



May 7, 2010

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Enzi
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510
Sent via email: ESEAcomments@help.senate.gov

Dear Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Enzi:

The ongoing work to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provides a welcome opportunity to address some of the consequences of implementing the 2002 version of the Act—commonly referred to as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). As you and your colleagues take on this formidable task, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) hopes you will consider our concerns and priorities related to federal policies that affect social studies classrooms.

It is social studies educators who provide students with content knowledge, historical understanding, intellectual skills, and civic values needed to fulfill the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy. At a time when policymakers are taking on the daunting issues of a struggling economy, financial industry regulation, immigration reform, climate change and other issues, we are reminded how important it is that the citizens of this great country understand how such issues, the debates surrounding them and the policymaking process affect them, and that, as citizens, they have important civic responsibilities in these deliberations. The federal programs and investments included in a revised ESEA must recognize that it is through the social studies that young people are exposed to civic engagement, economics and financial literacy, global awareness, historical reasoning and other subjects that yield increasingly crucial 21st Century skills.

The Importance of Social Studies—Setting the Tone at the Federal Level

In 2002, NCLB set laudatory goals that included attaining proficiency in math and reading by 2014, narrowing the achievement gap, and having well-prepared, highly qualified teachers in every classroom. In doing so, an unintended and documented marginalization of the core social studies disciplines— civics/government, economics, geography, and history—occurred in K-12 classrooms. This has resulted in decreased attention to social studies content, professional development

investments, assessment and countless other areas of great concern to social studies educators. While current law identifies each of the social studies subjects as “core” for the highly qualified teacher provisions of the law, they are not included in the basic program requirements, an anomaly that is producing disappointing results in literacy achievement and lack of preparation for civic roles and responsibilities. We hope revisions to the law address these problems and explicitly state that each of the core disciplines: English/Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies (civics, economic, geography, and history) are key to a well-rounded education. Proficiency in each of these subjects is needed for US students to be prepared for college, career, and citizenship in the complex and globally interdependent world.

Specifically, we recommend that as part of their improvement plans, states must outline how they plan to address social studies as key to the K-12 curriculum, and how they plan to invest some portion of their professional development funds in social studies educators. Forcing states to address these issues as they consider improvement plans would put social studies in the conversation and the plan, and require state leadership to consider social studies place in the classroom, assessments, and investments in curriculum and professional development.

Adequate Investments in Social Studies Educators and Education

Currently, social studies teachers rely on a number of federal programs for professional development and instructional efforts. We hope you will retain and strengthen these vital programs. These include Title II of ESEA, Teaching American History Grants, Academies for American History and Civics, National History Day, Close-Up Fellowships, and Excellence in Economic Education. Given the historic and critical mission of schools to build civic understanding and competence, funding for civic learning is of the utmost importance. Currently, federal funding for civic education is far below other academic subjects. According to data from the Department of Education, the federal government spends approximately \$0.50 per K-12 student on civic education in the US, and only \$2.44 on history per student, versus \$25.64 per student on reading and \$19.45 per student for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). We believe investing at least \$2.00 per student, or \$100 million per year in civic education, is an important first step in restoring the civic mission of our schools. NCSS strongly supports funding civic education through a competitive grant program. Our members find all of these federal programs to be invaluable, and NCSS hopes that any revision of the structure of these programs, including the Administration’s proposed consolidation of a number of programs, results in more resources for front-line social studies teachers.

There are also a number of discrete pieces of legislation that have been introduced in the 111th Congress that address professional development investments and other concerns around the teaching of history, civics, geography and other core subjects of social studies. As you develop a reauthorization proposal, we believe the American History and Civics Achievement Act (S. 659), the 21st Century Skills Incentive Fund (S. 1029) and the Teaching Geography is Fundamental Act (HR 1240/ S. 749) warrant examination and hope their intentions are reflected in a comprehensive bill.

Social Studies and Accountability

The current ESEA accountability requirements’ emphasis on math and reading assessments have had many trickle-down effects, including the elimination of social studies assessments altogether in a number of states. Social studies educators need and want assessment results and data to improve their practice, and federal statutes set the tone in K-12 education nationwide. We were supportive of the “multiple measures” approach considered in draft legislation in 2007, as well as a move toward the use of growth models, and hope that new accountability rubrics in the law are similarly inclusive. We also support the Administration’s call for the use of measures of student achievement and growth in additional areas, such as the social studies in accountability systems. We urge you to address the

narrowing of the curriculum and the civic achievement gap by including provisions for social studies assessment and professional development in the reauthorization of ESEA.

In addition, we ask that the structure and plans of the National Assessment of Educational Progress be modified such that social studies be a component of the two-year testing cycle that reading and mathematics are. Currently, social studies disciplines are only tested every four years, and the sample sizes are statistically insignificant, making it impossible to compare student achievement from one state to the next. We request that history, civics, geography, and economics, be conducted, one each year, such that each discipline area would be tested every four years with a sample size large enough to yield disaggregated data.

Teaching Reading, Writing and Critical Thinking through Social Studies

Further, we hope that changes to current law acknowledge the importance of background knowledge from social studies on achievement in literacy by creating incentives to integrate social studies content in reading and writing tests. Social studies is essential if our students are to be prepared for college, career, and citizenship. In fact, at a recent Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee hearing on ESEA reauthorization, Senator Patty Murray asked expert witnesses to outline what students need to learn in K-12 education to be college- and career-ready. The ability to think critically was most important, according to the witnesses. The ability to think critically is addressed directly in schools each day in social studies classrooms.

Defining social studies as "the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence," NCSS is the largest association in the country devoted solely to social studies education. With members in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and 69 foreign countries, NCSS serves as an umbrella organization for elementary, secondary, and college teachers of history, geography, economics, political science, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and law-related education. Organized into a network of more than 110 affiliated state, local, and regional councils and associated groups, the more than 20,000 members of NCSS include K-12 classroom teachers, college and university faculty members, curriculum designers and specialists, social studies supervisors, and leaders in the various disciplines that constitute the social studies.

Thank you for your consideration of these views. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact NCSS Executive Director Susan Griffin, at 301-588-1800, ext. 103 or sgriffin@ncss.org.

Sincerely,



Susan Griffin
Executive Director



Syd Golston
President