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Message to Congress: Don't Leave Social Studies Behind

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s Congress turns it attention toward the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to enact federal policy to prepare all students for college and career, it's important to remind legislators that it takes more than literacy and math skills for students to be successful and engaged citizens, ready to face the complex challenges of the 21st century.

Schools in affluent communities with high test scores have been more likely to provide students with a rigorous, well-rounded curriculum that includes civic education (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008) while their counterparts have not, thus producing an illiterate and unprepared citizenry entering the adult world.

Leaders in Washington can raise the importance of preparing students for civic life to an equal status of preparing them for college and career, as some organizations are doing now to a limited degree. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), the largest association in the country

devoted solely to social studies education and the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (CMS), have been advocating, and will continue to advocate for the inclusion of social studies education in schools to meet this goal.

ESEA Reauthorization

As part of the ESEA Reauthorization, Congress and the President can and should provide competitive grants that support the development and dissemination of innovative, engaging approaches to teaching social studies that includes history, civics, geography, and economics. And though the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has long advocated for the inclusion of all disciplines of the social studies, unfortunately, not all are reflected in the language of the bill moving forward. We are, however, thrilled to see that social studies is getting attention from members of Congress including Republican Senator Mike Enzi who drafted a legislative provision in 20ll providing that:

"Grants shall be made to support developing, implementing, evaluating, and disseminating for voluntary school use innovative, research-based approaches to civic learning which may include hands-on civic engagement activities, for low-income elementary school and secondary school students, that demonstrate innovation, scalability, accountability, and a focus on underserved populations."

In early April 2015, the ESEA Reauthorization bill was introduced by Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Chair Lamar Alexander and Ranking Member Patty Murray. Although it did not target all disciplines such as economics - which it is important to note, NCSS is working with legislators to broaden such language in the bill - here are the key provisions from the Alexander/Murray draft that relate to the Social Studies, Civics, History and Geography.

TITLE II—HIGH-QUALITY TEACHERS, PRINCIPALS, AND OTHER SCHOOL LEADERS (this Title creates three competitive grant programs for Civics, History, Geography)

Part C American History and Civics Education Section 2302 - Provides funding through competitive grants to Local Education Agencies to provide for the teaching of traditional American History "as a separate academic subject (not as a component of the social studies.)" Provides funding for instruction or professional development. Requires a partnership with institution of higher education or non-profit or library/museum or humanities organization. Will receive 85% of this Part's (C) funding. Section 2303 establishes Presidential and Congressional Academies for American History and Civics and will receive 10% of this Part's funding (professional development activities.)

"SEC. 2304. NATIONAL ACTIVITIES. (will receive 5% of this Part's funding)

- "(a) PURPOSE.—The purpose of this section is to promote innovative strategies to promote innovative history, civic, and geography instruction, learning strategies, and professional development activities and programs for teachers, principals, and other school leaders, particularly for low-income students in underserved areas.
- "(b) IN GENERAL.—From the funds reserved by the Secretary under section 2301(b)(3), the Secretary shall award grants, on a competitive basis, to eligible entities for the purposes of—
- "(1) developing, implementing, evaluating and disseminating for voluntary use, innovative, evidenced-based approaches to civic learning and American history, which may include hands-on civic engagement activities for teachers and low-income students, that demonstrate innovation, scalability, accountability, and a focus on underserved populations; or
- "(2) other innovative evidence-based approaches to improving the quality of student achievement and teaching of American history, civics, and government in elementary schools and secondary schools.
- "(c) PROGRAM PERIODS AND DIVERSITY OF PROJECTS —

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- "(1) IN GENERAL. —A grant awarded by the Secretary to an eligible entity under this section shall be for a period of not more than 3 years.
- "(2) RENEWAL —The Secretary may renew a grant awarded under this section for 1 additional 2-year period.
- "(3) DIVERSITY OF PROJECTS. —In awarding grants under this section, the Secretary shall ensure that, to the extent practicable, grants are distributed among eligible entities that will serve geographically diverse areas, including urban, suburban, and rural areas.
- "(d) APPLICATIONS. —In order to receive a grant under this section, an eligible entity shall submit an application to the Secretary and containing such information that the Secretary may reasonably require.
- "(e) ELIGIBLE ENTITY. —In this section, the term 'eligible entity' means an institution of higher education or other nonprofit or for-profit organization with demonstrated expertise in the development of evidence-based approaches for improving the quality of American history and civics learning and teaching.
- "SEC. 2305. AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS. "There are authorized to be appropriated to carry out this part such sums as may be necessary for fiscal years 2016 through 2021."

Though the language does not begin to include or guarantee the goals and purposes of a well-rounded social studies education for all students, we, the National Council for the Social Studies, are still very enthusiastic that social studies language and potential funding is included in the bill. Considering we have had nothing in federal legislation for over five years, this is a huge victory that cannot be overlooked. A lot of people have dedicated hundreds of hours to get language, any language, in the bill to support social studies. We will continue to seek legislative champions in Congress to support all the aspects of social studies that the National Council for the Social Studies believes in.

If passed, the bill will provide competitive grant opportunities for Local Education Agencies (school districts), State Educational Agencies (State Departments of Education), higher education (pre-service education), for-profit and non-profit organizations to provide professional development and resources to strengthen social studies education. I hope you will continue to support these efforts because it will enable us to get social studies "on the map" for teachers and students in every state. NCSS is asking everyone to stay abreast of the progress of the bill and be prepared to act quickly when called upon because it is an important and timely message being spread across the social studies community nationwide.

Rationale

There is an abundance of research findings and assessment data that provides ample rationale for promoting social studies in federal legislation. According to Peter Levine, Director of the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement and Scott Warren, Co-founder and Executive Director of Generation Citizen "almost all forms of civic engagement are strongly correlated with socioeconomic status for American youth. Among those ranging from 18 to 29 years old, the voter turnout

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rate is often three times as high for those who have attained a college degree than for those who have left high school without degrees. Inequality starts in our schools, and manifests itself in the political arena."

Test scores from the 2014 National Assessment of Educational Progress suggest similar disparities. Just 18 percent of grade 8 students scored "at or above proficient" in American history. Twenty-seven percent scored "at or above proficient" in geography and only 23 percent in civics.

Ken Burns, American documentarian also emphasized the critical need for social studies education at the 2014 Boston NCSS conference, "It (civics) is actually how things work, how things stick together. No amount of STEM or no amount of STEAM will work unless you have given the operator's manual. In a democracy that is called CIVICS and we need to bring it back!"

Terrorist acts in Western Europe, rampant unchecked genocide in Africa, human rights violations in Asia, internet surveillance and privacy rights, immigration policies, poverty and race relations in the United States are among the many complex problems we face in the 21st century with no easy solutions. Responding to these life and death scenarios necessitates a deep understanding of the historical and geographic context of each situation, the political constraints of various policy responses, and the potential impact on social, economic, and environmental conditions. And because these issues are multidisciplinary in nature, they require a deep multidisciplinary knowledge and skill base; characteristics that are the key defining aspects of the social studies.

The National Council for the Social Studies 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. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world." (1993, p. 213).

Hence, the social studies needs to be a critical part of every child's kindergarten through college experience. Accordingly, our message to Congress is - *Don't leave social studies behind!*

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