Kerry Schaeffer, MacArthur High School, Levittown, NY: I teach macroeconomics on the AP level and the regents level economics curriculum. The perfectly functioning economic world postulated in the AP curriculum no longer exists, if it ever did. Students in my classes have grandparents who had jobs at the Grumman Aerospace factory down the road, but it does not exist anymore, so employment there is not an option for either them or their parents. I have a senior class with twenty students. All twenty of them applied for the same minimum wage after-school job at a local Dunkin Donuts — and now they all hate the kid who got the job. My students see their parents losing jobs and they know their family incomes are decreasing. They know their parents cannot refinance the house and they worry whether they can pay for the elite colleges they dream of attending. One of the big themes in AP macroeconomics is teaching about unemployment. When I ask students to list ways people can get money if they are out of work they propose ideas like organizing a ponzi schemes, gambling in Las Vegas or the stock market, or killing a loved one for the insurance. One of them actually suggested applying for unemployment, which was what I was looking for. As we began to explore the types of unemployment, how it is measured, and the nature of the benefits, these young people who had been quick to come up with crazy ideas, began to tell personal family stories about dads who are seasonally unemployed and moms who are discouraged workers. As a wrap up, we looked at a blog by someone who calls himself the "white-collar blogger." He is an out-of-work lawyer who has become so desperate that he is lobbying for the right to sell one of his kidneys. As a class project, I am now going to have students attend community Board of Education budget meetings. In our town, the board is seriously considering shortening the school day so they can remove 45 secondary school teachers. That is not something that is in the AP theory of a perfect world, but it is the reality of economics and they need to understand what is really happening.

Jessica Cartusciello, Island Tress (NY) High School: One of the places I start when teaching high school economics is the CNN money website (http://money.cnn.com, accessed July 24, 2010) because it has a lot of articles that are both economically sophisticated and accessible to students. I use them in heterogeneous classes that have students of mixed performance levels. At the beginning of the economics course, I have students formulate their own opinions about what is going to happen with the economy. I obviously do not know the answers, and as they look at the website and economic reports on cable business news stations it becomes clear that the supposed “pundits” are not sure either and rarely agree. In initial lessons we learn about things like the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and become familiar with different economic indicators, such as housing starts, job creation, auto sales, and stock market indices. Different student teams are responsible for studying, following, and explaining one of the indicators to the class. The housing group, for example, follows housing starts and sales and tries to predict future trends and their impact on the economy.

Arlene Gardner, President, NJCSS and Executive Director, New Jersey Center for Civic and Law-Related Education at Rutgers University: New Jersey’s new state social studies standards integrate economics, geography, and civics into what is essentially a history curriculum. If you look at the standards, it appears that economics is being taught, however, it is very hard to do and most teachers are not doing it. When the New Jersey State Board of Education revised the high school graduation requirement, they added a semester course that is more like personal finance than economics. It is
usually taught by business teachers. While students need to understand personal finance, it is not a substitute to a real examination of economics.

The public has a lot of misunderstanding about how the United States got into the current economic situation and what the government has already done to try to resolve the economic problems. It is critical for social studies teachers, at a minimum, to learn about how the economy works and to get the facts out to their students. I recommend creating lessons where students are engaged in research and piece together answers to important economic questions. For example, what did the federal stimulus package actually do? There is a tremendous amount of ignorance about how the economic system works. It is amazing to me that the majority of people do not appreciate that there was a reduction in the payroll tax that ended up being a tax cut for most people.

Economists and teachers usually present students with a model, the “invisible hand,” that does not conform to reality. Economists tend to compartmentalize with theories over here and reality over there. I think a lot of economists actually are rethinking some of their theories. The idea of the consumer as rational and informed decision maker is obviously not true. Just look at all the irrational and ill-informed decisions that were made during the housing bubble. Social studies teachers need to critically examine economic theory with students as part of every history class. Unfortunately, many teachers shy away from this. They feel overwhelmed by economics themselves. Getting teachers to take economics workshops and teach more economics is almost like forcing them to eat spinach.

Linda Lapp (former President, NYCSS), Rush Henrietta High School, Henrietta, NY: I teach 9th grade in a suburban school district outside of Rochester, NY. One thing I try to teach my students is that history is repeating itself and that economic forces always play a major role. You see it by the Crusades. You can trace the movement of goods and the sharing of ideas and how this affected society. I do not feel like I do it enough justice, but I try to make real world connections to my students whenever possible. On global issues, many of my students are very insulated. They live in their own microcosm and they do not see outside of it. I have my students look at the tags in their clothing to see where it is made. It is quite possible it is produced by child or unfree labor and certainly it is produced by workers without unions who are working under substandard conditions for extremely low wages. One thing I love about my school district is we are one of the most diverse school districts in the country. I have students who are Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim. Many of my students this year are ESL including a French speaking girl from West Africa. This kind of diversity is an advantage as I try to get students to look at what is happening in the broader world.

Sarah Vagi, Beekmantown Middle School, West Chazy, NY: As an eighth grade U.S. history teacher, I try to weave coverage of the contemporary economic crisis into our discussions of the Great Depression of the 1930s. While I do not believe that history is destined to repeat itself, I do feel countries need to learn from the past to avoid repeating similar mistakes. My students examine the causes of both crises and we look at the programs that protected people and helped to end the Great Depression. Our community is in the northern part of New York State near the Canadian border. In the past, many Canadians shopped in the stores in our area, which has protected us from the harshest effects of this crisis. Even with these advantages the region’s workers are experiencing reduced hours and lay-offs. Local factories, including Wythe Pharmaceutical, have been letting workers go. Many of my students have
family members or neighbors who are affected. About fifty percent of the students in our school are now on free or reduced-priced lunch. Families were struggling before and the situation is worsening. Some face homelessness. How can we ignore what is happening in their lives when we study about the past?

Rozella Kirchgaessner (President, ATSS), H.S. for Law Enforcement, Queens, NY: Our nation’s total acceptance of the status quo is what got us here, especially the idea promulgated by the Republican Party since Reagan that prosperity will trickle down from the wealthy to the rest of us. The entire Obama stimulus package leaves a lot to be desired. The question for me is whether social studies teachers and our professional organizations should be reactive or pro-active and what form should pro-activity in schools take? I want students to evaluate which economic strategies will strengthen the middle class. Obama, in his Audacity of Hope (2006) outlined four main policy goals: Strengthening the middle class, improved and equitable health care, world-class education for the 21st century, and sound energy policies. The big question is, how do we accomplish them? That should be the focus of social studies discussions.

Chris O’Connell, Gilboa-Conesville Central School, Gilboa, NY: Helping students understand global complexity is a major problem. I teach in a very small district in the mountains. It is isolated and students are sheltered from the outside world. To combat this, I try to tie things in the news and in their lives with what I teach about in class. Last year I was building a garage. I told students how the price of the lumber, sheet rock, concrete, and other building materials was going up because of a construction boom in China on the other side of the world. China is starting to count more on the global market and this affects everything from the cost of food to the cost of fuel.

Michelle Lambo, West Hempstead (NY) High School: A major focus in the way I teach economics is that because of globalization we no longer exist in an isolated world. We are all affected by each other. What happens in the United States, or China, or Greece, has a ripple effect on other countries around the world. American-based companies are no longer strictly American. They move factories or just send out orders to other countries to take advantage of cheap labor, to lower their costs, and to increase their profits. I suspect these companies are keeping standards of living in many of these other countries low so that they can take advantage of them. If a country, or a community, starts to get prosperous and wages rise, all of a sudden a factory moves to someplace else where it’s cheaper and people are out of work. We see this cycle everywhere. On Long Island, property taxes in one town go up, people move out, poorer people move in, they can’t afford the tax rate, and conditions in the town deteriorate. The only way to stop this downward trend is to keep American companies here. The American government has to insist companies that get tax breaks keep production in this country.
Michael Isseks Goshen (NY) High School: My colleagues and I look at three basic questions when we teach economics or about economics in other social studies classes. How are goods and services produced and distributed in a capitalist society? For whom are they produced and distributed? What are the processes that make this system work? We frame these with a fourth essential question – how does self-interest promote social welfare? We try to evaluate capitalism as a whole with our students, both the good and bad aspects. We have adopted a micro or mini economy simulation in our class, where we let students run their own economy without regulation. It raises a lot of the same financial issues that we see being played out in our own economy and the world economy. Students apply for jobs, are hired, paid for attendance, and rent their desks. Students who accumulate a lot of money want to use their money for their own interest. We have a desk auction where they can purchase desks and rent them to other students. A lot of students start questioning whether the process is fair. Is it ethical? Is that just? We found students that formed their own corporations and secretly plotted to gain control over desks in multiple economics classes to maximize profit for themselves. In essence, the framework of the class is really the discussion of the morality of the profit. We spend a lot of time examining the 2008 downturn. Was it caused by a lack of regulation? Did people take advantage of inside I formation? Prior to discussion of complicated global economic issues, we first look at the personal financial issues of their own budgets and their own households from a microeconomic point of view. We explore what would happen if governments acted like individuals or if, or if individuals acted the way governments do by carrying large deficits, issuing lots of bonds, looking for loans so they can continue a cycle of spending when they don’t have the assets to spend. We work advertising, lobbyists, and multinational corporations into the equation and gradually students develop a sense about what is happening in the world today. We look at current events carefully such as how Greece’s debt is tied to the European Union and how Germany and Greece are connected. Germany is a powerful European lender and Greece is the weak sister of the bunch. The more questions students have, the better we are succeeding as teachers.

Matthew Leone, William Floyd High School, Mastic Beach, NY: Look back and to your right as you cross the Williamsburg Bridge into Manhattan, and you can see the waterfront sign of the Domino sugar plant. New York was the nation’s top sugar producer when Domino began operating in Brooklyn in 1856, but despite a sugar tariff to protect domestic producers, allowed by the World Trade Organization (WTO), federal subsidies to agribusiness made corn cheaper, and high-fructose corn syrup a sweeter deal. Workers were laid-off, and the plant was eventually sold to a real estate developer in 2004. A decade of redevelopment on the landmark site is expected to begin next year, turning the plant into housing units and parkland. “The purpose of teaching global studies is not to cover material but to give enough historical background to cover the world today,” says Ronald Chaluisan, Vice President of Programs at the New York City New Visions for Public Schools. “What are the relevant current events that allow students to study the historical events and allow them to make sense of the world today?” Students need to ask questions such as “How did agricultural subsidies affect the Domino sugar plant and NYC communities?” That question can also be expanded to include “How are farmers in developing nations affected?” According to Margaret Crocco of Columbia Teachers College, “Having a true global perspective rather than just a parochial outlook will be critical to American citizens and those of other nations even more prominently in the coming century than in the past.”
Jayne O’Neill, Passaic County Technical Institute, Wayne, NJ, former President NJCSS: I address the current state of the economy extensively in my civics classes where we continually examine current events. Many of my students and their families have been deeply affected by the economic decline. Parents have lost jobs and families have been forced to cutback. Many of my students receive free or reduced priced lunch in school and it is the only full meal they eat all day. Students worry about the future. Will they be able to attend to college and will going to college even make a difference for them? What type of jobs will be around? What career should they pursue? How will they pay for college and support themselves while they attend? They have many fears. In class, we try to understand what is happening and to weigh options.