The Tragedy of American School Reform

How Curriculum Politics and Entrenched Dilemmas Have Diverted Us from Democracy

Ronald W. Evans
The Tragedy of American School Reform
Also by Ronald W. Evans

The Hope for American School Reform: The Cold War Pursuit of Inquiry Learning in Social Studies
This Happened in America: Harold Rugg and the Censure of Social Studies
The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children?
The Handbook on Teaching Social Issues (coeditor)
The Tragedy of American School Reform

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Ronald W. Evans
This book is dedicated to my late mentor, Richard E. Gross, who read a previous draft manuscript and remarked, “This is what we’ve been up against for all these years.”
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The research project behind this book aimed to cover the entire era of social studies curriculum reform from its inception in the 1950s through its undoing in the late 1970s. Because the initial draft was quite lengthy, my editor at Palgrave Macmillan asked whether I had considered breaking the work into two volumes. The first volume, *The Hope for American School Reform: The Cold War Pursuit of Inquiry Learning*, examines the origins and development of the reform, the projects, and reactions from academics through the early 1970s. This, the second volume, focuses on changes in the direction of reform from the late 1960s through the 1970s, and the academic freedom battles and entrenched dilemmas that brought the era of the new social studies to a close. I will be forever grateful to my editor at Palgrave, Burke Gerstenschlager, editorial assistants Samantha Hasey and Kaylan Connally, and production assistants Richard Bellis and Rohini Krishnan, for the opportunity to publish my full treatment of the topic and for their efforts to help bring the project to completion.

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As a social studies teacher in the 1970s and early 1980s, I found that students were often excited by my experiments with inquiry and issues-oriented approaches to teaching. I was given tremendous freedom to create interesting lessons and courses within broad parameters. That freedom allowed me to explore a variety of modes of teaching, to go for depth when warranted, to engage students frequently in wide-ranging discussions of inquiry and value questions, Socratic seminars, debates, mock trials, and simulations. Teaching was a compelling, dynamic, and creative experience, deeply intellectual work combined with the opportunity to influence a rising generation.

This history of the new social studies, the newer social studies, and its aftermath, the conservative restoration, highlights two important dilemmas in the fields of social studies and curriculum, both of which are related to my early teaching experience and the experiences of teachers today. The first quandary, curriculum politics, is colorful and controversial, especially in social studies. It is, in essence, a blood sport in which armies of citizens struggle over whose version of the American way will prevail in our schools and culture. The second puzzle, which I am calling the “grammar” of social studies, embodies the entrenched dilemmas of schooling, the institutional obstacles that seem to stifle attempts at reform, and against which we have made little progress. Both of these dilemmas have profoundly influenced the landscape of social studies practice in recent decades. Unfortunately, in many schools today teachers are constrained by scripted lessons, pacing guides, and the pressures of standards and testing. In many instances, teachers are not given the requisite freedom for democratic education to flourish.

The reforms of the 1960s were not the earliest attempt to transform schooling. Efforts of the progressive era, and ensuing sidetracks, had tried and largely failed in their quest to transform the school from
an institution marked by tradition and social control to a dynamic center of interest and growth for all children. As illustrated in the first volume of this work, *The Hope for American School Reform*, the story of efforts to reform the American school began to change and emerge into something similar to its present form during the 1950s and 1960s, driven by collaboration among big science, government, business, and prestigious universities.

My thesis in this book, *The Tragedy of American School Reform*, is that improvement in social studies is constrained by two main factors: curriculum politics and the entrenched dilemma of classroom constancy. The first factor is well represented by the origins of the new social studies, the rise of the humanistic newer social studies, and the academic freedom cases and controversies of the 1970s that were a key element in bringing an end to reform and establishing a conservative restoration in schools. That restoration gradually led to the imposition of accountability reforms. The second factor is embodied in the failure of classroom practice to live up to its potential for interesting, engaging teaching worthy of our nation and the questions, social issues, and problems we face as citizens.

The curriculum reform movement that spawned the new social studies emerged as a response to a perceived external threat and to the perception of anti-intellectualism and quackery in public schools. University scholars served as the model for reform. However, the patterns of inquiry and concepts drawn from university scholarship, which might be seen as logical components of the “church of reason,” were not congruent with the traditions and culture of the schools. The reform, linked to empire, and the military-industrial-academic-complex, which served its interests, was artificially induced and imposed from above, an innovative “fix” or solution for schools that were assumed to be dysfunctional. The new social studies was partially superceded in the late 1960s by the newer social studies, a progressive and reconstructionist oriented movement that focused on relevance, activism, and values clarification as schools sought to develop a more humanistic approach.

Beginning in the late 1960s, the era of reform resulted in a number of academic freedom cases involving teachers and several major controversies that received significant national attention. In cases involving individual teachers who applied the newer techniques in classrooms, the new social studies was literally put on trial. Confrontations emerged over key new social studies materials, including the Fenton textbook controversy in Georgia and the conflict over MACOS,
which erupted in numerous cities and towns during the 1970s and led to debate in the halls of Congress.

Critics of the new social studies included an array of conservative activists: ultraconservative textbook watchdogs Mel and Norma Gabler, a network of activists linked to the John Birch Society, the Heritage Foundation, the Council for Basic Education, the American Party, journalist John Steinbacher, and others. It was to some extent an interlocking network that shared resources and information. At least a few of the players were well financed. These controversies resulted in termination of funding for MACOS and other projects and dealt a serious blow to freedom for teaching and learning in the 1970s that has had continuing consequences.

Similar pendulum swings are a regular attribute of the curricular landscape, toward traditional and discipline-based curricula during conservative times; toward experimentation, child-centered, inquiry, or issues-oriented curricula during liberal times. Despite ever changing curricular fashions and trends, a set of competing interest groups is a semipermanent feature of the social studies arena. The major competing camps, as I describe them in a recent book, *The Social Studies Wars*, endeavoring to influence the field include the following: traditional historians, who support history as the core of social studies; mandarins, intellectuals who advocate social studies as social science; social efficiency educators, who hope to create a smoothly controlled and more efficient society; social meliorists, Deweyan experimentalists who want to develop students’ reflective thinking capabilities and contribute to social improvement; and social reconstructionists, who cast social studies in schools in a leading role in the transformation of American society. Many scholars and teachers choose to meld aspects of two or more traditions in a consensus or eclectic approach.²

Aside from how the interest groups are described, their comparative rank and influence over the rhetoric of schooling changes slowly over the years. One may be dominant, then recede as another comes to prominence. None disappear, but remain present with a lower profile, as if parallel streams; while one is flooded, another may be dry. Each stream has a history of promoters and defenders, leaders and pretenders. Citizens, scholars, and teachers can learn a great deal about their own affinities and deepen curricular identities by examining the strands in some depth.

Frequently, the social studies curriculum, or its accompanying textbooks and materials have served as a lightning rod, attracting comment and criticism, as if the curriculum is a screen on which critics of various