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HOWARD SCHNAIPP

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A10-11

# SOCIAL STUDIES & SCHOOLS

Advocates: State trying  
to downgrade importance  
of history, civics in school ratings;  
Education Dept. says it's temporary

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# CONCERN OVER SOCIAL STUDIES

Groups worry NY will downgrade history and civics

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND  
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Social studies groups statewide are pushing back against a plan out of Albany they say would downgrade the importance of coursework in history and civics during a time when such lessons should take top priority.

The critics, who include a strong contingent from Long Island, add that the state's plan could lead to elimination of two major Regents exams. Those tests cover U.S. History and Government, and Global History and Geography.

At issue is a recent announcement by the state's Department of Education that it would drop, for the next two years, its practice of including scores from such exams in its academic ratings of high schools. Agency officials describe the move as a temporary "pause" and insist that social studies retains its status as a core academic subject, along with English, math and science.

Albany's plan has alarmed many educators, who note that the state already has taken steps to reduce the amount of class time spent on history, geography, civics and related subjects. Social studies leaders at the state level recently stepped up their criticism, joining colleagues from the Island.

Lisa Kissinger, president of the New York State Council for the Social Studies, fired off a letter to state education officials on May 22, urging them to reconsider their planned change in school ratings. A copy of the letter was obtained by Newsday.

"This 'pause' sends a message to all New Yorkers that Social Studies education is not a priority," Kissinger wrote. "We are concerned that 'pausing' the inclusion of results demonstrates a devaluation of Social Studies that could lead to the elimination of the Social Studies Regents exams and minimization of the critical impor-

## WHAT TO KNOW

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ance of this core subject."

Kissinger is a social studies administrator in the suburban Shenendehowa district near Albany, and her state organization represents hundreds of administrators, teachers and college faculty. Her letter was addressed to Lester W. Young Jr., chancellor of the Board of Regents, which oversees the education department and sets much of the state's education policy.

### State: Subject is integral

A senior department official, Theresa Billington, responded to Kissinger's letter the following day, insisting that her agency placed a high priority on social studies.

"The department values Social Studies as an integral part of our shared civic discourse and the critical role it plays in educating and shaping the students of New York State to become active citizens and future leaders of our nation," Billington wrote. She is an assistant state commissioner for school accountability.

Billington noted that some Regents history exams were canceled during the COVID-19 pandemic and added that this would seriously limit the amount of data available for school ratings. Kissinger pointed out, on the other hand, that data would be available from a global history exam administered last year, as well as from other tests sched-



Gloria Sesso, co-president of the Long Island Council for the Social Studies, opposes state's plan.



State education Commissioner Betty A. Rosa and Board of Regents Chancellor Lester W. Young Jr. last fall in Albany. State officials say social studies is a core academic subject for New York students.

uled for June and for the 2023-24 school term.

The assistant commissioner's response did not directly address Kissinger's concerns about the future of Regents exams. That's one of the thorniest issues facing the education department, which recently accelerated a previously announced overhaul of graduation requirements.

The overhaul could include a decision to stop using Regents exams as a diploma requirement. A state-appointed commission is scheduled to release recommendations for revised graduation rules by November — seven months earlier than originally planned.

Regents, which established the commission last September, have said that one goal is to

help more students gain the knowledge and skills needed to graduate, even if they do that through pathways other than traditional exams. "This is not about lowering standards," Young remarked at the time.

### Worries changes will stay

Social studies representatives have cautioned, however, that any changes in testing policy could affect studies of history and related subjects in a negative way, if not handled carefully. Under federal law, students must be tested periodically in English, math and science, but there is no such requirement for social studies.

As a result, social studies testing has sometimes taken a backseat. In 2010, Regents voted unanimously to eliminate so-

cial studies tests in fifth and eighth grades, on grounds that the state was short of money for assessments.

Those tests were never restored, and supporters of the social studies said there's a lesson in that.

"Once they pause, they will never return," said Gloria Sesso, co-president of the Long Island Council for the Social Studies.

On May 12, the regional group sent its own protest to Betty A. Rosa, the state's education commissioner. The letter asserted that the state's planned change in school ratings could create a "danger to democracy" by lessening the time schools spend on social studies lessons.

Billington responded to the Island group's letter, much as she did to Kissinger's, by insisting that her department placed great value on social studies.

Alan Singer, a Hofstra University education professor, agreed with critics that "once paused, it is unlikely social studies performance will ever be included in the assessments, and what is not assessed is not going to be a priority."

In a recent blog, Singer noted that a state decision in 2016 to limit events covered by global history exams to those occurring after 1750 had excluded topics such as the impact of Columbus' voyages. The blog's title: "History is in Trouble in New York State."

HOWARD SCHINAPP

AP / HANS PENNING

## EDITORIAL

# Make civics top school priority

■ **MEMBERS OF THE EDITORIAL BOARD** are experienced journalists who offer reasoned opinions, based on facts, to encourage informed debate about the issues facing our community.

No facts or concepts could be more relevant to the day-to-day workings of our democratic republic than those of civics, history, government and geography. And yet in public schools across America, those topics, which fit under the label of social studies, seem to get short shrift.

Popular ignorance of the mere basics is a hazard for the people.

That's why it resounds outside the classroom that social studies teachers and scholars are voicing opposition to a new plan by New York State's Department of Education. It's incremental, but under it the state would drop, for the next two years, the usual practice of including scores from tests covering U.S. History and Government along with Global History and Geography from the state agency's academic rating of high schools.

DOE officials say there is nothing for proponents of civics education to fear. They say that some Regents exams were canceled during the COVID-19 pandemic, which means there would be a lack of "benchmark" data with which to compare schools, justifying the temporary move.

But social studies groups are alarmed and skeptical. They have been especially so since the Regents voted in 2010 to eliminate social studies tests in fifth and eighth grades, and they were never restored.

Lisa Kissinger, president of the New York State Council for the Social Studies, is urging education officials to reconsider their planned change in school ratings. She has inveighed against any devaluation of the core subject. In response, a senior education official, Theresa Billington, denies any such downgrading is at work.

One test of the state's commitment to social studies is coming up. In November, a report is due from the Regents' blue-ribbon commission on graduation requirements. Optimists expect the panel to call for a real beefing up of social studies education. That would be wise.

At the moment, communities and their elected officials are divided over how we educate ourselves about race, gender, individual liberties and the collective good of the people — and how these matters are taught and tested. But there's a uniting concept behind social studies if done right: the made-in-America notion that only an educated public can fend off tyrants and find common ground.

Teaching history and government in public schools must be based on a common-sense consensus about which facts to explore and how to put them in context in a nonpartisan way. Professional educators know this. Only by studying the basics — the system we have, how we got here, why we live where we do — can we muster the critical thinking needed to achieve self-government.

Hopefully, a new push for a balanced social studies education would nudge New York schools toward giving students a practical knowledge of how their rights interact with the common good. What's more useful than that?



ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES/RUBBERBALL

**Social studies should be an essential part of education in New York.**

## LETTERS

## 'F' in History for State Ed. Dept.

Kudos to the editorial board for supporting U.S. History as a high school graduation requirement ["Make civics top school priority," Editorial, May 31]. "Teaching history and government in public schools must be based on a common-sense consensus about which facts to explore and how to put them in context in a nonpartisan way" was the most meaningful message.

This should include students being able to understand and articulate opposing sides of significant issues, adhering to the adage "truth has many faces." As a retired teacher, I realize that failure to acknowledge the validity of other points of view in all aspects of life is at the core of our current paralysis in many areas.

— FRED BARNETT, LAKE GROVE

"If you can cut the people off from their history," warned Karl Marx, "then they can be easily persuaded." In the United States, we have been doing this for years by diminishing classroom time and resources for social studies in favor of skills development in reading and math, which have been judged as more "employable." Civics has also suffered more from "textbook wars," where the default often became no text, leaving more money for other priorities.

The general population, especially our young, is thus cut off from a coherent context and is ready prey to the lies and misinformation of charlatans. We must consider "citizen" to be a primary "job" and prepare students for it as we do others.

— BRIAN KELLY, ROCKVILLE CENTRE

Your editorial was spot on. As it said, social studies is comprised of U.S. History and Government, and Global History and Geography. These are more than a set of dates, names and places. They are the stories of people, their struggles and triumphs, and their quest for freedom through the promise of democracy. By studying ways

that people strive to get along with one another, through civics, there can be conversation rather than conflict.

When the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice," I believe he knew that it begins with knowledge, understanding, and then nonviolent action. In our wonderful but divided country, we need the social studies now more than ever, and teachers who light the fire of learning for our youth, who are our future.

— SUSAN SCALONE, SHOREHAM

As a social studies teacher, it was disheartening to learn of the state's plan to downgrade the significance of social studies in the assessments of public schools ["Concern over social studies," News, May 30].

For most of my 38 years as an educator, the state wisely mandated four years of social studies in high school, keeping the subject part of the core academic disciplines. Sadly, in recent years, the state seems to be drifting toward downplaying the subject's importance.

This trend will not serve our democracy well. We study history to learn from the past, which enables an educated citizenry, the lifeblood of a genuine democracy, to repeat successes while avoiding pitfalls.

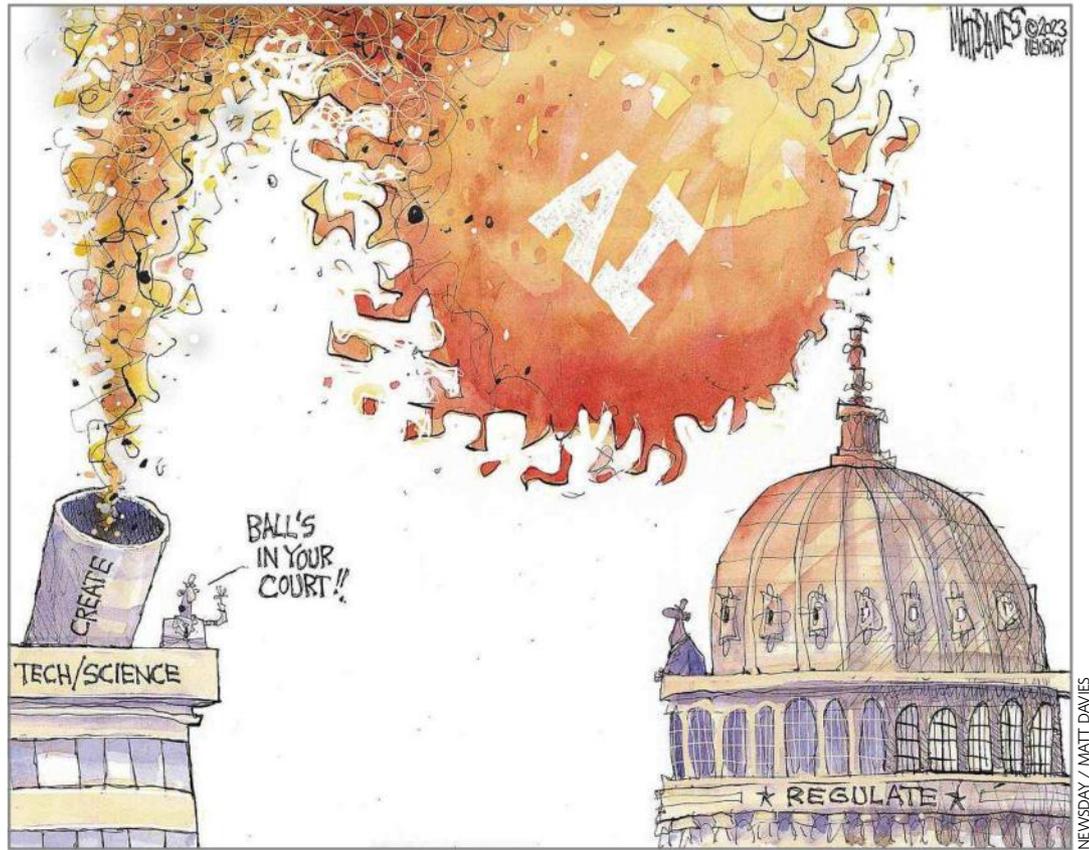
For students residing in a diverse nation, in an increasingly interdependent world, studying Global History and U.S. History, as well as government and economics, is critical. James Madison, chief architect of the Constitution, asserted, "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

This is absolutely the wrong time to disarm our young people of the knowledge that is vital to effective citizenship. Downplaying social studies will do exactly that.

— CAROLYN FAGGIONI, BELLMORE

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## MATT DAVIES



■ **EDITORIAL CARTOONIST MATT DAVIES'** opinions are his own. You can see more of his work at: [newsday.com/matt](http://newsday.com/matt)

The New York State Education Department insists there should be no cause for alarm at its "pause" in the inclusion of scores from these civics exams in its academic ratings of high schools. Does it think there's a "pause" on: risks to democracies, wars, attacks on people who differ from the majority, world poverty and pandemics, existential threats like climate change and the use of nuclear weapons?

Shall we take a "pause" on: distinguishing fact from opinion, making cogent arguments based on reliable data, engaging in civil discourse, identifying problems and possible solutions and the values that underlie them? All of these topics and skills — and more — are explored in these classes.

Our current educational evaluation system sends a clear message: What is not tested (and the scores that go unpublished) need not be taught. A conspiracy theorist might read this decision as a purposeful measure to keep its populace ignorant and complacent because it's hard to imagine that the Education Department wants to see the same

result at the secondary level for students on the cusp of voting.

— ANDREA S. LIBRESCO, MINEOLA

More than a century has passed since George Santayana wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

History is only one component of social studies, along with economics, government and geography, to name a few. To downgrade its importance, even temporarily, is playing into the hands of the anti-woke factions in New York as well as the rest of the country.

To me, being "woke" is simply being aware of your surroundings, especially what got you here. In other words, your history and the history of the nation, if not the world.

"Temporary" removal of an academic program is likely no more than a precursor to permanent removal.

We learn from our mistakes, and to not teach the mistakes of history and government as an important part of education will undoubtedly condemn us to repeat those mistakes.

— MICHAEL ZISNER, BETHPAGE

The study of history is not just dates that one Googles. Every day when we wake up, what happened yesterday is history. Looking back at our ancestors, learning about the eras that our grandparents and parents lived in helps our students understand their present world and how they can change the future they will live in. Downgrading history, even temporarily, is a mistake. I fear that temporary will become permanent.

— JIM SWIKE, SAYVILLE

*The writer is an adjunct history professor at Suffolk County Community College.*

The lack of understanding of how our government operates among many young people I speak with is remarkable.

All high school students should have to take a one-semester course to prepare them for the final, which is the same exam people longing to become citizens must pass.

Understanding how our government works would go a long way to taking the power away from those who spread misinformation about who has power in federal government.

— SCOTT SCHUBERT, DIX HILLS