

Redefining the **Vistas** of Social Studies

Steve Goldberg

I'd like to take this opportunity to introduce several people who have joined me today: my sons, Jonathan from Boston and Andrew from Baltimore; several members of my department at New Rochelle High School, New York: Neal Shultz, Kevin McIvor, and Heather Waters; my friend Larry Paska from the New York State Education Department, my dear friend and conference handler, Barbara Hairfield of Charleston, South Carolina; and my colleague, Gerrit Book, from Berlin, Germany. I want to acknowledge the board of directors and officers, and of course, my co-chair, Peggy Altoff; the Local Arrangement chairs, Chris Elnicki and Dorsee Johnson-Tucker; and the Program and Local Arrangements committees from across the nation and here in Colorado who are dedicated to preparing students for college, careers and civic involvement. Kudos for the NCSS staff, especially David Bailor, the director of meetings. A conference of this magnitude could not occur without his skill and passion.

This is a special year for NCSS for we are celebrating our 90th anniversary at this conference. Please view our special anniversary tribute banners in the convention hall. I want to especially thank three members of our Archives Committee—Mike Lovorn of Alabama, Mark Previte of Pennsylvania, and Brenda Parnes of New York—for their creative efforts in researching and compiling the history of NCSS juxtaposed against the history of the past 90 years.

Being president of the National Council for the Social Studies this year has been, without a doubt, the highest and most rewarding honor of my professional life of 40 years as a teacher, supervisor, and adjunct professor. My experience on the NCSS board of directors follows service as a member and officer of the Westchester Lower Hudson Council for Social Studies, the New York State Council for the Social Studies, and the New York State Social Studies Supervisory Association. My involvement in professional organizations has afforded me a privilege few receive: the chance to work with some of the finest people I know.

Twenty-five years ago NCSS held its conference in Chicago. I was teaching in Edgemont, a small suburban school district north of New York City. The president of NCSS that year, and the last New Yorker to hold this office, was Donald Bragaw, who was the head of the Social Studies Bureau of the New York State Education Department. What is so remarkable is that 20 years earlier, in 1965, when I was a senior at Plainview High School on Long Island in New York, Don Bragaw was my American history teacher. Don, who is now retired after a second career at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, emailed me the other day. He sends his regards and offers the following comments:

I wish that things were brighter for social studies and for education in general. I would hope that you will make a strong pitch for social studies to be at the forefront of democratic education ... From first hand observation in local schools, we are still mired in textbook instruction, and from the statements of many candidates for office [last week]...we see democracy become a sham of empty flag waving ... many of them know nothing about the Constitution ... and waving a banner does not reflect what the founding fathers (and mothers) were really all about. Enough! I only wish that NCSS was more proactive, and had a loud and urgent voice in the land.

What I hope to do in the next several minutes is share with you the salient points of Don's speech of 1985 and where we are today in comparison or contrast to social studies then. Of course, I am preaching to the choir, but I hope that my message will go beyond this room to all your colleagues back home for whom social studies professional organization membership should become an imperative!

In 1985, Don Bragaw focused his talk on excellence in social studies and the quest for professional leadership, stating that he "truly believed that as social studies professionals we must, as all



analogies or critical thinking skills appear on such tests. Is it because such thinking is not a major goal of our field of study? ... What are the standards of information gathering, using, and presenting in history, geography, and civics that can be used as the basis for testing?

I am not going to fully trace the 25 years from Don Bragaw's speech until today. But, in 1992, NCSS defined social studies; in 1994, we issued the *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*. In the 1990s, the standards movement in all the social studies disciplines produced volumes to work in conjunction with state standards that had also been developed; and we were off and running. Today, we remain committed to providing a framework to guide, not a prescribed scope and sequence. Decisions on scope and sequence, specific courses and requirements remain local decisions based on state standards. Today, when the teaching of social studies on every grade level and what to teach and when to test (if at all) is being challenged, it has become even more imperative that NCSS provide a document for those with the responsibility to revise and revamp social studies curriculum, to increase the quality of student social studies knowledge and skills. Our recently revised publication, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*, is subtitled *A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*.

It is clear that much has changed since 1985, but much that had changed, now has changed back. We have become a marginalized discipline in many parts of the nation. While our attention was focused last spring on events to redefine history and social studies in Texas, a significant vote by the New York State Board of Regents hardly made the headlines, even in New York. In order to reduce budgetary expenditures, the Regents voted on June 21 to eliminate the mandated fifth and eighth grade social studies assessments, thereby saving taxpayers a mere \$800,000. The item appeared on the agenda only two weeks earlier, just as 8th graders took their test (for the last time!) and just prior to the administration of the high stakes Regents examinations at the high school level. The New York professional organizations—state and local councils—were caught by surprise with little time to mobilize any action. The vote became a *fait accompli*, leaving educators stunned. In the Regents' justification was that there is no federal mandate of social studies testing and therefore these tests are no longer seen as necessary. New York plummeted from being one of the few states with both elementary and middle school benchmark assessments to a state with testing only in high school.

We have seen the continued politicization of the educational process with more and more federal involvement in establishing educational policy, which has reduced social studies in some states to a tertiary subject. No Child Left Behind and now the Race to the Top have challenged us as professionals in ways that raise similar questions to those of the 1980s. *Who are we and where are we going?*

professionals are supposed to do, take charge of our profession ... educating the public to our centrality and significance." He challenged the audience to "get off the pedestal and take charge of determining what social studies can and should be." He believed that social studies had become a "refuge for diffuse and multitudinous subjects, projects, and causes," and he challenged the professionals to define who we are and what we teach. He enumerated the influences on social studies content determination: textbook publishers, special interest groups (many, like Vietnam veterans, with valid causes), but also the politicians of the far right, the muddled middle, and the extreme left. He also cited curriculum building by legislation, the reaction to national reports and political agendas, the influence of video arcades and computer programming. Don stated emphatically that "We—NCSS—and the professionals it represents, have a responsibility to clear up misunderstandings and murky goals so we can more definitely delineate what the core of social studies is, and what and how that core can be implemented and supplemented...."

He bemoaned the disparity of social studies requirements across the nation and the paucity of valid social studies testing in many states. If the adage of what is tested is what tends to be taught is true, then we can easily see, Don said, the true picture of the nature and status of social studies. Finally, he spoke about assessment:

All tests ... have a way of shaping curriculum. In classroom after classroom across this nation, our students are constantly confronted by tests that tend to test for rote memory of isolated bits of information. Little or no relationships,

So, the challenges remain. NCSS will continue to promote advocacy on all levels. Of course, politicians and state boards of education must be sensitive to the economic needs of our time, but what are the opportunity costs if we continue to whittle away at the study of economics, geography, history, civics, and the other subjects that comprise our discipline? Since 1985, we have increased our advocacy initiatives at both the state and national levels. I applaud the Texas social studies teachers who attended daily sessions of the State Board of Education in Austin last spring. The process was so irksome. Although they were frustrated by the outcome, I can state emphatically that social studies is alive and kicking in Texas. Over 1200 teachers attended their conference last month in Houston! I have also traveled this fall to South Carolina, Florida, and Connecticut, and I will say that social studies councils are energized as well as can be expected in this depressed economy, but that is not enough! When we compare ourselves to our sister organizations—NCTE, NCTM, NSTA—we are hurting for membership. Numbers count in Washington and elsewhere when you want to make a difference.

We continue to seek collaboration with our sister social science organizations to work together to define or redefine social studies so that we can take our central position in the curriculum. Planning has begun on the development of Common State Standards in Social Studies. Fifteen state education agencies are collaborating with fourteen professional organizations in the social studies on this initiative. Recently, I have been appointed the only educator to a National Commission on Civics Education of the American Bar Association, the first effort by this association of lawyers and judges to begin active lobbying on the Hill for civics/social studies education.

Back in 1985, Bragaw outlined what he believed we should do to enhance our professional organization and increase our membership, and for the most part we have: we created awards for Programs of Excellence and for Teacher of the Year to honor excellence in teaching and social studies programs (but nominees have waned and this year we had no nominees for the Programs of Excellence awards). The board of directors is working to simplify the application processes to encourage more nominees. Bragaw advocated an increased role in In-service Programming, and we have moved in this direction, but not far enough; we should be exploring more online courses and working more closely with regional and state affiliates to promote more summer and school vacation clinics and study trips. He also suggested the restructuring of NCSS itself, which we have done over the past five years with a smaller board and fewer operational committees, but vibrant communities replacing many committees and NCSS SIGs (Special Interest Groups).

We continue to be proactive in our efforts to market our discipline. Several years ago the Florida Council for the Social Studies asked the board of directors to consider endorsing its Social Studies Honor Society Rho Kappa (in existence since

2000). We remain the *only* subject that does not have a National Honor Society, and after two years of study and review, at its fall meeting, the board of directors voted to “nationalize” Rho Kappa to recognize student academic achievement and service learning in the composite discipline of social studies. A committee of the board of directors is working on the specific details for a launch date in the fall of 2011.

As Gayle Thieman, in her address in San Diego three years ago, pointed out, today’s students are digital natives. They can navigate the Internet with ease; they communicate in new ways over Facebook and Twitter; they are plugged in to their iPods. And consequently, their comfort with 21st century skills makes their learning of social studies even more exciting by opening the vast world of digital sources—a world unknown to their teachers when we were their age. We are not a static discipline, and NCSS has also changed with the changing times. We seek to enhance our online communication through our newly enhanced website feature—NCSS Connected. But we must do more than merely connect online: we must use the tools before us as our students do every day: to reach out to the world around them, exchange ideas, and most importantly, to stand up and advocate.

In all these ways and more, NCSS is seeking to deserve your membership and your professional dedication by addressing some of the most significant needs of our professional lives. As Don Bragaw 25 years ago challenged us, we must take charge of our profession—not in a dictatorial fashion, but by assuming and asserting leadership. Professional association can empower us. We can make it the year of the social studies professional by encouraging others to join us in improving ourselves, our social studies programs, and our organizational and advocacy strength. Together we can make a difference. By associating and professionalizing our efforts, we can redefine the vistas of social studies and find our vision as we seek a new voice: we want to move social studies into the foreground once again through which students gain the requisite knowledge, skills, and habits of mind to “do social studies” every day as we prepare them for college, careers and civic involvement in our ever-changing interconnected global society. 🌐

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