

Why We Need to Preserve Social Studies in Hawaii

Those of us who live in Hawaii recognize that our island home is often defined by the diversity of its people. Our ethnic relationships, although they are not perfect are “distinguished by their tolerance, equality, and harmony” (Okamura, 2008, p.7).

For these reasons, Hawai'i is quite special, and so is a social studies education in Hawai'i. In Hawai'i social studies educators capitalize on Hawai'i's unique multicultural setting, and deliver a cutting edge curriculum that puts our students ahead in an increasingly diverse and global society.

I was born and raised in the Hawaiian Islands and did not gain this perspective until I went away to college in the late 1990's. Attending school in California, my peers and university professors were surprised to hear that I had been able to take courses like Global Studies, Asian Studies, and Ethnic Studies in high school.

From their experience, social studies classes that specialized in exposing students to a range of diverse cultures and perspectives had mostly been reserved for college level learning. They also helped to raise my awareness of the unique “first hand experiences” I had gained as a result from taking these courses in the context of Hawai'i.

Compared to many of my college peers, diversity was not an abstraction. My early learning had occurred in a room full of students who came from a variety of different backgrounds, and who shared their personal knowledge as a part of our daily classroom interactions. I realized that the informal education learned from my classmates cultivated in me increased cultural sensitivity and internalization of the knowledge and skills necessary for navigating a multicultural world.

With this improved critical consciousness, I was eventually propelled into the profession of teaching, where ten years later I am able to proudly showcase Hawai'i's unique contribution to the field of education to interested teachers across the globe.

Today, public high school teachers, like myself provide Hawai'i's students with some of the same opportunities that I had via mandatory social studies electives. Given that they have the available resources, the Hawaii State Department of

Education currently offers social studies electives like: Economics, Hawaiian Studies, Pacific Island Studies, Ethnic Studies, Asian Studies, European Studies, Humanities, Geography, American Problems, Political Processes, Philosophy, Human Geography, Psychology, Sociology, and Anthropology. Having taught a handful of these mandatory electives, I've seen my students become engaged, find relevance in their learning. In addition, my students, because they are taught in a multicultural setting gain not only the content needed for living and working in our global world but the necessary people skills as well.

Social studies courses like the electives listed above are essential in producing the student outcomes outlined by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2004). The P21 initiative explains that students in the 21st century must have content knowledge related to Economics, History, Geography, Government and Civics. This is because these types of social studies courses educate students about the context that Science, Technology Engineering, and Mathematics are situated in. Social studies courses also foster 21st century dispositions like: creativity, innovation, critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and collaboration. Most importantly, social studies courses are the only classes that directly teach our students about the social and cross-cultural relationships that are fundamental for life in the 21st century. One example that helps to illustrate these points, and shed light on Hawai'i's unique offerings to the P21 initiative is the Kailua High School ethnic studies program.

Located on the Windward side of Oahu, Kailua High School is the only public school in the nation to require ethnic studies for high school graduation. The University of Hawaii Asian Pacific Islander Youth Violence Prevention Center and the Hawaii State Department of Education created the course, originally funded by the Centers for Disease Control, as a school-based violence prevention initiative. In addition to teaching the content of ethnic studies, the course uses the innovative pedagogy of Philosophy for Children Hawaii to foster self-knowledge, healthy interpersonal relationships, empathy between peers, and empowers students to make positive changes in their communities. In the past seven years, since this social studies elective was implemented, both the Kailua High School community, and educators worldwide have recognized the course's benefits. Just last year visitors from China, Japan, Taiwan, Switzerland, Germany, and the continental United States visited ethnic studies classes at Kailua High School to learn about teaching tolerance from educators in Hawaii.

If the Board of Education approves Policy 4540 on August 16, 2011 Hawai'i is in grave danger of not only losing civics as a required course for graduation, but also the capacity to offer social studies electives like the ethnic studies course described. Social studies electives help to address the needs of 21st century learners, and distinguish Hawai'i as an educational leader. If Policy 4540 passes "changes in

Social Studies credit requirement from 4.0 to 3.0 credits may negatively impact the number of social studies teachers” (K.S. Matayoshi personal communication to the Board of Education, June 21, 2011). Hawai’i can’t afford this detrimental change; we need social studies teachers in order to be able to offer social studies courses!

If Hawaii is going to continue to be a role model for teaching about and promoting positive inter-cultural relationships, social studies programs in our state must continue to be nurtured and further developed. We need to grow and strengthen, not decrease social studies in our public schools. Keeping the four required credits will help to ensure that future generations in Hawai’i’s not only carry on the practice of amicable interpersonal relationships, but tackle head on the institutional forms of racism that continue plague our state (Okamura, 2008). Now is the time for Hawai’i’s people to apply what they’ve learned in their social studies classes. We need to work together, as a group of diverse people to preserve our social studies education, and continue to make Hawai’i a leader in teaching the world about tolerance, equity, and social harmony.

References:

- Okamura, J. Y. (2008). *Ethnicity and inequality in Hawaii*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Partnership for 21st century schools*. (2004). Retrieved July 27, 2011, from <http://www.p21.org/>

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