

Social Studies in the Era of No Child Left Behind

A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies

"A primary object...should be the education of our youth in the science of government. In a republic, what species of knowledge can be equally important? And what duty more pressing...than...communicating it to those who are to be the future guardians of the liberties of the country."

--George Washington

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) is increasingly alarmed by the erosion of the importance of social studies in the United States. This erosion, in large part, is a consequence of the implementation of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). Since the introduction of NCLB, there has been a steady reduction in the amount of time spent in the teaching of social studies, with the most profound decline noticed in the elementary grades.¹ In addition, anecdotal information indicates that many American children are receiving little or no formal education in the core social studies disciplines: civics, economics, geography, and history. That such a situation has evolved is untenable in a nation that prides itself on its history, its system of government and its place as a leader in the global community.

By requiring states to measure student achievement in language arts and mathematics and tying school performance reports and financial incentives to testing results, NCLB resulted in the diversion of both funding and class-time away from social studies and other non-tested subjects. The phrase "if it isn't tested, it isn't taught" resonates in the American educational community, with significant implications for educational practices and outcomes.

When NCLB was initially crafted, the social studies community was divided. Some social studies educators were concerned that student achievement could not be fairly measured by standardized tests, especially when there are no agreed upon national standards for social studies education. Further, such social studies educators recognized that fair and meaningful assessment of social studies standards and goals cannot be achieved solely through the administration of multiple-choice and short answer examinations. Other social studies educators, however, were disappointed to learn that social studies was not given a status equal to that of language arts and mathematics by the crafters of NCLB. They feared that the exclusion of social studies would lead to a diminution in the relative importance of social studies in American school systems. Events have proven both groups correct. Despite their initial differences, both groups of social studies educators are united by a common denominator?their belief that an education in social studies is essential to civic competence and the maintenance and enhancement of a free and democratic society.

The National Council for the Social Studies believes that social studies is a core subject in American schools on an equal footing with reading, writing, mathematics and the sciences. It is the official position of the NCSS, therefore, that the federal government should enact changes to the NCLB legislation to include core social studies disciplines. Both NCLB and existing assessment provisions of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) should be rewritten so that student performance data may be disaggregated in such a manner that all states can be compared to one another and to a national profile in the vital disciplines of history, civics, geography and economics.