ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to consider the continued saliency of the ideas of Harold O. Rugg, particularly for social studies education. Given the conservative political times in which we work, and the current educational emphases on academic standards, high-stakes standardized testing, and mastery of specified knowledge, and the impact of these developments on social studies education, it is useful to revisit Rugg’s contributions to the field. In this paper, we examine Rugg’s social and curricular theories. Then, in light of this examination, we imagine what Rugg would say about contemporary issues for social studies education, and what we, as curriculum scholars and social studies educators, can learn from his likely responses.

KEYWORDS: Curriculum history, social studies education, teacher education, curriculum debate.
history, but from time to time, it is important to explore their legacy and to determine the extent to which their ideas are still salient.

Given the current conservative political times in which we live and work (Goodman, 2006), which has fostered calls for the development of academic standards, the utilization of high-stakes standardized testing, the mastery (memorization) of specified knowledge – and the impacts of these emphases on social studies education, it is, perhaps, useful to those of us who question this conservative shift to revisit Rugg’s contributions to the field. What would Rugg say in regard to these trends? Can his proposals provoke our thinking about the purposes and substance of social studies curriculum, particularly in regard to aims for citizenship in a pluralistic, post 9/11 society? Can Rugg help us re-establish the place of social studies in today’s schools, in light of our country’s seemingly obsessive emphasis on science, technology, basic literacy, and math? Can Rugg assist us in providing a compelling response to conservative social studies scholars (e.g., Leming, Ellington, & Porter, 2003) who prefer a history-centered orientation to the field?

In response to these and other questions, we, first, situate Rugg within the historical context of the 1920s and 1930s, the period in which he generated most of his ideas. We, then, briefly address his thoughts regarding society since his curriculum theory and development emerged as a direct result of his social theorizing (Kliebard & Wegner, 2002). Next, we review Rugg’s curriculum theory and practice, focusing particular attention on curricular design and textbook reform. These discussions are then used as a basis for supposition upon what Rugg may contribute to our current discourses in social studies education.

We begin with a caveat. Contexts change and ideas and actions change with them. It is likely that Rugg would alter his understanding of education and society in light of the changes that have taken place in our country and the world since his demise. As a result, any effort to correlate his positions with the contemporary context is speculative and, thus, not meant to prove any thesis or provide a final word. Rather, our goal is to state “something clearly enough, intelligibly enough, so that it can be understood and thought about” (Frye, 1983, p. 173). Rugg provided many ideas for educators to consider during his own lifetime, and as the following discussion suggests, contemporary educators might learn something from his work as well.