**Dr. Darla Gerlach**

**Dr. Darla Gerlach** is the Teacher/Coordinator of the Gifted & Talented Education Program at Shaler Area Middle School. She has been teaching for over 20 years, received her doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh where she was the recipient of the Ernest B. Dorow Doctoral Fellowship in Social Studies. She has also received a 2013 Barringer Research Fellowship from the Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello which is awarded from the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies and the 2013 Innovation in Teaching Award from PCSS. Dr. Gerlach was one of six educators recognized by the National Civics Education Contest sponsored by Pearson & *We Are Teachers* at the National Council for the Social Studies Conference in 2013 for innovative teaching in a community-based project. She is involved in several project-based learning learning experiences: *Hear Me* program through CMU focusing on students’ voices in education; Youth Court Initiative; and the Western PA Conservancy community gardens. Over the years, she has given presentations at several PCSS Conferences.

**The Future of Social Studies in Pennsylvania**

Social studies curricula have to keep pace with the continuous evolution of our world. Students’ success in becoming literate in social studies and history is important to not only their futures but our global society. Citizenship education prepares young adults to become informed and active participants in their communities, country and the world. As students learn about history from a human perspective, they will understand the accomplishments and struggles that individuals encountered over time and this will prepare them to explore various views on political, economical and cultural issues facing our society.

It is our duty as teachers and mentors to help students understand the various cultural influences that shape our state’s and nation’s identity and the rights we have attained as citizens under the U.S. Constitution. As students examine multiple issues within social studies curricula, it is critical for teachers to instill higher-order thinking skills and inquiry-based learning to prepare students as 21st century problem-solvers. Through real-world contexts within the social studies classroom, students are encouraged to be creative thinkers as they analyze and assess evidence, and formulate and clearly present ideas. Social studies must continue to be part of the Common Core curriculum. It truly provides students a sense of structure—they are part of a larger societal organization, they learn about laws within a society and they learn about cultural differences and similarities. In the midst of educational teaching trends and focus on prioritizing curriculum, we must continue to educate students thoughtfully on the value of democracy, emphasize development of in-depth historical knowledge and cultural understanding and tolerance. Collectively, social studies curriculum offers valuable skills in the development of students’ civic competence and this leads to effective decision-making throughout individuals’ lives.