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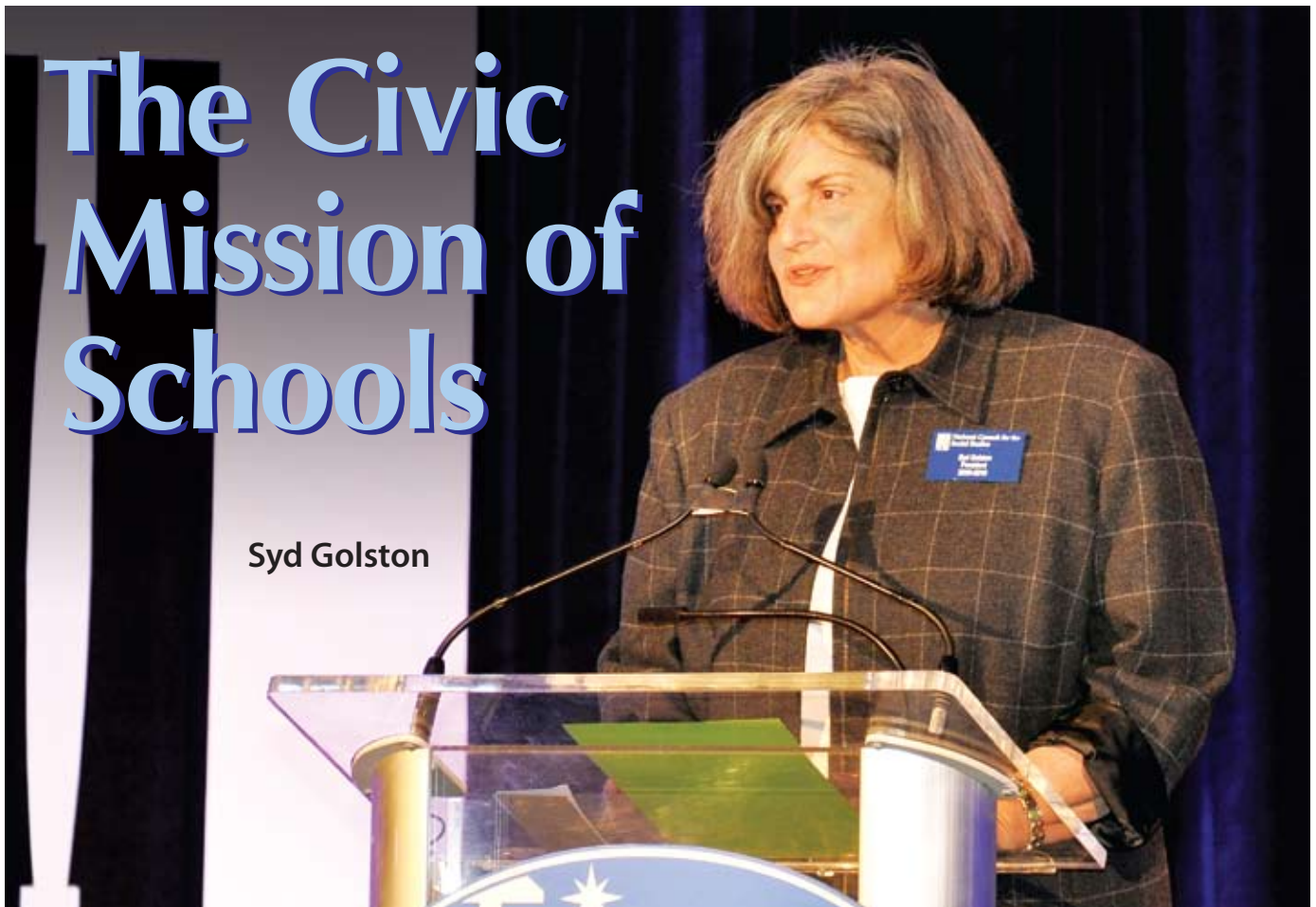
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This article is derived from the presidential address delivered at the NCSS Annual Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, on November 13, 2009.



The Civic Mission of Schools

Syd Golston

Thank you to the wonderful North Atlanta High School Choir, with director Rushia Evans and choreographer Bernard Jackson. I made a special request for this breakfast—a singing group from an Atlanta high school, and when you ask Dr. Eddie Bennett for something, you get the very best there is. Eddie was my co-chair for this conference, and he is the first person I would like to thank this morning, for his friendship and his leadership and his hard work. If I'm ever in a lifeboat, I hope Eddie Bennett's there. The Georgia Council knows what a fine person he is, and now we all do—please stand up and let us give you a round of applause.

We were assisted by the Conference Planning and Local Arrangements committees, both of them mined with members of the incredible Georgia social studies family. Let's thank Local Arrangements co-chairs Cathy Geis and Pat Guillory. Please stand if you served on either of those great committees. Diane Hart comprised a powerful committee of one, which she has done for several NCSS annual conferences in a row. We had some 950 applications to present sessions, and she organized the selection by almost 200 NCSS reviewers.

My two children are also here, my daughter Maggie and my son John. Of course, you all know how your children become your colleagues too: you enlist them to help set up your room and grade your multiple choice tests, and they smile when they find you at the breakfast table grading papers.

We are in Atlanta, the cradle of the civil rights movement, thinking about **Dreams and Deeds** and **the Civic Mission of Schools**. There's a vision of Martin Luther King's Beloved Community on the covers of our programs—these front porches that surround us are reminders of neighborliness and of our enduring responsibilities toward one another.

Dr. King dreamed of a community of justice, where brotherhood would be an actuality in society. As social educators, we have been given guidance on how to try to bring about such a community, in a remarkable document I've been quoting for months now. It's the Civic Mission of Schools Report, written by the leaders in our field in 2002.

In this report, we are reminded that our central responsibility is to prepare **competent and responsible citizens**.

- responsible citizens are informed and thoughtful; have an appreciation of history and American democracy, understand public and community issues; and know how to obtain information, think critically, and enter into dialogue among others with different perspectives;
- they participate in their communities;
- they act politically through group problem solving, public speaking, petitioning and protesting, and voting;
- they have moral and civic virtues such as concern for the rights and welfare of others, social responsibility, tolerance and respect, and belief in the capacity to make a difference.

The Civic Mission of Schools Campaign suggests six promising practices for schools to follow as we prepare such citizens, and I'd like to focus on these this morning.

Effective instruction in government, history, law, and democracy.

For the past eight years, social studies instruction has been slashed and devalued, especially in our elementary schools, in the hunt for adequate yearly progress in reading and math.

And then we began to live through a national crisis. Social studies teachers stood up to their duty—a covenant we have with society, a promise we make to help the children to understand what is happening, to put it into context, and to teach the skills of citizen and consumer for the future.

Many people realized that most of what they knew of financial cycles and mortgages and markets came from their secondary school classes. Our history teachers helped students to learn about other financial crashes—the Dutch Tulip Craze, the South Sea and Mississippi Bubbles, the Florida Land Boom, the Great Depression.

Even the youngest children were taught, in age appropriate ways, about unemployment and saving and sacrifice. Here in Georgia, we should recognize the work of the Georgia Council for Economic Education. We have with us GCEE's Glen Blankenship, who has trained teachers in hundreds of Georgia elementary schools how to teach economics to our early learners.

We are trying to lead students to the great realizations of mutual dependence and social responsibility. In hard times, these values are the hallmarks of our resilience and the route to our recovery.

Classroom discussion of current events

Oh, the lessons we have learned in the past months about the importance of teaching current events!

Sometimes we wonder how we can “fit it in” with what we have to “cover.” But the application of what we are teaching to current issues is the very reason that public schooling exists in the United States. The engine for free public education was the need for an informed electorate.

The reissue of *Expectations of Excellence*, the NCSS standards—a set of curriculum frameworks, not a laundry list of facts—points us once again in the direction of guiding questions that connect content to current events. Open the pages of our standards and you will see how all 10 thematic strands apply to health care, fiscal policy, liberals and conservatives, war and peace.

The social studies classroom must be the home for the gathering and evaluation of information, for the formation of a student's individual views, for open discussion and the expression of differing opinions, for building the ability to disagree agreeably.

When we fail to learn these skills, what we get is talk radio, divisiveness, and fear mongering. As a nation, we fail social studies.

Community service

The pantheon of NCSS heroes holds a special place for service learning teachers.

Khris Nedam's elementary school students in Northville, Michigan, studied Afghanistan and raised enough money to build a school, a health clinic, and an orphanage there. Khris is pictured here. Tomorrow's keynoter Greg Mortenson would be very proud of her.

Jennifer Dawson's classes led a service learning project at Lost Mountain Middle School in Cobb County, Georgia, that provided cleaning and school supplies, portable stereos, and water bottles for Clarkdale Elementary School, whose campus was swept away in floods here just weeks ago. Jennifer is here with us today.

Tomorrow evening, you can meet Principal Linda Hooper and students from Whitwell Middle School in Tennessee as they present the film *Paper Clips*, about Whitwell's service learning project on the Holocaust, which started in a small town and then touched the world.

History teacher John Calvin of Scottsdale School District in my home town took his Close Up students to the Lincoln Memorial, and they asked him where Martin Luther King Jr. stood when he gave the “I Have a Dream Speech.” It wasn't marked—then. They raised over \$60,000 in seed money (Lincoln pennies from students all over the country), and they lobbied Congress and the Park Service, and now there is a civil rights museum below the memorial.

Tim Rockey told his government students at Sunnyslope High School in Phoenix that he would teach them the rules, and then they'd play the game. They published years of voters' guides that were distributed to thousands of homes in their neighborhoods—and candidates for statewide office made trips to his classroom.

Students who were involved in such projects will be our very best citizens, the shining stars of the Beloved Community. As adults, they will volunteer to help the neediest. When the jury summons arrives, they will serve. They will study the issues and they will vote.

Extracurricular activities

Research shows that students involved in their schools become adults who are involved in their communities.

Under the leadership of President Elect Steve Goldberg, NCSS is developing its own special extracurricular club: a national honor society for outstanding social studies students. Our model is Rho Kappa, the social studies honor society founded by the Florida Council for the Social Studies. Look for developments in the coming year. We will be able to honor and inspire our best kids with opportunities to serve and to extend their interests.

Enhanced participation in school governance

The Student Council is just one part of this promising practice. The democratic classroom is another. We have lost, this fall, two of our heroes who worked steadfastly toward that goal: Jere Brophy and Ted Sizer. Brophy wrote forcefully about creating a classroom in which the student's role in managing his own learning is paramount. Sizer had a vision of the school as an egalitarian community, which shaped the discourse about high schools and will continue to do so. We will miss them both immeasurably.

Active learning projects such as mock trial, mock congressional hearings, historical simulations, and debates.

We know that there are people who are heard all over educational and even congressional circles, powerful voices called Fordham and Finn, Ravitch and Hirsch, who fight us on these higher level thinking activities. They say that "You can't think about nothing," and tell stories about children who can't read but spend the whole day baking nutbread.

This is a false dichotomy. (And by the way, I think we should go back to teaching formal logic in social studies courses.) Of course, you can't think about nothing. The role plays and mock trials and interactive jigsaw activities must be content rich in both primary and secondary sources, as well as embedded with thinking skills and democratic practices.

Here is a picture of a content rich experience. The Alhambra High School American history teachers could easily have taught the Great Depression in PowerPoint lectures and textbook readings, but instead they chose to ask their classes to create a Hooverville, where almost 200 students became Depression re-enactors. You could ask one of these girls why she was living under a tent, and she would tell you about the farm her family had in Dust Bowl Oklahoma, or the home she lost in St. Louis when her husband lost his job. After they read about the soup kitchens of the Depression, I helped four girls in the junior class to cook Hot Dog Stew in the Home Ec Labs, from a 1935 recipe. We gave it out at our model Hooverville Soup Kitchen. I don't



think any of these students forgot the content they learned. If you tested them today, I think they would outscore the kids who got just the lectures and the text selections.

If the cultural literacy posse goes after us, we should remind them about the science teachers. We could ask Diane Ravitch why she doesn't advise biology teachers to throw away the dissections and just show the kids big pictures of what's inside that fetal pig. Why don't chemistry teachers do the experiment themselves, or show a film of it—or just tell the class what happens when sodium and chlorine are mixed?

Of course, that sounds ridiculous.

We should address the critics of social studies who believe that only content counts this way: as adults, we are certainly grateful for the inquiry skills we learned in science classes, even though no one ever requires us anymore to make a borax bead, or cut open a crayfish. But there is a critical thinking activity that all of us perform over and over, throughout our lives: we

are asked every year to step into a voting booth and help to run our country.

Don't our students need to learn this process, just as they learn to conduct a science experiment?

As the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act comes up in Congress this year, let's keep our

eyes on the prize. We have had too many years of test prep factories, of sorting children in Adequate Yearly Progress "buckets" instead of seeing them as the special and precious individuals that they are.

Let's restore the civic mission of schools. As Charles Haynes and Terry Pickeral of the Civic Mission Campaign wrote:

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.¹

There's been enough collateral damage from the testing epidemic. Remember the Beloved Community. Let's keep in mind that final summative assessment that underlies the task we have accepted as social educators: Were the learners able to sustain our lives on this small and troubled planet? Did we learn to live together in peace? 🌍

Note

1. *The School Administrator*, October 2008.

NCSS President SYD GOLSTON is an educational administrator, curriculum writer, and historian. She taught at all grade levels from 7th to college, specializing in constructivist learning experiences in local and women's history. She has been an administrator in the Phoenix Union High School District in Phoenix, Arizona since 2000, most recently as a social studies specialist for the district.



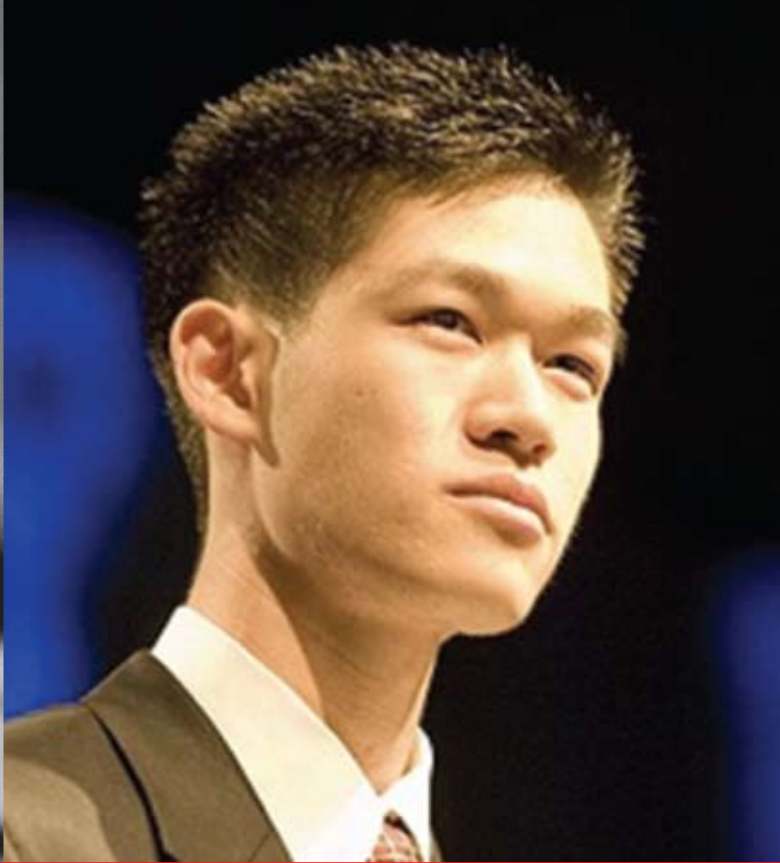
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