

Debating the Future of Social Studies

The essay by Chester Finn, Jr. is from the introduction to *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* by James Leming, Lucien Ellington and Kathleen Porter. It was published by the Fordham Foundation and the full text is available at their website (<http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/publication/publication.cfm?id=317>). The response to Finn is by Alan Singer, editor of *Social Science Docket*. His book, *Social Studies for Secondary Schools* (published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ) was one of the social studies methods texts critically reviewed in the Fordham Foundation study. The introductory essays are followed by responses from members of the New York and New Jersey Councils for the Social Studies.

Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?

by Chester E. Finn, Jr.

For a very long time, the deterioration of social studies in U.S. schools resembled the decline of the Roman Empire: protracted, inexorable, and sad, but not something one could do much about.

Evidence kept accumulating that American kids were emerging from K-12 education and then, alas, from college with ridiculously little knowledge or understanding of their country's history, their planet's geography, their government's functioning, or the economy's essential workings.

Evidence also accumulated that, in the field of social studies itself, the lunatics had taken over the asylum. Its leaders were people who had plenty of grand degrees and impressive titles but who possessed no respect for Western civilization; who were inclined to view America's evolution as a problem for humanity rather than mankind's last, best hope; who poo-hooped history's chronological and factual skeleton as somehow privileging elites and white males over the poor and oppressed; who saw the study of geography in terms of despoiling the rain forest rather than locating London or the Mississippi River on a map; who interpreted "civics" as consisting largely of political activism and "service learning" rather than understanding how laws are made and why it is important to live in a society governed by laws; who feared that serious study of economics might give unfair advantage to capitalism (just as excessive attention to democracy might lead impressionable youngsters to judge it a superior way of organizing society); and who, in any case, took for granted that children were better off learning about their neighborhoods and "community helpers" than amazing deeds by heroes and villains in distant times and faraway places.

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Defending Social Studies

by Alan Singer

In college I majored in history. My master's degree and Ph.D. are in history. I planned to be a history teacher. Yet in the battle over whether we should teach history or social studies, I stand on the social studies side of the great divide.

According to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 1994), "The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world."

The NCSS (National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools, 1989) emphasizes that "content knowledge from the social studies should not be treated merely as received knowledge to be accepted and memorized, but as the means through which open and vital questions may be explored and confronted. Students must be made aware that just as contemporary events have been shaped by actions taken by people in the past, they themselves have the capacity to shape the future" (3).

I like the NCSS conception of social studies because it is multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary. It recognizes the complexity of our world and a democratic society's dependence on thoughtful, informed, active citizens. Because the purpose of social studies is to engage students in an examination of "open and vital questions" so that they "develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions," social studies teachers focus on enhancing student analytical skills and what John Dewey (1938) calls intellectual "habits of mind." Content knowledge is crucial for these understandings, but at the center of a social studies curriculum are the students and what has meaning to them, rather than particular prescribed information.

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Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong? by Chester E. Finn, Jr. (Continued from page 2)

The social studies problem seemed hopeless. And so I and many others concluded that serious education reformers were well advised to put it on a raft and push it into deep water somewhere in the despoiled rain forest or maroon it on a glacier whose melting is caused by the excessive carbon dioxide emanating from prosperous societies. Put it somewhere far away and hope it will vanish.

Putting Social Studies Aside

As recently as September 10, 2001, we at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation were throwing up our hands in frustration-and turning to other challenges. This, despite enormous earlier efforts by us and our antecedent Educational Excellence Network to diagnose and cure the problems of social studies. We had helped with the work of the Bradley Commission on History in the Schools and the launch of the National Council on History Education. We had worked with the National Geographic Society to restart geography as a legitimate school subject. We had served on boards and committees beyond counting. We had evaluated state social studies standards. Back in 1987, Diane Ravitch and I had penned *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*, which helped expose the breadth of historical ignorance among high school juniors and seniors. We had published books on the decline of the humanities in U.S. schools and what to do about them. We joined with Freedom House and the American Federation of Teachers in 1987 to write and circulate *Education for Democracy: A Statement of Principles, Guidelines for Strengthening the Teaching of Democratic Values*. We had contributed to the State Department publication *What Is Democracy?* (see <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/whatsdem/>). And on and on.

We had tried. For the most part, however, we had failed. The forces arrayed on the other side were too powerful, too entrenched in their university posts and their command positions in state education departments. The empire seemed destined to decline until it fell. And so, for the most part, we went on to other issues, to education reform battles where we glimpsed a better chance of making a difference. Not the least of these was a many-faceted effort to bring more choices into education, and not the least of the reasons for that was our conviction that a more open and diverse delivery system would enable educators and parents who cared about history, geography, and

civics to find ways of imparting them to their pupils and children. The larger social studies problem, however, seemed hopeless.

Then came the terrorist attacks of September 11 (and their smaller-scale counterparts from Yemen to Nairobi to Riyadh), soon followed by the responses of the “leaders” of social studies. Naturally, the question had immediately arisen of what to teach children about these horrific events. And the despicable answer, from many quarters of the social studies field in particular and the education establishment in general, was teach them to feel good about themselves, to forgive their trespassers, not to blame anyone (lest this lead to feelings of hatred or prejudice), to appreciate diversity, and to consider the likelihood that America was itself responsible for this great evil visited upon it.

Teachers were not urged to explain to their young charges why some bad people abhor freedom and seek to obliterate democracy; why America, because of what it stands for, is abhorrent to those who would enslave minds, subjugate women, and kill those who differ from themselves; why the United States is worth preserving and defending; and how our forebears responded to previous attacks upon their country in particular and freedom in general. Do not teach such things, was the message. They are jingoistic, premodern, doctrinaire, wrong. So signaled the mandarins of social studies.

This was, for us and many other Americans, the last straw, for it signaled that social studies was not some harmless crumbling wreck of a curricular empire, but was instead becoming-with the best of intentions, to be sure-a force within our very own schools that would, unchecked, prevent the rising generation from learning our nation’s history and thus erode America’s future.

Could we do anything about it? I do not take for granted that we’ll succeed. But I couldn’t look in the mirror if we didn’t try.

Good Intentions, Strange Results

A second recent event made the effort yet more urgent, though this one was entirely well intended and in other respects praise-worthy. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act of 2001 deals with social studies mainly by omitting it from the new nationwide education accountability system. This was not meant, heaven knows, as a hostile act. The authors of NCLB are patriots all and the Bush administration has

undertaken commendable efforts to rekindle civic education and deepen historical understanding. Rather, NCLB's authors seem to have concluded that the country would do well to start by getting kids proficient in reading and math (and eventually science), with other valuable (and, compared to social studies, less controversial) subjects left for later. Meanwhile, went the reasoning in Washington, those other subjects could safely be entrusted to states, communities, schools, and educators. NCLB did not aspire to take over the entire curriculum. Perhaps its authors were also deterred by the contentious nature of social studies in particular, the difficulty that some states have had in agreeing on solid academic standards for this fractious field, and the backlash from the uproar a decade ago over national history standards.

In any case, the omission of social studies-and, more importantly, of history, geography, and civics-from NCLB is beginning to have deleterious effects. It's causing some states and schools to downplay these subjects in favor of those for which they'll be held publicly accountable and compared with each other. As the old educator truism puts it, what gets tested is what gets taught. Already we hear reports from the field that history is getting slighted due to the press to get everyone proficient in math and reading. Hard as it is to imagine history getting less attention than before in U.S. schools, this is surely not a good thing.

Moreover, as social studies sinks below the watchful eyes of governors, legislators, business leaders, and others who are apt to take a commonsense view of it, it becomes gripped ever more firmly by the field's own leaders, i.e., by ed school professors, textbook authors, state and local social studies supervisors, and their ilk. In other words, those who have brought this field to its present ruinous state-and are major sources of the bad ideas that dominate it-are destined to gain even greater control of it, simply because of the vacuum created when a state's lay leaders focus laser-like upon the challenges directly posed by NCLB: reading, math, and science, to be sure, but also "highly qualified teachers," synchronized testing systems, and other ambitious and difficult undertakings.

To recap: at the very time we most need our citizens and future citizens to learn what it means to be American and why America is worth defending, to become more conscious of the world they inhabit and the conflicts that rock it, to grasp the differences

between democracy and totalitarianism and between free and doctrinaire societies, the part of the school curriculum on which we must rely for help has turned into a hindrance. It's not getting the job done. It's wrongheaded. It may even be making matters worse. Yet we are entrusting it ever more definitively to the hands of those who brought it to this sorry state. The keys to Rome are being turned over to the Goths and the Huns.

That's downright upsetting. And while a small private foundation such as this one cannot hope to reverse such mighty forces, we can at least lend a helping hand to those who are willing to take on that challenge.

Fighting Back

Accordingly, we made a small grant to a small but plucky band of social studies "contrarians," as they termed themselves, who sought to explain what was wrong with this field-their field-and to suggest how it might be set upon a different course. These brave souls, led by Lucien Ellington of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and James Leming of Saginaw Valley State University, yearned to redeem social studies. So we said sure, we'd provide a little help. Would they be whistling into a gale? Indeed. Should they nonetheless be encouraged to try? Absolutely. They are not alone, after all. Having long experience in the field, they are convinced that most social studies teachers are as concerned as they are about the state of the field and are hungry for encouragement and direction about how to change it. If any educational good can emerge from these perilous times, it is a rekindled recognition by many Americans that the schools have an important role to play in the preparation of knowledgeable and patriotic citizens.

Messrs. Ellington and Leming and their colleagues have done a fine job of explaining where and how and why social studies went awry. I shall not try to summarize their analysis. Allow me, though, to note that this volume is one of several renewed efforts by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (and the affiliated Thomas B. Fordham Institute) to open the windows of social studies and allow some fresh breezes to blow through.

Our first effort, as the "anniversary" of 9/11 neared in September 2002, was to publish (on the web only) a collection of short essays entitled *September 11: What Our Children Need to Know*. We are now updating, expanding, and reissuing those essays, both on the web and in hard copy, as a short volume entitled *Terrorists*,

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Despots, and Democracy: What Our Children Need to Know.

With support from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Fordham Institute is also in the midst of two important studies. One is a fresh analysis of state social studies standards to determine how well they handle U.S. history. The other is a critical review of widely used secondary school textbooks in American and world history.

More will follow. We cannot be confident that our small efforts will have the desired impact on this enormous problem but, fortunately, we are not alone. A number of other organizations—from the National Endowment for the Humanities to the Bill of Rights Institute to the Albert Shanker Institute—are embarked on complementary quests to refurbish this woebegone corner of the American classroom.

What this band of reformers seeks (though their emphases and wording may differ slightly) is to bring the basics back into social studies. In particular, as we noted 16 years ago in *Education for Democracy*, three essential tenets must undergird any decent social studies curriculum for young Americans:

1. Democracy is the worthiest form of human government ever conceived.

2. We cannot take its survival or its spread-or its perfection in practice-for granted.

3. Democracy's survival depends upon our transmitting to each new generation the political vision of liberty and equality before the law that unites us as Americans and a deep loyalty to the political institutions our Founders put together to fulfill that vision.

To safeguard our nation and its political heritage, Jefferson pre-scribed education for all citizens to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom." This is as true today as ever before. In a world that grows more dangerous, in fact, it becomes truer and more urgent than ever. In today's political climate, we are forced to reevaluate what our threats are, who our allies are, and how we should strive to protect our way of life. It is essential that we equip our daughters and sons with the tools they will need to understand the past and prepare for the future. The point is not to brainwash children. It is to give tomorrow's adults a proper educational context within which they can understand the world around them and form their own opinions about it. To that high end we dedicate this effort.

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Defending Social Studies by Alan Singer (Continued from page 2)

The idea of social studies as a secondary school subject is under attack in the United States today from a coalition that includes Chester Finn and Diane Ravitch, two of the leading academic forces on the political right, as well as affluent conservative think tanks such as the Olin, Fordham and Bradley Foundations and the Hudson and Manhattan Institutes (Spring, 2002), the Bush Administration's Department of Education, and the leading organizations representing professional historians, the Organization of American Historians (historians who study the history of the United States) and the American Historian Association (any practicing historian based in the United States).

In May, 2002 (Schemo, 2002), a press conference organized by the U.S. Department of Education announced that "Only one in 10 high school seniors scored well enough on the . . . the National Assessment of Educational Progress, to be considered proficient in American history." Diane Ravitch, a former undersecretary of education who sits on the board that oversees the test, was part of a panel of experts that spoke at the press conference. She declared that these were "truly abysmal scores" and expressed concern that high school seniors, who "are very close to voting age or already have reached it, . . . know so little about their nation's history and express so little capacity to reflect on its meaning." Recalling the September 11, 2002 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, Dr. Ravitch added, "Our ability to defend, intelligently and thoughtfully, what we as a nation hold dear depends on our knowledge and understanding of what we hold dear."

The Manhattan Institute

The May, 2002 press conference echoed similar concerns about teachers and teacher education raised by Heather MacDonald of the Manhattan Institute in a 1998 op-ed piece in *The New York Times*. According to MacDonald (1998), "(W)ith their unerring instinct for bad policy, ed (*sic*) schools promote group learning incessantly. But why? Students need no help in socializing. They do need to learn how to sit still, pay close attention and engage in intelligent discussion with an adult. Education school might be justified if its theories produced literate, knowledgeable students. But they do not. Student-centered learning, along with pervasive official disdain for memorization and book learning, is turning out students who lack a basic grasp of history, math and English."

Ravitch and others at the conference attributed the poor showing to a shortage of teachers certified in history. In 1991, the National Center for Education Statistics found that 53.9 percent of high school history teachers lacked even a minor in the field. The problem for them is that there is no such thing as a middle school or high school history teacher. In most states, history instruction is imbedded in social studies programs. Their enemy is the NCSS and state education departments that permit people whose primary training is in geography, economics, political science, sociology and anthropology to teach courses that are rooted in history. My experience, however, is that teachers with a strong background in these disciplines, as long as they have some historical preparation, bring perspectives that enrich classroom instruction.

While Ravitch, MacDonald, and the NAEP are convinced that the problem of poor student performance on the NAEP test is rooted in the inadequate historical knowledge of social studies teachers and poor pedagogical practice, there are other possible explanations. Poor student performance may reflect the inappropriateness of the test itself, a failure to engage students because of test-driven curriculum, problems with the content that is being taught, serious social problems that the schools are ill-equipped to address, or perhaps even broader cultural phenomenon. In a letter to *The New York Times* (Chase, 1998) in response to MacDonald, a public school teacher from Huntington Village, New York wrote: "Anyone can be an expert lecturer in history; few can craft a curriculum that instills the desire for continued learning. There is only one way to do this. Put the student at the center of the classroom and show the student that the teacher is there not to simply lecture and drill but to show her how to learn."

Evidence suggests that the problem discussed by Ravitch, MacDonald, *et al* is not new, just related to history or restricted to teenagers. For example, it is not clear whether the "inadequate" preparation of social studies teachers is sufficient to explain the following reports.

- According to a 1992 Gallup poll (Cronin, 1992) of common beliefs held by Americans, 29% of the people surveyed believe in witches, 45% believe in ghosts, 47% agreed that "God created man pretty much in his present form at one time within the last

10,000 years,” and 52% believe in the existence of the devil.

- In April 2002, the National Science Foundation released a study showing that “a bare majority of Americans, . . . know that it takes the Earth a year to orbit the Sun, . . .” In addition, “(m)ore than half think that dinosaurs and the earliest humans coexisted, and that lasers work with sound waves” (Fountain, 2002).

The Fordham Foundation Report

The battle over whether secondary schools should focus on historical information or use a student-centered social studies approach was recently ratcheted up to a higher level of contentiousness by a vitriolic report distributed by the Fordham Foundation (Leming, 2003). In its introduction Chester Finn, Jr. declared: “For a very long time, the deterioration of social studies in U.S. schools resembled the decline of the Roman Empire: protracted, inexorable, and sad, but not something one could do much about. . . . In the field of social studies itself, the lunatics had taken over the asylum. Its leaders were people who had plenty of grand degrees and impressive titles but who possessed no respect for Western civilization; The social studies problem seemed hopeless.

“Then,” according to Finn, “came the terrorist attacks of September 11. “Naturally, the question had immediately arisen of what to teach children about these horrific events. And the despicable answer, from many quarters of the social studies field in particular and the education establishment in general, was teach them to feel good about themselves, to forgive their trespassers, not to blame anyone (lest this lead to feelings of hatred or prejudice), to appreciate diversity, and to consider the likelihood that America was itself responsible for this great evil visited upon it.”

Given what Finn and his supporters believe, I am proud that I have made their enemies list, not once, but twice, in 2003. An article in the *Washington Times* (Beichman, 2003) denounced leftist revisionist historians who feel “a profound grief at the Cold War defeat of the Soviet Union” and believe “America got what it deserved on September 11.” As evidence, the article cited an essay published by the Organization of American Historians where I wrote that “The events of September 11 do not compare in magnitude with a number of actions taken by the United States since the end of World War II . . .” While I do believe this, I was not sorry at the passing of the Soviet Union. I condemned the attack on 9/11 and was frightened for

myself and my family and suffered along with many other New Yorkers and Americans.

Social Studies for Secondary Schools

The Fordham Foundation report includes a review by J. Martin Rochester of the first edition of a textbook I wrote for college students preparing to become social studies teachers. Rochester described the book, *Social Studies for Secondary Schools*, (Singer, 1997), as “an exemplar of progressive groupthink” because of its “constructivist orientation” and dismissed it or offering “all the standard progressive clichés about direct instruction equaling ‘chalk and talk’ and fostering dreary, dictatorial classrooms.”

One passage in the book drew Rochester’s greatest ire. “Deriding attention to facts as belonging to the ‘Dragnet’ (or ‘Jeopardy’) school of pedagogy, Singer goes so far as to state, ‘I do not believe there are any independent objective criteria for establishing a particular event or person as historically important’ (p. 26).” Rochester declares that “factual competence is essential to civic competence” and quotes a Princeton historian who charges that educators “pose as courageous progressives dedicated to liberating schoolchildren from the tyranny of rote instruction. . . . But if they have their way, the widely lamented historical illiteracy of today’s students will only worsen in the generations to come.”

The review concludes that “Given the fact that the standards for what constitutes historical accuracy and mastery are so low, we should not be surprised that Singer believes students, by the time they reach high school if not sooner, are ready to “become historians and social scientists.”

The Fordham Foundation’s attack on my book, to which I plead guilty in every case, is exactly why I am proud to call myself a social studies teacher. I value historical knowledge, but I always remember that my job is to teach kids, not a specific list of facts. I teach students to do research, to evaluate and to form their own views, to “become historians and social scientists,” not to memorize a long list of things that someone in authority has deemed important.

Teaching American History Grants

If the Fordham Foundation represented just another rag tag collection of disaffected dogmatists, they could be dismissed – but the problem is they are quite wealthy and have powerful allies. The federal government has launched a campaign to finance the teaching of patriotic historical information in the public

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schools at the expense of social studies – promoting propagandistic content over learning, critical thinking, evaluating ideas and evidence and democratic citizenship. In order to receive a Teaching American History Grant (Paige, 2003), a school district must pledge to present “traditional American history” which “teaches how the principles of freedom and democracy, articulated in our founding documents, have shaped – and continue to shape – America’s struggles and achievements. . . . Traditional history puts its highest priority on making sure students have an understanding of these principles and of the historical events and people that best illustrate them.”

While I seem to remember that many of the founders owned other human beings, that women, religious minorities and non-property holders had no voting rights, and that the Constitution allowed the slave system to remain intact until the Civil War, the complexity of that past does not appear to be part of their “traditional history.”

My own historical research on New York City’s involvement in the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade is a case in point. The traditional view is that slavery was a Southern institution and that New York and the North states were the champions of freedom. The reality was much more complicated. For much of the 19th century, New York City was the financial center for the production and distribution of sugar and cotton, slaved produced commodities, and of the illegal trans-Atlantic Slave trade that continued to smuggle enslaved Africans into Cuba. Slavery was so important to the city’s economy that in January, 1861, the mayor of New York proposed that the city join the South and secede from the federal union (Singer, 2003).

As an historian, I am particularly upset with the role played in the latest round of the culture wars by prominent historians. In an essay in *The New York Times*, Sean Wilentz (1997), a founding member of the National Center for History in the Schools and the Princeton University professor quoted in the Fordham Foundation report, divided the universe into two oppositional forces, “history-minded reformers” who are advocates of “more demanding history standards,” and supporters of “the old mishmash known as ‘social studies’” who harbor “a fundamental disregard for history” characterized by an unwillingness to make serious demands on students or teachers. Meanwhile the instead of publicly challenging the Department of Education’s demand for its version of “traditional history,” the American Historical Association printed

an article in its newsletter explaining how to work around the grant guidelines (Ebner, 2003).

National History Standards

The professional historians and their organizations need to remember the well-known statement by the Reverend Martin Niemoeller where he discusses the European Holocaust during World War 2. Niemoeller reflects that “First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist. . . . Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me.” Historians may think they will be the victors if the social studies falter under the right wing assault, but let me assure them, they are next in line as the Fordham Foundation and the Department of Education weed out those insufficiently committed to patriotic “traditional history.” Historians should not have short memories. In January, 1995, the U.S. Senate voted 99 to 1 to reject National History Standards that were prepared by the National Center for History in the Schools with participation from the NCSS, the Organization of American Historians, and the American Historical Association. The Senate resolution claimed that the standards, which were written under a grant from the federally funded National Endowment for the Humanities, promoted historical understandings that failed to provide students with a decent respect for the contributions of western civilization to the development of the United States. The sole dissenting vote was cast by Senator Bennett Johnston, a Democrat from Louisiana. Johnston opposed the resolution as being an inadequate repudiation of the proposal (Rethinking Schools, 1995).

I guess the most important reason that I am glad I became a social studies teacher and a teacher educator is that I get to work with teachers and students who are trying to figure out that “old mishmash” known as the world we live in. I would much rather be involved in figuring this out with them than with all the esteemed historians and politicians on the Fordham Foundation payroll. And maybe, just maybe, someday we can have a broader influence on education and on the world.

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