

Advocating for Social Studies: Documenting the Decline and Doing Something About It

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This article illustrates the efforts of educators in North Carolina to advocate for the social studies in an age of high-stakes assessment and tight budgets. Although this story begins with one state, the marginalization of social studies in elementary schools is a nationwide problem. The federal No Child Left Behind law (NCLB) is due for reauthorization, and committees in the House and Senate have begun their deliberations; so now is the time to become informed about the issue and get involved.¹

In this article, we summarize the data about the decline in instructional time devoted to social studies in schools, discuss the barriers inhibiting the teaching of elementary social studies, and then describe our advocacy visit to Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., where we discussed these issues with members of Congress and their staffs. We also offer a set of advocacy guidelines in hopes of encouraging social studies professionals to state their concerns to their legislators and the public.

Rationale for Study and Action

Educational researchers have observed that, in this current era of high stakes testing, there is a reduced emphasis placed on the elementary social studies.² They provide strong evidence of

- (a) reduced time for social studies instruction, and
- (b) emphasis on high-stakes testing rather than subject matter.

These problems, most evident in the elementary grades, seem to be an unintended consequence of NCLB.

In using the phrase “high-stakes testing,” we are referring to policies in which students can be denied graduation, teachers sanctioned, and schools lose federal funds when state-administered test scores do not meet an arbitrary, quantitative hurdle, as required by NCLB. The narrow focus on high-stakes testing is “squeezing the intellectual life out of our schools as they are transformed into what are essentially giant test-prep centers.”³ We are alarmed that a significant part of the curriculum that is squeezed out is social studies.

A. Lost Time

Recent research indicates that the time spent on social studies instruction is declining across the nation.⁴ In a national, random survey, “teachers in two of the three grades surveyed (second and fifth) spend little classroom time on social

studies.”⁵ According to the first phase of a longitudinal study conducted across North Carolina, most elementary students are receiving social studies instruction only 2 or 3 days a week for only half of the year. During the other half of the year, science is usually taught. Last year, North Carolina implemented an end-of-grade science test. However, a similar state test for social studies is not planned. There is evidence that the trend for instructional time is shifting further away from social studies in order to increase time for science instruction. Primary (K-2) North Carolina teachers report spending 15 to 30 minutes on social studies on the days that it is taught.⁶ Another study found North Carolina elementary teachers teaching social studies only 30 minutes a week.⁷

According to the 2001 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) teacher survey results, 37 percent of U.S. fourth graders spent only 1 to 2 hours per week on social studies, 31 percent spent 2 to 3 hours, and 19 percent spent more than 3 hours. However, 73 percent of fourth graders spent 4 or more hours on mathematics.⁸

Others have confirmed that social studies instructional time has decreased in elementary schools, middle schools, and “low-performing schools” since

Advocacy Talking Points

Talking Point A

The time devoted to teaching core social studies subjects in elementary grades—such as civics, history, geography, and economics—is being severely reduced.

In North Carolina, social studies is taught 2-3 days a week; 15-30 minutes in K-2 classes.	Rock et al., 2006
North Carolina teachers ranked social studies a distant third, behind language arts and math and just ahead of science.	Rock et al., 2006
Teachers in Washington State only spend 1-3 hours per week on social studies.	Stecher & Chun, 2001
North Carolina elementary teachers teach social studies about 30 minutes a week.	Burroughs et al., 2005
Only 19% of teachers in South Carolina and North Carolina reported teaching social studies daily.	Heafner, Lipscomb, & Rock, 2006
Teachers in South Carolina and North Carolina ranked social studies third or fourth among key content of language arts, math, science, and social studies.	Heafner, Lipscomb, & Rock, 2006
Indiana elementary teachers averaged only 12 minutes per week teaching social studies.	VanFossen, 2005
More than 500 Indiana elementary teachers ranked social studies last behind language arts, math, and science.	VanFossen, 2005
More than 900 principals (including administrators from Maryland and Illinois) reported a decrease in instructional time for elementary social studies.	von Zastrow & Janc, 2004
More than 100 South Carolina principals ranked reading, language arts, math, and science before social studies.	Lintner, 2006 Leming, 2006

Talking Point B

Testing is driving what is taught. Other tested subjects (most notably language arts and math) have been increased within the school day, thus cutting the time for social studies dramatically.

More than 900 principals (including administrators from Maryland and Illinois) reported that their schools are taking instructional time from social studies to focus more on tested subjects.	von Zastrow & Janc, 2004
About two-thirds of surveyed teachers (from North Carolina) said that the amount of time spent preparing students in tested subjects was a major barrier to providing appropriate instructional time for social studies.	Rock et al., 2006
Teachers in Washington State reported increases in instructional time for tested subjects and decreases for non-tested subjects (including social studies).	Stecher & Chun, 2001
A group of North Carolina teachers consistently reported that the amount of instructional time on social studies has been reduced in order to spend more time on other subjects that are on standardized tests.	Burroughs et al., 2005
Teachers in South Carolina and North Carolina stated the main barrier to teaching social studies was lack of time due to the emphasis on other tested subjects.	Heafner, Lipscomb, & Rock, 2006
Indiana elementary teachers also noted a strain on social studies instruction because of tested subjects.	VanFossen, 2005

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Professors Eric Groce (left) and Tina Heafner (right) met with Rep. Virginia Foxx (R-NC), on Capitol Hill, July 26, 2007.

NCLB was instituted in 2002.⁹ This marginalization contradicts the stated aims of NCLB: to reduce the “achievement gap” and provide more opportunities to all students, and, in particular, to low-performing students.¹⁰ A school experience with scant social studies lessons and activities, however, means that less opportunity is being provided.¹¹ In most school curricula, history, geography, civics and government, and economics are deemed to be core subjects; however, following the provisions of NCLB, social studies is not funded or properly supported with reasonable accountability measures.

B. Testing, Testing

A report, “Academic Atrophy: The Condition of Liberal Arts in America’s Schools” details how elementary social studies, the arts, and foreign languages are being marginalized as the curriculum

narrows in order for tested subjects to be taught.¹² Six additional studies indicate that state testing programs and standards-based reform are barriers that prevent the teaching of social studies.¹³ In the majority of states, elementary social studies is not a tested subject; therefore, it is not taught as often as courses linked with standardized assessments. In 1998, 30 states required statewide elementary social studies testing.¹⁴ At the present time, only 11 states require a state social studies test: Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wisconsin.¹⁵

Some research suggests that teachers might devote more time to teaching social studies if a statewide assessment was mandated.¹⁶ Conversely, it also appears that teachers will sacrifice quality teaching (avoiding “best practice” methods that often require more preparation

and class time) if there are pressures to improve state standardized test scores. Subsequently, testing should be used to extend student learning and inform the teacher, not punish a teacher, much less threaten an entire school system or state with loss of funds.¹⁷ A comparison of two states, one in which social studies is tested and another state that does not test social studies in the elementary grades, found that the inclusion of testing in the elementary grades doubled instructional time for students in the tested state; however, teacher motives for teaching social studies varied greatly between the two states. The results suggest that increased time for teaching social studies did not necessarily translate into quality social studies instruction. There seems to be more to quality teaching than simply “more testing.” A majority of North Carolina teachers surveyed said that they enjoyed teaching social studies, and teachers who

valued social studies were more likely to teach it.¹⁹

Visiting Capitol Hill

We visited Capitol Hill to make our representatives aware of these problems and to ask for action to promote the teaching and learning of the social studies. The dialogue that transpired with our congressional leaders is somewhat unsettling, yet offers insights about the importance of advocacy and action.

As social studies educators, we are very aware of the importance of civic participation and the need for constituents to voice their concerns. Our elected officials need to hear from their constituents so that they can make informed decisions on behalf of the citizenry. That sounds like Civics Education 101, but the reality is that all too often we assume that politicians are aware of current issues especially in education, when in fact, they are not. We met with congressional representatives and educational advisors in December 2006 and July 2007. Most of these people responded to our news with statements of disbelief or defensiveness.

Providing Evidence

We answered this skepticism with talking points based on multiple research articles that substantiate the negative impact of testing on social studies instruction in North Carolina and across the country (Handout). NCLB offers only rhetorical support for civics; it does not include social studies or its core disciplines (i.e., civics, history, geography, and economics) within the accountability equation, nor does it offer financial support for the teaching of social studies.

We explained how high stakes testing places pressures on teachers, whose job security often depends on their students' achievement on standardized tests as well as compulsory compliance with scripted lessons. "This is not what we intended with No Child Left Behind," said one congressional advisor. The advisor emphasized the importance of hearing more about teacher experiences, and she asked for qualitative research that would

describe the challenges that teachers face, as well as the consequences of the "curriculum squeeze." This was a frequent response among the educational advisors, which clearly shows a need for teachers to visit their congressmembers and voice their experiences and struggles. There is no need to travel to D.C.; you can visit them in their home offices in your own state. Check out the Senate and House calendars to determine when members are in their home state.¹⁹

One young advisor asked us pointedly, "What offices have you visited: Democratic or Republican?" We were quick to point out that our goal was not partisan action, but a bi-partisan awareness of national educational issues, including practices that are detrimental to the development of an informed and involved citizenry.²⁰ At the end of the day, we agreed to continue speaking out and organizing.

Appropriate Assessment?

It appears that adding social studies into the mix of required, standardized tests does increase the amount of time social studies is being taught, but the quality of the instruction may be compromised in some of the testing states.²¹ We need to continue to have the conversation about whether more testing is the solution to current problems.²² Assessments should help teachers know if learning goals have been met, not define instructional time or encourage punitive actions toward teachers or students. The American Psychological Association, the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, and many others have expressed educational concerns and issued statements critical of high-stakes testing: "Punishing students, educators, or schools based solely on the results of one type of assessment violates all standards of proper test use and should not be done."²³

Even if a test in social studies would increase instructional time, what price will students pay for this? When science testing begins in 2007, then "the number of tests that states will need to administer annually to comply with NCLB is expected to rise to 68 million."²⁴ Do chil-

dren need an additional test? Will testing social studies actually improve instruction in our elementary classrooms across the nation, or will it pressure teachers to teach lists of events and dates out of context for students to memorize?

The reevaluation and reform of assessment procedures must have a significant place in this discussion.²⁵ New York is an example of a state that has students synthesize information on their social studies test. For example, on the fifth-grade State of New York Social Studies Test, there is a multiple-choice section, as well as a constructed-response section. Document-based questions are included in which students compose an essay that incorporates examples and details from a social studies document.²⁶ This type of assessment goes beyond the typical multiple choice test, and requires teachers to develop lessons in more depth.

Your Turn

We have heard about the marginalization of social studies in past decades.²⁷ Now, we must take action. We provide a set of guidelines summarized in the acronym **ADVOCACY** (sidebar). We also want to hear from you today. Tell us your story. What are you doing to advocate for the social studies? How are you dealing with the problem of marginalization in your classroom or school? E-mail your advocacy ideas and experiences to ssadvocacy@ecu.edu. We must learn from each other and become more vocal. Sharing our advocacy ideas could empower and inform us as we fight to restore social studies to a meaningful and essential place within the curriculum. 🌐

Notes

1. Social Studies Discipline Organizations Joint Statement on NCLB (March 29, 2007), www.ncss.org/advocacy/nclb.
2. Susie Burroughs, Eric C. Groce, and Mary L. Webeck, "Social Studies Education in the Age of Testing and Accountability," *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice* 24, no. 3 (2005): 13-20; Terrance Furin, "High-Stakes Testing: Death of Our Democracy?" *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 15, no. 4 (2003): 32; James S. Leming, Lucien Ellington, and Mark Schug, "The State of Social Studies: A National Random Survey of Elementary and Middle School

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NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

A.D.V.O.C.A.C.Y.

A few suggestions on how to be an advocate for social studies in your community

Awareness: Describe the Problem

Our legislators do not know what is really happening in schools unless teachers tell them. Describe in your own words what you experience in your own practice of teaching social studies. Deliver this message in a brief letter and (if possible, once a year) in a personal visit with state and national legislators.

Data: Know the Research

A good argument is made when you combine examples from your own personal experience with research results from a larger sample. For example, research shows that some elementary students only receive 12 minutes of social studies per day.¹ This statistic would be a good talking point during advocacy efforts. The accompanying Handout (p. 256) offers these types of talking points to use during your advocacy campaign. There is hardly enough time in a teacher's day to eat lunch, let alone read research articles in order to remain up-to-date on the status of social studies. The Handout is provided for teachers and educators who need a quick reference to current research about social studies education.

Visit: Contact Your Legislators

Begin contacting the policymakers at the state and national levels. It is not necessary to travel to a state or national capital; schedule a visit to your members of Congress when they are home during a break. Sending a letter by fax is the next best method of communication. E-mails are often lost in a flood of electronic petitioning, and letters sent in the mail are delayed and can be destroyed by the security screening process in Washington, D.C. Find your representatives and senators online at www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm and www.house.gov/Welcome.shtml.

Optimism: Think Positively

It is essential to remain positive when you begin advocacy visits or advocacy efforts. Do not become discouraged if a legislator or an aid is not immediately convinced by your arguments or backs away from promising to hold a certain position. The point of your visit is to deliver information, not to twist arms.

Communicate: Convey Your Purpose

Communicate with anyone who will listen, not just to "leaders." Inform the parents of your students. Parents can have a strong voice. If parents knew about the decline of social studies instruction in the schools, they would likely become strong allies. Communicate your message to newspaper reporters, school boards, and local community leaders, as well.


Audience: Be Relevant to the Listener

Think about your audience. Make your message match your audience. Ask yourself what would be important for a parent to know? Before visiting a legislator, check the voting record to see how he or she has voted in the past. If you are comfortable lobbying, ask your legislator to consider taking a specific stand on a specific piece of upcoming legislation. (The difference between advocacy and lobbying is discussed at www.aafcs.org/PPToolkit/advocating.html and www.npaction.org/article/articleview/148/1/248.)

Challenge: Question the Norm

Today, key stakeholders (such as parents) do not often realize that inadequate social studies instructional time is the norm. This problem must be publicized on a large scale. We need to speak out and begin to question why teaching social studies 30 minutes per week in some states has become acceptable.

You: Be the Role Model

You are the example for your colleagues and other members of the community. Certainly, social studies teachers can learn to advocate effectively. There are many ways to become a social studies advocate. Invite parents to your room during a social studies activity. Highlight a school social studies event at every faculty meeting. Visit www.socialstudies.org/toolkit to find social studies advocacy ideas and sample letters to use in your efforts. 

Note

1. Phillip J. VanFossen, "Reading and Math Take So Much of the Time... An Overview of Social Studies Instruction in Elementary Classrooms in Indiana," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 33, no. 3 (2005): 376-403.

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"We have embarked on one of the greatest social engineering experiments ever to be conducted on our children. With no evidence of producing better citizens, neighbors, employees, or college students, we are testing our children at a rate never before known in our society. And we are using these tests to sort and label our kids and our schools. It has been a multibillion-dollar gamble with nothing at all to show for it to date."

—George Wood,

"A View From the Field: NCLB's Effects on Classrooms and Schools," in *Many Children Left Behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is Damaging our Children and our Schools*, Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2004, p.44.

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 16. VanFossen; Heafner et al.
 17. Neill and Guisbond.
 18. Heafner et al.
 19. Senate Calendar: www.senate.gov/pagelayout/legislative/two_column_table/2007_Schedule.htm; House Calendar: www.house.gov/house/House_Calendar.shtml.
 20. See the Partnership for 21st Century Skills at www.21stcenturyskills.org.
 21. Heafner et al.
 22. Rock et al.
 23. Quote is from Neill and Guisbond, 32; see also APA Position Paper, "Appropriate Use of High-Stakes Testing in Our Nation's Schools," May 2001, www.apa.org/releases/testing.html.
 24. Christy Guilfoyle, "NCLB: Is There Life Beyond Testing?" *Educational Leadership* 64, no. 3 (2006): 8-13, 8.
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