



# Los Angeles County Office of Education

Leading Educators ■ Supporting Students ■ Serving Communities

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The Commission on No Child Left Behind  
One Dupont Circle, Suite 700  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Dear Commissioners:

The No Child Left Behind Act, approved by Congress and the President, has undertaken the laudable task of improving student achievement and closing the achievement gap between high-performing and under-performing students in K-12 public education.

The Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) is also dedicated to this goal. LACOE uses a variety of service delivery systems to eliminate the educational barriers associated with poverty and racial divisiveness in education, enabling students to exceed state and national standards. These services include universal quality, early childhood education, effective data driven programs for all students, and state of the art technical assistance. We are a premier provider of integrated, educational programs and services from birth to adulthood in a richly diverse and multicultural global environment.

LACOE provides programs and services for teachers, administrators, parents, schools, and the 81 school districts in Los Angeles County — the nation's most populous county with nearly 1.7 million students.

The No Child Left Behind Act has demonstrated enormous impact in aligning instruction and state standards, and stimulating 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 71 percent of the nation's 15,000 school districts have reduced instructional time in a number of subject areas to allow for more instructional time for reading and mathematics, the subjects tested for use in NCLB reporting. According to the report, instructional time for History, Geography, and Civics has been cut by 33%, followed by Science at 29%; Visual and Performing Arts at 22%; Physical Education at 14%; other subjects, 17%.

According to a recent article published by the New York Times, "Schools from Vermont to California are increasing — in some cases tripling — the class time that low-proficiency students spend on reading and math, mainly because the federal law, signed in 2002, requires annual exams only in those subjects and punishes schools that fall short of rising benchmarks. The changes appear to principally affect schools and students who test below grade level. The intense focus on the two basic skills is a sea of change in American instructional practice, with many schools that once offered rich curriculums now systematically trimming courses like social studies, science and art."



We believe this narrowing of the curriculum is contrary to the intent of NCLB. Reading is a core skill vital to continued learning. History, Geography, Civics, Science, and other subject areas cannot be understood without the ability to read. Using reading to acquire knowledge is also the vital step to acquiring the vocabulary needed to score well on the standardized tests used to measure progress as required by NCLB.

NCLB must 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 adequately prepare both teachers and young people to participate effectively as citizens.

Public schools were created in America to prepare the young to be educated, responsible, participating citizens. In the nineteenth century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, high levels of civic participation were demonstrated by American youth. In the last 30-40 years, civic engagement has decreased dramatically. Trust in government has declined. Interest in public affairs has fallen. The age group with the lowest voter turnout is 18-25. 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. These include instruction in government, history, law and democracy and opportunities to "practice democracy" through simulations of democratic processes and procedures, participation in school governance, service-learning, and discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events.

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. As Co-Chair of the California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, along with Gary Hart, former California Secretary of Education, and David Gordon, Superintendent of Sacramento County Office of Education, 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. Information about other noteworthy accomplishments including state legislation, board of education resolutions, and a resource directory can be found at the Campaign web site, [www.cms-ca.org](http://www.cms-ca.org).

However, to effectively implement the Carnegie recommendations in California classrooms throughout the state, 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. They need ongoing professional development, and most importantly they need an appropriate amount of instructional time to teach this important area of the curriculum.

Needless to say, teachers of Science, Health and Physical Education, and the Visual and Performing Arts also require the same attention to curriculum materials, professional development and instructional minutes.

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 of reading and mathematics undermines the intent of the educational process by failing to provide the vital next step after learning to read, *reading to learn*.

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. NCLB must not narrow the curriculum and our students' knowledge, it should stimulate the expansion of knowledge at every step in our children's schooling.

I am grateful for the opportunity to share our views and provide feedback about the No Child Left Behind Act. This exercise in democracy does not go unnoticed and I look forward to the opportunity to discuss these matters further.

Sincerely,



Darline P. Robles, Ph.D.  
Superintendent

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