

The Social Studies are Essential to a Well-Rounded Education

Arne Duncan

In his article, “The Common Standards Movement and the Role of Social Studies on the Internet” (*Social Education*, November/December 2010), C. Frederick Risinger praises the work of the NCSS in partnering with the Civic Mission of the Schools campaign to bring social studies back from the periphery of our schools’ curricula. I couldn’t agree with him more that it is time for a renewed national emphasis on social studies and citizenship education.

As social studies teachers, you live with the unintended consequences of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act every day. You understand that the law has created flawed incentives for states and school districts to narrow their curricula to English and math. This fundamentally misguided practice leaves out core disciplines that are essential to a well-rounded curriculum, including social studies.

To be sure, reading and mathematics are essential subjects. Students wouldn’t be able to learn about history and civics if they couldn’t read primary source documents and other texts. In addition to reading skills, they need a solid grounding in statistics and math concepts to grasp important principles in economics, geography, and the other social and behavioral sciences. But we absolutely cannot focus exclusively on reading and mathematics to the exclusion of other important disciplines, including social studies, as well as science, the arts, physical education, and others necessary for a well-rounded education. To marginalize social studies for the sake of reading and math is not only misguided, it is educational neglect. Educators and policymakers need to recognize that social studies is a core subject, critical to sustaining an informed democracy and a globally competitive workforce.

Unfortunately, under NCLB many school districts have undervalued the social studies. Principals, particularly those at elementary schools, tell me that though they would like to

allow ample time for social studies education, they feel constrained by pressures to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP). By sacrificing civics, economics, and history, these leaders have felt forced to neglect the long-term benefits of a well-rounded education, instead allowing less important, short-term goals to take over.

President Obama and I reject the notion that the social studies is a peripheral offering that can be cut from schools to meet AYP or to satisfy those wanting to save money during a fiscal crunch. Today more than ever, the social studies are not a luxury, but a necessity. We need to fix NCLB so that school leaders do not feel forced to ignore the vital components of a good education.

President Obama’s plan to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) will create a law that is fair, flexible, and focused on the schools most at risk, rather than micromanaging the schools that are doing well. That is why the president’s proposal to reauthorize ESEA calls for states and districts to focus the most rigorous federal interventions on the bottom five percent of schools, those most in need of reform. Schools in the bottom 10 percent will work with their local school districts on plans to improve. This will give most schools more opportunities to expand their curricula so that students have access to all of the core disciplines, including social studies, while making a place for all of the subjects necessary for a well-rounded education.

The president’s plan will continue to require schools to assess students as part of its fair and flexible accountability system. But this system will be significantly changed so that the social studies are no longer treated as second-class subjects. Under the plan, the new assessments will tell educators and parents if students are on track for college and careers. They will measure student growth and reward schools for producing significant

growth, not simply whether or not they have met proficiency on an arbitrary achievement bar. They will identify huge disparities in achievement among student populations. But test results will be only one of multiple measures used to identify which teachers are most successful. Armed with valid assessments, schools will be in a position to provide teachers with meaningful professional development and career paths. And the data will be used to identify and reward the teachers and schools who are closing the achievement gap and whose students are on track for college and careers.

These types of assessments have been called for by the Connected Learning Coalition—representing 250,000 content-area teachers, administrators, and educational technology specialists, including those in NCSS. Their Principles for Learning acknowledge that assessment is part of learning. It is how teachers take stock of what is working and what isn't. Instead of abandoning testing, we need to set higher standards and develop better assessments, those that go beyond the mediocre fill-in-the-bubble tests of today.

The Department of Education is supporting the work of states to create better assessment systems, aligned to the Common Core for English language arts and math for 2014–2015. But we also need higher standards and better tests for social studies. I urge social studies teachers to work together to encourage states and local school boards to develop high social studies standards based on themes and skills and to create authentic growth measures of student learning. In some states where the curriculum has been narrowed, teachers may even want to work with educational leaders to include social studies in their accountability system—as proposed by the president's plan—making a bold statement about the importance of social studies as a core subject.

The challenge of how we assess student learning in social studies is critical because your goals for students are so much larger than any bubble test could measure. You are creating contributing and responsible citizens. You are unleashing initiative, creativity, and problem-solving. You can always test to see if students understand the founding principles of the U.S. Constitution or where the Great Lakes are, but there is no bubble test to see whether or not they are becoming curious and informed participants in our democracy. To be on track today for college and careers, students need to show that they can analyze and solve complex problems, communicate clearly, synthesize information, apply knowledge, and generalize learning to other settings. We need your help creating assessments that test the full range of what students know and can do.

I would also like to remind all education stakeholders that testing itself is not the end game. It is merely a tool, one method

of raising standards and ensuring accountability. We know from research that access to a challenging high school curriculum has a greater impact on whether a student will earn a four-year college degree than his or her high school test scores, class rank, or grades. And we know that low-income students are less likely to have access to these accelerated learning opportunities and college-level coursework than their peers. The real objective is not to get students to score well on myriad bubble tests of



Arne Duncan teaches a class at Falls Church High School about the federal role in education, February 3, 2010. (Courtesy of the U.S. Department of Education)

content knowledge, but to help them all to become engaged and thinking citizens who are prepared for college and careers. The social studies play a critical role in creating civically competent young people who make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good and who contribute to an increasingly diverse, but interdependent world.

You know that. This is why you teach. It is why we need your leadership and expertise as we all work to educate tomorrow's citizens. The greatest thinkers in nearly every society have concluded that a well-educated person needs to learn much more than math, science, and how to read in their native tongue. As James Leach, the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities recently put it, a society that fails to study history, refuses to learn from literature, and denies the lessons of philosophy “imprisons [its] thoughts in the here and now.”

As social studies teachers, you have the key to set the prisoners free. 🗝️

ARNE DUNCAN is the U.S. Secretary of Education.