

# Solidarność

Anton Schulzki

*This speech was delivered virtually at the 101st NCSS annual conference on Saturday, November 20, 2021.*

**S**olidarność—a word I was introduced to back in the 1980s when I was a college student and about to enter the teaching profession. The Solidarity movement, the workers union of Poland, was just getting started and one of its founders, Nobel Laureate Lech Walesa, would go on to say, “The sole and basic source of our strength is the solidarity of workers, peasants, and the intelligentsia, the solidarity of the nation, the solidarity of people who seek to live in dignity, truth, and in harmony with their conscience.” In 1984, during my second year of teaching, a musical artist known as “Little Steven,” or Steve Van Zandt, released an album, *Voice of America*, with a track on it called “Solidarity.” In the song he wrote:

Look at me I ain't your enemy  
Why can't we walk on common ground  
We don't need to be fighting each other  
What we need, what we need is  
solidarity

Those lyrics and the words of Lech Walesa have stayed with me ever since. When it came time to develop a theme for the 101st National Council for the Social Studies annual conference, I knew that “Solidarity in Social Studies” was a natural bookend to my career. In some ways, it was a hopeful theme particularly based on the events of 2020, with the idea of coming together once again in solidarity. Unfortunately, rather than meeting face-to-face in Minneapolis as planned, we meet in a virtual world.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank from the bottom of my heart the Minnesota

Council for the Social Studies (MCSS) for their untiring and unwavering support of this conference. Local arrangements chair Jessica Ellison, current MCSS president P.J. Wiggin, and a host of volunteers shared the excitement and then disappointment of not being able to meet with us in person. Thank you to the American Bar Association’s Frank Valadez and Tiffany Middleton for the work they have done in conjunction with our conferences. An enormous debt of gratitude goes to Dr. Lawrence Paska and the entire team at NCSS. With David Bailor leading the way, we moved the conference from an in-person event to a fully online event in just three short months.

There have been many incredible individuals with whom I have crossed paths within NCSS who have been enormously supportive, including past presidents, presenters, conference attendees, the Canada Community, the Colorado Council for the Social Studies, past members of the NCSS board of directors, and especially the current board of directors. I would like to thank two other individuals for their unwavering inspiration and guidance. The co-chair of the conference is 2018–19 NCSS president India Meissel. She talked me off a few ledges and helped keep me focused. Finally, a person I met at my first NCSS conference in 2001, changed my professional journey; 2006–07 NCSS president Peggy Altoff, who became my district facilitator, provided constant counsel and support. She taught me that, as she stated in her 2006 NCSS presidential address “It is all about relationships!” That advice continues today, and I am forever in her debt.

Mural honoring “Solidarność,” Poland’s solidarity movement, and its leader Lech Walesa. Chisinau, Moldova, 2017



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The events from March 2020 through autumn of 2021 have placed enormous stress on social studies teachers across this country, and yet, some sense of satisfaction. In the spring of 2020, teachers moved heaven and earth in order to meet the needs of their students, oftentimes teaching in a remote fashion that very few had experience in doing. The 2020-21 school year provided continued challenges as teachers were faced with teaching in person, online, or a hybrid, sometimes not knowing how they would be teaching the next week! And yet social studies teachers and teachers across this country have risen to the occasion. Indeed, they represent the best of solidarity—coming together in unity to support each other and the students.

Beginning with the publication of the *1619 Project* by the *New York Times* in 2019 and continuing through elections of 2020 and 2021, social studies curriculums across the country came under greater scrutiny. For many educators, the term “critical race theory” became a term that is now omnipresent in our discussions with the public. Time and time again teachers, administrators, and school boards have been accused of somehow indoctrinating students. One would believe that social studies was the *only* subject that was being taught in schools. However, it is well documented that there has been a marked decrease in social studies education, particularly in the elementary and middle schools across this country over the past two decades! Putting it mildly, there continues to be a disconnect in an alarmingly increasing number of communities regarding what is actually being taught in our schools.

What has become more problematic and, in many ways, more insidious is the desire of some

to eradicate social studies education from the curriculum. They want to eradicate it by preventing teachers from addressing so-called divisive concepts or controversial issues in the classroom. We have seen legislation passed by several states and local school boards to limit what is being taught in social studies classrooms. The restrictions being put into place are antithetical to a solid social studies education; indeed, could have a chilling effect on education in general. The professionals in the classroom

have had their judgment questioned by those who have spent little or no time within those classrooms. Critics have spent little time or no time asking questions of teachers, administrators, or school boards. As a result, teachers across the country are choosing not to discuss certain topics in their classroom for fear of retribution—including the loss of their jobs—by those who would silence discussion and choke off academic freedom. This silencing of the free expression of ideas will, in the end, be more harmful to our students as they will lack a comprehensive education in social studies. There can be nothing more insidious than

the eradication of a subject from the curriculum because of fear, intimidation, intolerance, or political indifference.

It is tempting in this era of hyper-partisanship, an era that lacks both civil and civic discourse, a time when educators are feeling isolated and are under attack more and more, for educators to walk away from the profession or simply adhere to bad policy. I understand that it is difficult for many of my colleagues to speak up and to speak out against these attacks on social studies. It is, however, a time for us to stand together in solidarity for social studies. It is a time for us to use our collective voices in solidarity against ignorance, injustice, and indifference. It is a time for us to use

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our voices in solidarity for equity, diversity, and inclusion. It is time for us to stand in solidarity to support our students, our colleagues, and our profession.

The National Council for the Social Studies has long supported the academic freedom of teachers in the classroom. In the May 1951 issue of *Social Education*, the “Committee on Academic Freedom” published “Four Essentials of Freedom to Learn.” The “Four Essentials of Freedom to Learn” included the right to study significant issues, the right of access to publications that have a 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. This document was released during the period of McCarthyism, a period that was known to restrict discussions of difficult topics in education. NCSS took the lead in speaking out in support of the professionals in the classroom at that time, a tradition worth adhering to today, 70 years later.

NCSS has, in addition to supporting academic freedom, been a leader in maintaining a code of ethics regarding our profession. First published in 1990, and updated since, the NCSS *Revised Code of Ethics for the Social Studies Profession* stands as a model for all education professionals. Among the principles in our code is “the ethical responsibility of social studies professionals to provide to every student the knowledge, skills, experiences, and attitudes necessary to function as an effective participant in a democratic system” and “the ethical responsibility of social studies professionals to cultivate and maintain an instructional environment in which the free contest of ideas is prized.” These principles embody the integrity and professionalism that NCSS members bring to their classrooms and communities every day. We are an organization that supports a wide variety of educators in a plethora of educational settings. Attempts to limit or deny those professionals the ability to teach all students is something that NCSS must continue to stand against. Academic freedom, a professional code of ethics, highly trained social studies teachers, robust and available resources are all crucial to providing excellent social studies education in our classrooms. These are the principles that NCSS represents.

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. Educators have moved beyond using a single textbook in their classrooms and telling a single story to their students. Educators now have access to thousands of sources that were unavailable when the “Committee on Academic Freedom” published its statement in 1951 and when our code of ethics was published in 1990. The appropriate exercise of academic freedom is essential to the fulfillment of a broad and complete social studies education—one that prepares students for college, career, and civic life.

As Bayard Rustin said, “If we desire a society that is democratic, then democracy must become a means as well as an end.” One means of protecting our democracy is to ensure that outstanding social studies educators, indeed all educators, are free from coercion and threats. We, as members of NCSS, support the principles behind academic freedom and our code of ethics and are willing to educate all as to what a comprehensive, thorough, and accurate social studies education entails. I urge all of us to go out and continue to make the National Council for the Social Studies *the* leading social studies education organization—in solidarity with students, parents, the public, and most importantly, our fellow educators. ■



**Anton Schulzki** is President of NCSS (2021–2022).