



History and Civics Instruction At Risk

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A crisis is escalating in America's schools. At a time when an understanding of the world has never been more important, the core subjects of history and civics, critical elements of the academic curriculum for millions of youth, are facing devastating cutbacks and even elimination. This battering of one of the pillars of education is crippling efforts to prepare students to become responsible citizens, productive employees and educated consumers in a democratic society.

Making sure our young people know the story of our democracy has never been more important, say experts such as David McCullough, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of the acclaimed biographies *Truman* and *John Adams*. "We are losing our story, forgetting who we are and what it's taken to come this far Our story is our history, and if ever we should be taking steps to see that we have the best prepared, most aware citizens ever, that time is now," McCullough has written.

The same message was recently delivered by former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. She said, "The evidence is clear—and should be profoundly disturbing—we are failing to impart to today's students the information and skills they need to be responsible citizens. Only an educated citizenry can insist that our nation's commitment to liberty be upheld, and the promise of our Constitution fulfilled."

And, in an article for *Educational Leadership*, another expert, Institute for Educational Inquiry president John Goodlad writes: "In spite of the obstacles, it would be the height of folly for our schools not to have as their central mission educating the young in the democratic ideals of humankind, the freedoms and responsibilities of a democratic society, and the civil and civic understanding and dispositions necessary to democratic citizenship."

Students Must Be Prepared to Participate in Our Democracy and Workforce and For Further Study

For decades the traditional curriculum included history, civics, economics, geography, sociology and the arts, in addition to reading, mathematics and science. These core competencies, especially history and civics, helped young people prepare for what Thomas Jefferson called "the office of citizen," giving them the values, knowledge and intellectual skills needed to make the critical decisions—in the voting booth, at a city council meeting and with clients and coworkers—that are essential to the functioning of a diverse and democratic society.

Historically, the traditional curriculum has also played a key role in teaching young people how to thrive and survive in the workplace. Over the years, generations of students have learned how to work comfortably with people from other cultures, solve problems creatively and think in a multidisciplinary way. These "soft skills" are ones that employers want and that high school graduates lack, according to the report *Diplomas Count 2007*. Such skills also are essential for students' successful pursuit of higher education.

Issue Brief

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The Emphasis on Testing Is Diverting Resources from History and Civics

More recently, however, the value of history and civics has come under attack. In the early days of the U.S.-Soviet space race, schools across America began to strip resources from generic “social studies” programs to buttress science and mathematics programs. Then a back-to-basics movement funneled money and attention to reading, writing and arithmetic programs.

Today’s clamor for accountability has brought testing to the fore with the result that in many schools, if a subject “ain’t being tested, it ain’t being taught.” Increasingly mathematics and reading—the focus of the high-stakes testing—are becoming *the* core curriculum at the elementary and middle school levels. These subjects are more amenable to standardized testing and automated grading, so they provide a less expensive and more convenient benchmark of academic progress. As the call for more testing has echoed across America, teachers by necessity are concentrating on mandated subjects, for which standardized testing and automated grading are available, at the expense of subjects such as history and civics, which often demand sophisticated and time-consuming testing methods, including teacher-scored essay questions, to assess student performance.

This dramatic shift is a by-product of well-intended efforts to ensure the quality of classroom instruction and maximize student achievement. Today, however, districts facing demands for improved test scores at a time of dwindling resources are being forced to cut and reshape their course offerings, despite the negative impact on their students’ education.

The Lack of Attention to History and Civics Has Serious Consequences

History and civics programs have become major casualties as schools retool to meet accountability standards. Moreover, as resources shrink and priorities shift, many schools do not have, or are in danger of losing, qualified teachers in these subject areas—a problem that is most acute in schools with large percentages of poor and minority students. Some states no longer have a statewide social studies coordinator to oversee the development of curriculum, the implementation of appropriate testing standards or even the selection of classroom resources. As a result, new or inadequately trained teachers struggle to create coherent and innovative lesson plans.

Education needs to be academically sound, but we should never substitute the important mission of achieving measurable classroom success for the essential goal of preparing young people to embrace their responsibilities as citizens, employees and consumers in a democratic society.

A lack of history and civics knowledge and poor multidisciplinary and critical-thinking skills produces citizens who are ill-equipped to make informed decisions on complex subjects. Results of tests and surveys conducted in the past few years tell the alarming story.

- More than half of high school seniors in one study could not say which countries the United States fought in World War II.
- American youngsters finished second-to-last in a social studies survey conducted among 18- to 24-year-olds from nine countries. At a time when the United States is fighting an ever-expanding war against terrorism around the world, 87 percent couldn’t find Iraq and 83 percent couldn’t find Afghanistan on a map; 30 percent couldn’t locate the Pacific Ocean.
- More than a third of students surveyed at 55 top-ranked universities didn’t know the Constitution established the division of powers in our government. Only 29 percent knew the meaning of the term “Reconstruction,” and 40 percent didn’t know in which half-century the Civil War was fought.
- Almost a third of Americans included in one survey believed the president is empowered to unilaterally suspend the Bill of Rights during a war.



One study indicated some improvement among younger students, but even that modest progress is imperiled by the severe cuts in history and civics programs that have begun in recent years. A 2002 national survey by the Council of State Social Studies Specialists (CS4) found growing concern that the subject is falling by the wayside.

“Many social studies educators are very concerned about the lack of attention placed on social studies in the state,” said Alabama officials responding to the survey. “In the 2001–2002 school year, there were no social studies state assessments until grade 10. The message was clear to the educators in K–9 that social studies was not as important as other disciplines.” California, one of dozens of states facing huge budget deficits in 2003 and beyond, cautioned that “finding and acquiring financial resources” to help students meet state social studies requirements will be extremely difficult.

A lack of history and civics knowledge and poor multidisciplinary and critical-thinking skills also has significant social and economic consequences. A 2003 report issued by the National Council on Economic Education states that few young people understand the simplest personal finance issues. That void can have serious repercussions later in life as they try to manage their money and credit, open a retirement account or buy a house. “With mortgage delinquencies and foreclosures soaring, federal researchers have identified a key contributing factor: Many borrowers do not understand their mortgages—especially subprime loans that come with complex features and costly penalties,” according to a 2007 *Washington Post* article.

No Child Left Behind Is Posing Further Challenges

Few people question the motives behind the federal *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation, which aims to substantially upgrade the skills of the nation’s public school students during a 12-year period. No one disputes the need to make sure every student can read and write. Yet NCLB’s emphasis on the testing of literacy and mathematics, as well as its focus on standardized testing as the primary measure of academic success, have unintentionally crippled efforts to teach and test other core subjects. Educators across the United States have been forced to choose between the basic skills the law promotes and measures and the broader traditional curriculum in which academic success is not always as easily assessed.

Educators in some states call social studies “the child left behind” by the NCLB legislation and say the new law is having a major impact on curriculum planning, teacher training and funding decisions. In addition, many states have had to divert other critically needed resources from some school districts to help districts with low-performing schools comply with the new legislation.

Action Is Needed to Help Fill Curriculum Gaps and Support Federal and State Missions

New or enhanced curriculum resources are needed to help fill the gaps created by efforts to comply with high-stakes testing requirements. Moreover, these instructional materials should support the state standards and curriculum frameworks that local school districts use. They should also support the reading and mathematics testing elements of NCLB.

Today’s students have more diverse backgrounds and learning styles than ever before. The new or enhanced curriculum resources should be offered in a variety of perspectives to keep instruction inclusive and relevant to students’ lives. They should also leverage multiple mediums to appeal to students with different instructional needs, helping to keep them in school.

For America, the stakes could not be higher. We need to prepare our students to live and work in a diverse and interdependent world. Education needs to be academically sound, but we should never substitute the important mission of achieving measurable classroom success for the essential goal of preparing young people to embrace their responsibilities as citizens, employees and consumers in a democratic society.



