

Building the Relationships That Matter

It's all about relationships!

Some of you have heard me speak of BFO's—which, for the uninitiated, are the letters that stand for Blinding Flash of the Obvious. We all know that—

- Every student at every grade level should be studying one or more of the disciplines of social studies every day.
- The strongest source of emotion for teachers is a colleague who agrees with them.
- Well, the BFO for this morning is...It's all about relationships.

None of us would be who we are without strong relationships, beginning with family. I have been blessed with three brothers, Larry, Robert and Gerry. They, their wives (who are my friends) and my nieces and nephews continue to provide valued support for my professional endeavors, especially during this year as president of NCSS.

Think of our years of preparation for the social studies profession and those who have made a difference in our lives; silently thank them for their professional passion and their determination in helping us succeed.

Think about those whom we have helped—students, colleagues and others—and the reasons we have been able to do so. Two years ago, I got an e-mail from Marcia Baynes, who had been my student teacher in 1974 at Herring Run Junior High in Baltimore City Public Schools. We worked together with both eighth and ninth grade students at that time. We have since met and visited, and have been fortunate to discover that the relationship we established those few—uh, light-years ago—is alive and well. Marcia—thank you for being here.

Relationships established in our work environment are important to us all. I would not be standing here this morning if not for the support of my colleagues and the administration in Colorado Springs. I would like to particularly thank Dr. Mary Thurman, assistant superintendent in District 11, who has chosen to demonstrate that support by participating in this conference.

It's all about relationships! How many of you have formed bonds through professional associations with your state councils and at NCSS conferences? And some of you will spend

time renewing those relationships at this conference. While this is the 86th annual NCSS meeting, I attended my first in 1986, twenty years ago, and haven't missed one since. There are still people I meet just once a year and I so look forward to that contact. I see by the nods of many heads that you know exactly what I mean.

It's all about relationships! I know that there is one way that I am related to everyone seated here—we all have a passion for one or more of the disciplines of social studies—and for conveying the knowledge and skills of those disciplines to our students and colleagues. That's why, in a room of 500 social studies educators, we have at least 5,000 different opinions on just about everything related to social studies! And for three days, we get to wear our professional passion on our sleeves or around our necks, fulfilling the promise, the potential of social studies by improving our practice. Our students are depending on us to do so.

It is *all* about relationships. We are strengthening ties with our sister organizations among the social studies disciplines. In September, a summit of representatives from all major social studies content organizations met for the first time in years because all of us recognize the need to increase the recognition of the disciplines of social studies during the process of reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). What each of us, individually, thinks about the requirements of NCLB is almost inconsequential. What we can do about it collectively is what will serve to eliminate the marginalization of our contents. We are working together, as representatives of content groups, to craft a message that each discipline organization can agree to support during the reauthorization process, and we have each agreed to supply available data and “marshal our troops” at key points during the process. These relationships with other organizations are bearing fruit for each of us and for our students, and I promise we will keep you informed as the process goes forward.

Again, it is all about relationships. English, Math, Social Studies and Science teacher organizations were invited to two meetings called by the Center for Education Policy here in Washington, D.C., to talk about issues related to the “highly qualified” provision of No Child Left Behind and teacher quality. NCSS Executive Director Susan Griffin and I rep-



resented NCSS at the first in September, and a past member of the Board of Directors attended the second, just this past Wednesday. The agendas for these meetings included discussions about issues of recruitment and retention, as well as how to redefine “highly qualified.” We were strengthening relationships with organizations like the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the National Association of School Boards and a dozen others. Many ideas were offered, and we discussed a change in policies that currently provide additional pay to attract teachers to poorly performing schools but do not provide the training and the support needed to work in those schools.

So, with these relationships established, NCSS is working to include social studies as a “core content” area in No Child Left Behind so that teachers in many areas will not be restricted in what they teach by what No Child Left Behind currently requires. Because social studies is not currently considered a core content area, many of our students, particularly at the high school level, will not be prepared to meet the demands of a global twenty-first century society. We have to be sure that schools have teachers who can teach the range of social studies subjects. If the one teacher in a small school is certified in history, that means students get no geography or civics or economics courses. You get the point! Along with our allies, we must use our power to ensure a rigorous and robust social studies education for every student, regardless of their circumstance.

It’s all about relationships. Members of our technology committee (Linda Unger, Roy Sovis, Zora Warren and Joe

O’Brien) worked diligently and on a tight schedule to complete an Information and Communications Technology or ICT literacy map. This was part of a collaboration with Partnership for the 21st Century, the leading advocacy organization for infusing twenty-first century skills into education. The ICT document enables educators to find concrete examples of how literacy in information and communications technology can be integrated into social studies, while making the teaching and learning of social studies more relevant to the demands of the twenty-first century.

It is all about relationships! We have an opportunity after the recent election to establish new relationships and to strengthen those that already exist. Following the “Holiday Season,” when we build and strengthen our personal relationships, comes the “legislative season” at the local, state and national levels. In the last few years our advocacy efforts—at all levels—have made social studies—at all levels—a more integral part of this “legislative season,” and each of us must work to make that happen again this year. You know what we will be working on at the national level, and some of you have already worked with your state council boards to establish legislative priorities. Here is yet another opportunity for those of us in social studies to be heard.

So, I am issuing the same challenge today that I issued during my campaign speech in the House of Delegates a few years ago. Here it is. Work with your state council and board to establish a single legislative priority, whether it be increasing social studies requirements, increasing time for social studies at the

continued on page 51



RELATIONSHIPS THAT MATTER *from page 5*

elementary level, or issues of assessment and accountability. Determine a strategy for advocacy, such as picking a single day during the legislative session and having all your members call their legislator on that day, or getting everyone to call one legislator. It takes as few as eight contacts to focus a legislator's interest on a specific issue. Then, follow up with calls, letters, and/or personal appearances. Build the relationships that matter to our students.

Another type of relationship that really takes personal effort is membership in state and national social studies councils. I know I am preaching to the choir here, especially to those whose state organizational memberships remain healthy. But all of us would benefit by building one new professional relationship that includes membership in our state and national organizations. We know that there is power in passion and power in relationships, but there is also power in numbers. I call on each of you to find a new member and to cultivate that professional relationship, especially among our pre-service and new teachers. I heard an idea at the summer's leadership institute that I would like to share... it was recommended that a gift bag be given to a student teacher as part of the congratulatory circumstances ending this challenging experience. It would obviously contain something personal, but also a student membership to both the state and national councils. Wow! What a way to build both a personal and professional relationship that will make a difference in a teacher's life as well as the lives of the many students who work with that teacher.



So, let's spend the next few days cultivating the relationships that are truly at the core of the promise and practice of social studies. And after the holidays, let's work on our political relationships. Thank you for demonstrating your professional passion by your presence here—both at the breakfast and at the conference. I wish you three days of unparalleled professional growth. And remember—It's all about relationships!!!! 🌐

PEGGY ALTOFF is president of National Council for the Social Studies and K-12 supervisor in social studies for District 11 in Colorado Springs, CO.