



Part 3: Continuing to Grow and Change

During the past 100 years, NCSS has established institutions and adopted core values that will continue to guide us through the challenges of the future. In this section, former president Jeff Passe addresses the governance structures of the association. NCSS Executive Director Larry Paska shares his hopes for the next 100 years. Looking at present and future challenges, current president Anton Schulzki compares some contemporary rhetoric to the threats to academic freedom in the McCarthy Era and the 1950s as he lays a pathway for the work ahead. Rosemary Blanchard examines the support of NCSS members for Human Rights Education, while former president Tina Heafner discusses the NCSS reaction to the coronavirus and reviews current issues faced by social studies educators, concluding that “there has never been a more important time to teach or to learn social studies.”

Practicing What It Preaches: One Hundred Years of NCSS Governance

Jeff Passe

Let’s travel back 100 years to when NCSS was born. Most communication was by U.S. mail; members travelled to meetings by railroad; and the leadership was dominated by white, male professors from elite universities. Over time, as travel and communication evolved, teachers and school administrators took on greater roles in organizational leadership.

A major transformation occurred in the 1980s after the annual meeting was moved from Thanksgiving weekend to the previous weekend—conference attendance soared. Many of the new attendees were female teachers, who had recently assumed a greater presence in secondary and higher education. Some of those teachers had previously been unable to attend NCSS annual meetings due to gender-related responsibilities for the holiday dinner. Eventually, the annual meetings were so successful that they outgrew hotels and had to be moved to convention centers.

Governance operations evolved too. Like most non-profit organizations, NCSS had a president, a board of directors, and a staff led by an executive director. The composition of the board of directors was periodically altered in attempts to increase representation. Board seats were guaranteed first for secondary teachers, then supervisors, college professors, elementary teachers, and then middle school teachers. When Board meetings became unwieldy and expensive, NCSS voted to reduce the Board’s size, while still maintaining at least one representative from each group and allowing for more at-large representation.

Over the years, affiliated groups were formed by supervisors, chief social studies school officers, college and university faculty, and international members. While all affiliated organizations were ostensibly under the NCSS umbrella, each developed its own program, governance, and publications. To a large degree, the various groups held separate, parallel meetings, only breaking away for the plenary events geared toward all members. There was intense competition for space, as the affiliated groups competed with the main program for meeting rooms. In response, some groups chose to gather a day, then two days, before the main meeting, inadvertently increasing the separation between them and the classroom teachers who arrived later.

Organizational governance became a challenge when the affiliated group programs overlapped with NCSS committee and special interest group (SIG) meetings. The supervisors and professors who previously took leadership roles in those meetings (due to the perks of their jobs and the ability to commit to attending meetings in person each year) were not as available as in previous years.

NCSS convened a governance task force in the early 2000s to address these and other concerns. The task force issued a set of recommendations to embrace a new vision built on the potential of the newly-popular Internet: All SIGs and some committees would be transformed into online “communities,” thus allowing participation for the thousands of members who rarely attended the annual meeting. It was expected that the opportunity to participate in NCSS governance would attract non-member social studies teachers to the organization.

The path to leadership has long been through the NCSS House of Delegates (HOD). The HOD met for four hours



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over two days at the annual meeting. Delegates were allocated based on the number of members in each state council who were also NCSS members. Those who were not active in their state organizations, could not become delegates. The task force proposal allowed affiliated group members and community members to take part in the HOD, assuming that they could attend the annual meeting. At HOD, delegates could network, get elected to HOD leadership positions, and gain prominence among the other delegates. The newly enfranchised affiliates and communities became potent advocates in the HOD for perspectives that were not previously emphasized.

As NCSS increased opportunities for its members to become leaders, the components of governance also evolved.

The HOD, originally designed to be a forum for state councils to communicate with the national leadership, was increasingly perceived by some as inconsequential since much of its business was devoted to a series of reports by the president, executive director, and other leaders, honoring state council successes, and conducting elections for insignificant offices.

The highlight of any HOD session was the usually colorful debate over resolutions. Resolutions are only advisory in nature, aimed at informing the Board, but they kindled the master debater in many delegates, leading to powerful oration but also to a series of mind-numbing amendments that taxed even the most experienced parliamentarians. While some resolutions, such as those expressing support for civic education, enjoyed near-unanimous support, others divided the HOD based on political leanings or, more acutely, the issue of whether NCSS should even take stands on political issues.

Recognizing that the exhausting resolution debates were discouraging participation in organizational governance, successive HOD Steering Committees redesigned the meeting format to be more efficient and meaningful in its activities. The HOD continues to play an important role in leadership development. Today the HOD also contains representatives from each of the affiliated groups and the Special Interest Communities and is limited to a single Friday afternoon session. All of the reports and resolutions are available online in advance of the convention and voting is done electronically.

NCSS officers (i.e., the president, president-elect, and vice-president) and Board are elected by the membership, though only a small proportion of members cast a ballot. As with many educational associations, voters know little about the candidates besides where they live and what they teach. Campaigning is prohibited. Candidate statements accompany the ballots, but they tend to say the same thing, primarily because there is general agreement about the issues facing the organization's voters, who have no way of knowing about the candidates' skills in leading a large organization. As a result, the effectiveness of NCSS elected leaders has varied considerably from year to year.

The NCSS president has a lot of responsibility in leading the Board, especially on budgetary matters, working alongside

the executive director and professional staff, preparing for the annual conference, supporting state and local councils, interacting with affiliate groups, and representing the organization. While some presidents have been successful in managing the array of tasks, others have not fared as well.

The NCSS executive director and staff have been a source of stability for the organization because most serve for lengthy periods. The NCSS office manages membership development and marketing, publications, and meetings under Board policy, attending to the business side of NCSS. The executive director, strategically placed near Washington, D.C., is often the face of the organization in meetings with other educational and civic organizations as well as on Capitol Hill.

NCSS's shared governance model, in which policymakers (i.e., the Board) approve the budgets submitted by the staff, has occasionally caused financial distress for the organization. It is difficult for any Board of Directors to anticipate economic shifts. There have been periods of healthy budgets when membership increased and conferences were well attended. But there have also been large deficits that led to substantial belt-tightening, furloughs, and layoffs.

Throughout its history, NCSS governance has been an exercise in the balance of power—between the Board and staff, between different types of educators, between the national and state councils, and between the organization and its affiliated groups. Social studies teachers know well that the nation's founders viewed tension between branches as a good thing. The struggle to maintain a balance of power has enabled NCSS to be resilient, weathering political and economic storms. The product has been a stronger organization, poised to advocate and build capacity for quality social studies education. 🌍



JEFF PASSE is a professor at Cal Poly Pomona. He has taught and written about curriculum and social studies since 1982. Highlights of his career include serving as NCSS President and CUFA Chair.

NCSS Presidents 1921–2021

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1921, Albert E. McKinley | 1947, W. Linwood Chase | 1972, Jean Fair | 1998–99, Tedd Levy |
| 1922, Leon C. Marshall | 1948, Stanley E. Dimond | 1973, Harris L. Dante | 1999–2000, Richard Theisen |
| 1923, William H. Hathaway | 1949, W. Francis English | 1974, Stanley P. Wronski | 2000–2001, Susan Adler |
| 1924, Thomas J. McCormack | 1950, Erling M. Hunt | 1975, Jean T. Claugus | 2001–2002, Adrian Davis |
| 1925, Howard C. Hill | 1951, Myrtle Roberts | 1976, James P. Shaver | 2002–2003, Stephen Johnson |
| 1926, Bessie L. Pierce | 1952, Julian C. Aldrich | 1977 : Howard Mehlinger | 2003–2004, Denee Mattioli |
| 1927, J. Montgomery Gambrill | 1953, John Haefner | 1978, Anna S. Ochoa | 2004–2005, Jesus Garcia |
| 1928–29, August C. Krey | 1954, Dorothy McClure Fraser | 1979, George G. Watson, Jr. | 2005–2006, Jeff Passe |
| 1930, Edgar Dawson | 1955, Edwin R. Carr | 1980, Todd Clark | 2006–2007, Peggy Altoff |
| 1931, Rolla M. Tryon | 1956, Helen McCracken Carpenter | 1981, Theodore Kaltsounis | 2007–2008, Gayle Thieman |
| 1932, DeWitt S. Morgan | 1957, William H. Cartwright | 1982, James A. Banks | 2008–2009, Michael Yell |
| 1933, William G. Kimmel | 1958, Jack Allen | 1983, Carole L. Hahn | 2009–2010, Syd Golston |
| 1934, Howard E Wilson | 1959, Howard H. Cummings | 1984, Jean Craven | 2010–2011, Steve Goldberg |
| 1935, Edgar B. Wesley | 1960, Eunice Johns | 1985, Donald H. Bragaw | 2011–2012, Sue Blanchette |
| 1936, Ray O. Hughes | 1961, Emlyn Jones | 1986, Paul R. Shires | 2012–2013, John Moore |
| 1937, Elmer Ellis | 1962, Samuel McCutchen | 1987–88, Jan L. Tucker* | 2013–2014, Stephen Armstrong |
| 1938, C. C. Barnes | 1963, Stella Kern | 1988–89, Donald O. Schneider | 2014–2015, Michelle Herczog |
| 1939, Ruth West | 1964, Isidore Starr | 1989–90, Mary A. McFarland | 2015–2016, Kim O’Neil |
| 1940, Howard R. Anderson | 1965, William H. Hartley | 1990–91, C. Frederick Risinger | 2016–2017, Peggy Jackson |
| 1941, Fremont P. Wirth | 1966, Adeline Brengle | 1991–92, Margit McGuire | 2017–2018, Terry Cherry |
| 1942, Roy A. Price | 1967, Richard E. Gross | 1992–93, Charlotte C. Anderson | 2018–2019, India Meissel |
| 1943, Allen Y. King | 1968, Ralph W. Cordier | 1993–94, Denny Schillings | 2019–2020, Tina Heafner |
| 1944, James Quillen | 1969, Ronald O. Smith | 1994–95, Robert J. Stahl | 2020–2021, Stefanie Wager |
| 1945, Mary G. Kelty | 1970, Shirley H. Engle | 1995–96, H. Michael Hartoonian | 2021–2022, Anton Schulzki |
| 1946, Burr W. Phillips | 1971, John Jarolimek | 1996–97, Pat Nickell | |
| | | 1997–98, Richard Diem | |

* In 1987, NCSS changed the term of a President from a calendar year to a school year. Jan L. Tucker was President from January 1987 to June 1988.



“Historic Panels by Decade” is a display of NCSS history created by the NCSS Archives Committee in which each past president is listed, titles of presidential addresses are referenced, major events during the decade are illustrated, and those issues most pressing for NCSS membership are noted.

NCSS 2121

Lawrence M. Paska

One of my favorite things to do on a late Friday afternoon is to pick a random back issue of *Social Education* and start reading. Our NCSS office has multiple shelves packed with a century's worth of social studies publications. Every time I dig into our recorded history, a few similar themes emerge:

- The very definition of social studies is debated and re-shaped;
- How to balance appropriate, equitable coverage of all social studies disciplines in the K-12 classroom;
- The key phrases “lifelong inquiry” and “informed civic action” from our 2018 vision statement appear in many different contexts;
- The importance of high-quality social studies learning across K-12 education is a strong advocacy focus;
- The reduction or outright elimination of social studies learning time is documented as a threat to our profession; and
- Many members dedicate their entire career to NCSS by publishing their work and steering the direction of NCSS as leaders. (This is my favorite observation!)

Our first *Social Education* issue was published in January 1937. The very first article was a reprint of R.O. Hughes's Presidential Address, delivered on November 27, 1936, at the Annual Conference in Detroit. Titled “Social Sanity Through the Social Studies,” this address includes many observations which could easily be written 85 years later. For example:

- “How much misunderstanding has occurred because of perverted interpretation of the past! How much prejudice has been built up by a continued repetition of such false interpretation!”
- “[W]hen was there an age in any history that was not an age of change? Who would want to live in a fixed and static world, with nothing to do but sit on our thumbs and watch the same old things happening in the same old way, world without end?”
- “It is far better that we content ourselves with helping [students] get the information they need to make their own choices and with giving them practice in discussing all sides of disputed questions. What if the entire membership of a class does not reach just the same conclusion! Their elders have not always done so.”¹

Digging further into the context of social education during the first year of *Social Education*, NCSS' 1937 yearbook, *Education Against Propaganda*, included such timeless chapters as “Propaganda and Society,” “How to Read Editorials,” “Propaganda Influences within the School,” and, of particular relevance, “Teaching Students in Social-Studies Classes to Guard against Propaganda.”² An NCSS Bulletin at this time, *A Guide to Newer Methods in Teaching the Social Studies*³ introduces readers to still-contemporary topics as “individualized instruction,” “differentiated assignments,” and “the problem method.”

What will NCSS be writing and thinking about 100 years from now? Let's dream about the year 2121 as a time in which our current NCSS vision is realized: “A world in which all students are educated and inspired for lifelong inquiry and informed civic action.” In the 22nd-century classroom, social studies will be the foundation upon which every local and state education system is built. I will avoid Hollywood visions of a future with flying cars and avatars, and focus on the gains achieved by 2121 for social studies to hold its proper place in the school day.

In 2121 ...

- Inquiry is the guiding approach for every school subject. New learning theories validate the central role that inquiry plays in human development and student learning.
- Content-rich disciplines are the basis for instructional blocks. “Social Studies Block” is a 90–120 minute period in the early childhood and elementary school daily schedule in which students build literacy through inquiries in grade-appropriate social studies.
- Professional development is fully, equitably funded at the local, state, and federal levels, because it is known as an essential part of student and school success.
- NCSS continues to grow as its members test and adapt new inquiry models; publish and share content and research; and, network and share more resources with colleagues.
- Teacher recognition is everywhere! There is a

constant desire to identify best and promising new practices. NCSS welcomes a cadre of “social studies ambassadors” each year from among its wide network of over 200 Affiliated Councils and Communities who can speak to elected officials, parents, the general public, and anyone in their region or state about the impact of social studies on children every day.

- “Civic life” is known as its own form of literacy. To be literate is to demonstrate active participation and engagement in civic life.

Our path to 2121 begins right now! We already laid the groundwork for inquiry, professional learning, teacher recognition, and civic literacy to move social studies to the forefront of our education system. Now, let’s begin each day with one

simple—and very public—compelling question: “What will we learn in social studies today?”

Notes

1. R.O. Hughes, “Social Sanity Through the Social Studies,” *Social Education* 1, no. 1 (January 1937): 3–10.
2. E. Ellis (ed.), *Education Against Propaganda: Developing Skill in the Use of the Sources of Information in Public Affairs*. Seventh Yearbook of the National Council for the Social Studies, 1937.
3. G.W. Hodgkins, *A Guide to Newer Methods in Teaching the Social Studies*. Bulletin No. 7 of the National Council for the Social Studies, December 1936.



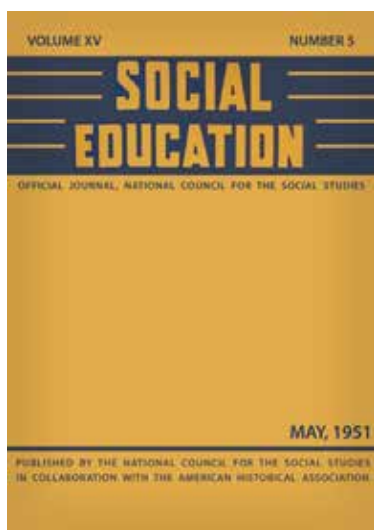
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Academic Freedom

Anton Schulzki

As the National Council for the Social Studies approaches its next 100 years, it is incumbent upon our membership to look not only back but forward. Examining our past, we find that for much of our existence NCSS has been at the forefront not only of social studies education, but educational conversations across the country. Recently, there has been much discussion in the national press regarding what is or is not being taught within the walls of our social studies classrooms. The irony of some of this discussion is that as we approached our 100th anniversary, the amount of time devoted to social studies education within our elementary classrooms had decreased over the years. In some ways, it is comforting to note just how interested the public has once again become in what we are doing in our classrooms.



Teaching controversial topics has long been a part of social studies education. Whose story of origin should be told, what sources should be used, and which topics our students should learn about have always provided challenges for social studies educators. Today is no different. There are those times when the past does seek to

instruct us on the present. We must accept that guidance. The May 1951 issue of *Social Education* contained an important report by the NCSS Committee on Academic Freedom on “The Treatment of Controversial Issues in the Schools.” The report presented four “Essentials of the Freedom to Learn” and ten principles to follow in the study

of controversial issues.¹ This brief look at our past should help inform our present and guide our future.

The four “Essentials of the Freedom to Learn” include the right to study significant issues, the right of access to publications that have significant bearing on the issues, the right to study all sides of an issue free from compulsion, and the right to reach and express an opinion that is different from others in the class.² Think of the power that those statements have regarding what our students and teachers were doing at a time when discussion of controversial topics, such as communism, was often seen as being detrimental to the American way of life. This was the 1950s, the height of McCarthyism and the Red Scare across our country. Teachers often had to sign loyalty oaths before they were even allowed to teach. Yet here was our organization standing firm in support of educators and most importantly, students’ right to study and discuss the most significant and controversial issues of that day.

Among the ten principles to follow in the study of controversial issues are these:

- To present or to permit the presentation of significant current questions by the class.

- To help students obtain an adequate quantity and variety of materials representing all sides of the question.
- To help students form their own working questions, pursuit of which will lead to greater understanding of the problems.
- To call attention to the case for unpopular causes if necessary to assure a well-rounded consideration of the question.
- To help students distinguish between fact and opinion, and to form their opinions from the available facts rather than to look for facts to support a preconceived opinion.³

It is apparent that NCSS has held these views about academic freedom for quite some time. It is, I believe, often instructive that as an organization looks forward, we also look backward to understand just how much things have and, in some cases, have not changed.

It is incumbent upon us to build upon the legacy of the past 100 years and to ensure that the next 100 years continue to support social studies educators across the country. While as a teacher I wear many hats, as president of NCSS in the 2021–22 school year, I am often reminded that NCSS represents a myriad of teachers from many kinds of schools, universities, and social studies-based organizations. We are not a one-size-fits-all organization! That being the case, academic freedom is something that I believe all educators need to continue to advocate for. Good social studies education relies upon the use of multiple sources, from across disciplines, to help our students understand the complexities of our society.

It is often said that in education change is inevitable, and so it is with NCSS. We will continue to grow and change as we have done for the past 100 years. Teachers have moved beyond using a single textbook in their classrooms and telling a single story to their students. Educators now have at their access literally thousands of sources that were unavailable when the “Committee on Academic Freedom” published its statement in 1951. The appropriate exercise of academic freedom is essential to the fulfillment of a broad and complete social studies education. As educators continue to address the broad variety of topics that the social studies encompass, NCSS will continue to be the leading social studies education organization. We know that teachers and the public should be asking for more and more leadership from NCSS, and we stand poised to deliver that leadership, expertise, and guidance. We continue to uphold the NCSS vision: “A world in which all students are educated and inspired for lifelong inquiry and informed civic action.” It is our responsibility today to continue to make that happen. 🌍

Notes

1. NCSS Committee on Academic Freedom, “The Treatment of Controversial Issues in Schools,” *Social Education* 15, no. 5 (May 1951): 232–36.
2. Ibid, 232–33.
3. Ibid, 233.



ANTON SCHULZKI is President of NCSS (2021–2022).

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A History of NCSS Involvement in Human Rights

Rosemary Ann Blanchard

Active support for human rights education and for the human rights dimension of civic engagement has long been an integral part of NCSS’s values, policies, and practices. This commitment was made official in 2012 with the establishment of an NCSS Human Rights Community.

The term “Human Rights” has come to encompass understandings of the rights of individuals within all societies (previously expressed with phrases such as the “rights of man,” or “natural rights”). The term itself, however, is largely a product of the twentieth century. Indeed, it took atrocities on a global scale for the phrase “Human Rights” to come into common usage.

In his 1941 State of the Union address to Congress, President Franklin D. Roosevelt referenced the universality of human rights: “Freedom means the supremacy of human rights everywhere.” The phrase is repeated in the UN Declaration of 1942 (the main treaty of the World War II allies), in the preamble to the UN Charter (1945), and, of course, in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In 1945, NCSS participated in the development of a statement entitled “Education for a Free Society,” under the auspices of the Liaison Committee for International Education and its International Education Assembly.² The statement enunciated core values for education in a democratic society—values that today reflect many of the characteristics we would today identify as educational ideals that are friendly to human rights (e.g., equal education for all, freedom to learn and learning for freedom, and education to enrich the full human personality). NCSS shared these visions with its members in the February 1945 issue of *Social Education*.

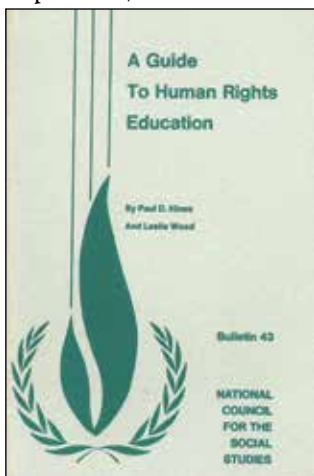
In 1948, NCSS, in conjunction with the Committee on International Education of the National Education Association (NEA) and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), issued a statement entitled “Education

for International Understanding in American Schools.”³ The NEA/ASCD/NCSS statement—developed and issued as the UN Commission on Human Rights was negotiating the final language for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—both anticipated and endorsed the ideals of the nascent UDHR. It urged that programs of education for international understanding be directed toward preparation of “the World-Minded American” whose values and actions would reflect those ideals:

II. The world-minded American wants a world at peace in which liberty and justice are assured for all.

VIII. The world-minded American has a deep concern for the wellbeing of humanity.

History is fickle, of course, and the “World-Minded American,” social studies educators and their national council soon had to contend with domestic accusations that world-mindedness was the equivalent to being “soft on communism,” unpatriotic, or worse.



NCSS did not, however, abandon its incipient commitment to preparing human rights awareness. By 1968, the 20th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, President Lyndon Johnson joined the UN General Assembly in officially declaring 1968 Human Rights Year. In 1969, NCSS published Bulletin 43, *A Guide to Human Rights Education* (Paul D. Hines and Leslie

Wood), with an introduction by Chief Justice Earl Warren.⁴ Warren’s introduction, from a speech delivered to the President’s Commission for the Observance of Human Rights Year, made clear that the work of upholding human rights was a domestic challenge as well as a global one:

[I]n recent years the fabric of our society has come perilously close to the tearing point because of a failure to live by that principle [of equality]. The potential for strife is great when some men will not deal with others as equals worthy of dignity and respect and fairness. ... let us not forget the threat which may be the gravest of all... because it threatens us as ... moral beings—and that is the threat of ourselves—the threat that we may cease to be an outward going, freedom loving, and tolerant people. The threat that we may destroy our own democratic institutions through malice or inadvertence (p. 7).

Hines and Wood, in their discussions of teaching for the promotion of human rights, stressed both the teaching of content and the creation of opportunities “to develop the attitudes and qualities of mind necessary to the successful promotion of human rights.”⁵

The importance of incorporating teaching about human rights and teaching through practices friendly to human rights continued to be reflected in NCSS publications, and presentations at NCSS conferences throughout the latter third of the twentieth century. William Fernekes was the founding chairperson of the International Human Rights Education Special Interest Group within NCSS (1985–1992) and contributed to several NCSS publications throughout the 1990s on the need to incorporate the human rights perspective into teaching about children’s rights, genocide, Indigenous Peoples, natural disasters, and global citizenship education. Kristi Rudelius-Palmer, Nancy Flowers, Fernekes and others worked with NCSS on the development of the National Human Rights USA Resource Center around the 50th Anniversary of the UDHR (1998) and on presentations and publications tied to that landmark.

The twenty-first century is on its way to becoming the Century of Human Rights Education within NCSS. The first decade saw an increase in HRE-related contributions to NCSS publications. More recently, the American Red Cross contributed to a special section within *Social Education* devoted to exploring International Humanitarian Law, a dimension of human rights practice which is too often omitted from general discussions of HRE.⁶

The HRE Community does not and must not assume that this current period of “belonging” within the social studies family is a given. In preparation of this report, I learned of the establishment and subsequent demise of an NCSS special interest group on International Human Rights Education. Nationalist and racist ideologies that considered extinguished in the American psyche have recently demonstrated their persistence. Respect for LGBTQ equality has moved forward to an encouraging degree, but, again, those gains exist against a background of intimidation and threat. Anti-immigrant/anti-migrant rhetoric and legally enforced policies are undermining fundamental principles of human rights and rights of children and families. We NCSS members share a common human destiny. Our values are only as enduring as our success in transmitting them to future generations. 🌍

Note: Dr. Glenn Mitoma, the HRE Community Scholar Presenter in 2018, greatly assisted with this overview.

Notes

1. *The Social Studies in Secondary Education*, Bulletin 28 (Bureau of Education, Department of the Interior, 1916)
2. I. James Quillen, “The Role of the Social Studies Teacher in the Postwar World,” *Social Education* 9, no. 1 (January 1945): 9–12.

3. "Education for International Understanding in American Schools" (National Education Association, 1948)
4. Paul D. Hines and Leslie Wood, *A Guide to Human Rights Education*, Bulletin 43 (NCSS, 1969)
5. Hines and Wood, 59
6. Exploring Humanitarian Law, *Social Education* 74, no. 5 (October 2010).



ROSEMARY ANN BLANCHARD is a retired educator, attorney, advocate, and all-around human rights pest (of the good sort). She is Associate Professor of Education Emeritus with California State University Sacramento and adjunct instructor and academic researcher in Peace Studies at the University of New Mexico. Her research and advocacy interests include curricular research and policy advocacy to support incorporating human rights and humanitarian law into core American social studies. Dr. Blanchard serves on the Human Rights Educators USA Steering Committee (www.hreusa.org)

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Leading in Unprecedented Times

Tina L. Heafner

“What is true of all the evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves.”
—Albert Camus, *The Plague* (1947)

When I ran for vice-president of NCSS in 2015–2016, I never expected a turbulent, uncertain future in which democracy would be threatened and our world would be on fire. Today, we are at a critical juncture in history and we, social studies educators, are on the frontlines of change. Adults, youth, and children are turning to history, geography, economics, and civics to cope with the complexities of our human experience and to seek answers to the questions that govern our daily lives. There is no time in our contemporary lives in which the study of social studies has been more critical to our understanding or necessary for prudent action. As a researcher who has empirically documented the marginalization of social studies in public education in America, I hold hope for a more prominent and central role of social studies in a post-pandemic era.

Pandemics not only affect individuals, they change the world. Pandemics also serve as a mirror of all challenges that a society faces. The coronavirus pandemic has forced us to reflect on what we were, who we are, and what we can be. Social studies educators have had to grapple with the schooling and societal implications resulting from school closures and shelter-in-place policies necessitated by COVID-19. We have confronted numerous challenges, which include equity issues raised by a shift from face-to-face to online learning; the role of social studies in addressing the personal, societal and policy issues related to a global pandemic, and quickly designing and implementing student and inquiry-focused online learning. In times

of crisis, like the pandemic we are living through, we find our greatest hour in our unity. During my NCSS presidency between July 2019 and June 2020, I had the opportunity to engage with teachers and administrators across the country as we collectively sought strategies and ideas for creating powerful social studies learning and inquiry through virtual and remote education. I was inspired by the unsung efforts of PK–12 social studies educators, heroes of our children and youth, who worked endless hours to migrate brick and mortar schooling to virtual schools. Teachers had to learn new technologies with little time to prepare, found ways to connect and build community with their students, and creatively attended to the educational and socio-emotional needs of their students. NCSS created a COVID-19 resource page, developed webinars about teaching social studies online, and connected members with pandemic historians, authors, and researchers. While COVID-19 forced new, creative paths of delivering remote education, it also revealed the cavernous socio-economic and racial divisions in American society.

As social studies educators, we know we must come to terms with our nation’s past—a nation founded in slavery and the legacy of deep seeded racism and systemic oppression. We recognize the significant responsibility of facing the hard truth of our history and learning from it to inform our actions as we work to fight racism. We know that social studies education and educators play a vital role in creating the needed change.

We live in a world in which democracy is in retreat. Authoritarian regimes are on the rise, and the proportion of free countries is in decline. 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. Democracies do not die in darkness; they falter in plain sight with the consent of the governed.¹ Knowledge of social studies must serve as an anchor in a time when fake news and lies assail us, our structures of democracy are under siege, political divisions and social tensions intensify, democratic institutions are fractured, and nations face constitutional crises. Across the world, we see the increased use of authoritarianism, police and military forces, and social-media bullying, all to stifle peaceful protests and to squelch social unrest which seeks to end oppression. We know that democracy is not a spectator sport and social studies has a responsibility to safeguard it. We are called upon to situate government responses in historic, geographic, global and economic perspectives taught in social studies classrooms to deepen students’ understanding of their lived experiences, enhance their civic reasoning skills, and challenge them to question structural inequalities. We must galvanize our communities and youth to engage in the electoral process and to exercise informed civic action. We must use our collective voices to directly impact local, state, and national policies and

priorities to hold elected leaders and agents of the state accountable to the people. This is the Sputnik Moment of social studies and NCSS.²

We call upon social studies educators on the frontlines of change to continue to be active participants in the goal of combating racism, anti-blackness, gender discrimination, xenophobia, ageism, ableism, and other forms of bigotry in our communities, nation, and world.

We must leverage social studies to educate for a more compassionate, humane, and just society. We must continue to advocate for the right of all students to learn social studies and not accept a PK-12 education in which social studies is pushed aside. There has never been a more important time to teach or to learn social studies. 🌍

Notes

1. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Crown; Reprint edition, 2019), 109.
2. Tina Lane Heafner, "Agency, Advocacy, Activism: Action for Social Studies" *Social Education* 84, no. 1 (January/February 2020)



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