

The State of Social Studies: A National Random Survey of Elementary and Middle School Social Studies Teachers

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During the past two decades there has been mounting evidence based upon tests, surveys, and research that most American students graduate from or leave high school with little basic knowledge of history, civics, economics, and geography. Many policy makers, academics, educators, and members of the general public are increasingly troubled by this trend. In an ever more complex world it is imperative that a critical mass of American citizens have a better understanding of history, current affairs, and political and economic institutions. Arguably, the very future of the American Republic could be at stake. The nation's schools have the charge of imparting history and social science content to students, and have, since the early part of the last century, done this through offering social studies, a subject that theoretically encompasses content from history and social science disciplines.

While significant evidence of student performance, or the lack thereof, in social studies and associated subjects such as history exists, to date no systematic attempt has been made to gain some level of national understanding of what exactly is going on with social studies in our elementary and middle schools. This study is such an attempt. It exclusively focuses upon public elementary and

middle schools, the educational institutions where formal history and civic education allegedly begins. The elementary classroom is also where students develop some of their initial attitudes about, and knowledge of, history and the social sciences. In what follows we focus upon the people responsible for this instruction: elementary and middle school teachers.

Much of the debate over the direction of social studies education has been based on inferences drawn from such sources as test scores, printed standards, textbooks, academic writing about the social studies, conference presentations, and analyses of school curricula. While each of these sources offers insight into the nature of the teaching of social studies in our nation's schools, each in its own way offers a limited perspective. Actual instructional practice is often quite different from the inferences drawn based on the above sources. "Curriculum as taught" is often different from "curriculum as designed" or the "curriculum as imagined." One effective method of ascertaining the status of social studies today in America's schools is to obtain more direct information about what actually occurs in social studies classes and how teachers perceive social studies, both as a discipline and in relation to other subjects.

Although there are many surveys that have examined teachers' educational philosophies and pedagogical predilections, we are unaware of any studies focusing exclusively upon social studies teachers. Also important is the fact there are no studies in at least the last ten years that have utilized random nationally-representative sampling techniques. Prior research on social studies teachers has been limited by non-random sampling procedures that inevitably raise questions about how representative the sample is and the generalizability of the findings.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, we were able to develop an interview protocol and retain the services of the University of Connecticut's Center for Survey Research to conduct a nationally representative telephone survey of second-, fifth-, and eighth-grade social studies teachers.¹ In late spring and early summer 2005, 1,051 telephone interviews were conducted with equal numbers of randomly selected second-, fifth-, and eighth-grade teachers from throughout the nation who teach social studies. Typically, state testing takes place at grades 5 and 8 and teachers from these two grades surveyed are charged through most state curricula to

engage in the first systematic instruction in U.S. history.

We considered it to be critical to have a sample size of around 1,000 teachers in order to reduce the margin of error to plus or minus 3%. Our objective was to have results that could, with a high degree of confidence, represent an accurate picture of social studies teachers and social studies classrooms in America's public schools. The funding level was sufficient to achieve the desired sample size and a 15-minute telephone interview with each participating teacher. Time constraints limited the range and format of questions that could be asked. The areas of inquiry of the telephone survey were:

- The importance of social studies in the schools and instructional time devoted to social studies in teachers' classrooms
- Teachers' preferred rationales for teaching social studies
- Teachers' and school leaders' preferred teaching styles
- The influence of state testing programs on classroom practice
- Teachers' views on important topics that should be emphasized in the social studies curriculum
- Teachers' reports of their most recent class activities
- Teachers' views on professional preparation and current professional development needs
- Teachers' views on the value of social studies research
- Teachers' views on textbook use and quality
- Teachers' views on the impact of the No Child Left Behind legislation
- The influence of teachers' moral, social, and political views upon their classroom instruction
- Teachers' control over their classrooms

Key Findings: Social Studies Gets Little Time in Elementary Schools

Teachers reported that social studies in general, or associated subjects such

TABLE 1. The Curricular Emphasis of Social Studies

Q. When teachers teach social studies, especially U.S. history and civics, what degrees of emphasis do you think should be given to each of the following? Please use a 1 to 10 scale, where 1 means no emphasis at all and a 10 means extremely heavy emphasis. Use any number in between, the higher the number the greater the emphasis. (Shown: % rating it an 8, 9, or 10 [significant emphasis])

	(Grades 2, 5, & 8 combined)	Grade 2	Grade 5	Grade 8
Promoting the acceptance of cultural diversity	85%	88%	81%	84%
The Constitution and the U.S. system of government	84%	69%	88%	96%
Thinking critically about American institutions and American culture	78%	70%	77%	86%
Learning to interact socially with others	75%	86%	72%	66%
Injustice in the American system, with particular attention paid to race, gender, and class injustice	70%	64%	66%	78%
American historical heroes	67%	69%	70%	64%

TABLE 2. Instruction

Q. In your most recent social studies class period, did you do any of the following? (Shown: % saying yes)

	(Grades 2, 5 & 8 combined)	Grade 2	Grade 5	Grade 8
Have whole class teacher presentation/discussion	90%	96%	90%	85%
Have students engaged in problem solving or critical thinking activities	86%	87%	85%	88%
Have students work in small groups	85%	87%	85%	88%
Have students reading in textbooks	64%	57%	73%	64%
Have students working in workbooks or on handouts	58%	62%	53%	58%
Have video-based activities	51%	42%	48%	63%
Have computer-based activities, including the internet	49%	36%	53%	57%
Have students engaged in service-learning or community activities	30%	38%	29%	23%

and textbooks, but believed they had a lot of control over the classroom methods they employed.

as history or civics, received relatively little instructional time compared to other subjects. Most elementary school teachers devoted less than one hour per day to social studies in any form. Seventy percent of second- and fifth-grade teachers spent less than

four hours per week teaching social studies. By comparison, 11% of the same teachers spent less than four hours teaching math and 8% spent less than four hours teaching reading. In many schools, social studies subjects such as history or geography

aren't taught as separate subjects but are "integrated" with language arts or science. Approximately half of both second- and fifth-grade teachers "integrated" what little social studies they taught.

Social Studies Teachers Report that Schools Accord Social Studies Low Importance Compared to Other Subjects

Despite much institutional rhetoric about "the importance of citizenship education," the majority of teachers didn't perceive their schools as placing much importance on social studies in general or associated subjects such as civics, economics, geography, and history when compared to other school subjects. Unsurprisingly, teachers at all levels indicated that well over 90% of schools considered math and reading highly important. Science was lower than math and reading in perceived school-wide importance but was rated significantly ahead of social studies.

Only 29% of all teachers indicated that their schools thought civics and government important. We believe this to be a striking statistic, given that it is widely accepted that civic education is an important function of the schools. Only in eighth grade, where teachers tend to be subject-matter specialists, did as many as half of teachers report that their schools considered "social studies in general" important. Although there were some variations between grades, just a little over one third of all teachers indicated their schools thought history important. Approximately a quarter of all teachers reported that geography was considered important in their schools. Only 14% of all teachers felt their schools regarded learning about the economy as important.

Teachers Rate Acceptance of Cultural Diversity as a More Important Rationale for Teaching Social Studies than Learning about American Heroes

Teachers were given six rationales often cited for including social studies in the

school curriculum and asked to rate each based upon the degree of emphasis they felt the rationale should receive in the curriculum (Table 1). Although majorities of teachers rated each of the six reasons as important, there were variations depending upon grade levels and little difference in the two reasons that were rated most important. Teachers rated the following reasons for teaching social studies in descending order of importance: promoting acceptance of cultural diversity (85%), learning about the Constitution and U.S. system of government (84%), thinking critically about American institutions and culture (78%), learning to interact socially with others (75%), learning about injustice in the American system (70%), and learning about American historical heroes (67%).

Teachers Rate Student-centered Instruction as Their Preferred Style but the Largest Percentage of Respondents Employed Teacher-centered Instruction in Their Most Recent Social Studies Class

Teachers reported that they tend to blend a combination of teacher-centered and student-centered instruction in their classrooms. A majority of teachers indicated that their teaching style was student, rather than teacher-centered. Still, when asked to indicate from a list of eight possible instructional methods, which ones they used in their last social studies class period, a higher percentage (90%) of teachers reported using whole class teacher presentation/discussion than any of the other methods. (Table 2) However, having students engaged in "problem solving or critical thinking activities" and "working in small groups" ranked as the second and third most popular methods most recently used in class. Seventy-three percent (73%) of teachers reported that the school administration preferred that they use student-centered instruction; however, only 67% of teachers indicated a preference for this method. Teachers reported having little control over social studies themes, topics,

Social Studies Teachers Think That Their Preparation Has Been Less than Top Quality

When asked to rate the quality of their university history, social science, and professional education courses, student teaching was the only aspect of preparation that even half of teachers rated as "very good." Excluding student teaching, 36% ranked their professional education courses as very good, 53% as good, 8% as poor, and 1% as very poor. Only 31 percent of teachers rated their history and social science courses as very good; 59% ranked them as good; 8% as poor, and 1% as very poor.

Since only 17% of fifth-grade teachers and 10% of second-grade teachers had more than ten courses in history or social science as undergraduates, their ability to rate the usefulness of these courses is open to question. Only at the eighth-grade level did a majority (60%) of teachers report having taken ten or more history or social science courses.

Teachers Cite Improving Subject Matter Knowledge and Mastering Better Methods for Teaching Content as Top Professional Development Needs

When asked to choose from eight areas they thought were important for their professional development, social studies teachers at all levels selected "presenting content effectively" and "subject matter knowledge" as their top two needs. Teacher citation of these two professional needs could well be an implicit recognition on their part of serious deficiencies in their undergraduate preparation to become social studies instructors (Table 3). Teachers in low-income schools accorded even more importance to these two professional development areas that teachers in more middle class communities.

Many Teachers Do Not Perceive The Impact of Standards, Testing and No Child Left Behind as Harmful

Despite the justifiable national emphasis on standardized reading and math test

scores, we felt it was important to assess what effect this emphasis might have on the place of social studies in the curriculum. One reasonable concern is that social studies might be even more weakened as a result of recent federal and state testing. We found this concern to be only partially supported by the data.

Although the majority of teachers (61%) reported that state testing has had no impact on the amount of time for social studies, 26% did report that they now spend less time on social studies. Teachers had similar reactions regarding the impact of No Child Left Behind legislation on time for social studies. Fifty-six percent (56%) of teachers surveyed believed general standardized testing makes social studies less enjoyable but 65% indicated that they would do less direct instruction and more inquiry and group work if testing were to disappear. A large majority of teachers consider it important to prepare students for state social studies tests and that number is even greater among schools with a higher percentage of low-income students.

While there are considerable differences of opinion among teachers whose students take state tests about those tests, more second- and fifth-grade teachers are satisfied than dissatisfied with state tests. However, eighth-grade teachers show a significantly higher level of dissatisfaction with testing. Fifty percent of eighth-grade teachers said that they were dissatisfied, compared to 45% who were satisfied (the comparable statistic for second-grade teachers was 48% who were satisfied, compared to 32% who were not).

Teachers' Personal Beliefs as Liberals and Conservatives Influence Their Teaching

No clear ideological bias was detected among teachers—at least not self-perceived. About half of teachers believed that their moral, social, and personal values were in line with their community. Of the rest, an equal number felt they were more liberal or more conservative than their communities. (Table 4) Sixty-five percent (65%) of teachers stated that “all

TABLE 3. Professional Development Needs by Income Level of School Students
Q. Here is a list of professional development needs teachers frequently identify. For each one, please rate how important it is to you in your own professional development. Use a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 means it is a very low need area for your professional development and a 10 means it is a very high need area. (Shown: % saying 8, 9, or 10—high need area).

	Total	0 to 30% free/reduced lunch	31 to 70% free/reduced lunch	71 to 100% free/reduced lunch
Presenting content effectively	68%	62%	69%	77%
Subject matter knowledge	66%	59%	65%	76%
Meeting the academic needs of culturally and learning diverse students in your school	64%	59%	66%	75%
Meeting students' social and psychological needs	60%	60%	58%	68%
Assessing student performance	54%	48%	53%	60%
Classroom management	51%	43%	52%	61%
Constructivist teaching techniques	50%	45%	49%	56%
Preparing students for test taking	43%	33%	51%	55%

TABLE 4. Influence of Values in Teaching

Q. How often would you say that your views on moral, social and political issues influence your approach to the teaching of social studies...?

	Total (Grades 2, 5 & 8 combined)	Grade 2	Grade 5	Grade 8
All of the time	16%	13%	17%	17%
Some of the time	49%	52%	49%	46%
Seldom	26%	26%	27%	27%
Never	8%	8%	7%	8%

of the time” or “some of the time” their views on moral, political, and social issues influenced their approach to the teaching of social studies. Only 35% of social studies teachers responded that they were largely value neutral in their approach to teaching in the classroom.

Conclusion

The results of this survey, as might be expected, reflect the complexity of the topic. Although some of the findings are somewhat reassuring, there is plenty of data that should be a subject for great concern given the important role that social studies should play in the formation of American citizens.

The founders of this nation did believe that education was vital to a successful

republic. As an ethnically heterogeneous nation, founded on a set of core political beliefs, the United States depends, more than most countries, on civic literacy. While high levels of competency in reading, math, and science are necessary for a strong nation, these alone will not guarantee national survival. Civic and historical literacy are also essential if our republic is to flourish. The finding that schools place less importance on social studies than most other subjects suggests that the goal of civic literacy is not as highly valued as the rhetoric might suggest. Those citizens and policy makers who believe that some early understanding of the economy is essential face an abysmal situation. Economics was rated dead last in our study.

Another important finding in our study is that teachers in two of the three grades surveyed (second, fifth), spend little classroom time on social studies. Students' low performance on tests of civic, historical, geographic, and economic knowledge is easily understood in light of these findings. Students' performance on standardized tests is in part a function of time on task. It is also a function of the content and quality of instruction.

It is likely that teachers spend more time on delivering quality instruction in those subjects teachers prioritize as more important. We also find it a subject of great concern that elementary teachers rated American heroes the social studies topic they felt deserved the least emphasis of the six options presented. This could be reflective of an attitudinal sea change in our culture relative to the recent past. For almost 50 years the majority of academic and media elites have denigrated heroes, promoted "anti-heroes," and focused inordinate attention upon often-superficial celebrities. It seems that even teachers of our nation's children have been influenced by the message that the study of courageous individuals who make a difference is relatively unimportant.

Also, the finding that acceptance of cultural diversity was rated the most important reason for teaching social studies, can help to explain low performance on standardized tests. Our experience has been that "diversity" curricula, in stark contrast to solid world geography and history content, are superficial at best and politicized at worst. We believe that this study is highly significant in the partial light it sheds on the decades-long attempts by various groups to devalue American traditions and values. In the minds of many social studies educators today, core American values and the traditional heroes that embody them now appear suspect.

We think that our finding that social studies teachers are aware of the limitations of their subject-matter preparation programs is important. Most American students receive their first formal U.S.

history instruction in the fifth grade. We consider the finding that more than 80% of fifth-grade teachers have ten or less university courses in any history or social science to be strong evidence that the large majority of the first U.S. history teachers our children encounter are woefully unprepared. Teachers appear to recognize that they need a stronger subject matter background to teach effectively, and they identify subject matter and how to teach content as their most important professional development needs. We feel that schools of education should heed this warning by teachers and re-examine the assumptions that result in only limited time for subject matter courses in current programs. You can't teach well what you don't know.

We also wanted to examine the claim that schools of education, and higher education in general, are places where prospective teachers are indoctrinated with ideologies that contrast with Americans' world views. Two thirds of the teachers indicated that their moral, social, and political values influenced their approach to teaching social studies. Half of these respondents reported holding values congruent with their communities while half reported holding more liberal or more conservative views than their communities. It would appear that in some cases the social studies classroom may be politicized in a manner inconsistent with community values.

We find we can identify no single factor that is the source of the problem that could be used to "fix" the social studies. One of the many reminders that social studies education needs "fixing" can be found in the national McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum random survey of 1,000 adults.² This poll found that 22% of Americans could name all five members of the Simpson family cartoon show, but only 1 in 1,000 could name all five First Amendment freedoms. Jay Leno's street interviews, general surveys of Americans' level of historical and civic knowledge such as the Five Freedoms survey cited above, as well as data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), all pro-

vide sources of concern about the quality of social studies education today.

On the one hand, we find some of the survey findings reassuring. We find, in general, that teachers are positively engaged in the process of reform of social studies with a more substantive focus on high-quality subject matter. More elementary teachers are satisfied with their state standards and testing programs than dissatisfied, and the impact of state testing and No Child Left Behind appears to have less overall impact on time spent on social studies instruction than is sometimes asserted. Another indicator of the priority being placed on strong subject matter is teachers' awareness of their own professional development needs. The fact that teachers identify their top two professional development needs as "Presenting content effectively" and "Subject matter knowledge" suggests to us that teachers both recognize the limits of their teacher education programs in this regard and feel the need to address their weaknesses.

On the other hand, we find much to be concerned about. Given the importance of citizens' knowledge of history, civics, geography, and economics to the effective functioning of our republic, it is troubling to see how little time and importance is attached to the social studies in comparison to other areas of the school curriculum. We find the low importance attached to economics especially troubling given the importance of economic and financial literacy to individual success and general prosperity. We also find alarming the low importance attached to teaching about American heroes. It is difficult to see how one can teach a history that inspires civic participation without according a prominent place to the examination of the lives of exemplars of the American citizen. This is especially true at a time when the United States is engaged in global struggle against enemies of American ideals.

We feel that today there is a disconnect between what social studies teachers need to be successful and what they are being taught in their teacher preparation programs. The consequences can

be found in the teachers' identification of their professional development needs and in their evaluation of their preparation as having been of less than top quality. We believe that if social studies education is to improve, university-level teacher preparation must be restructured so that prospective teachers come to see the value of mastering subject matter, actually learn more content, and develop effective pedagogical skills for teaching subject matter.

Notes

1. This study is one step in what has become known as the "Contrarian Project." In 1995, a group of long-term National Council for the Social Studies members decided to form a special interest group in response to what was perceived as a decidedly anti-content and politically correct drift within the organization. It was the Contrarians' judgment that the organization, and hence the voice of social studies education, had been captured by scholars who saw the social studies as a mechanism for transforming American culture rather than teaching the next generation to preserve and honor democratic traditions and American values. In the 12 years that the Contrarian group has been in existence members have organized sessions at NCSSE annual meetings, written journal articles, and most recently published the book *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?*
2. Reported by the Associated Press on March 1, 2006.

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Methodology

The three authors and the staff of the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut developed the questionnaire jointly.

Telephone interviews were conducted by the Center for Survey Analysis (CSRA) in Storrs, Connecticut. Professional survey interviewers, trained in standard protocols for administering survey instruments, conducted all the interviews. The draft survey questionnaire and field protocols were thoroughly tested prior to starting the formal data collection period. Telephone interviews for the project were conducted during April, May and June 2005. A total of 1,051 interviews were conducted—351 interviews with second-grade teachers, 350 with fifth-grade teachers, and 350 with eighth-grade teachers. The interviews were generally 15 to 17 minutes in length.

In order to achieve a representative, national sample of public school social studies teachers, CSRA employed the following multi-step method. A nationally-representative, random sampling of public elementary schools was drawn from the comprehensive, representative data base available from the National Center for Educational Statistics (which maintains and regularly updates this database). The sampling frames were cleaned of all schools that do not teach grades 2, 5 or 8. In all, *three different sampling frames*—schools that teach second graders, schools that teach fifth graders and schools that teach eighth graders—were pulled so a school would not have to teach all three grades to fall into the sample. The size of the school (number of students) was factored into the selection process—larger schools (those with more students) had a greater chance of being selected.

In these types of surveys, it is typically more difficult to reach larger schools in the urban centers. The Northeast is typically harder than the South or Midwest. Therefore, we followed a strict *one-to-one replacement protocol based upon these three variables* (urbanicity, size of school and region of the country). For example, if a large urban school in the Northeast was randomly selected for the study and refused to participate in the study, another school that was also large, urban, and in the Northeast was selected to take its place. This helped ensure proper national representation of all public schools.

Initially, telephone calls were placed to the front office of these selected schools, asking for the school's participation in the study. CSRA then worked with the front office to randomly select a social studies teacher (or second/fifth grade generalist teacher). A common random selection method, the alphabet method, was used for this study. For example, we might ask to speak to a second-grade teacher whose last name begins with "P" or the letter closest to "P". The letters would be randomized. Interview appointments were then scheduled with that teacher, at a time or location most convenient to him or her (at school during the day or at home in the evening—respondent's choice). All interviews were conducted via telephone.

The sample error associated with a sample of this size, 1051, is plus or minus 3%, meaning that there is less than one chance in twenty that the results of a survey of this kind would differ by more than 3% in either direction from the results which would be obtained if all members of the sample frame had been selected. The sample error is larger for sub-groups.

Of the teachers in the sample, 74% were female and 26% male. The proportion who were white was 85%, and 15% were non-white. In the sample, 46% had a Bachelor's degree, 43% had a Master's, 10% had a Master's plus 30 or Post Master's certification, and 1% had a Ph.D. or Ed.D.

Most of the teachers had more than ten years of teaching experience: 34% had taught for more than 20 years, 26% for 11 to 20 years, 21% for 6 to 10 years, and 18% for 1 to 5 years, while 1% were first-year teachers.