



October 23, 2017

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Room 6W231
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos:

The National Coalition for History (NCH) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Secretary of Education's proposed supplemental priorities and definitions for discretionary grant programs. NCH is a consortium of over 50 organizations that advocates on federal legislative and regulatory issues. The coalition is made up of diverse groups representing historians, archivists, teachers, students, political scientists, museum professionals, genealogists and other stakeholders. Numerous NCH members are national organizations with missions that focus on the improvement of K-12 history education.

Proposed Priority 4 is entitled "Fostering Knowledge and Promoting the Development of Skills that Prepare Students to be Informed, Thoughtful and Productive Individuals and Citizens." The notice recommends that to reach these goals students need, "knowledge of civics, financial literacy, and problem solving and employability skills (such as critical thinking, interpersonal skills, or organization skills)."

While the proposal recommends a greater emphasis in civics, it unfortunately does not mention history. Knowledge of history complements civic learning in creating an informed and engaged citizenry and is essential to the successful implementation of proposed Priority 4. We urge explicitly adding the term "history" under Priority 4(a) so that it reads "fostering knowledge of the common rights and responsibilities of American citizenship and civic participation such as through *[history and]* civics education. . ." To make it consistent, the word "history" should also be added in the background section between civics and financial literacy.

Listed below are the reasons that history should be included as a priority:

1. The Department's Office of Innovation and Improvement currently manages two grant programs that pair history and civics: American History and Civics National Activities Grants and Presidential and Congressional Academies for American History and Civics. Section 2233(a) of "The Every Student Succeeds Act" (PL 114-95) states the purpose of the History and Civics National Activities grants, "is to promote new and existing evidence-based strategies to encourage innovative American history, civics and government, and

geography instruction, learning strategies and professional development activities and programs for teachers, principals, or other school leaders, particularly such instruction, strategies, activities, and programs that benefit low-income students and underserved populations.”¹ Congressional intent is clear that the two subjects are of equal importance to a well-rounded education for K-12 students. Leaving history out of Priority 4 runs counter to the statute that created the grants.

2. The scores in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) U.S. history assessment² unfortunately mirror the lack of significant progress cited in the NAEP tests for civics proficiency. Since 1994, the first year of the NAEP U.S. history assessment, the average score for eighth-graders has increased by only 8 points, 259-267. There was no significant change in the average score compared to 2010, the previous assessment year. In 2014, only eighteen percent of eighth-graders performed at or above the *Proficient* level in U.S. history. By comparison, twenty-nine percent of students tested performed at the *Below Basic* level. Students in the 75th percentile were still below the proficient level. There were no significant differences in scores for students at any of the five percentile levels compared with 2010. These disappointing findings echo those cited for the underperforming student scores in civics and financial literacy and merit additional emphasis in funding.
3. Priority 4 cites the need for “employability skills (such as critical thinking, interpersonal skills and organizational skills).” Historical thinking requires the development by students of the ability to collect, organize, analyze, contextualize, and synthesize data into a cogent position that is supportable by evidence.
4. In developing the core concepts of the discipline, the American Historical Association (AHA) views historical perspective as central to active citizenship. According to the AHA, history students can, “Apply historical knowledge and historical thinking to contemporary issues and develop positions that reflect deliberation, cooperation, and diverse perspectives.”³

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment. The National Coalition for History and our member organizations look forward to working with the Department to ensure history and civics education once again play a vital role in providing our nation’s students with a well-rounded education. Please contact Lee White (lwhite@historycoalition.org) with questions or comments.

Sincerely,



Lee White
Executive Director
National Coalition for History

¹ <https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114publ95.pdf>

² https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/hgc_2014/#history/scores

³ <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/tuning-the-history-discipline/2016-history-discipline-core>