

We Walk the Talk!

Kim O’Neil

This article is based on the presidential address delivered at the NCSS annual meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana, on Friday, November 13, 2015.



It is an honor to be before you today as the 95th NCSS conference is about to unfold. You are an incredible group of people. I know because two of you are my family members, my sister Monica, who is a fellow teacher and who has been my compatriot for many an NCSS conference, and my daughter, Kate, who is always there for me. I see so many friends that I’ve made over these “social studies council years.” Thank you for your support. For those of you I haven’t met, I know that we already have one thing in common—our love of social studies education. You are all leaders in social studies education. Your presence here says that.

When I began my teaching career in Liverpool, New York, a suburb of Syracuse, I was told, perhaps “indocinated” to believe, that “leadership” meant that the teacher was to stay in the classroom, teach, and lead the students to gain knowledge. But since that time, I’ve redefined leadership! As social studies educators, our role as leaders is not only in the classroom, but everywhere we venture. We have to do this because if we aren’t vigilant, what we teach will continue to be marginalized and will diminish until it’s out of sight. I speak with the perspective of an elementary teacher.

When I visualize social studies educa-

tion, I see a stove with four burners. Our cousins—English language arts, science, and math—have burners that are red hot, yet I see social studies on the back burner with the burner almost turned off!!! A politician is the cook. I do not understand why the teaching of social studies is not the priority of a government leader.

However, I see signs that social studies is starting to sizzle. First, there is the potential reauthorization of the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) It is heading for reauthorization and, yes, it has social studies language in the document. The Senate version actually mentions history, civics, geography,

and financial literacy. Though it is certainly not inclusive of all our social studies disciplines, at least someone on Capitol Hill is talking about us.*

In the social studies arena, there are many advocates who have been pounding on doors to promote the teaching and learning of social studies. For many states the door has opened, some wider than others, and that is because of the College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards, better known as C3. This document has helped and continues to help to bring social studies back into the core academic fold. It provides a framework which each state, district, and teacher can use as a foundation for the curriculum. It offers continuity, a common language, and avenues for collaboration among teachers nationwide. The C3 Framework unifies the social studies community and at the same time allows for the diversity and uniqueness of every part of the U.S. After so many years of being marginalized, the C3 Framework

*The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed by President Obama on December 10, 2015, and represents good news for social studies education.

has been the vehicle to help revalidate the importance of social studies education.

I would like to give recognition to the three primary writers who directed the collaborative effort and who continue to dedicate countless hours to keeping the C3 Framework alive and well. I would like to recognize the lead writer, Kathy Swan, and contributing writers, John Lee and S.G. Grant, for their service to social studies education.

But what if we can't write a framework? What can we do? We can do what we do best—we walk the talk! This is what we teach in Dimension 4 of the C3 Framework—"Take Action." This is not just something to do in Washington, D.C., on the Hill, but at the state level, at the local level, right in your own school community. Taking action comes in many forms, but it is always with the understanding that it is "informed" action. This may begin with students constructing arguments at the elementary level to persuade the cafeteria to provide a certain desired food item; in high school, it may take the form of students inviting a local politician for a debate on a current community topic. Providing students with Dimension 4 opportunities from kindergarten through grade 12 will ensure that our democracy will continue because of its active and engaged citizenry.

NCSS is here to help propel you along the professional continuum to expand your leadership potential.

Follow the airline mantra, "Put your oxygen mask on first." Before you can help your students and your community, you must continue to challenge yourself and seek out leadership roles to promote the teaching and learning of social studies. These next few days are a time to recharge, to validate your practice, to expand upon your practice, and to network with educators in your field.

The vitality of social studies education depends on your continued leadership inside and outside the classroom. Take advantage of the many opportunities from the various organizations you

will find here. I have been fortunate to participate in programs conducted by the National Consortium for Teaching About Asia (NCTA), the Goethe Institut, the Center for Canadian-American Studies, Colonial Williamsburg, and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. I hope you find these booths and many more in the Exhibit Hall.

You will find outstanding sessions from which to choose. May you return home inspired and eager to engage your students in ways to celebrate social responsibility!

Please enjoy the conference! 🌐

Kim O'Neil is President of the National Council for the Social Studies.

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