

Are High School Economics Teachers the Same as Other Social Studies Teachers?

The Results of a National Survey

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Economics in the Curriculum and Economics Teachers

Economics has assumed an important role in the social studies curriculum. In a 2007 survey, the National Council on Economic Education (NCEE) reported the following:¹

- Economics is included, at least to some extent, in the educational standards of all states.
- Seventeen states require students to take an economics course as a high school graduation requirement (up from 14 in 2004 and 13 in 1998).
- Twenty-three states require the testing of student knowledge in economics, two fewer than in 2004.

Personal finance, the application of economics to household decision-making, appears to be of growing importance. The same NCEE survey found that:

- Courses in personal finance are now included, at least to some extent, in the educational standards of 40 states (up from 34 in 2004 and 21 in 1998).
- Twenty-eight states (up from 20 in 2004 and 14 in 1998) now require these standards to be implemented.
- Seven states require students to take a personal finance course as a high school graduation requirement (up from six in 2004 and one in 1998).
- Nine states require the testing of stu-

dent knowledge in personal finance (up from eight states in 2004 and one in 1998).

Previous studies have focused on how well students are learning economics, how teachers are trained, and other outcomes associated with improved understanding of economics.² However, almost nothing is reported in the research literature on economics teachers' views of the curriculum, how they teach their subject, their views on public issues and professional development. To improve our understanding of the teaching of economics we surveyed 300 economics teachers as

part of a larger survey we commissioned of 1,201 social studies teachers.

Why Do Economics Teachers Think Economics is Important in the Curriculum?

When asked about specific reasons why economics should be included in the school curriculum, a large majority of economics teachers (87 percent) emphasized that economics enables students to better understand important current economic issues. This suggests that macroeconomic content and international trade issues are a high priority to economics teachers. Economics teachers also agreed that economics helps students become well-adjusted, productive members of society (80 percent), and enables students to understand the basic concepts and generalizations of the discipline (79

Methodology

We commissioned the Center for Survey Research and Analysis (CSRA) at the University of Connecticut to conduct a survey of high school social studies teachers across the nation. A nationally representative random sampling of public high schools was drawn from the comprehensive, representative database available from the National Center for Educational Statistics. Schools were stratified by size (number of students), region, and urbanicity to ensure a representative sample. Telephone interviews were conducted from December 2007 to April 2008. A total of 1,201 surveys were completed. Surveys were conducted with 300 U.S. history teachers, 300 world history teachers, 300 economics teachers, and 301 civics/government teachers. This article will focus on the responses of the economic teachers. This research was supported by a grant from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation and a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to the National Council on Economic Education (now known as the Council for Economic Education).

percent). However, they do not find it as important to teach students how to be activists supporting economic policies using market-oriented solutions (45 percent) or to teach students how to be activists supporting economic policies that use the power of government (41 percent).

A somewhat different pattern emerged when economics teachers were asked to rate the reasons for including economics in the curriculum in order of importance (most important and second most important). Encouraging these teachers to assign priorities to goals adds insight into what economics teachers actually think. Most economics teachers appear to regard economics content as an important tool in developing critical thinking skills. On the importance of critical thinking, they seem to be similar to the other social studies teachers who participated in the overall study, although somewhat less enthusiastic. Table 1 shows that when asked which of the reasons is the most important to include economics in the curriculum, economics teachers choose the objective of forming critically-minded, reflective citizens (48 percent). Both U.S. history teachers and civics teachers ranked critical thinking as most important, but rated it higher at 60 percent and 62 percent respectively.

Predictably, economics teachers stress the importance of mastering basic economic concepts. They ranked developing an understanding of basic economic concepts as the second most important reason (42 percent) to include economics in the school curriculum. The least important reasons identified by the surveyed teachers were developing activists using the government (12 percent), developing activists using the market (11 percent), and helping students learn about other countries (6 percent).

What Content Is Most Important in Economics?

High school economics texts reflect a strong emphasis on core microeconomic and macroeconomic content. Much less content, only about three or four chapters

Table 1: **Most Important Reasons to Include Economics in the Curriculum**

	Combined importance	Most important	2 nd most important
Forming critically-minded, reflective citizens	48%	28%	20%
Developing an understanding of basic economic concepts	42%	24%	18%
Using economics to better understand current affairs	34%	14%	20%
Developing an appreciation of core economic values and freedoms	23%	11%	12%
Helping students adjust to society	20%	10%	10%
Developing activists to use government to solve current societal problems	12%	4%	8%
Developing activists to use market to solve current societal problems	11%	6%	5%
Helping students learn about other countries	6%	2%	4%

Table 2: **Most Important Topics to Emphasize in the Economics Curriculum**

Question: Considering all the reasons we have discussed regarding where the emphasis should be in the economics curriculum, which do you think should receive the most/second-most emphasis?

	Combined importance	Most important	2 nd most important
Personal finance and consumer education	62%	44%	18%
Microeconomic concepts	36%	14%	22%
Macroeconomic concepts	31%	14%	17%
Critical thinking about free market institutions	30%	15%	15%
How markets create prosperity	13%	5%	8%
International trade and institutions	13%	4%	9%
Injustice in the economic system	11%	3%	8%
Non-market economic systems	0%	0%	0%

of textbooks, has been devoted to consumer issues or personal finance. This emphasis reflects that for years, the standard high school texts have been simplified versions of college textbooks on the principles of economics.

In contrast to the emphasis of the textbooks, it appears that economics teachers place a much higher value on personal finance and consumer education. Table 2 shows that 62 percent of the respondents ranked personal finance and consumer education as the most important

content. This was followed by microeconomic content and macroeconomic content, which are widely regarded to be the vast majority of the content in a typical economics course, and which ranked second (36 percent) and third (31 percent) respectively, far below personal finance. Interestingly, while forming critical thinking skills was the most important reason for including economics in the curriculum, thinking critically about free market institutions ranks very low (30 percent). Perhaps most surpris-

Table 3: **Anticipated Vote—By Subject**

Question: In the upcoming national election of 2008, do you anticipate that you will vote mostly...

	Total	US History	World History	Civics	Economics
Democratic	35%	36%	35%	37%	34%
Republican	22%	22%	22%	19%	26%
Independent	16%	17%	14%	19%	13%
Haven't decided yet	17%	18%	20%	17%	14%

ing of all, only international trade and institutions—topics of heated debate in the 2008 presidential election—ranked even lower (13 percent).

How Do Economics Teachers Teach?

No national study that we know of has been published which compares the overall pedagogy of high school economics teachers and other social studies teachers. Economics teachers have long been regarded as using teaching methods of instruction that are more or less like those of other social studies teachers. There has been little reason to think otherwise.

The results of this study reveal that whole class teacher presentation/discussion is the most widely used activity by social studies teachers. However, some differences do emerge. While seven in ten economics teachers report using this activity frequently, this is less than that reported by the U.S. history (78 percent) and civics teachers (77 percent). This is further illustrated by the finding that only 38 percent of economics teachers reported using whole class teacher presentation and discussion in their most recent class, while half of the teachers in the other subjects used it. Economics teachers spend more class period time working in small groups, on problem-solving activities, and on Internet-based activity in comparison to the other subject teachers.

This suggests that economics teachers are somewhat more activity-oriented than other social studies teachers. This finding might be due to the fact that a variety of relatively short and widely

used simulations and problem-solving activities are easily available to economics teachers. Two possible explanations come to mind. The National Council on Economic Education, which is rated by teachers as a valuable source of curriculum materials, has published many materials that include simulations and demonstrations in addition to direct methods. Some of these—such as a market price simulation in which students replicate making trades on the floor of a commodities exchange, and a trading activity sometimes referred to as a “grab bag,” where student exchange “gifts” and calculate how satisfaction increases when trade becomes freer—are popular simulations that involve intense activity, but take up relatively little class time. Second, the fundamentals of economics include a more precise set of agreed principles and definitions than other social studies disciplines, which may make it easier to use focused simulations and demonstrations to demonstrate a specific concept.

Are Economics Teachers More Market-Oriented Than Other Social Studies Teachers?

High school economics teachers are responsible for teaching about the private sector and how markets work as well as the role of government in a market economy. We wondered whether high school economics teachers are more market-oriented in their attitudes than other social studies teachers. The results reported in Table 3 suggest that when it comes to voting in the 2008 election, economics teachers are not so much different from their social studies

colleagues. For example, 34 percent of the economics teachers planned to vote Democratic compared to 35 percent for the other social studies teachers in our survey. However, Table 3 also shows that 26 percent of economics teachers planned to vote Republican compared to 22 percent for all social studies teachers. This suggests that economics teachers are slightly more conservative than other social studies teachers. It is also interesting to note that economics teachers are less likely to view themselves as Independents than their social studies colleagues.

Economics teachers appear to diverge from other social studies teachers when it comes to their views on specific issues. Table 4 reveals that economics teachers have views about economic issues that are distinctly different from those of other subject area teachers. Economics teachers are more likely to agree that the strength of this country is mostly based on the success of American business (74 percent) and that government regulation of business usually does more harm than good (47 percent). They are also less likely to agree that the rich just get richer while the poor get poorer (51 percent) and business corporations make too much profit (49 percent).

The same pattern emerges in terms of support for certain policies. Economics teachers, for example, are less likely to support the U.S. government guaranteeing health insurance for all citizens than teachers of other subjects (51 percent, compared to about 60 percent of the U.S. history, world history and civics teachers).

Taken together, the responses reported in Tables 3 and 4 suggest that teachers of economics are somewhat more market-oriented than are their colleagues who teach in other areas of social studies. Perhaps this is to be expected since the content of economics stresses the importance of markets in allocating goods and services. It is nonetheless another finding that makes high school economics teachers somewhat distinctive.

Table 4: **Economics Teachers Opinions on Issues**

Question: For the following questions, please tell me if you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. (Percent agreeing)

	Total	US History	World History	Civics	Economics
The strength of this country is mostly based on the success of American business	67%	64%	68%	62%	74%
Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good	38%	30%	40%	36%	47%
Business corporations make too much profit	59%	64%	63%	61%	49%
Today it is true that the rich just get richer while the poor get poorer	61%	65%	65%	61%	51%

Sources of Supplemental Curriculum Materials and Professional Development

Economics teachers, like other social studies teachers, are interested in finding supplemental curriculum materials and attending professional development events to keep them up-to-date on content and to enliven their teaching. The economics teachers in this study were asked about the value of specific economic organizations in terms of supplemental curriculum and professional development they provide. For both supplemental curriculum and professional development, the National Council on Economic Education was viewed by teachers to be extremely, or very, valuable (54 percent and 43 percent respectively).

Economics teachers also value materials from the Federal Reserve as well as state councils on economic education and their affiliated university-based centers. Forty-five percent of teachers rate the Federal Reserve’s supplemental curriculum as extremely, or very, valuable, and 33 percent rate it similarly for its professional development opportunities. Thirty-four percent of teachers rate the supplemental curriculum from state councils and university-based centers for economic education as extremely or very valuable, and 35 percent say the same about the professional development opportunities.

Conversely, economics teachers find both Junior Achievement and Jumpstart Coalition for Personal Financial Literacy as not too, or not, valuable for supplemental curriculum (42 percent and 38 percent, respectively) or for professional development (45 percent and 43 percent, respectively). It is important to note some teachers are unfamiliar with the Foundation for Teaching Economics (19 percent), Junior Achievement (18 percent), and Jumpstart Coalition for Personal Financial Literacy (32 percent) and, therefore, could not rate the value of the materials and opportunities provided by these organizations.

Discussion and Conclusions

How should we reconcile the views of economics teachers regarding why economics is important as a discipline and what content within economics they believe to be of greatest importance? A surprising finding is that personal finance and consumer education content are regarded as being more important than basic principles of economics. We suspect that high school economics teachers view personal finance and consumer education as something very distinctive that they can offer—content of practical and immediate value to students that is perhaps different from the somewhat more abstract content offered in the other parts of the economics course as well as in other social studies courses.

In spite of this, it seems that high school economics teachers spend the majority of their time teaching basic micro- and macroeconomic concepts.

A number of factors support this interpretation. First, the 2006 National Assessment of Economic Progress (NAEP) found that about two-thirds of twelfth-grade students reported taking either an advanced or a general economics course. The NAEP results showed that 79 percent of twelfth-graders performed at or above Basic, 42 percent at or above Proficient, and 3 percent at Advanced. While caution must be used in comparing NAEP results in economics to performance of students on other tests, this level of achievement was much higher than the levels attained by students in history, geography, or civics. It would seem difficult to attain this result if economics teachers were not stressing basic economics principles in the high school course.

Second, most of the content of standard, high school economics textbooks remain devoted to basic principles of economics. Leet and Lopus,³ for example, found that all eleven high school economics textbooks in their study covered most of the standards identified in the *Voluntary National Standards in Economics* published by the National Council on Economic Education.⁴ These standards rest firmly on mainstream principles of economics. Finally, the emergence of Advanced Placement economics courses in high school, as discussed by Sally Meek and John Morton in this issue of *Social Education*, also suggests that standard economics content remains dominant even while teachers regard personal finance as being highly important.

We note, however, that high school economics teachers do not seem to place much importance on international economics. The results here show that content involving international trade and institutions, as well as the need to help students learn about other countries, were ranked relatively low. Given the importance in international trade and the

many other changes related to globalization, this is alarming. It again raises questions about the structure of the typical high school economics course. If high school economics teachers are spending a great deal of time on matters related to personal finance—how to balance a checkbook—while ignoring content regarding the benefits of trade, how international trade is measured, and international economic institutions, this represents a serious imbalance at a time when a proper understanding of the global economy is more important than ever. 🌐

Notes

1. National Council on Economic Education, *Personal Finance and Entrepreneurship Education in our Nation's Schools, 2007: A Report Card: Survey of the States* (New York: National Council on Economic Education). See www.ncee.net.
2. Please see Steven L. Miller and Phillip J. VanFossen, "Recent Research on the Teaching and Learning of Pre-Collegiate Economics Education," in *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education*, eds. Linda L. Levstik and Cynthia A. Tyson (New York: Routledge, 2008), 284-306 and Michael Watts, *What Works: A Review of Research on Outcomes and Effective Program Delivery in Precollege Economic Education* (New York: National Council on Economic Education), which can be found at www.ncee.net/eee/research/WhatWorks.pdf.
3. Don R. Leet and Jane S. Lopus, "Ten Observations on High School Economics," *Citizenship, Social and Economic Education: An International Journal* 7, no. 3 (2007): 201-241; National Council on Economic Education, *Voluntary Content Standards in Economics* (New York: National Council on Economic Education, 1998).
4. National Council on Economic Education, *Voluntary Content Standards in Economics* (New York, NY: National Council on Economic Education, 1998).

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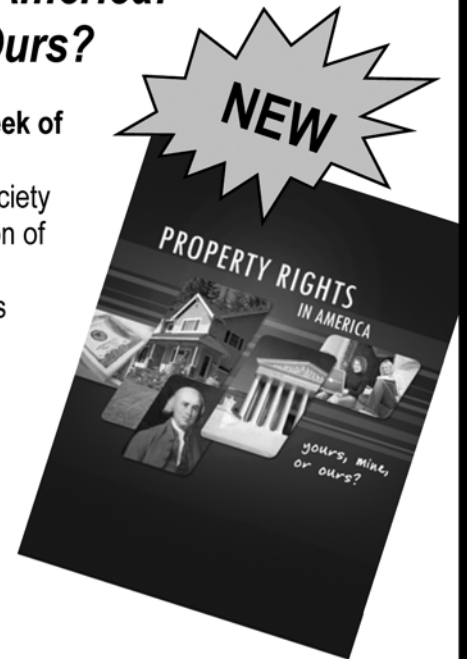
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