

EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY

California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools

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Does NCLB help prepare our youth to become engaged citizens?

Testimony Presented at the NCLB Commission hearing in Los Angeles, on Teacher Quality, Recruitment, Retention, and Distribution; April 11, 2006; by the California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools.

- **The future of America and of our democratic government depends on effective teachers who provide each new generation with the knowledge of our history and government, the skills needed to make informed decisions about complicated public issues, attitudes that support democracy and a commitment to engage in civic life.**
- **Public schools were created in America to prepare the young to be participating citizens. In the nineteenth century, there were high levels of civic participation. Over the decades since that time, civic engagement has decreased dramatically. Trust in government has declined. Interest in public affairs has fallen. Sadly, American young people are increasingly willing to help their neighbors, but are less willing to take part in civic life.**
- **In recent years, we have become the most diverse nation in the world. New arrivals often come from societies with weak democratic institutions and they have little or no experience with self-government. While all our citizens need to understand our government and the role of citizen, these new arrivals are at a tragic disadvantage. They are often fearful of the representatives of government and do not seek their help when it is needed. Their children often become their only source of information about our institutions. As a result, education about our government is vital both for these families to the well being of our democracy!**
- **In 2003 The Carnegie Corporation of New York published a report, *The Civic Mission of Schools*. After reviewing research on the impact of school-based efforts to prepare young people to be engaged citizens, the report identified six promising approaches to civic education that our schools can implement (see attached list).**
- **With funds from The Carnegie Corporation of New York, a broad coalition of**



California education and community organizations was created in 2004 to encourage the implementation of those suggestions in our schools. The early efforts of this campaign are encouraging. We have built broad support for the need to take action in this area. Ten school districts have been involved for over a year. One high school in each district has used the Carnegie recommendations to develop a plan, which is now being used to strengthen existing efforts that promote civic engagement.

- However, to effectively implement the Carnegie recommendations in California classrooms, thousands of teachers need opportunities to learn more about our government as well as how to present what they learn to their students. They need access to experienced guides and stimulating materials. There is no better way to strengthen our school's preparation of young people for engaged citizenship than by deepening the preparation and ongoing professional development of teachers in this important area of the curriculum.
- The No Child Left Behind Act, approved by Congress and the President and implemented nationally for the past 5 years has undertaken the laudable task of improving and standardizing the education of American young people in two areas of the core curriculum; reading, and mathematics. The Act has had an important effect aligning instruction and state standards, and stimulating the more effective use of test data, according to a report recently released by the Washington, D.C. based Center on Education Policy.
- Unfortunately, the Center's report also found that, in many schools, instructional time has been reduced in at least one other subject to make more time for English and mathematics, the subjects tested for use in NCLB reporting. According to the report, History, Geography and Civics were the most heavily cut areas of the curriculum (33% as compared to science, 29; art and music, 22; physical education, 14; other subjects, 17.)
- We believe this narrowing is contrary to the intent of NCLB. Reading is a core skill vital to continued learning. History, Geography and Civics cannot be understood without the ability to read. Using reading to acquire knowledge is also the vital step to acquiring the vocabulary needed score well on the standardized tests used to measure progress as required by NCLB.
- The vital step in learning for young people is being given the opportunity to apply core skills to the acquisition of knowledge, other skills and their application. Narrowing the curriculum to teach only core skills undermines the intend of the educational process by failing to provide the vital next step after learning to read, reading to learn.

- **History, Geography and Civics became part of the American school curriculum as a means to meet our school's responsibility to prepare youth to become knowledgeable, and skilled citizens committed to engagement in civic life.**
- **NCLB should be modified to support both the integration of vital skills and the acquisition of knowledge from a broad array of subject areas. Of special importance to the health of our democratic institutions, is to be sure we adequately prepare both teachers and young people to participate effectively as citizens. Therefore, our campaign strongly supports strengthening and featuring the elements in the curriculum that are vital to our civic life; history, geography and civics.**
- **NCLB must not narrow the curriculum and our student's knowledge, it should stimulate the expansion of knowledge at every step in our children's schooling.**

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THE CIVIC MISSION OF SCHOOLS

SIX PROMISING APPROACHES TO CIVIC EDUCATION

Research shows that schools can help to develop competent and responsible citizens when they:

1 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.

2 Incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives. When young people have opportunities to discuss current issues in a classroom setting, they tend to have greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communications skills, more civic knowledge, and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school. Conversations, however, should be carefully moderated so that students feel welcome to speak from a variety of perspectives. Teachers need support in broaching controversial issues in classrooms since they may risk criticism or sanctions if they do so.

3 Design and implement programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction. Service programs are now common in K-12 schools. The ones that best develop engaged citizens are linked to the curriculum; consciously pursue civic outcomes, rather than seek only to improve academic performance or to promote higher self-esteem; allow students to engage in meaningful work on serious public issues; give students a role in choosing and designing their projects; provide students with opportunities to reflect on the service work; allow students—especially older ones—to pursue political responses to problems consistent with laws that require public schools to be nonpartisan; and see service-learning as part of a broader philosophy toward education, not just a program that is adopted for a finite period in a particular course.

4 Offer extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities. Long term studies of Americans show that those who participate in extracurricular activities in high school remain more civically engaged than their contemporaries even decades later. Thus, everyone should have opportunities to join high school groups, and such participation should be valued.

5 Encourage student participation in school governance. A long tradition of research suggests that giving students more opportunities to participate in the management of their own classrooms and schools builds their civic skills and attitudes. Thus, giving students a voice in school governance is a promising way to encourage all young people to engage civically.

6 Encourage students' participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures. Recent evidence indicates that simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberation, and diplomacy in schools can lead to heightened political knowledge and interest. The data are not conclusive, but these approaches show promise and should be considered when developing programs and curriculum.