



The Critical Need for a Renewed Focus on Social Studies Education

**Improving the quality and status of social studies education in America is a matter of
NATIONAL WELL-BEING and GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS.**

It is critical that the United States improve the performance of its young people in math and science if the nation is to compete globally in the 21st century. Universal literacy must also be sought. However, there are other skills and competencies that are essential for children to acquire if the United States is to remain politically and economically competitive in the 21st century. Readers of this document are asked to consider the essential skills and knowledge listed below. Given the fact that these skills and knowledge are not taught in math, science or reading classes, improving the quality and status of social studies education in America is a matter of national well-being and global competitiveness.

Analyzing, Evaluating, and Interpreting Information

According to David T. Moore of the National Security Agency, a critical skill set for civil, military, or law enforcement intelligence officers includes understanding of global and regional geography, economic systems and structures of government. These professionals, as well as those in business, finance, and academia, must understand the historical trends that offer the only extensive evidential base for the analysis of how societies around the world function. This body of knowledge provides the context to efficiently and accurately process the overwhelming volume of information available in today's world. Dr. Moore explains, "Since the advent of the Information Age, "[collecting] information is less of a problem and verifying it is more of one." (Moore, 2005) Determining the reliability of sources by detecting bias; and comparing ideas, models, systems, and perspectives are core elements of social studies education. Their relevance to professionals in every walk of life - private, commercial and governmental - is absolutely apparent.

Global Awareness

David Moore's comments are echoed by those who study global commerce. Social studies education is critical to understanding and appreciating difference and diversity. If Americans are ignorant of the contemporary and historical experiences of a variety of cultures, we cannot hope to understand why people, communities or nations behave as they do. The fact is that social studies improves judgment in global interactions.

If corporations plan to maintain a leadership role in the global marketplace, employees must acquire a global perspective. As our business world becomes increasingly interactive and internationally focused, culturally sensitive approaches are essential for professional and respectful communications. Beyond raising corporate reputations to a more sophisticated level, cross-cultural education maintains profitable relationships. Basic cultural education eliminates costly misunderstandings. (Sinunu, 2007)

Essential Skills

Reading:

Social studies is the forgotten partner of reading instruction. The most important criterion influencing reading comprehension is that the reader has adequate background in the content and vocabulary being presented in the text. (Tankersley, 2003) Instructional leaders must come to understand that reading comprehension is not a "skill" that can be taught directly.

"Comprehension [is often taught] as a series of 'strategies' that can be practiced and mastered, but it really doesn't work that way. The mainspring of comprehension is prior knowledge -- what readers already know that enables them to create understanding as they read. For millions of poor readers, lack of context prevents consistent comprehension. The mistaken idea that [if students] practice comprehension strategies, they can read anything may be the single biggest factor holding back reading achievement." (Willingham, 2006).

Reading experts from across the nation have asserted that no content area provides more context, background and rich vocabulary to aid reading comprehension than social studies.

Writing:

Students learn to establish positions and support them with facts, statistics, examples, analogies, etc in the social studies classroom. Students are taught to modify positions when appropriate and they are taught the critically important skills of verifying, as well as citing sources when paraphrasing, summarizing, and quoting. These are the written communication skills valued in business and government service and are not taught in math or science and infrequently in reading classes.

Critical Thinking:

In the real world, people have to choose among multiple options. There is seldom a single correct answer in life. Teaching students to be effective decision makers by applying problem solving models is a critical role of social studies education. Social studies helps students make sense of the dynamics of human systems, understand catalysts for change, and value context when analyzing events. As the list of nations that comprise “the free world” grows, global citizens must possess the ability to evaluate problems from a variety of perspectives and synthesize solutions that differ from the standards of the past.

Civic Literacy

When citizens of a democracy are deprived of an effective social studies education it places both the citizen and the democracy at risk. Democratic illiteracy is no less destructive than reading illiteracy. One of the most important factors in the fall of republics throughout history has been the disengagement of citizens who no longer felt connected to their government and became disinterested in what it was doing. Given these facts, how can the world’s longest standing republic justify not having a national standard for civic education of students? How can it defend allowing half of the states in the union not to require all high school students to receive a full year of government instruction during their high school career?

The Compelling Need

The United States has a proud and dynamic history. Past generations understood their duty to impart this story to the nation’s children. Unfortunately, we are now raising a generation of American citizens who are historically, culturally and civically illiterate. If our political leaders do not act to reposition social studies as one of the four core academic subject areas with the same support and requirements as reading, math and science, then they bear the burden of responsibility for producing a generation of Americans ill-equipped to participate in our American democracy or compete in the complex global environment of the 21st century.

The question is really quite simple; if the knowledge and skills described above are essential to America’s youth, then how can this nation any longer afford to marginalize social studies education?

If this is a National Problem, Why Begin in Maryland?

Begin in Maryland because:

1. Maryland possesses the top-ranked school system in the nation! Our state should lead, rather than wait for others to meet this challenge.
2. Marylanders want their children to be well-equipped to participate in our democratic society and compete in the complex global environment of the 21st century.

References

- Moore, D (2005) Species of Competencies for Intelligence Analysis, Defense Intelligence Journal, Arlington, VA.
- Sinunu, W. Why Cultural Awareness Matters, Creating Cultural Awareness, New York, NY.
- Tankersley, K. (2003) The Treads of Reading. ASCD Press, Alexandria, VA.
- Willingham, D. T. (2006). How Knowledge Helps. *American Educator*, Washington D.C.