

TESTIMONY SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

FROM

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES

TO THE

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE**

MAY 18, 2006

“The United States and its democratic system of government are constantly evolving. No one can predict with certainty what may be needed from its citizens to preserve and protect it fifty years from now. For social studies to perform its mission of promoting civic competence, students must learn not only a body of knowledge but [also] how to think and how to be flexible in using many resources to resolve civic issues. It is not overstating the case to say that America’s future depends on it.” (Curriculum Standards for Social Studies. NCSS, 1994, xvi)

The mission of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) is to provide leadership, service and support for all social studies educators. Social studies educators give students the content knowledge, intellectual skills and civic values they need to fulfill the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy. The Council welcomes the opportunity to submit this testimony and to convey the conviction of the Council’s more than 26,000 members—around the nation and the world—that social studies is an invaluable discipline that should be included in conversations about federal priorities and investments in education—especially during the upcoming debate around the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

NCSS defines social studies as "the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence." Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. In essence, social studies promotes knowledge of and involvement in civic affairs. And because civic issues--such as health care, crime, immigration, and foreign policy--are multidisciplinary in nature, understanding these issues and developing resolutions to them require social studies education. These characteristics are the key defining aspects of social studies.

Powerful social studies teaching helps students develop social understanding and civic efficacy. Social understanding is integrated knowledge of social aspects of the human condition: how they have evolved over time, the variations that occur in various physical environments and cultural settings, and the emerging trends that appear likely to shape the future. Civic efficacy—the readiness and willingness to assume citizenship responsibilities—is rooted in social studies knowledge and skills, along with related values (such as concern for the common good) and attitudes (such as an orientation toward participation in civic affairs). The nation depends on a well-informed and civic-minded citizenry to sustain its democratic traditions, especially now as it adjusts to its own heterogeneous society and its shifting roles in an increasingly interdependent and changing world in the 21st Century.

Recently, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (www.21stcenturyskills.org) has emerged as the leading advocacy organization focused on infusing “21st century skills” into education. The organization brings together the business community, education leaders, and policymakers to define a powerful vision for 21st century education and to

ensure that students emerge from our schools with the skills needed to be effective citizens, workers and leaders in the 21st century. A recent report from the partnership, “Results That Matter: 21st Century Skills and High School Reform” outlines a compelling framework for 21st century learning that focuses on the results that matter for today’s high school graduates and suggests that the vision for 21st century learning embrace the following elements:

1. A continued focus on English, math, science, foreign languages, civics, government, economics, arts, history and geography;
2. The incorporation of 21st century content into the curriculum, such as global awareness, civic literacy, health awareness, and financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy;
3. Teaching of learning and thinking skills;
4. Teaching of information and communications technology;
5. Teaching of life skills, such as ethics and personal responsibility; and,
6. The proliferation of 21st century assessments in education.

In order for any of this to occur, there must be assurances that:

- the curriculum for social studies is required in all schools, and at all grade levels on a regular basis;
- the human and financial resources required to provide this social studies programming are available to all schools; and,
- there are accountability measures for social studies in place at the school, district, state and national levels.

The National Council for the Social Studies strongly supports these findings and recommendations, and urges the Committee to consider both.

That is why we paid particular attention to a report released by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) on March 28, 2006 which focused on the implementation of NCLB. “From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 4 of the No Child Left Behind Act,” is a comprehensive analysis of how the law is being implemented at the state, district and local levels. Based on a survey of 50 states, 299 school districts and 38 case studies of school districts, the report provides the most up-to-date information about the law's implementation and shares the opportunities and challenges that it has presented for states and districts.

While the report found that implementation of No Child Left Behind has brought positive results to schools nationwide, NCSS is troubled by one finding: One-third (33 percent) of school districts reported reducing time for social studies “somewhat or to a great extent” to make time for reading and math, while 29 percent said they had reduced time for science and 22 percent for art and music. This is clearly an unintended result of NCLB that must be addressed.

While we are familiar with Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings' assertion that "what gets measured gets done," we believe this attitude shortchanges our youth as teachers and administrators focus almost exclusively on achievement results in math and reading. The gradual elimination of social studies from the school day would adversely affect social studies educators, students, families, communities and citizens.

NCSS firmly believes that by incorporating a social studies curriculum into the school day, the reading and math skills of the students will actually be enhanced. For example, "Review of Social Studies Research and Literature, 1995-2005" (April 18, 2005), which was completed for a state social studies task force, highlights several key findings relative to instruction in the social studies that are worthy of note, and that those charged with formulating federal education policy should keep in mind:

- Young learners, in the elementary years, are capable of learning foundation knowledge and processes that are also needed for learning in middle and high school social studies.
- Using informational texts as a means to develop reading abilities is important for young readers, and encouraging older students to read a variety of texts...leads to greater achievement.
- ...[A]ll national standards documents assert that effective programs must help students learn important content and processes, beginning in primary school grades and building civic competence within each grade, K-12.
- Assessments, especially those driven by accountability, determine to a large extent which studies receive time and emphasis in classrooms, what is taught to students, and which areas receive funding for materials and professional development.

These findings suggest that an emphasis on reading knowledge alone ignores the value of important content and analysis. Rigorous and relevant social studies curriculum can—and does—teach reading skills while imparting important knowledge and skills.

The District Facilitator of Social Studies in District 11 in Colorado Springs, CO recently analyzed data for elementary schools in this district of nearly 30,000. She noted a close correlation between high scores on state assessments in reading and those for the Terra Nova test, contracted through CTB-McGraw Hill, in Social Studies. This is an indicator that instruction in social studies, emphasizing vocabulary and reading skills, can lead to achievement in tested subjects—in particular, reading.

One state in which rigorous and relevant social studies high school curriculum has become a reality is Michigan. "To ensure Michigan's students have the skills and knowledge needed for the jobs of the 21st Century global economy, on April 20, 2006, Governor Jennifer M. Granholm signed into law a rigorous new set of statewide graduation requirements that are among the best in the nation." (<http://michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-38924---,00.html>). Where once there was a requirement for 0.5 credits in civics, there is now required 3 credits of social studies--0.5 credit in civics; 0.5 credit in economics; and two others between U.S. history and

geography and world history and geography. The state is also completing a revision of Grade Level Content Expectations for social studies, beginning with Kindergarten, to be presented to the state Board of Education in August.

As evidenced by the findings of the recent report from the Center for Educational Policy, NCSS knows that this emphasis is not present in all schools, districts or states. The report points to a widespread reduction in the amount of time spent on social studies. Such cuts are illogical when contrasted with research showing that exemplary elementary teachers have their students do more social studies and science reading than students in less effective classrooms (www.readingrockets.org/articles/96, p 2-3 of 10).

Further, the role social studies plays in encouraging responsible civic participation is irrefutable. Recently, the Civic Mission of Schools identified Six Promising approaches to civic education (www.civicismissionofschools.org). The very first approach, based on research, shows that schools can help to develop competent and responsible citizens when they:

“Provide instruction in government, history, law, and democracy. Formal instruction in U.S. government, history, and democracy increases civic knowledge. This is a valuable goal in itself and may also contribute to young people’s tendency to engage in civic and political activities over the long term. However, schools should avoid teaching only rote facts about dry procedures, which is unlikely to benefit students and may actually alienate them from politics.”

It is obvious that the potential narrowing of the curriculum as an inadvertent consequence of the implementation of No Child Left Behind warrants the attention of educators and policymakers across the nation.

Powerful social studies teaching begins with a clear understanding of the subject’s unique purposes and goals. NCSS’s believes citizenship education is the primary purpose of K-12 social studies. Noting that concern for the common good and citizen participation in public life are essential to the health of our democratic system, it states that effective social studies programs prepare young people to identify, understand, and work to solve the problems facing our diverse nation in an increasingly interdependent world. Such programs:

- foster individual and cultural identity along with understanding of the forces that hold society together or pull it apart;
- include observation of and participation in the school and community;
- address critical issues and the world as it is;
- prepare students to make decisions based on democratic principles; and
- lead to citizen participation in public affairs.
- Provide deep content knowledge as a basis for each of the preceding skills

Clearly, these programs are also important tools for imparting math and reading knowledge and skills. Social studies is a discipline that facilitates the teaching of a

number of subjects and arms young people with the knowledge and skills they need to be effective and responsible citizens. The National Council for the Social Studies looks forward to working with you in the coming months on the important effort of reauthorizing the No Child Left Behind Act.