

# Staying Alive: Social Studies in Elementary Schools

Angela Pascopella

IT'S A CRISIS. Social studies, particularly in the elementary grades, has been pushed to the back burner in schools.<sup>1</sup>

Time is the biggest nemesis. Increased attention to math and language arts under the federal No Child Left Behind law is squeezing out social studies. Many states have standards in social studies so teachers are expected to cover the topic, but without being attached to a high-stakes test, the subject has lost ground.

Some states, such as Illinois, are even dropping state social studies tests. What little social studies is taught usually consists of "laundry lists"—vocabulary words, dates and people's names, educators say, which is just plain boring.

Money is another rare commodity to buy proper books, to find quality teachers, and even to create standardized tests to ensure the subject is being taught.

Most educators find the decreased attention to social studies a travesty. Even though many students learn social studies in middle or high school, they lack the basic knowledge needed for the subject. Many middle and high school teachers are squeezed for time and can't teach it all.

In the end, educators fear youngsters are growing up with little or no knowledge of their own and their neighbors' histories, ironically when the nation is debating many foreign policy issues.

"What has happened with No Child Left Behind is that someone made a political decision that reading and writing and arithmetic are the core subjects that we need to spend a considerable amount of time and money on in grades three through eight. And it put social studies on the back burner," says Jesus Garcia, president of National Council for the Social Studies. "That doesn't make sense. We should maintain the core subjects at the forefront

and allow the kind of funding to teach that well."

The 2004 report from Council for Basic Education, *Academic Atrophy: The Condition of the Liberal Arts in America's Public Schools*, reveals that social studies is suffering, particularly in high minority schools.<sup>2</sup> The good news, the report states, is more emphasis is placed on math, reading, writing, science and secondary social studies. But the bad news is the reduced commitment to the arts, foreign language and elementary social studies.

Syd Golston, dean of students at El Hambra High School in Phoenix Union High School District, says education author Alfie Kohn<sup>3</sup> is right when he says learning for the joy of learning should guide education, but it doesn't. While districts nationwide may test social studies, there is little, if any, time for mock trials, role playing or immersion learning, Golston says, which really inspires children and makes learning fun. "There is no time to do the things that are personal and process-oriented," he adds.

## What it Means

Social studies is the integration of social sciences and the humanities to promote civic competence within the social sciences, such as history, political science/government, economics and geography.<sup>4</sup> "We say the purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good in a democratic society in an interdependent world," Garcia says. "Historically, social studies has always been one of the core subjects that was dominant in the curriculum."

Before the nation was even formed in the 1700s, Garcia says, social studies was about building community. When the country expanded westward, social stud-

ies included the right to rule, and then in the 20th century it was more about what it meant to be an American. "We have to make sure everyone understands what it means to be an American ... with rights and responsibilities. If we don't teach that in elementary grades we will have a country that is fractured because of diversity.

"Not learning what it means to be an American could have some dire consequences down the road," Garcia continues. It could reap ignorance as to why "we're in Iraq. Why do we do the kinds of things we do?"

History and social science connect the past to the present and the present to the future, says Cricket F. L. Kidwell, director of curriculum and instruction for Trinity County Office of Education in California. And, she says, it provides foundations for students to develop civic skills.

## To Test or Not to Test

If state standardized testing is the only way to force teachers to teach social studies, some educators grudgingly support it.

But others don't want testing to be the driving force as it creates a "teaching to the test" mentality. "It becomes an artificial exercise in school," Garcia says. "It's taken the creativity out of teaching in our effort to show kids are learning ... We ought to do some testing to make sure kids know the subject but we need to find different ways to do that. Not just paper-and-pencil, national kinds of tests."

Students can learn by doing—getting involved with the community, doing projects in school and joining discussions, Garcia says.

Others think testing might be the only way for action.

Steven Goldberg, social studies department chairman for the New Rochelle

City School District, just outside New York City, thinks No Child Left Behind should include social studies. He asks: How many Americans can find Iraq or Afghanistan on a world map? What do we know about Islam? Do Americans understand the political system?

“If we don’t get it on the front burner it will be lost. Why the legislature did not include social studies in No Child Left Behind is baffling,” Goldberg says.

Kidwell agrees. “No Child Left Behind is remiss in not making sure history and social science are taught” in elementary grades, she says.

A few years ago, North Carolina started rewarding or punishing school districts according to scores from tests administered in the third and sixth grades, states Jeff Passe, professor of reading and elementary education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. For low scores, a team of experts helped teachers improve program quality. For improved scores, teachers earned bonus money. “As long as newspapers publish test scores and as long as our government bodies reward and punish schools and systems based on test scores, social studies won’t be on the stove at all unless there is some kind of test for it,” Passe says.

But Passe would rather see less testing in part because students are over-tested anyway.

“We have to find a middle ground, cut back on some testing,” Passe adds. “Instead of testing every child every year, a random sample could be tested periodically. There wouldn’t be this concern about over-testing, and social studies would easily fit into the mix.”

Peggy Altoff, K-12 social studies facilities director at Colorado Springs School District 11 in Colorado and vice president of NCSS, is another grudging supporter of tests. But she says, “We must provide the instruction that allows” students to become productive citizens. While there is no plan in Colorado to assess social studies at the state level, as of next school year, districts must report on achievement in non-tested areas as part of the state’s accreditation process, including social studies in K-12. In District 11, educators are using Terra Nova

social studies assessment tests in fifth and eighth grades. “Schools are beginning to pay more attention to it,” she says.

Altoff quotes George Wood, director of The Forum for Education and Democracy, who wrote in *Many Children Left Behind*<sup>5</sup> about what happens when a standardized test is used as the sole measure of school quality:

Simply put, with a focus on testing the curriculum is narrowed, leading to the most ineffective teaching practices becoming the norm. As non-tested areas (art, music, social studies) and “frills” (field trips, naps, even recess) are eliminated, the school experience becomes limited, and everyone—children, parents and communities—reports less satisfaction with the schools.

### **A Few Good Social Studies States**

The Empire State covets elementary social studies—as seen with its testing program. New York tests social studies in fifth grade, which covers grades three and four curricula. “It has required elementary schools to provide instruction in social studies,” says Goldberg, also past president of the New York Council for the Social Studies. “There is a lot of support for social studies now, but as the pressures of No Child Left Behind become greater, particularly with English and math, is that going to force the New York state education department to look at social studies and make an adjustment? Right now we’re fine.”

According to the CBE report, 36 percent of elementary principals in New York reported increases in time for social studies, while 22 percent reported decreases.

But if social studies is threatened, Goldberg says, “we will marshal our troops to campaign vigorously for the maintenance of a strong elementary program.”

Delaware, too, values social studies. In the late 1990s, the state tested English and math in grades three, five, eight and 11. They added social studies and science in 2000 as part of the state’s accountability plan.

“Some states took social studies off the table,” says Lewis Huffman, education associate for social studies in the Delaware Department of Education. “We said it counts, and it counts as part of a

formula.”

The state tests, under the Delaware Student Testing Program, four standards in each of four disciplines including civics, economics, history and geography throughout the elementary grades.

The state also offers professional development for teachers, many of whom need content background in geography and economics particularly, Huffman says.

The state doesn’t do it alone. The Delaware Geographic Alliance, an active organization of teachers, administrators and others interested in strengthening geography in the state’s schools, runs summer institutes. The Center for Economic Education at the University of Delaware also donates time, focusing on training and professional development for the teaching of economics. One professor runs a mini-society session whereby teachers learn how to create a mini-society in their classrooms where students can learn about economics and what it takes to purchase goods and services.

A social studies coalition, comprised of district curriculum directors as well as members of the Center for Economic Education and local museums—“all the people in support of social studies”—meet monthly and run two institutes a year to train teachers and design lessons to help them meet standards, says Huffman, a co-chairman. Because districts have been asking, the state is also developing a statewide-recommended curriculum linked to standards, Huffman says. The hope is the curriculum, which will receive input from classroom teachers, will be available by 2007.

Test scores show minor improvements at the fourth and sixth grade levels, but middle school scores are flat, Huffman says.

Social studies might be taught three times a week, but Huffman wants more. “That’s the best we can get. It doesn’t mean we’ll stop focusing on that. If we create more lessons and more units and activities, I think it will be more possible.”

A research study is underway in North Carolina to determine who is teaching social studies statewide, according to Passe. The study, conducted last year, involved professors of social studies education from six schools.

“The teachers who value social studies are more prepared and feel that their students are more prepared,” he says. “They feel they do a good job and they value it.”

The tentative conclusion is that those who value social studies were persuaded by someone else who valued it, Passe says. “I think those teachers who learned that will teach regardless of fads,” he says.

In California, there is no assessment in elementary social studies, but the state does test history and social science at grades eight, 10 and 11, which is based on academic content standards.

“The bottom line is that we don’t have a group—Parents for More Testing,” says a chuckling Thomas Adams, director of curriculum frameworks and instructional resources for the California Department of Education. “The trend is to reduce the amount of testing” particularly in elementary school, he says.

A state framework for history/social science exists, but many teachers are unaware of it, Kidwell says. Kidwell proposes a long-term plan with a state-appointed panel that would allow focus groups to sort through teacher comments about programs and learn what is working and what is not. The groups could also make recommendations on how to adjust state standards that better reflect high-quality teaching practices.

She would also recommend an assessment system that includes history and social science in all grade levels. “I think it does have the potential of being done away with in the grades not assessed,” she says.

### Everything is Connected

A promising route to get social studies back in the limelight in elementary grades is proving its cross-curricular appeal. The International Reading Association has convened a group including NCSS, National Council for Teachers of Mathematics, and National Science Teachers Association to ensure that no one subject is more worthy than another. Cutting social studies in the early grades is just bad, says Cathy Roller, director of research and policy at IRA. “That is a very huge misunderstanding of what it means to have good literacy instruction,” she says. “Kids do need time to learn to read but they also need time to develop concepts that they develop through their science and social studies. And there is no reason why a lot of reading time can’t be spent working with social studies and science materials.”

“This is a great concern for us as it is for everyone else,” adds James Rubillo, NCTM executive director. “In the immediacy of one moment we tend to forget that students need a whole range of abilities and skills to survive in our culture, in our society.”

Even Gary Nash, director of the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA, which provides lessons for history educators, says, “Reading will always be in the curriculum but pushing history out of the way as a way to [improve] learning to read seems like an unnecessary killing of a bird here.”

A supplementary materials company, Newbridge Educational Publishing, sees

growing excitement for their products, which include a Read to Learn series of engaging stories in social studies for elementary grades. “Social studies is a good way to teach reading,” says Linda Sanford, senior vice president and director of publishing. “The important thing is that the material is developed around best practices in reading and writing. They are literacy-based, and there is an understanding that everything is about reading.”

NCSS is also lobbying Congress to make representatives aware of what is happening. Researchers in NCSS are collecting data over the next two years to determine where social studies is headed.

Golston sees social studies surviving the storm. “I don’t see it dying and going away. Not in these times.”

### Notes

1. This article is excerpted from the article “Social Awareness on the Back Burner” in the December, 2004 issue of *District Administration*, on the web at [www.districtadministration.com](http://www.districtadministration.com). Used with permission.
2. Council for Basic Education, *Academic Atrophy: The Condition of the Liberal Arts in America’s Public Schools* (Washington, DC: CBE, 2004), [www.c-b-e.org](http://www.c-b-e.org).
3. Alfie Kohn, *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and Tougher Standards* (New York: Mariner Books, 2000).
4. [www.socialstudies.org](http://www.socialstudies.org)
5. Deborah Meier and George Wood, *Many Children Left Behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act Is Damaging Our Children and Our Schools* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004), xii.

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