

Left Behind: The Importance of a Well-Educated Citizenry

How NCLB is Cutting Social Studies Out of the Public School System

Allison Pfeiffer
May 2007

“If we're going to have a successful democratic society, we have to have a well educated and healthy citizenry.”

-Thomas Jefferson

“Too many people equate social studies to what they remember from their school days--no matter how long it has been since they were in school. We need to communicate that social studies is changing to meet the challenges of today's world. It is not enough for students to memorize dates or locations on a map. Today's social studies provides students with the knowledge, thinking skills and experiences that will allow them to grow into effective citizens.”

National Council for Social Studies Education
Advocacy Toolkit

“We need to test children on their academic knowledge and skills for the same reason we take them to the dentist to see whether or not they have cavities—because we need to know. As caring adults, we want the children in our lives to have healthy teeth because we know that their teeth have to last a long time. If the dentist finds that their teeth are not healthy, then we get the cavity filled, and we teach them how to brush correctly, to use dental floss and avoid too much sugar. Children don't like going to the dentist, and we don't like the expense, but we do it because it's the right thing to do.”

-NCLB Official Website

In 2002 the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was passed in order to ensure quality education for all students in the public schools of the United States. As a piece of both egalitarian and neo-liberal legislation, its aim was to bring quantitative progress to all school-age youth, especially those in lower-achieving schools. NCLB was to achieve this goal by testing students' proficiency in three subjects: math, reading and science. Through this standardized testing the government would hold schools accountable for the progress of their students. However, the result has been far from the progress intended. As a result of NCLB, class time is spent teaching to the test, and the social sciences are being ignored. Not only does the drop in social studies education present a risk for the students in high-stakes testing schools, but it also widens the inequality gap between students and presents a threat to the communities around them; for this reason parents, students, teachers and community members should push for increased emphasis on engaging social studies education in schools.

Social Studies and the Test

While math, reading, and science are tested by every school in the country, social studies is not. It is easy to test math skills on a standardized test; there is only one right answer. It is also easy to test reading comprehension; the text shows the right answer. Reading and math are skills, easy to test and measure. However, social studies and science are different. Both have to do more with specific knowledge and understandings. Also, both require basic reading and math skills to comprehend. However, there is a set of fairly standard science lessons that nearly every grade school student learns: these are the planets, this is a hypothesis, this is a test, these are insects. Science made it onto the test. Social studies, on the other hand, did not. While most grade school students learn about the president and the governor, much of the rest of social studies is not a standardized curriculum. Social studies is a broad area of study, one that is too loosely defined to

effectively test. For example, while the college entrance test, the ACT, tests in math, science, reading, and writing, it does not test in social studies. The SAT, too, excludes social studies. Because math, science, and reading are all on the NCLB tests, they make up a standardized ‘core’ that all students in the United States have to learn, and because social studies is too difficult a subject to test effectively, it is left out.

The NCLB is designed to improve achievement in the most important subject areas through a system of accountability based on standardized tests. “Embedded in high-stakes testing is the assumption that improvements in education will necessarily result from accountability and testing” (Misco). The NCLB way of ensuring accountability is a system of warnings and consequences for schools that do not show improvement on the state standardized test. In order to pass the NCLB requirements, and presumably improve education for the students, a school must raise the test scores of students in every demographic by a certain percentage every year. Consequences become more serious every year the school fails to meet requirements of Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP. According to the supporters of NCLB, this system should help raise the quality of education by making schools accountable for the progress of their students.

NCLB fails students and teachers

The system of accountability set up by No Child Left Behind puts pressure on administrators and teachers to spend class time teaching what will be on the test rather than preparing students for future studies. Because schools are at risk of being shut down if their students do not get better at taking tests, administrators push teachers to do whatever is necessary to make sure that test scores improve. This leads to pressure to teach only test subjects and pressure to teach only test-necessary skills. On the higher level, schools and school districts are

following this trend, taking social studies and other non-NCLB subjects out of the curriculum focus. “In Florida, for example, students can purportedly complete their high school education without taking a social studies course and social studies teachers receive fewer professional development opportunities than teachers in other disciplines”; and “if a student attends low-performing elementary and middle-schools in some California districts, they won’t have history until they’re 15 or 16, and all they’ll have is 20th Century history” (Misco). Effects like these are especially bad in elementary schools, where class time is not cut up into separate periods, and teachers can allot teaching time however they see fit. In fact, the Council for Basic Education just came out with a study that showed, “that 30% of elementary school principals surveyed said their schools have reduced the amount of time spent on social studies instruction, and 50% of principals in schools with large minorities reported decreased time for social studies instruction” (Burroughs). Essentially, social studies are being pushed out of grade school curriculums, and replaced by test taking skills.

The problems with ignoring social studies

Although a primary goal of NCLB is to close the inequality gap, in practice, the pattern of teaching to the test, most prevalent in high-minority schools, reinforces the inequality NCLB aims to solve. By spending classroom time teaching math, reading, and test-style science while leaving out social studies, teachers are furthering the inequality gap. Higher education requires critical thinking skills far beyond those necessary for basic test taking. It is nearly impossible for a student with mediocre to strong skills in only math, reading and science to get into a college. Almost all college applications require writing samples and a transcript with at least 2 years of high school social studies. The school districts that are focusing on passing NCLB requirements rather than preparing their students for future education are simply making it harder for their

students to go somewhere in life. In essence, NCLB requirements have the most negative effect in schools and communities that are high minority and already struggling.

Teaching social studies in schools is not only important to the higher education of students, but also to the function of societies and governments. Social studies, defined as the study of history, civics, geography, economics, cultures, and psychology, is in essence a compilation of lessons necessary in order to be an active member in the political process and in civil society. Social studies, more so than any other area of study, requires and promotes critical thinking on the part of students. A good social studies curriculum forces students to interpret history, government, and current events in a critical light. While science and English classes can have critical thinking elements, critical thinking is a main goal of social studies education. Because “critical thinking is necessary to achievement of good citizenship and scholarship in a free society, two major aims of education in the social studies,” it is the job of the public school education system to effectively teach it (Patrick).

In addition to teaching critical thought, good social studies curriculums include lessons on the function of government and the role of citizens in the process. The reality is that “citizens are made, not born... [and] civic education is the key formative mechanism” (Glaston). Without an understanding of basics civics, citizens would be less active not only in elections, but also in voicing their opinions outside of the elections through letters to congressmen, etc. Students need to understand the basic political systems in the US because “the more knowledge citizens have of political principles and institutions, the more likely they are to support core democratic principles, starting with tolerance” (Glaston). In essence, compromising social studies in public schools is compromising the democratic process. Because the most affected schools are high-minority ones in struggling communities, denying social studies education to these demographics

runs the risk of lowering the political participation of communities, and puts the country at risk of losing the point of view of these people in the democratic process.

The negative effects on the critical thinking skills of students and the effects on the democratic process lead into another possible negative effect: harm to civil society. Although the definition of civil society is blurry, it can be described as the social, religious, and labor associations in which people interact. An active and healthy civil society requires its members to feel mutual responsibility for each other, accept diverse groups of people, and respond to problems within that society. To achieve these, a community must have citizens who are both critical and supportive of the societal, environmental, and political themes of a time period. If a society does not have citizens with these skills, it is likely that the civil society of those people will suffer. An inactive or unproductive civil society can mean a community that does not try to help suffering members, is politically and socially apathetic, or discriminates against various minority groups. Though it is not likely that the setting aside of social studies in public school curriculums will cause the total downfall of civil society in our country, it will likely have significant negative long-term effects.

In effect, the current system of testing brought on by NCLB satisfies neither the Neo-liberal nor the egalitarian liberal goals that led to the bill. The Harvard Civil Rights project found that, “neither a significant rise in achievement, nor closure of the racial achievement gap is being achieved,” through the NCLB standards (Lee). Rather, the NCLB testing is negatively affecting the education of American students by converting previous teaching time to test-prep and making teachers focus their attention on test-related subjects rather than more engaging and important methods and areas of education. For neo-liberals, the eventual effect of students who are prepared for test-taking rather than for the job market is a definite problem with the current

NCLB legislation. For egalitarian (welfare) liberals, the inequity of the teach-to-the-test system and the negative affects it can have on a society are a huge problem. Both of these points of contention are largely connected to the problems relating to social studies and standardized testing. With the problem of social studies and the NCLB clear, the question left is: what can we do?

Solutions

On the national level, adding social studies to the current NCLB testing standards or other education legislation might seem an obvious way to address this problem. In reality, however, this would cause as many problems as it could potentially solve. Social studies is taught in a different way in every classroom. Each teacher focuses on different subjects, often what interests them most. Setting nation or even state-wide standards for what students must know would not only stifle the creativity of the teachers, but the fact-based nature of standardized testing would inevitably lead social studies curriculums in the direction of fact-based rather than discussion-based teaching. In essence, adding social studies to the NCLB tests would minimize the positive aspects of the subject and simply add to the problem of standardized testing as a whole.

If adding social studies to NCLB isn't the answer, then what is? Getting rid of NCLB is not likely to happen, as "high-stakes testing and accountability policies are here to stay, at least in the near future"; and, even if the NCLB could be thrown out tomorrow, shouldn't the US have a nation-wide policy promoting quality education for all? One of the most promising ideas for a solution on the national level is the formation of an entirely new NCLB, since the presence of such a wide inequality gap in test scores is an indicator that the education system in the United States needs improvement. However, a test-and-punish system is not the way to

achieve these goals. A better version of the NCLB would, first and foremost, include funding for the schools. However, these changes will not happen quickly, and will most likely not happen at all without significant public pressure.

When considering solutions, it is important to go back to the initial goal of NCLB: closing the inequality gap. Pushing teachers to teach to the test widens the inequality gap and puts social studies education at risk. At their root, “achievement gaps in educational content are due, at least in part, to differences in teacher training and retention” (Harris). An effective new NCLB would address this problem at its root through recruiting, training, and rewarding good teachers. Simply putting money into the educational system would increase teacher salary, provide more rigorous teacher training, and provide more administrative support for teachers, all of which would greatly improve education. Of course, this is not an easily reached solution. Budgets are tight in almost every urban school district in the country despite constant requests for more money from states. In order to change in this way, our country needs not only to acknowledge that the education system needs help, but also to back that statement up with the money needed to bring change.

On the state and school district levels, there are even more possibilities for improving the current state of social studies education. The easiest and most important place to intercept the pattern of ignoring social studies in the schools is in individual classrooms. As social studies gets pushed to the side, teachers end up covering the material “created only to ‘meet the goal’” (Burroughs). Teachers must understand that the best way to teach students the necessary basic understandings of map reading, government, and cultural diversity is through creative, engaging activities. Because of NCLB, “Teacher creativity [in teaching social studies] is becoming something of the past” (Burroughs). Teachers simply don’t have the time or the energy to keep

students improving on tests, cover all of the curriculum requirements, and create engaging lesson plans. This is quite possibly one of the worst effects of NCLB. Students learn best by participating in activities, rather than simply listening to lectures. In order for social studies to be effectively taught in schools, "The focus must shift from the formal curriculum to the life of the student in the classroom. Issues of participation and inclusion become cognitive issues" (Nuthall). Teachers need to devote significant time and focus to these classroom activities. Parents and students need to let educators know that it is more important to have students engaged and learning one topic than trying to brush through five just to fill curriculum requirements and hurry on to testing. This will lead to students being more engaged with the topics of social studies, and engaged students are students who learn the best. If parents and students push for more time spent on actually teaching social studies (instead of simply brushing past the subject) in the classroom, it is likely that teachers will comply.

It is important that teachers recognize the potential for great reading and math lessons within the required social studies curriculum. There is reading material at nearly every reading level that relate to potential history lessons. If a teacher plans it out, a history lesson can easily become a lesson in learning new words and practicing reading comprehension. Writing skills, too, are easily incorporated into any form of social studies. Students can write narrative, expository, or persuasive pieces that relate to history, government, geography, etc. Though it may not seem as obvious, math can also be integrated into some types of social studies instruction. When learning about the number of states and state representatives, students could use basic multiplication to relate the population of a state to the number of representatives. Also, basic linear graphing skills could be taught in the context of a basic economics course. This approach to teaching social studies allows teachers to maintain the focus on math, science, and

especially reading skills that the students will be tested on while keeping them engaged in the classroom through creative social studies curricula.

While integrating other subjects into social studies is a good solution for elementary school classrooms, it is not as effective in the divided schedule of most middle and high schools. It is not the job of a high school algebra teacher to focus his or her time replacing a social studies class. But how can we counter the trend of schools like those in Florida, where students can graduate without ever taking a social studies class? Add social studies to graduation requirements. It is clear that for high schoolers, soon to enter the greater social and political world, social studies is an important subject to have. However, many states only require 2 years of social studies in order to graduate, and others have no requirements at all (ECS). Though most students take more than the minimum requirements, it is important to remember that the students that do not are often the ones in most need of the social studies lessons. Parents, students, and educators need to push to make these requirements more rigorous.

Conclusion

The No Child Left Behind Act is putting classroom social studies time in danger, and in effect harming the futures of the individual students and communities. Through the test-and-punish method, this piece of legislation is forcing teachers to teach to the test and set social studies aside. Because the pressure on low-performing, high-minority schools is the highest, the students in these schools who are already struggling are the ones most likely to be denied the education in civics, geography, history, and economics. The importance of social studies goes beyond the future education of these students. Social studies is about learning the skills of citizenship, and without the understanding of government, civil society, and the world, it is

unlikely that these students will become the sort of citizens that our country wants and needs. For these reasons, change needs to happen. While the system and effects could be stopped in a number of different places, the course of action is roughly the same in all of them: public outcry. Though they may seem like simple ideas, the solutions posed above are all things that would help mitigate the damage done to social studies education. It is important that Senators, State Representatives, school district board members, superintendents, principals, and teachers all know that letting social studies leave the core subjects of study in public schools is unacceptable.

Annotated Bibliography

Burroughs, Susie. "Social Studies Education in the Age of Testing and Accountability"
Educational Measurement, Issues and Practice. Washington: 2005. Vol. 24.

<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?did=996931481&Fmt=7&clientId=44460&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

A comprehensive article on the effects of NCLB on social studies curriculums. Showcases a study of schools in a number of different states, and demonstrates how NCLB testing policies have affected social studies teaching time and quality of teaching.

Center for Civic Education. http://www.civiced.org/index.php?page=talking_points

The CCE is an organization that works to promote civics education in schools through various campaigns, seminars, and professional development programs. The website is a source for all of these, as well as information on the decline in civics education and civics lesson plans.

Education Commission of the States. "High School Graduation Requirements: Social Studies"
2007.

<http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=901>

This is a simple table listing the social studies graduation requirements for each state in terms of total credits and specific class requirements. It is a good resource for anyone interested in advocating for more rigorous social studies requirements.

Furin, Terrence. "Some Strategies in Dealing with High-Stakes Testing and The Death of Social Studies Education" Urban Education Journal.

<http://www.urbanedjournal.org/notes/notes0019.pdf>

This article has a great section at the end of 'Saint Joseph Graduate Student Teacher Suggestions for Inclusion of Social Studies in a High-Stakes Testing Environment'. The curriculum integration ideas, especially, could be very helpful for teachers.

Lee, Jaekyung. "Tracking Achievement Gaps and Assessing the Impact of NCLB on the Gaps: An In-depth Look into National and State Reading and Math Outcome Trends" 2006.

http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/esea/nclb_naep_lee.pdf

This article is an in depth look at the affects of the NCLB on inequality gaps in the country. The Harvard Civil Rights Project page, <http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/>, in general, is a good resource for people interested in inequality in the schools in the United States.

National Council for the Social Studies. www.socialstudies.org

This website provides information about NCLB through the eyes of social studies educators and has resources for social studies teachers. The "Joint Statement on NCLB" is an especially interesting page, showing the recommendations made by NCLB educators suggesting changes to the act.

No Child Left Behind Official Page. <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>

This is the official government website on the NCLB Act. It has regular updates on the newest changes to the system, and statistics showing improvement. It is a good source for information about the finer points of the Act, and for understanding the reasoning behind the system of accountability and standards.

Rethinking Schools Online. "The No Child Left Behind Act".

http://www.rethinkingschools.org/special_reports/bushplan/index.shtml

This webpage has links to critical articles about NCLB testing, funding, and impact, as well as articles posing solutions to the problems and ideas for citizen activism. "Don't Mourn, Organize!" is an especially interesting one by Monty Neill

Savage, Tom. *Effective Teaching in Elementary Social Studies*. Simon & Schuster, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, NJ. 1996.

This book is a good resource for teachers looking for advice on teaching social studies in elementary schools. It has a section on social studies as an integrated study that has good ideas for curriculum integration. It is also a good resource for teachers struggling with the challenges of teaching in a widely varied urban district with ESL students.

Other Works Cited

Glaston, William. "Political Knowledge, Political Engagement, and Civic Education" Annual Review of Political Science. 2001.

<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=1&hid=101&sid=63693dbb-e9cb-4307-8324-67bf99fa658c%40sessionmgr104>

Harris, Douglas. "Accountability, Standards, and the Growing Achievement Gap: Lessons from the Past Half-Century". *American Journal of Education*. February 2006.

<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/AJE/journal/issues/v112n2/112202/112202.html>

Misco, Thomas. "In Response to NCLB: A Case for Retaining the Social Studies". *Essays in Education*. Vol. 15. 2005. <http://www.usca.edu/essays/vol152005/misco.pdf>

National Council for Social Studies Education. "Advocacy Toolkit"

<http://www.socialstudies.org/toolkit/?print-friendly=true>

NCLB Official Website. "Testing For Results". 2004.

<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/ayp/testingforresults.html>

Nuthall, Graham. "The Role of Memory in the Acquisition and Retention of Knowledge in Science and Social Studies". *Cognition & Instruction*; 2000, Vol. 18 Issue 1, p83,

<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=1&hid=118&sid=93b6c9bf-3178-4cac-ac84-93a9bd6af142%40sessionmgr102>

Patrick, John. "Critical Thinking in the Social Studies." ERIC Digest No. 30. 1986.

<http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-924/critical.htm>