As the Contributing Editor for the “Ready to Teach” feature, I welcome submissions of relevant and new ideas to be considered for inclusion in this section. “Ready to Teach” is regarded as a section where social studies educators can share powerful teaching ideas and reflections about lessons that probe deeply into the human condition. In these perilous political times, social studies is being marginalized in elementary and secondary schools. Education experts continue to bear witness to an increasing trend to devote more class time and instruction to reading and mathematics, as well as other core subjects considered essential by state and federal mandates. Consequently, social studies and civic education are experiencing a decrease in curriculum resources and instructional support. Despite the current state of de-emphasis on social studies teaching and learning, these are challenging but important times to be a social studies educator. Increasingly, social studies teachers are being asked to find ways to teach the demands of mathematics and reading test mandates in their classes. As social studies educators, we are poised to help students tackle important issues of our time. The preparation of young people for their role as future citizens is the most frequently mentioned reason for social studies in the school curriculum. In some schools, across subject areas, there is growing but limited support for interdisciplinary collaboration. In some cases, elementary education teachers report that they do not teach social studies despite the existence of state standards. At the middle and high school levels, social studies teachers are often surprised to learn that many of their students have acquired limited-to-inadequate prior social studies knowledge and skills. Although reading and writing are important, I wonder exactly what will students have to read and write about if they learn nothing about the historical and political forces that have shaped their lives and the world in which they live.
Social studies is the basis of education for democratic citizenship and is about helping young people understand and embrace the core values of liberty, equality, and justice—the guiding principles upon which this nation was founded. Indeed, it seems thoughtless to simply teach young people how to read and write better while neglecting to guide them toward a deeper understanding of the core principles of democracy. While encouraging students to think critically about those events and the people who shaped them, reading and writing about democratic struggles is hardly a waste of time. Preparing young citizens who are successful test-takers with no analytical or critical thinking skills is undemocratic.

Students must be encouraged to understand the benefits of finding ways to meet the challenges of political life in the 21st century: both domestic and international. While it is important that all children and youth learn to read, write, and master the skills of mathematics and science, we cannot overlook the fact that social studies offers insight into practices that extend over long periods of time and across more than one generation. Such a perspective can go a long way in helping young people develop “wise and reflective” decision-making skills. Social studies teaching and learning is essential to helping young people understand that government of, by, and for the people is deeply rooted in individual and group effort, and forgoing one’s self-interest for the “common good” is a hallmark of our democratic traditions. Where will students learn about the value of public service if they are denied opportunities to learn about the value of service for the common good?

Social studies education is critical to facilitating literacy acquisition in students and merges the areas of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, as well as the ability to be a problem solver. In social studies classes, students are able to use a wealth of problem-solving resources, skills, and strategies in order to enhance their literacy abilities. What better area is there to study problem solving in a practical way than through social studies? Students need to wrestle with the problems and solutions created by centuries of conflict and tension among the world’s cultures and societies. How will students learn how to tackle a challenging word problem in math or a poem steeped in intricate vocabulary and symbolic language if they are unable to see the task from multiple perspectives? The strategic use of primary and secondary sources to teach problem solving while integrating reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills is the cornerstone of the standards-based reform efforts and should not be diminished or discarded in favor of packaged reading and math programs that consume and weaken the curriculum. Students deserve the chance to be active agents in their learning and not just spectators or passive consumers of information.

In many underserved schools, students no longer have an interest in, or the motivation to learn about the foundations of our democracy. More than any other group, these students should be empowered by the instructional experiences in their social studies classes. The cornerstones of helping these students understand what it means to be thoughtful participatory citizens involve encouraging more thorough critical thinking skills along with strengthening students’ abilities to back up expressed opinions with facts. At the middle and high school levels, the principles of learning communities can be implemented, and students can integrate listening and writing skills into the process of learning social studies. In turn, these students can learn to read and write more clearly and precisely by evaluating historical and civic content. Mathematical principles can be
covered with the study of economics and examination of their communities and the
global economy. An integrated curriculum should stress the importance of reading and
writing as well as the study of domestic and world history and persistent social issues.
For these students, social studies should be an opportunity to explore more fully the
question “Why?” while instilling motivation for further learning beyond the walls of the
classroom. The classroom should become the laboratory where students are able to study
the real world they encounter everyday.

Together, we can find ways to prepare all children to learn and to fulfill their
potential in these times of extraordinary educational challenges and opportunities.
“Ready to Teach” is offered as a teaching and learning community where we can
embrace more fully the amazing possibilities and incredible opportunities before us. We
are a richly diverse society--a global world where we communicate and create with
anyone, anywhere, any time--the challenge and enrichment begin with social studies
education.