

Point of View

Citizenship Must Not Be the Last of the Three “C’s”

Peggy Altoff

NCSS is nearly 90 years old, and in all of these years, it has been the goal of the organization and its members to prepare students to be effective citizens. There has not always been universal agreement on specifics, but few would dispute that knowledge and skills acquired through social studies provide students with the tools essential for civic competency.

Outside of the organization, the goal of preparing students for citizenship can be found in the halls and walls of nearly every school, district administration building and school board meeting room in the nation. However, in the last few years, citizenship has disappeared from the rhetoric and reality of educational reform efforts at all levels. The shift was barely noticeable at first, but now the goals of education have been reduced to two of the “three C’s”—college and career. From the Gates Foundation to state houses and Congress, the purpose is now to increase the number of high school graduates ready for success in college and career. Top this with the narrowing of the curriculum resulting from the emphasis on No Child Left Behind’s mandates for reading and math, and it becomes even more of a challenge to embrace the future by educating citizens for democracy. As Charles C. Haynes and Terry Pickeral observed in an article in *The School Administrator* (October 2008), “Reading and math are important—very important. But if we care about the health of our nation, then we must be more concerned about what kind of citizens do the math and read the books.”

Recently, I attended a public meeting of my state’s Graduation Guidelines

Development Council, which is charged with recommending minimum high school graduation guidelines to the State Board of Education. “Clicker” technology was used to have attendees respond to questions and to initiate discussion. There was one question about the primary outcome of education, with six possible responses: Post-secondary Readiness, Workforce Readiness, Minimum Competencies, Socialization and General Education, Create a Thoughtful and Responsible Citizenry, and Other. As you might expect, the majority of participants selected the first two, with 15 percent selecting the “citizenry” option. The discussion comments were very revealing. Speakers for each of the first two “assumed” that other options were considered part and parcel of their selections. When I finally commented, it was to observe that making such assumptions could be part of the problem. I referred to Justice Sandra Day O’Connor’s comment, made at the 2007 NCSS conference and elsewhere, that the knowledge and skills of citizenship were not acquired through the genes. I used the “three C’s” to indicate that citizenship needed to be addressed with as much intentionality as the current focus on college and careers if our students are to be prepared to maintain this

democracy; otherwise, post-secondary and workforce readiness will have little meaning.

We cannot throw out the baby with the bathwater! Part of embracing the future must be hard work to assure that we can still engage in the essential tasks that are part of that future, namely to “teach students the content knowledge, intellectual skills, and civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy,” as the NCSS mission statement affirms. The passion that each of us carries for one or more of the disciplines of social studies must be expanded and enlarged to include a passion for advocacy in order to assure that preparation for citizenship remains both an overarching goal of education and the greatest achievement of the 21st century. When we attend meetings in our schools and districts, when we attend civic or religious gatherings, when we advocate for social studies among our local, state, and national legislators, we must urge every individual or group to engage in the work needed to maintain and enhance citizenship as a goal of education.

There must be three C’s on the horizon: citizenship, college, and career, with a complete social studies education helping to prepare students for each of them. 🌐

Peggy Altoff is past president of NCSS and K-12 coordinator in social studies for District 11 in Colorado Springs, Colorado.