

# What Social Studies Educators can do about the Marginalization of the Subject They Teach

C. Frederick Risinger

The juxtaposition of the 2012 national elections and the marginalization of social studies/citizenship education in the pre-K-12 school curriculum has been both coincidental, and, in a way, an opportunity for us—social studies teachers, supervisors, and teacher educators—to find ways to restore creative classroom instruction about history, government, citizenship, and social studies to equality in the curriculum.

Two years ago, *Social Education* published my open letter to President Barack Obama in which I expressed concern about the marginalization of social studies in the preK-12 curriculum and said that without effective instruction in social studies and civics, our nation would not only lose its national bearings, “it will lose its soul.” The letter accompanied my column on the movement to establish “Common Standards” for all subject areas and how the emphasis on English/Language Arts and Mathematics and high-stakes testing was pushing social studies out of the curriculum.

I did not receive a reply from the president, but Secretary of Education Arne Duncan wrote an article referring to my column and stating his support for social studies. Duncan also spoke at last year’s NCSS Annual Meeting.

He said some nice things about social studies and acknowledged that high stakes testing linked to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) program contributed to the marginalization of social studies. However, I have yet to hear about any initiatives from the Department of Education to help improve the status of social studies in the curriculum.

Currently, there are two approaches to national standards for all subject areas: (1) those associated with the No Child Left Behind program of the U.S. Department of Education; and (2) the ones being developed by the Common Core Standards Initiative. Most social studies specialists believe the Common Core standards are more favorable to our field and more compatible with NCSS goals and policies. In January 2010, NCSS and the Civic Mission of

Schools (CMS) convened a meeting of national organizations in civics, economics, geography, and history, to discuss working together on State Created Standards for Social Studies. Their work has progressed well and several states across the country have adopted them or are using them to create their own state standards.

So, rather than my usual column providing links to Internet sites that will help teachers design instructional approaches to a specific topic or idea in social studies, this column will help social studies teachers take steps to defend our subject in the curriculum, mobilize public support for social studies and citizenship education, and strengthen our role as social studies and citizenship educators. To accomplish these goals, we absolutely must work together—within our school, our district, our state—and with social studies throughout the nation. Here is a set of recommended strategies and websites to assist you and your colleagues in helping to save social studies.

## **A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy**

[www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerful](http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerful)

Several of my recommended sites are within the NCSS website. We have to encourage our colleagues to join NCSS and its state affiliates. No other organization can muster the resources and people to speak out for our field. Strengthening NCSS is the best way to maintain and enhance our role in the school curriculum.

## **The NCSS Toolkit: Today's Social Studies ... Creating Effective Citizens**

[www.socialstudies.org/toolkit](http://www.socialstudies.org/toolkit)

This is the most valuable web page in my list. The NCSS toolkit provides virtually all the information, recommended strategies, and other materials that you and your colleagues will use to drum up support for your efforts to maintain and improve public support for social studies.

## **Education World**

[www.educationworld.com/standards/national/soc\\_sci/](http://www.educationworld.com/standards/national/soc_sci/)

Even though this set of Common Core Standards in social studies is also on the NCSS website, I wanted to highlight the way that Education World presents the introduction to the standards and identifies which cooperative organization helped develop them. You can go to each of the partner sites and find other links that will help you in your efforts.

## **Education World**

[www.educationworld.com/a\\_curr/curr008.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/curr008.shtml)

On this page, Education World explores "Five Themes for Good Citizenship" and suggests activities that can be used in the classroom to help students understand citizenship. I like their defi-

nition and description of the five themes. (You may have to close an advertisement first, before you can see their approach to citizenship education, which is for grades K-6.)

## **National History Education Clearinghouse**

<http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/state-standards>

While this site focuses primarily on history teaching and materials, it has one page that lists all state social studies standards by state and grade level. Just select the state and grade level and the



state standards currently in use.

## **CNN: Civic Education in the News**

<http://articles.cnn.com/keyword/civic-education>

This site changes regularly to keep up with daily happenings related to civic education. It can provide you and your group with examples of why social studies/civic education is important and why it should not be neglected in the curriculum. On the day I looked at it, it had articles and news stories about Constitution Day and how it's observed in schools around the nation and a recommended classroom strategy where students weigh in on the issues of civil liberties and national security. Many of the stories include teaching suggestions.

## **Teaching the Responsibilities of Citizenship-ERIC Digest**

[www.education.com/reference/article/Ref\\_Citizenship\\_2/](http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_Citizenship_2/)

This ERIC digest from long ago is

written by my friend, colleague, and great spokesman for civic education, John Patrick. It is still one of the best discussions of what citizenship education is and why and how it should be taught in the schools. It should be read, and re-read, by every social studies teacher. Check it out, I think you'll agree.

## **20 Ideas for Teaching Citizenship to Children**

[www.kellybear.com/TeacherArticles/TeacherTip27.html](http://www.kellybear.com/TeacherArticles/TeacherTip27.html)

Kellybear is a website designed by Leah Davies who recommends strategies and materials for teachers. This url links to an excellent article that is a comprehensive discussion of great ideas for teaching citizenship, primarily in the elementary grades. Secondary teachers will be able to adapt the ideas for their own classes. I enjoyed reading them.

There are dozens of other websites that I could have used. My primary purpose for this column is to help us (social studies educators) find ways to work together to help protect and improve the role of social studies in the curriculum. Ask to speak to your local school board to present information about the importance of social studies and how it is being marginalized by NCLB testing. Organize a letter writing campaign by members of your state NCSS affiliate to state legislators asking them to support social studies/citizenship education. Make a presentation to your school or district's parent/teacher organization. We have to work together to preserve the role of social studies in the schools. It's not just for us; it's for our nation. 🇺🇸

**C. FREDERICK RISINGER** retired as director of professional development and coordinator of social studies education after 31 years at Indiana University, Bloomington. He currently is working on a new writing project and working on a website designed to help current teachers and teachers-in-training. He can be reached at [risinger@indiana.edu](mailto:risinger@indiana.edu).

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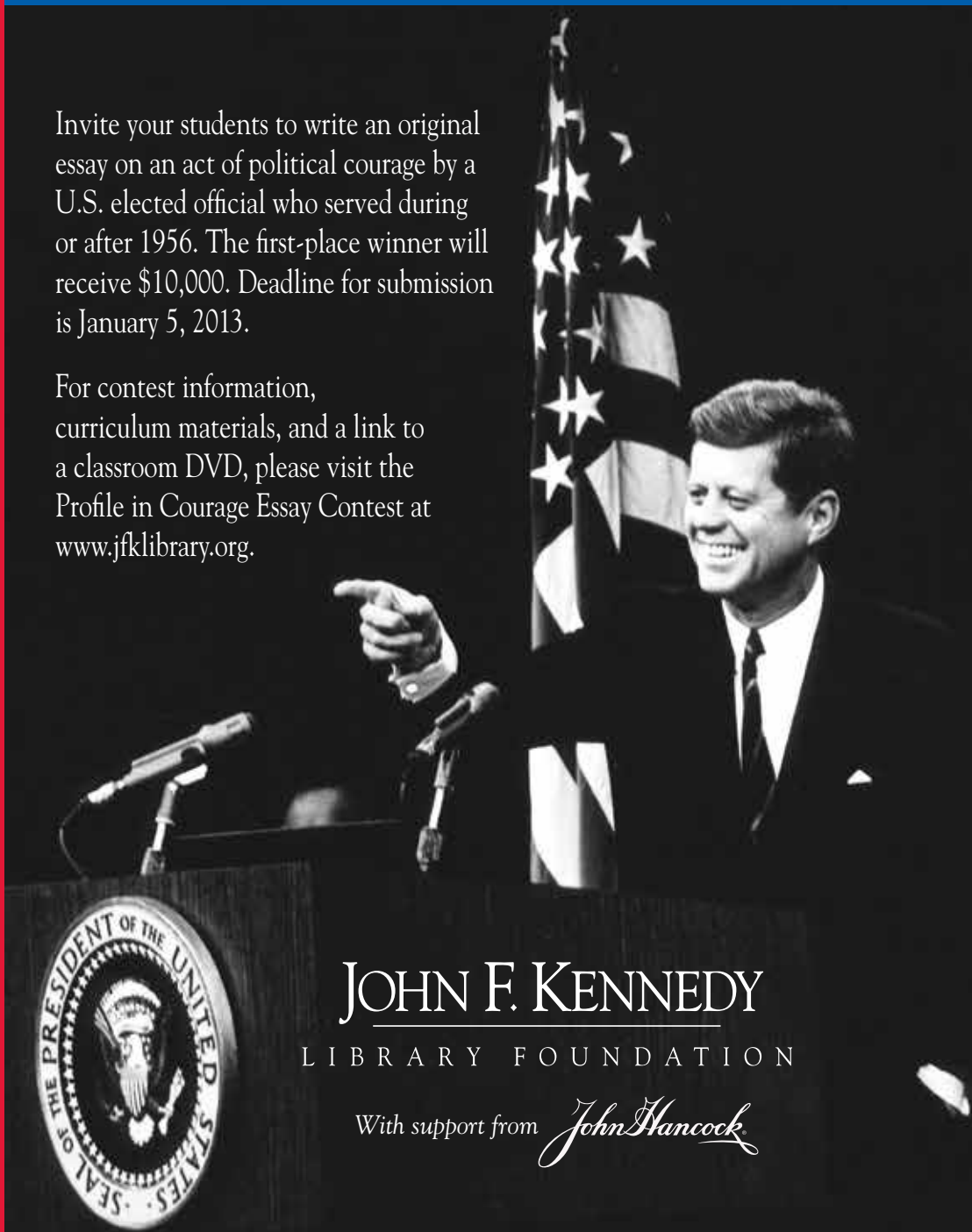
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