop thoughtful standards for teaching and learning social studies, until the School District of Philadelphia invests more in its Office of Social Studies, and until professional training in teaching social studies is recognized and adequately valued, we will not be able to truly participate in dismantling systems of oppression in schools.”²

Adina is absolutely right. This year's NCSS conference theme, Advancing Social Justice, is all about showcasing the ways we can all work to dismantle these systems of oppression and this is why advocating for social studies education is so critical. We also believe social studies is critical to addressing and dismantling systems of oppression in schools across the country. But if it is marginalized this cannot be done. We must demand more of our policy and decision makers, but we must also work to examine our own classroom practices and recognize our role in ensuring what we teach and how we teach it dismantles these systems of oppression.

It has always been important to challenge these narratives, and people throughout history have done so, but it is critical now more than ever.

As an organization, we are actively working on addressing these issues and I call on all social studies educators to take action as well. It is my profound hope that our work ensures all children have access to high-quality teaching and learning in social studies—this is a must to ensure our mission as a country in working towards creating a more perfect union.

Earlier this year NCSS issued a statement condemning the killing of George Floyd and earlier this year we released a statement in response to Anti-Asian Harassment.³ Most recently, we issued a response to statements saying teachers were indoctrinating students, we addressed the teaching of slavery using the 1619 Project and signed on to a statement by the American Historical Association on the recent White House Conference on American History.⁴

Recently, the CivXNow Coalition, of which NCSS is a member, spearheaded the Educating for American Democracy Act.⁵ The bill would invest one BILLION dollars in civic education.

As an organization we will continue to address issues impacting social studies education.

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.

NCSS revised our vision and mission statements in 2018. I wanted to share the mission statement in particular, to point out the specific focus on advocacy within our new statement.

This is such a key pivot in helping redefine our role as an organization.

As a social studies educator, I have also believed that I have an additional job description as an advocate for social studies. I want to challenge each of you to also think about this as a key aspect of what you do. I firmly believe, as former President Obama said, “we are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” We are the ones closest to these issues and most uniquely poised to advocate for change.

One question you may think about, because I know I do, is how can I best advocate for social studies?

The (NCSS) Advocacy Task Force recently created an Advocacy Toolkit.⁶ This toolkit debuted at the NCSS Summer Leadership Institute and was recently approved by the NCSS Board of Directors. The toolkit is designed to support individuals and NCSS affiliated groups to create their own advocacy plan to actively advance social studies education in their own states and districts.

We hope this is a starting place in helping you realize your own role in advocating for our discipline. (www.socialstudies.org/advocacy)

In closing, I want to again say thank you. You matter! You are doing such important work day in and day out and whether you know it or not, this truly has an impact on our youngest citizens today and far in the future.

I leave you with a challenge to think about how YOU can actively advocate

for social studies. The time is now! Thank you! 🌍

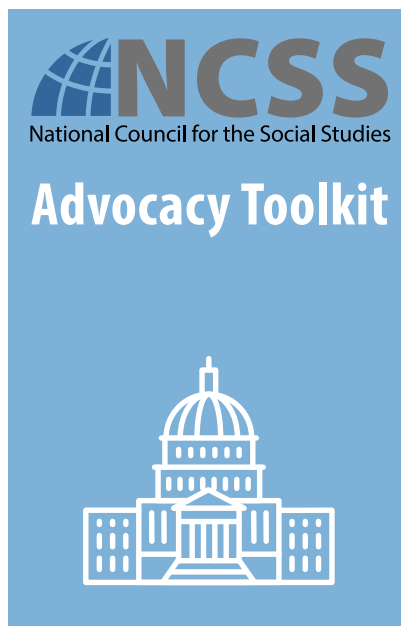
Notes

1. CCSSO, *The Marginalization of Social Studies, 2018*, https://ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/Elementary%20SS%20Brief%2045%20Minute%20Version_0.pdf
2. Adina Goldstein, “To Fight Systemic Racism, Social Studies Must Be a Central Part of School Curriculum, Philadelphia Public School Notebook (June 15, 2020), <https://thenotebook.org/>.
3. www.socialstudies.org/news/ncss-condemns-killing-george-floyd-countless-black-people; www.socialstudies.org/current-events-response/response-anti-asian-harassment-and-violence-during-covid-19
4. [www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-statement-on-the-recent-white-house-conference-on-american-history-\(september-2020\)](http://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-statement-on-the-recent-white-house-conference-on-american-history-(september-2020))
5. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1yNO9CwJHbYdFNyte1pobaQ0TbU8lmyhm/view>
6. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1WaYZHDkjgi-hWuy-GsVqTHJrqshVSKLPnPXCR_3YLM/edit



STEFANIE WAGER is the President of the National Council for the Social Studies.

Visit socialstudies.org/advocacy for the new NCSS Advocacy Toolkit and other resources for advocating the importance of social studies education.



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