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Letter from the Editors

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As we introduce the first issue of 2026, the field of social studies education finds itself at a critical juncture, navigating what has been described as a "crisis in authority" within a landscape of extreme political polarization. Educators today are under immense pressure to address civic strain while balancing new legislative initiatives and mandated standardized tests.

This issue of the Journal of Social Studies and History Education (JSSHE) brings together diverse perspectives that explore how we might ground our work during these uncertain times and rethink the future of democratic life.

A primary theme in this issue is the urgent need to address widespread civic and historical illiteracy. Research highlighted here reveals that a significant portion of the public lacks foundational knowledge in history, geography, and civics, with traditional textbook and lecture-heavy instruction often failing to foster lasting understanding. In response, contributors advocate for a shift toward research-backed pedagogical approaches such as:

- **Project-Based and Inquiry-Based Learning:** Strategies that promote

active, student-centered engagement through real-world relevance.

- **Culturally Responsive Teaching:** Methods that prioritize emotional connection and personal relevance to improve student retention.
- **AI-Enhanced Instruction:** The exploration of artificial intelligence as a tool to boost motivation, engagement, and personalized learning outcomes, from planning international trips to interviewing historical witnesses

The importance of active learning extends beyond the American context. This issue features a study of university students in Japan utilizing the "case method," an approach that places students in the role of decision-makers to analyze real-world scenarios. A key finding from this research is that assessment design—specifically supplemental work like post-class quizzes—plays a vital role in shaping behavior and performance, even in active-learning environments. Quizzes, in particular, were linked to higher gains in open-mindedness and collaboration skills.

Finally, this issue examines the frameworks of civic education, comparing

responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented citizen approaches to help practitioners find their footing in a tense political battle for the "soul of schools". We also include a critical look at how specific historical content, such as the Eastern Front of World War II, is represented in secondary education.

Together, these articles emphasize that effective social studies instruction must go beyond rote memorization to prioritize critical thinking and cultural relevance. We hope this collection serves as a valuable resource for educators striving to guide the next generation through a complex and evolving world.