



CAMPAIGN FOR THE CIVIC MISSION OF SCHOOLS  *Educating for Democracy*®

Proposal for No Child Left Behind (ESEA) Reauthorization

“Democracy must be reborn in every generation, and education is its midwife.”
- John Dewey

The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools believes that education for democracy (civic learning), along with workplace preparation, is part of the dual mission of American public education. As we approach a new administration and the subsequent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 2002 (AKA ‘No Child Left Behind’), the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools presents this policy brief. We support a variety of changes the original law, which overlooked civic learning in its accountability framework, to reverse some of its unintended consequences and to make the civic mission of schools a federal priority.

Executive Summary: Four Goals for NCLB Reauthorization

Civics Assessment in Title I

- A civics and history assessment should be incorporated into the required assessments in elementary and secondary grades, preferably with no net increase in overall testing.
- Civics content should be included in the Reading and Writing tests whenever possible.
- Since current standardized tests are not well suited to accurately assess much more than factual knowledge, we should allow states to use other means to measure civic skills, values, and attitudes.

Increasing the Effectiveness of NAEP

- The civics and history NAEP tests should be revised to better obtain an effective national picture of student achievement levels. The frequency of NAEP tests should not increase, but the number of students tested in each state should increase, to permit disaggregating civics results at the same level as is possible in other NAEP-tested subjects.

More Prominent Placement within the Department of Education

- To increase the prominence and autonomy of civic learning within the Department of Education, Congress should establish an “Office of Civic Education,” removing civic education from its current place within the Office of Safe and Drug-Free schools.

Increased Funding for Research and Professional Development

- We believe that a reauthorized NCLB Act should include specific provisions that provide support for both professional development and for research into effective civic learning programs.



Testing and Assessment

A range of studies demonstrate that subjects which are not tested are simply not taught. With NCLB mandating tests in reading, mathematics, and science, but not in civics or social studies, it comes as no surprise that nearly three quarters of American school districts have cut back on social studies, civics, and American history to concentrate on the tested subjects.¹

The revised NCLB needs to ensure that social studies, civics, and American history are not continued to be squeezed out under the pressure of testing in other subjects. Increasing the prominence of social studies in the NCLB accountability framework is a necessary first step toward increasing the quality and quantity of civic learning, but must be coupled with adequate funding, curricular resources, and institutional support in order to restore the civic mission of schools.

We propose including the four core disciplines of the social studies (history, civics, geography, and economics) among the core subjects defined in Title I of NCLB. We have argued against including these tests in how states determine Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), but instead believe that – like the NCLB Science requirement – mandatory civics tests should be administered to students once in each grade span (three times during a student’s K-12 experience) with results publicly reported on the state’s annual report card in accordance with the provisions of NCLB.

In addition to civics assessments, social studies content should be integrated into the reading and writing tests to ensure that students are able to think critically and debate questions of public significance, skills indispensable to participation in a democracy premised on citizen deliberation.

Our proposal does not advocate increasing the overall time students sit for high stakes state tests in order to include civics assessments in Title I. It is possible to streamline the tests in reading, mathematics, and science to make room for civics assessments. Moreover, since students in high school are not required to sit for states test each year (as they are in grades 3-8), social studies states tests could be administered at a different point in the high school experience.

Efforts to include civics within the assessment framework requires a carefully designed test to ensure that the civic learning experience focuses on conceptual understanding and critical analysis, not mere factual knowledge that is the focus of many current standardized tests. Many important civic skills and dispositions are not easily assessed using standardized achievement tests, leading us to recommend that the reauthorized NCLB include incentives for states and districts to develop alternative assessment types beyond mere short-answer written exams.

An assessment scheme with expanded scope will give a more accurate measure of students’ true ability to apply civic skills. While some alternative means of assessments already exist,² further development of such assessments will require research, a responsibility that the federal government should shoulder, and additional flexibility for states on assessment strategies. We recommend that states be required to allocate no less that 10% of Title I assessment funds and no less than 10% of Title II professional development funds to developing performance assessments, classroom based performance tasks, and graduation requirements that emphasize projects and demonstrations.

¹ A recent study by the Center on Education Policy found that 71% of school districts had decreased time dedicated to social studies since the passage of NCLB.

² Examples include citizenship portfolios, public policy papers, and juried presentations of service learning and other problem-based projects.



A Stronger NAEP Test

The results of civics assessments from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are currently the only national means of measuring the civic competency of American students. Moreover, a growing body of research suggests a growing civic achievement gap between white and minority students and between upper and lower income students.³

As a result, in order to obtain an effective national picture of student achievement in social studies and civics, the number of students tested in each state should be increased to permit disaggregating the results. NAEP should continue to be administered every five years, but with an increase in the number of students tested to permit the same level of disaggregation as in other subjects tested in NAEP.

Increased Prominence

Institutional support for civic education is vital to ensuring that it receives adequate attention and funding in the long term. Currently, the responsibility for civic education programming and research is spread over a range of government agencies, non-profits, and academic research centers, without centralized federal support. Within the Department of Education, civic education (The Character and Civic Education [CCE] Group) is relegated to a sub-office within the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools.

Without its own office, civic education receives significantly less attention and funding than it might otherwise. The CCE group is not in control of its own budget, and has suffered on two levels in recent years: there has been funding cuts for the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, and money allocated for CCE within the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools has decreased as well.⁴

An Office of Civic Education within the Department of Education, which would include its own budget and director, would go a long way toward increasing efficiency and visibility of an office currently lacking in both funding and prestige.

This Office of Civic Education would exist on the same level as the Office of English Language Acquisition and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. The head of the new office would have a title and stature comparable to the head of those other offices (either Assistant Secretary or Deputy Assistant Secretary), and would report directly to the Secretary of Education. The office would continue to execute the mandate of the current CCE group,⁵ but would also include expanded responsibilities of administering the grant programs discussed below, and would serve as a center for ideas and innovation in a way that the current CCE office does not.

³ Depending on grade level, there is a 24-30 point gap in NAEP scores between White/upper-income students and minority/low-income students. See “Civics 2006: the Nation’s Report Card,” <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2006/2007476_1.pdf> For more on the civic achievement gap, see The Civic Achievement Gap, CIRCLE Working Paper #51, by Meira Levinson.

⁴ See United States Department of Education budget requests for FY 2001-2009.

⁵ The current office administers programs in character and civics education, reports on issues and programs, and provides technical assistance to state agencies and state and local correctional institutions.



Financial Support

We believe that a reauthorized NCLB should include specific provisions that provide support for both professional development and for research into effective civic learning programs. Specifically, we recommend the following:

- The revised law should strengthen teacher training and professional development in social studies, civics and content-based reading. Increased NCLB funding should be available for undergraduate preparation and in-service professional development to improve teaching in social studies, history, civics, and community-based civic learning and to prepare teachers of reading and literature to include historical and civic material.
- The federal government should provide funding for development of new and effective assessments in civic learning.
- The federal government should back research to confirm the view of several prominent authorities that teaching history and social studies can enhance student performance in reading.
- The federal government should support research on the civic achievement gap and programs that are effective in closing the gap.

For more information, please visit the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools online at www.civicmissionofschools.com, or contact Ted McConnell at ted@ncss.org.