



November 26, 2008

Presidential Transition Team
Washington, DC

Dear Education Team:

On behalf of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and its more than 25,000 members, we would like to share our views and priorities on a number of issues that will be considered by you and your team at the Department of Education. As President-elect Obama and his Secretary of Education work with lawmakers on Capitol Hill to consider policies that affect K-12 schools and classrooms, we urge the consideration of these views.

NCSS defines social studies as "the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence." The mission of the Council is to provide leadership, service and support for all social studies educators. During this presidential election year, we were reminded how important it is that citizens know their civic responsibilities. It is similarly important that federal investments validate the role of social studies in teaching young people about civic engagement, economics and financial literacy, global awareness, historical reasoning and other teaching that yield increasingly crucial 21st Century skills.

As social studies educators strive to give young people the skills and knowledge they need to become effective citizens, it is crucial they have access to quality professional development to meet the demands of the ever-changing classroom. While NCSS is encouraged by a number of the President-elect's proposals related to teacher recruitment, preparation and retention, there are a number of existing federal programs that assist districts, administrators and principals in their efforts to support their classroom teachers. We ask you to work with Congress to adequately fund these initiatives, including the Teaching American History grant program, National History Day, Civic Education, Excellence in Economic Education, Teacher Quality Enhancement Grants and NCLB Improving Teacher Quality State Grants. Adequate federal funding for existing programs and innovative new ideas can and do help tens of thousands of students and teachers to gain important skills and experiences.

As you know, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has had an enormous impact on public education throughout the nation and has brought vital focus to the need to define school wide academic success as success for every child. NCSS endorses this goal, but believes the law can be both strengthened and improved. NCSS is concerned that social studies is getting short shrift in the classroom as teachers and administrators focus almost exclusively on math and reading. If American students are to succeed in the global market place of the 21st Century, it is the teaching of social studies, science and other core disciplines that will serve as the means to stimulate interest in academics and prepare students for their roles as citizens.

The Center on Education Policy (CEP) released a report in 2007 that asserts that since the enactment of NCLB, 44% of districts surveyed have reduced time for social studies. That percentage leapt to 51% in districts with "failing schools." The updated survey, from earlier this year, indicates that more than half (53%) of districts surveyed cut instructional time by at least 75 minutes per week in social studies. This is clearly an unintended consequence of NCLB and one that deserves attention.

Further, social studies content is even more crucial today as the country deals with a global financial crisis, since most citizens acquire their basic understanding of the economy only through their social studies experiences in school. Parents are also depending upon social studies teachers—at all grade levels—to explain to their children what is happening, to teach the historical context of financial cycles, and to build confidence and optimism in age appropriate ways.

Rigorous and relevant social studies curriculum can—and does—emphasize reading skills while imparting important knowledge and skills. The same is true of mathematics. Economics, financial literacy, geography and other disciplines have mathematics lessons and content imbedded in their teaching. 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.

We look forward to working with President-elect Obama and his team as they face appropriations challenges, consider the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act and address important issues that affect classrooms, teachers, administrators, parents and students.

Thank you for your attention to these views. As the transition progresses, if we can provide you with any additional information, please contact NCSS Executive Director Susan Griffin at 301.581.1800 or sgriffin@ncss.org.

Sincerely,

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Susan Griffin

President
Michael Yell