

Teachers Discuss Teaching About 9/11

Len Romano, Northport, NY schools (retired), President, NYSCSS: Every teacher, every year, has an obligation to make students aware of the tragedy that took place on September 11, 2001. That will be no different this year. What is striking for me is that although for most teachers this was an event that we lived through and left a deep impression on our lives, fifteen year olds in tenth grade were only five-years-old when the attacks occurred. Unless their family had a first hand connection to the tragedy, they probably know little or nothing about what happened. Teaching about 9/11 is becoming more like teaching about the Vietnam War and Pearl Harbor, events that shaped the lives of people who are still living, but are now lumped together in the curriculum as part of the distant past. I would focus on helping students understand the magnitude of this event, for people in the New York metropolitan region, for the United States, and on the global scene. A key part of 9/11 was the fall-out, both short term and long term. That cannot be addressed in one or two lessons. If we take the commemoration of 9/11 seriously, we will need to develop a unit for serious study to be included at the end of the calendar year when 8th and 11th grade classes discuss recent events in United States history. The unit should include domestic concerns about the constitutionality of the Patriot Act, changes in air travel, precautions at sporting events, and attitudes toward immigrants. There are also economic implications that need to be discussed. Foreign policy discussions should focus on the "War on Terror," wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, other conflicts between the west and the Islamic world, and the new alliance system.

Jayne O'Neill, Passaic County Technical Institute, Wayne, NJ, former President NJCSS: My school has a 9/11 commemoration every year including an assembly with speakers. One local woman speaks on a regular basis. She is a mother who lost two sons in the September 11, 2001 attack. She talks about her sense of loss and the impact on her entire family and on the nation as a whole. The school has a significant number of Islamic students and she explains how it is important not to stereotype people or hold entire groups responsible for the actions of a few. Right after the attack, there was a backlash against Muslims in the local population but that problem has receded in the

past few years. Our student population is diverse and the climate in our school is peaceful. For teaching, I recommend materials distributed by the newspaper the Bergen Record. They are available for free at <http://LearnAbout9-11.org>.

Laura Gibbs, K-12 social studies coordinator, Freeport, NY: Our district concentrates on building awareness of the 9-11 attacks in the earlier grades. In middle and high school students are given the opportunity to research the details and analyze and evaluate the events leading to the attack. They also assess U.S. foreign policy before and after the events. Students debate questions such as: Why was the United States targeted? Was the U.S. response in Afghanistan and Iraq justified? Has the U.S. response been successful? Has the U.S.A. Patriot Act enhanced national security?

Mark Schwarz, supervisor of social studies and art, Jefferson Township High School, Oak Ridge, NJ: The events of the past decade have stimulated me to evaluate my views about the role of the United States in the world. I suggest involving students in understanding and evaluating the current international situation should be part of the tenth anniversary commemoration and a continuing part of the social studies curriculum.

One of the greatest problems facing this nation (and subsequently the world) is the recent polarization of the American two-party system along ideological lines. Gerrymandering and party politics have always been disturbing practices, but their evolution in the current digital/information age appears to be curbing the influence of sectionalism and increasing the salience of religious and economic beliefs. It also seems the further we polarize as individuals the less rational we become. Consider the pendulum swing between the rampant jingoism behind the Iraq War and the idealistic election of the inexperienced Barack Obama. Each event had its rationale, but similarly its own partisan hysteria.

As the leading world power, the United States needs to put an end to the entrapment of narcissism. Currently, its government operates in a quite fair and transparent fashion but it is not perfect. The United States arrived at its current state of democratic luxury

not because of fair practice, but because of economic opportunism and its resultant rewards. How can the U.S. refuse to reach out to nations such as Iran, Cuba and Venezuela with fair trade policy? Surely an economic partnership would inextricably carry with it a obligatory respect for each others' sovereignty.

We need a new system of international policy. Instead of the elementary labeling of friend and foe, perhaps we should intellectually consider a principal of inclusiveness based on benefit of the doubt. No one is innocent. No nation is perfect. We all had to start from somewhere. Maybe we can all agree that every nation deserves the benefit of the doubt until proven otherwise. Should any nation bite the hand that feeds or undeniably threatens a peaceful world, it would then be that much easier to rationalize sanctions or militarily intervention. Contrary to what our own extremists might have us believe, being tough and fair are not mutually exclusive. That is an important lesson for our students to learn.

Arlene Gardner, President, NJCSS and Executive Director, NJCCLRE at Rutgers University: Yesterday was a beautiful day and my husband and I decided to look at all of the monuments in the town where we live, Westfield, N.J. The latest one is dedicated to the twelve local people who died on September 11, 2001. It is a very understated obelisk that lights up at night. There is a little marker for each person. I believe teachers should present the events of 9/11 from a personal tragedy perspective. However, while that is necessary, it is insufficient. Students also need to explore how the world has changed since 9/11. The tenth anniversary provide a great opportunity for students to appreciate the interplay of individual actions with larger, potentially global, consequences and the way we as individuals function on two levels, a personal level that makes up all aspects of our daily lives and a global level that ties us into people we do not know and events that take place all over the world.

The impact of 9/11 defined the entire last decade. Imagine how different things would be if 9/11 never took place or if the U.S. had reacted in a different way. I always like to ask "what if." What were the options? Students need to recognize that history is not this inevitable flow of predetermined events, which is how history books often portray it. If you think history is an inevitable flow of events, you have no control over it, and might just as well ignore it. That is not the lesson we want students to learn. Probably the best way to

look at 9/11 is for teachers to try to get students to see the contingency of history and ask what alternatives were possible and might still be possible.

Christina Santoriello Samoset Middle School, Lake Ronkonkoma, NY: I marked the 9th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks by teaching my 11th grade U.S. history students about the Patriot Act. Only two students could tell me anything about it. In small groups they had to decide if the Patriot Act was an infringement on the rights and liberties granted in the Constitution. Another day we discussed the controversy over the mosque and cultural center proposed for a site near ground zero. What I saw in my students is a form of "Islamophobia." They assume all Muslims are terrorists. They were quick to give me all the reasons why people would be opposed to building the mosque. As we discussed the underlying ideals of Islam they began to see why some would support the building of the mosque/cultural center. Nine years ago, when I was a 10th grade student, I don't even think I really understood what terrorism was. My students might not be old enough to be able to personally recall what happened on that fateful day nine years ago, but they sure know what it is like to grow up in a world forever changed by the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Kerri Gallagher, P65K, Brooklyn, NY: The upper elementary school students who I teach will get the most benefit from actually seeing and feeling the emotions of New Yorkers on that day. I would probably start my lesson with video footage of the Towers being attacked, followed by the reactions of civilians. I would use copies of newspapers follow the attacks, as well as radio recordings. I think allowing them to see what those of us who remember that day saw, they can develop their own opinions. The students will be able to see the news as we saw the news. I also think I could use this lesson as a foot hold to springboard as to where we are as a nation today. By that time, we will have been fighting a war for as long as our students can remember. Many have no idea why or how we entered the war we are in. By allowing them to see the emotions behind the attacks on 9/11, they may better understand the drive that many Americans felt for "revenge".

Perez Moore, Freeport (NY) High School: I was a member of the New York Army National Guard from 1984 to 1986 and 1998 to 2005. On September 11,

2001 I was on my way to work with the New York City Department of Social Service. At 8:45 AM I got off the subway and noticed people standing in the street. There was smoke in the sky. I asked, "What happened?" A lady stated to me that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. Surprised, I assumed it was an accident. At my worksite, my co-workers were listening to the radio and discussing the "accident." I started my daily routine, but then the second plane hit. There was fear and then panic throughout the office. People had trouble with their cell phones. A few telephone lines did not work. We all crowded around the office television. When the towers fell, I called my Army National Guard base and asked for direction. The operations sergeant stated that the situation was confused and to stand by. A half hour later I received activation orders via fax to proceed to my unit or to any other National Guard location. As I drove to my unit there was chaos and panic in the streets. People were crying and angry. When I arrived at my unit, the 442 Military Police Company, I was instructed to telephone all guard members and have them report as soon as possible. However, most guard members had taken the initiative to report on their own. We loaded up our basic deployment equipment and proceeded to the Senator Jacob Javits building in Manhattan. After our area was organized the entire unit proceeded to ground zero. As we drove down the Westside highway we noticed thousands of people lined up on the highway. We also noticed people verbally abusing anyone they thought was Muslim. There were chants of "death to Muslims." We were ordered to intervene, break up fights, and detain individuals. When we finally made it to ground zero, we experienced the full effect of the attack. Both towers had collapsed and there was tons of debris and charred buildings everywhere. Professional firefighters and police officers walked around in a daze. There appeared to be no action plan or controlling authority. My unit was posted at various checkpoints. For the next two weeks various Search and Rescue units from around the country and a few foreign groups worked the ground zero site. It was my unit's assignment to drive S&R personnel to and from ground zero. My unit stood down after those two weeks. I was happy to be a part of history and experienced a national unity not experienced since. However, I am sorry it was the attack on the towers. I personally agreed with the military action in Afghanistan and Iraq even though Iraq had nothing to do with the terrorist attack.

Atif Khalil, JHS 194Q, Queens, NY: When the September 11 attacks are introduced in classrooms, "patriotic pressures" cloud judgment and analysis. Teachers become servants of power and proclaim false explanations for the attacks, such as "They hate our freedom" or "They want to turn us into a Islamic state." Social Studies classrooms by default are transformed into nationalistic platforms devoid of objectivity. When this happens history is altered and ultimately sold as a lie. Of course we must discuss the horrific events of that day and pay tribute to the innocent lives that were lost. And of course we should honor the brave public servants who risked their lives helping others escape. However, in social studies classrooms we must also analyze the justifications that were presented by participants for these horrifying attacks on the United States. Osama Bin Laden released videotape where he took responsibility for the attacks. In the tapes, Bin Laden claimed that he was waging war on an imperial nation that had taken the lives of hundreds of thousands of innocent victims in Iraq and Palestine. He charged that U.S. foreign policy caused the attacks. According to Bin Laden, just as Muslims had expelled the imperial Soviet Union from Afghanistan, they would expel the Imperial U.S. from the Middle East. Whether you accept his explanation for the attack or not, students, especially high school students, need to discuss this man's reasons and the question of whether U.S. policy in the Middle East played a role in the September 11 attacks? The problem we face as social studies teachers is that there is such hostility to Bin Laden and his followers that it is virtually impossible to discuss this question in any public arena let alone a classroom. Students should also view speeches by U.S. officials after the attacks and draw their own conclusions on their validity. After students they understand the facts and form their own judgments, they need to evaluate U.S. policy and decide if they believe it is helping to prevent terrorism or inciting it?

Gerard Porter, Dake JHS, West Irondequoit, NY: On September 11, 2001 I lost a close loved one who was trapped in the World Trade Centers in a floor above the crash line. Cell phone use was just becoming widespread. He knew he would not be able to get out and he called home to say good-bye to his wife. At the time I was eighteen years old and a freshman at SUNY Buffalo. It was very difficult for my family to confront this as a reality. I did not understand how deeply this

affected me until an incident occurred while I was student teaching three years later. I was placed in the Lackawanna school district in a school with a very diverse student population where a number of students were Islamic. My first day in front of a class I was shaking with nervousness, far more than the regular nervousness that is normal for student teaching. I was supposed to be teaching the class about the Crusades, a religious war between Christians and Muslims. I was twenty-one years old and full of hate. I felt we were in the middle of a religious war all over again. There were students in the room who were wearing traditional Islamic garb and I associated them with the enemy. Talking about the Crusades, I referred to the people of North Africa as "A-rabs," the way I spoke about them with family and friends. A girl politely raised her hand and corrected me. She said the proper way to pronounce the name of this group was Arab. I think she understood I was not intentionally being disrespectful. This girl's calm response was the best thing for me. It

helped me to see my students as children who had nothing to do with terrorism. There was no plot in their book bags. Everyone has not had my experiences, but everyone needs to in some way. Teachers must find ways so their students are able to see people as people rather than grouping them together as enemies to be feared and stopped.

Regina Alatsas, P207, Marine Park, Brooklyn, NY:

I teach in a K-8 school where the demographics are very civil servant, white ethnic, with some minority students bused in. Although the 8th graders are multicultural and somewhat aware of 9/11, presenting any viewpoint that is considered anti-American (the school celebrates Flag Day, mandates recital of the pledge, God Bless America, and the National Anthem daily) is considered taboo by administration and most parents. How can I present the good, the bad, and the ugly on the 10th anniversary and beyond of 9/11?

Available online from Rethinking Schools: War, Terrorism and Our Classrooms - Teaching in the Aftermath of the September 11th Tragedy, includes essays by Stephen J. Gould, Alfie Kohn, Bill Bigelow, and Arunhati Roy. http://www.rethinkingschools.org/static/special_reports/sept11/pdf/911insrt.pdf

Available online from Teachable Moment from the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility: DBQ: What fuels terrorism by Islamic fundamentalists? <http://www.teachablemoment.org/high/terrorismdbq.html>
Controversy over the NYC Muslim Community Center & the 9/11 experience <http://www.teachablemoment.org/middle/park51.html>

Available online from The September 11th Education Trust: Creating Timelines and Using Personal Narratives and U.S. National Security and 9/11 <http://www.learnabout9-11.org>
The full curriculum package can be purchased from Social Studies School Service <http://www.socialstudies.com/c/product.html?record@TF42488>

Labib's Café: Sharing the Bad Times (<http://www.cityofmemory.org/map/#/story/1594/>): Produced, edited and narrated by Judith Sloan for the *Crossing the BLVD* series. In an Egyptian cafe on Steinway Street in Astoria, hate spilled over and was calmly mopped up four nights after the September 11th attack on the World Trade Towers. Four young men entered the Queens, New York coffee shop that Labib Salama, an Egyptian immigrant to the US, had owned for five years. The gang did not hurt anyone, but they smashed everything: the tables, the mirrors, and the pictures on the walls. The police caught the young men but Labib Salama refused to press charges. He told the police he understood their anger and did not to create more. The young men returned to coffee shop an hour later, apologized, and helped to clean up the store that they had ransacked. Judith Sloan talked with owner Labib Salama and his customer Nasser Elgabry about these events.

The West Wing: Episodes of the television series examined terrorism in the wake of September 11, 2001. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDsY8qCxLHQ>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YbN65un7F0&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VatPKqTgzh4&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXKd8Ps4nKs&feature=related>

John Duggan, Freeport (NY) High School: My teaching about 9/11 is informed by my own experience that day. I worked at 80 Pine Street on the 28th floor on the west side. I sat about five feet from the window, which looked directly at the Twin Towers. The markets that we depended on were just phoning in when we heard a thunderous crash. I mean it sounded like thunder - in New York City terms, a Con Ed accident. There was always building going on downtown and at first we thought it might have been a huge construction truck dropping something. Then oh-my-God, we saw the WTC. The gaping hole and fire started almost immediately. We had no idea what had happened. We thought it was an explosion, maybe a bomb. Quickly from our news monitors we found out that a plane had crashed into the tower. Some left immediately for trains to take them home. I stayed. I watched the plumage of glass, fire, paper and smoke streaming from the hole in the glass building. On that bright sunny morning, I could see the sun shining off the shards falling down. As I stood transfixed, I saw the second plane. It took just a couple of seconds to fly from my left to right and then crash into the second WTC. I would have said it was a small commuter airliner. I remember the sun shining off the aluminum siding but it looked really small in comparison to the towers. Within minutes on the monitors I saw the replay and how big the plane really was. Now we thought we were under attack. Friends from the WTC were now heading into our building with the story of the disaster. While we talked, the Trade Center that I saw hit by a plane collapsed in front of my eyes. The mushroom from the implosion crossed Broadway, through Chase Plaza and came towards our building. Our whole building shook when the mushroom hit. People started screaming. Plan or no plan I walked out the door and headed for the steps. I walked down the twenty-eight floors with strangers heading for uncertainty. The lady next to me was crying that we were all going to die. Like a New Yorker, I told we would die but not today. The ground floor was packed with people heading onto a street that was as dark as dusk. I headed for a bridge to get me off of Manhattan. I was too afraid to take the Brooklyn Bridge because it was too famous and therefore a target. I chose the Manhattan Bridge because nobody knows the Manhattan Bridge. As I headed for the bridge I saw the second WTC collapse and it made me think of Pearl Harbor. I felt that a war would soon start. I reached the Manhattan Bridge and saw a line of NYC Fireman heading for the towers. Once I got north of the towers it was amazing to see what a beautiful day it was. In Brooklyn, near the Queens border, I saw U.S. jets flying above me. I felt safer and angrier at the same time. I stopped twice on the walk to try and reach my wife. Both times a store let me use the phone and offered me water for free. When I reached home I noticed that my black golf shirt was now grey and my hair matted.

Jeffrey Glass, Freeport (NY) High School: As a survivor of the attack on the World Trade Center, I plan to discuss with students what I believe are some important messages that do not seem to get enough attention. Inevitably we will have to discuss terrorism, but I will leave that lesson for another day. First, the survival instincts of the people who were physically involved in 9/11 were unbelievably strong. Exiting the WTC down crowded and smoke-filled flight of stairs, people stopped to help and comfort one another, carrying those who could no longer walk and giving articles of clothing to others to help cover wounds and shield eyes and lungs. Immediately outside the towers, the need to comfort and help others overwhelmed the urge to evacuate the area quickly. People who could not run were being helped by those who were in better physical and emotional condition regardless of the expanding cloud of debris that seemed about to engulf everything in its path. While all of these actions may be deemed small gestures of individual kindness and perhaps don't qualify as acts of high heroism, the lesson they can teach us and our students is that, in times of life-threatening crisis, human beings will put themselves and their own safety at risk to help one another. The mass chaos and panic that we see in movies and on television when, for example, aliens chase crowds through the streets thankfully exists only in fiction. In real life, the group experience of danger seems to protect, calm, and strengthen those who are experiencing it. I have never seen people work as hard as they did in the days and weeks that followed 9/11. At Ground Zero, the recovery efforts by legions of people went on nonstop for months. By the next day, the rebuilding was not only under way, but far ahead of what anybody could have imagined possible. Within a few days, the entire financial community had rebuilt to the extent that the financial markets could reopen. The lesson to be learned from such experiences starts with human resiliency, but it really goes much further. In times of crisis, the sum of our collective energy is much greater than the sum of our individual efforts. The title of the social studies lesson I will teach is "Renewed Faith in the Human Race." And its message is that out of atrocity can come strength, goodness, and hope. Human spirit and group strength, unlike buildings, cannot easily be destroyed.