

Executive Summary of NCSS Position Statement: Human Rights Education — A Necessity for Effective Social and Civic Learning*

Introduction:

Human Rights Education, in both its civil and its humanitarian aspects, is a necessary element of social studies education. It should be integrated into education for all learners at every stage of life. Therefore, it is incumbent on all educators, formal and informal, to assure that principles of human rights and humanitarian conduct are incorporated into social and civic education at every level.

Background:

Questions about rights and responsibilities of humans in society are as old as humankind. The development of universal principles of human rights and humanitarian law constitutes an essential story in the history of the United States and the world.

In the United States, the commitment to equal and unalienable rights is part of our American Revolutionary heritage. While these ideals have struggled for realization throughout our history, civil society movements at every level have led initiatives for their realization, contributing to the abolition of slavery, expansion of suffrage, establishment of legally enforceable civil rights, continuing to this day to expand legal and social commitment to dignity, equity and wellbeing.

The 19th Century saw major advances in humanitarian law . In Europe, the newly formed International Committee of the Red Cross drafted the First Geneva Convention (1864). Simultaneously, Abraham Lincoln issued General Order No. 100, the Lieber Code (1863), parallel laws both requiring humane conduct amidst the devastation of war.

In the 20th Century, two world wars and the Holocaust led to a flowering of human rights agreements and humanitarian standards, an effort in which the United States played a prominent roll. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms (1941), the Atlantic Charter (1941), the Declaration of the United Nations (1942), the Charter of the United Nations (1945), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Nuremberg Principles (1945) and the expansion of the Geneva Conventions (1949) resulted in a shared body of political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights which together articulate fundamental principles of universal human rights and international humanitarian law. These developments were accompanied by regional human rights agreements throughout the world.

Rationale and Recommendation:

Universal human rights today include those rights identified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the various international and regional treaties and national laws adopted to ensure those rights. These rights have been further elaborated through various

covenants, conventions and declarations. International humanitarian law is a special category of human rights law, which seeks, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict.

Human rights agreements generally include a commitment by all parties to educate their people about these rights and requirements. Thus, the quality of human rights/humanitarian law education provided in pre-collegiate education throughout the United States carries national and global consequences. The UN General Assembly established a World Programme on Human Rights Education (2005). In coordination with this effort, the UN General Assembly has adopted a Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (UNDHRET, 2011). The United States has expressed its official support for both the declaration and initiative. At the same time, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the American Red Cross (ARC) have launched initiatives to disseminate information about international humanitarian law (IHL) through programs of school based and community education.

It is a fundamental responsibility of educators in the United States to incorporate human rights education into their teaching, curriculum planning and program administration. Human rights education is referenced in the College, Career and Civil Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. At least 35 states reference human rights in their social studies content standards.

Implementation:

NCSS members and all educators are encouraged to use the NCSS position statement to develop and promote human rights education practices and programs so that all students will understand and value fundamental principles of human rights and apply those principles in their lives. A wide range of human rights-related curricula and lesson plans are available to assist in this effort.

Universal human rights represent a positive value system. Thus, human rights education includes both content and process dimensions. Human rights should be explicitly linked to relevant provisions of international, regional, national and state laws, treaties and declarations, providing students with the opportunity to engage in original primary source research. The learning environment should be structured to reinforce respect for fairness and human dignity. Through examination of human rights concerns in both their international/global dimension and their domestic implication students can discover connections between universal human rights and contemporary issues of diversity, economic inequality, group wellbeing and individual choice.

Resources

The full NCSS Position Statement on Human Rights Education can be found at http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/human_rights_education_2014. A comprehensive list of resources and references is included in the Position Statement. Readers are also encouraged to explore the list of resources maintained by Human Rights Educators USA on their website: http://www.hreusa.net/materials_teaching.php.

* Adopted by NCSS Board of Directors on September 21, 2014