

## **Putting the Teaching of American History and Civics back in the classroom**

**Bill Number: Oversight**

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**Witness:**

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**Testimony:**

Mr. Chairman:

Thank you for the opportunity to join this distinguished panel today to discuss the teaching and learning of American history and civics. The subject of this hearing is not only an important education policy issue, but one that has been at the heart of my own efforts as a scholar and teacher over the past 30 years.

In particular, I was pleased to note that the definition of “key documents” in S. 504, the proposed American History and Civics Education Act, includes not only the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, but also the Federalist Papers. Much of my own research and writing has focused on the proper interpretation and relationship of these documents. In addition, it was my privilege to apply my research as a member of a Justice Department task force during the Reagan Administration that sought to restore the essential role of Federalism to American political thought and governance.

One of the key benefits of Federalism, by the way, is that by reserving key decisions to officials and citizens at the State and local levels, Federalism promotes better and more involved citizenship.

Mr. Chairman, President Bush and Secretary Paige share your emphasis on the growing importance of history and civics education at a time when our Nation is at war in defense of our most deeply held beliefs and ideals. The Department currently funds two programs that help reinforce our shared values, and both are priorities in the President’s 2004 budget request.

### **TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY**

The first is the two-year-old Teaching American History program, which in fiscal year 2003 will provide nearly \$100 million to promote the teaching of traditional American history as a separate academic subject in our elementary and secondary schools. This program makes competitive awards to local school districts that establish partnerships with postsecondary institutions, non-profit history or humanities organizations, libraries,

or museums. These partnerships support professional development for teachers of American history.

Mr. Chairman, I know you have used the phrase “civic illiterates” to describe the woeful ignorance of civics demonstrated by American students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). I’m afraid there is perhaps even greater cause to apply that description to student knowledge of history, because only 10 percent of high school seniors scored at the proficient level on the 2001 NAEP history test.

Much of this poor performance arises from the fact that too much of the history taught in our schools is compressed and diluted within broader social studies curricula. I say this not to denigrate social studies or social studies teachers, but to recognize that it is impossible for even the best-trained teacher to do justice to the full sweep of America’s history in a curriculum that also covers such topics as geography, the environment, conflict resolution, and world cultures.

For example, one published social studies curriculum for elementary school students includes a “mini lesson on American history” as just one of 50 lesson plans. I think all of us would agree that American history deserves more than a “mini lesson” in any elementary school curricula worthy of the name. This is why the Teaching American History program emphasizes comprehensive, research-based professional development focused on teaching traditional American history as a separate subject. We want all 50 of those lesson plans to be on American history—at least two or three times during the 12 years that students spend in our elementary, middle, and secondary schools.

The problem of diluted curricula is compounded when, as is too often the case, history teachers are teaching out-of-field or, even if fully certified in social studies, were not required to demonstrate knowledge of US history as part of their certification. The Teaching American History program, which currently supports 174 projects in 47 States, is intended to help address this lack of content training.

One exemplary project is in West Morris, New Jersey, where Superintendent Henry Kiernan has created a new program that is helping improve the knowledge and teaching skills of over 70 history teachers. Participating teachers meet with eminent historians to discuss the craft of teaching history. They also use an interactive web site to conduct history research, distribute their research for review by fellow educators, and use the final product in their own classrooms.

The West Morris program includes summer seminars that meet for four days in historically significant locations. Last summer, the focus of the seminar was on the American Revolution and was located at Princeton. The seminar featured Dr. Gordon Wood of Brown University and master teachers from the National Council for History Education. This summer the focus is on immigration and the seminar will be located in New York City, under the direction of Dr. Kenneth Jackson of Columbia University and the New York State Historical Society.

One final note about West Morris: Superintendent Kiernan has renamed the Social Studies Department the History and Social Sciences Department, to reflect the stronger emphasis on history he is trying to foster in his district.

## CIVIC EDUCATION

The second major activity supported by the Department in this area is the Civic Education program, which provides a \$16.9 million grant to the non-profit Center for Civic Education in Calabasas, California. The Center operates the We the People program, which consists of two projects: The Citizen and the Constitution and Project Citizen. Let me try to avoid any confusion here by clarifying that the Center for Civic Education's We the People program is entirely separate from the new initiative by the same name at the National Endowment for the Humanities. The NEH initiative, working in partnership with the USA Freedom Corps, is part of a concerted effort by President Bush to encourage the teaching of history and civics and emphasize the role of citizenship in our democracy.

The Citizen and the Constitution project provides teacher training and curricular materials that serve elementary, middle, and high school students. The materials are intended to promote civics understanding and responsibility among students, including support for the constitutional rights and civil liberties of dissenting individuals and groups. The project also involves simulated Congressional hearings that give students the opportunity to learn about and demonstrate their understanding of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. At the secondary school level, these hearings culminate in a national competition here in Washington, DC. If you haven't met some of these students yet, Mr. Chairman, you probably will in the near future, because the winning class from each State and their teachers make it a point to visit Members of Congress. In addition, you might be invited to serve, along with other public officials, as a judge in the competition.

Project Citizen encourages middle school students to focus on the role of State and local governments in developing and implementing solutions to social problems. Participating students select a problem, evaluate alternative policies to address the problem, and develop an action plan, which they present to school and community leaders in a simulated legislative hearing. Project Citizen also offers an intensive, weeklong institute to participating teachers.

The two We the People projects collectively serve about half the States, some 1.3 million students, and almost 22,000 teachers annually.

The Civic Education program also provides \$11.9 million to the Cooperative Education Exchange program, which supports education exchange activities in civics and economics between the United States and eligible countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States, former republics of the Soviet Union, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and developing democracies.

Grant recipients under the Cooperative Education Exchange program provide educators from eligible countries with exemplary curricula and teacher training programs in civics and economics. They also create and implement programs for US students on the culture, governance, history, and experiences of their exchange partners. I think this is especially important, because I believe there are few Americans who have spent time overseas or time studying other countries who have not come away with a deeper understanding and appreciation for our own democratic system.

I would add that my own experience bears this out. A little over a decade ago, I was fortunate enough to serve as a consultant on constitutional, political, and economic reform to the governments of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

The Civic Education program is a clear Administration priority, and has been recognized by the USA Freedom Corps as a critical part of the Administration's efforts to foster a national culture of citizenship and responsibility.

#### BROADER SUPPORT THROUGH NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

In addition to these two programs focused specifically on American history and civic education, the No Child Left Behind Act—President Bush's signature education reform legislation which last year reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA)—provides significant support for improved teaching and learning of both American history and civics and government.

For example, the legislation defines both history and civics and government as core academic subjects. This is important because the new law requires all teachers of core academic subjects to be highly qualified by the end of the 2005-2006 school year, and the definition of "highly qualified" includes demonstrated subject area competence in each of the academic subjects in which the teacher teaches.

The reauthorized ESEA also permits States to use State Assessment formula grant funds to pay for standards and assessments in history and civics and government, once they have developed the reading and math assessments required by the new law. Other State formula grant programs provide considerable resources to help States and school districts ensure that all teachers are highly qualified. These programs include \$11.7 billion in Title I Grants to Local Educational Agencies, \$2.9 billion for Improving Teacher Quality State Grants, and \$385 million in State Grants for Innovative Programs.

#### CONCLUSION

The Teaching American History program and the Civic Education program reflect the strong emphasis the Department of Education places on restoring these two disciplines to their rightful place in the education of every American child. Together with the broader support provided through the No Child Left Behind Act that may be used to improve teaching and learning in these two essential subjects, as well as other initiatives such as

those at the NEH and the “Our Documents” project at the National Archives, I believe we are on the right course to achieve this goal.

I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have.