

Stockton's SRI&ETTC Hosts Inaugural Conference for Social Studies Teachers

Conference Emphasizes Importance of Civics Education and Engagement

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Galloway Township, NJ – Nearly 100 local social studies educators attended the inaugural “Conference for Middle and High School Social Studies Teachers” hosted by the Southern Regional Institute & Education Technology Training Center (SRI&ETTC) at the SRI&ETTC on April 16.

This year’s conference theme, “Fulfilling Our Civic Mission,” discussed the role of public schools as cornerstones of democracy and the idea that the future of the democracy depends on informed, engaged and responsible students.

“The primary reason for this conference is to provide professional development opportunities in our region for social studies teachers,” said Patricia Weeks, director of the SRI&ETTC. “There are numerous programs available in literacy and mathematics since students are assessed in these areas each year. But teachers often have to travel beyond South Jersey to attend workshops in social studies and civics education. Stockton has excellent resources in this content area and we are so pleased to be able to make connections with the K-12 community.”

Ambassador William J. Hughes, who served as U.S. ambassador to Panama and as a U.S. congressman for 20 years, gave the keynote address, emphasizing the importance of knowledge and participation in the political process.

“Democracy is not a spectator’s sport,” Ambassador Hughes said. “It’s become one, unfortunately, because ‘politics’ has become a dirty word.”

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Ambassador Hughes, citing his experiences in the House of Representatives during a time when members worked together, described the need for give and take, understanding, civility and tolerance in politics.

“At the heart of everything is civility, a tolerance of other points of view. In many respects we’ve lost a lot of that. We’ve got to work on ways to get people back involved in public discourse, politic,” he said. “Civics in education is where I believe we need to start.”

Linda J. Wharton, associate professor of Political Science at Stockton, presented findings from her latest research, “Understanding the United States Constitution and the Supreme Court: A Survey of New Jerseyans,” published by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy this week. Wharton, in collaboration with Dr. James Avery, associate professor of Political Science at Stockton, concluded that many adults in New Jersey do not know basic facts about the U.S. Supreme Court and the U.S. Constitution, based on a statewide survey by the Stockton Polling Institute.

For example, a majority could not name a single U.S. Supreme Court justice or how many justices sit on the Court. However, majorities knew how justices get appointed and how the U.S. Constitution can be amended.

“Interestingly, while our respondents did not do well on some basic information questions, they did quite well on some of the process questions, which I think is encouraging,” Wharton said. “It is more important to know and understand the political processes. It’s about engagement as a citizen in our democracy.”

Following the presentations, educators dispersed into 11 various breakout sessions covering global citizenship, teaching advanced placement history, student engagement, and more.

Jeanne DelColle, instructional development and strategic partnerships specialist at Stockton University, presented, “Global Citizenship: Preparing Our Students for an Interconnected World.”

“Looking at the standards as they are, social studies, the red-headed stepchild of the universe, gets shortchanged all the time... Science and social studies do not coexist anymore. Unfortunately, they have been pushed out of the way for language arts, literacy and math because those are the tested subject areas,” DelColle said.

John Mason and Rebecca McErlane, sixth grade teachers at William Davies Middle School in Mays Landing, presented “PARCCING with Social Studies,” which focused on effective teaching strategies and methods. The title refers to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), computer-based assessments of K-12 students’ mastery of English language/literacy and math.

Mason and McErlane emphasized the integration of primary and secondary sources, informative reading and writing and the ability to craft an argument seated in textual evidence.

The SRI&ETTC, which offers professional development courses to preK-12 teachers and other education professionals, has an educational network and a consortium of 80 organizations, of which 68 are school districts throughout southern New Jersey. This encompasses 200 schools, over 7,500 teachers, and more than 100,000 preK-12 pupils.

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