

HIGH SCHOOLS, CIVICS, AND CITIZENSHIP

What Social Studies Teachers Think and Do

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Executive Summary

“History is who we are and why we are the way we are,” said David McCullough, perhaps America’s most celebrated popular historian. From a nation’s history, to its economic structure, politics, and constitutional order, a teacher can inspire appreciation or revulsion, mindless conformism or gratuitous agitation, boredom or wonder. Social studies teachers are uniquely positioned to frame and inform students’ outlook about the nation, to tell the story of who we are.

This study revolves around an essential question: what are teachers trying to teach our youth about citizenship and what it means to be an American? The findings are based on a national, random sample survey of 866 public high school social studies teachers, an oversample survey of 245 Catholic and private high school social studies teachers, and three focus groups. Social studies teachers are excellent sources of information for this type of research. They are in the trenches, and they can report not only on their own attitudes, priorities, and behaviors, but also on what is actually happening in high schools and school districts.

Here is what we learned:

Teacher attitudes and values appear to be in step with those of ordinary Americans writ large.

- Fully 83 percent of teachers believe that the United States is a “unique country that stands for something special in the world”; 11 percent see it as just another country, no better and no worse than others. Likewise, in a 1998 survey of the general public, 84 percent of respondents said that “the U.S. is a unique country that stands for something special in the world.”
- Eighty-two percent of teachers think it is most important for high school students to “respect and appreciate their country but know its shortcomings.” Again, the general public agrees: in 2002, 90 percent said it was better to include the bad and the good—“warts and all”—when teaching American history.
- About 3 in 4 teachers (76 percent) say that high schools should impart respect for military service.

Teachers may be setting too low a bar for what they expect students to know about American history and government.

- Teaching facts is the lowest priority for social studies teachers when it comes to instruction in citizenship. Of the five priorities high schools may have around the teaching of citizenship, only 20 percent of teachers put teaching key facts, dates, and major events at the top of their list. Furthermore, it is the last of twelve items rated by teachers as absolutely essential to teach high school students: only 36 percent say it is absolutely essential to teach students “to know facts (e.g., location of the fifty states) and dates (e.g., Pearl Harbor).”
- Out of a list of twelve items, social studies teachers are most likely to say it is absolutely essential for high schools to teach students “to identify the protections guaranteed by the Bill of Rights” (83 percent).

- Other essential concepts of how the American political system functions garner less enthusiasm. Six in ten deem it absolutely essential for high schools to teach students “to understand such concepts as federalism, separation of powers, and checks and balances” (64 percent) and “to be knowledgeable about such periods as the American Founding, the Civil War, and the Cold War” (63 percent).
- Are today’s high school students actually reading the nation’s keystone documents? When asked how close this statement comes to their view—“By graduation, virtually all students in my high school have carefully read the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution”—56 percent of teachers say it comes close to their view, but 40 percent say it does not.
- Finally, teachers’ reliance on textbooks appears to be on the decline. Two out of three (67 percent) say they rely on them “less and less” in their classrooms.

Teachers are not confident that students are learning.

- The news is either extremely dire or mildly reassuring, depending on how one reads the data. If the “somewhat confident” and “very confident” categories are combined, 50 percent or more of teachers are confident that most students graduate from their high school knowing eleven of the twelve items concerning citizenship (see table 1).
- But if only the “very confident” responses are considered—that is, using a higher threshold—the results are grim. Across all items, no more than 24 percent of teachers say they are “very confident” that most of the students from their high school have actually learned them before they graduate. For example:
 - “To identify the protections guaranteed by the Bill of Rights”: 79 percent are confident when the “very” and “somewhat” categories are combined, but just 24 percent are “very confident.”
 - “To have good work habits such as being timely, persistent, and hard-working”: 50 percent are confident when the “very” and “somewhat” categories are combined, but just 6 percent are “very confident.”

Social studies teachers believe their subject area is not viewed as a top priority—and testing is partly to blame.

- Forty-five percent say their school district treats social studies as “an absolutely essential subject area,” while 43 percent say it is considered “important but not essential.”
- More than four in ten (45 percent) say the social studies curriculum at their high school has been deemphasized as a result of NCLB, though 39 percent say it is “holding its own.”
- Seven in ten (70 percent) say social studies classes are a lower priority because of pressure to show progress on statewide math and language arts tests.
- Yet social studies teachers want to hop on the testing bandwagon: 93 percent say “social studies should be part of every state’s set of standards and testing.”

Public and private school teachers share remarkably similar views when it comes to what it means to be an American and what students should learn about citizenship . . .

- Public and private school teachers give remarkably similar rankings to these five possible priorities that high schools may have around the teaching of citizenship:
 - “Internalizing core values like tolerance and equality” (49 percent public versus 54 percent private rank it first or second in priority)
 - “Promoting civic behaviors such as voting and community service” (49 percent versus 44 percent)
 - “Instilling good work habits” (46 percent versus 41 percent)
 - “Understanding the key principles of American government” (38 percent versus 43 percent)
 - “Teaching key facts, dates and major events” (20 percent versus 19 percent)

. . . but they differ enormously in their day-to-day experiences and their assessment of school atmosphere.

- While just under half (45 percent) of public school teachers say social studies is considered an absolutely essential subject area in their district, two out of three private school teachers (68 percent) say this is true for them.
- Private school teachers are almost twice as likely to report having a great deal of control over what topics they choose to cover

and how quickly or slowly they move through the curriculum (86 percent versus 45 percent).

- Private school teachers report significantly higher levels of confidence that most students in their high schools learn what they are supposed to before they graduate. This confidence differential is especially stark on items pertaining to the implicit curriculum, such as teaching good work habits and respect for authority. For example:
 - “To have good work habits such as being timely, persistent, and hard-working” garners 31 percent “very confident” responses among private school teachers, compared with 6 percent among public.
 - “To be tolerant of people and groups who are different from themselves” garners 43 percent “very confident” among private, compared with 19 percent among public.
- Private school teachers are also more likely to report an overall more positive school atmosphere for conveying the importance of citizenship:
 - Their high school has a community-service requirement for graduation (82 percent versus 37 percent).
 - Their administration maintains a school atmosphere where adults are respected (88 percent versus 65 percent).
 - Their high school encourages involvement in student government and other issues-oriented clubs (91 percent versus 73 percent).