

# Saving Social Studies/ Citizenship Education and Your Job Using the Internet

C. Frederick Risinger

Those of you who have followed this column know that I've been talking for a long time about the marginalization of social studies in the K-12 curriculum. The evidence couldn't be clearer. The emphasis on reading/language arts and mathematics at the national and state levels, coupled with high stakes testing in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) program, have created an environment where many states, school districts, and classroom teachers are spending less classroom time on the courses we teach. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development has characterized NCLB as having a "singular focus on student performance in reading and math..." Even Arne Duncan, the U.S. Secretary of Education, agreed with me in his recent article in the May/June issue of *Social Education*. I don't know if he read my "Open Letter to President Obama" in the November/December issue of this journal, but I still strongly believe that the effective teaching of social studies is being pushed out of schools. And that's simply wrong, and, I believe, dangerous. As I said in my letter to the president, "...if we do not teach our young citizens about history, geography, economics, civics, and other social studies areas, our nation will lose its national bearings ... it will lose its soul."

Many prominent individuals and organizations have spoken out on this issue. Former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor is working with several organizations to promote citizenship education and has said, "The nation's survival depends on its citizen's knowledge of its government." Former Congressman Lee Hamilton, who co-chaired the 9/11 Commission and now heads the Center on Congress at Indiana University, argues that

Citizenship requires both knowledge about government and the ability to be involved in governance. It means knowing how to identify and inform yourself about issues,

explore and evaluate possible solutions, and then act to resolve problems. It demands that you know how to interact respectfully with others. And it asks that you accept responsibility for meeting your community's and the nation's challenges.

Others have joined the movement to encourage and improve social studies and citizenship in the schools. Actor Richard Dreyfuss, an activist for citizenship education, spoke at a conference here in Bloomington a few months ago. He established The Dreyfuss Initiative, a national effort which focuses on "preparing our nation's next generation to be effective and engaged citizens." In May,

he announced his own "civics curriculum," which focus on "logic," "values of debate, dissent, and civility," and "critical analysis."

It's great that Arne Duncan, Sandra Day O'Connor, and Richard Dreyfuss support citizenship education. But now it's time for me to ask YOU what you are going to do. I assume that you are a social studies educator or supervisor at the preK-12 or college level (or at least interested in the field). I honestly believe that we are in danger of being pushed out of the curriculum. Oh, there probably will always be history, geography, economics, and even civics courses in the curriculum. But they will be fact-based courses where students will never learn to analyze social issues and historical events. They will never participate in group discussions about contemporary events or problems facing the nation and the world. They will never learn that maintaining a democratic and free nation requires responsible, knowledgeable, participation in our own government.

Here are some websites that I think will provide individuals and groups with information they can use to promote social studies/citizenship education and defend it within the curriculum. Some of these have information already formatted for presentation or which can be easily turned into a PowerPoint or other format. Of course, I think the best

vehicle for this is working with professional associations such as NCSS and its state affiliates. NCSS has assumed a leadership role along with the Civic Mission for the Schools. But we need to expand outside groups that are focused on education. At the local level, social studies teachers can develop presentations for PTA and PTO groups, Rotary and other professional organizations, city and county councils, and any organizations that will listen. Use local newspapers and radio stations, too. Frequently, they are looking for information on issues of local concern.

One thing that I think we should do is link the words “social studies” and “citizenship” together. We know that we’re social studies educators. But frankly, many (maybe most) U.S. citizens are unclear about what social studies is. The term “Citizenship” is more clear, linked to daily life, and more likely to generate support among the general population. You’ve seen me use the term “social studies/citizenship” frequently in the past year or so, because I thought it was both more understandable and more accurately described our mission. I used it throughout my “open letter” to the president.

What I’ve tried to do in this column is provide individual social studies educators, and others who believe that effective social studies/citizenship education is essential for the nation’s (and the world’s) future, with encouragement and resources to become advocates for the field. You know why you became a social studies educator. So do I. We had dreams of helping students prepare for effective citizenship in a pluralistic, democratic, society. Let’s not let the dream die.

### **The National Council for the Social Studies**

[www.ncss.org](http://www.ncss.org)

I know, I know ... why am I recommending our own site? Simply because NCSS has far more resources than most of its members realize. Moreover, it provides links to other sites that provide information that will help local and state

organizations prepare news releases and design materials that will inform citizens about the importance of social studies and citizenship education in the schools. Be sure to check out “Connected,” a new online network for members to express their views, and share their experiences. It includes blogs, e-group discussions, and resource document sharing.

### **Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools**

[civicmissionofschools.org/index.html](http://civicmissionofschools.org/index.html)

The Civic Mission of Schools is located within NCSS headquarters and is our strongest partner in trying to preserve and enhance the role of social studies/citizenship education in the school curriculum. Both Sandra Day O’Connor and Lee Hamilton (along with several other notable political figures) have written op-ed pieces that appeared in national and statewide news outlets. You can also find one of the most comprehensive studies of how effective civic education fits into the concept of 21st Century Skills necessary for student (and citizen) success. There are many resources within this site.

### **The Importance of Social Studies Education**

[www.ehow.com/about\\_6547605\\_importance-social-studies-education.html](http://www.ehow.com/about_6547605_importance-social-studies-education.html)

This site is aimed directly at family-related issues and topics. It presents information that would be perfect for a talk with a PTO or PTA group and expands the concept of social studies in a way that would be appealing to parents and others. For example, it points out that social studies, being an interdisciplinary subject, helps students see how all knowledge is interrelated; it also has a section illustrating understanding, compassion, and tolerance for the world’s people.

### **The Dreyfuss Initiative**

[thedreyfussinitiative.org/index.php](http://thedreyfussinitiative.org/index.php)

I am impressed with the motivation behind actor Richard Dreyfuss’s organization. One of the mottos featured on the site is “We must put Civics back into the

hands of all Americans.” Dreyfuss has criticized Maryland Governor Martin O’Malley’s efforts to remove civics education from the state curriculum and complained, “We don’t teach America how to be Americans.”

### **UNESCO-Citizenship Education for the 21st Century**

[www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/TLSF/theme\\_b/mod07/mod07task03/appendix.htm](http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/TLSF/theme_b/mod07/mod07task03/appendix.htm)

This site broadens the concept of citizenship education into a worldwide issue, which I think is important. It, too, provides a great deal of information that social studies educators can use to illustrate the importance of what we teach.

### **Negativity and Partisan (De) Mobilization in the 2010 Mid-Term Elections**

[www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-wolf/negativity-and-partisan-d\\_b\\_794573.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-wolf/negativity-and-partisan-d_b_794573.html)

I apologize for the lengthy URLs for some of these websites. This study, reported in *The Huffington Post*, was a significant factor in my letter to President Obama. It describes how polarized and angry the U.S. electorate was prior to and after the 2010 elections. The polarization they described then is worse now, is reflected in the news every day, and is one of the reasons that, as Lee Hamilton says, “Congress is broken.”

As always, all of these sites, particularly NCSS, provide links to other sites that can help individuals or groups prepare materials for presentation to both educational groups and the general citizenry. It’s essential that we make the case for social studies/citizenship education. Let’s get started! 📖

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