

**Testimony before the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service**  
**Creating an Expectation of Service Hearing: Civic Education and Service in Schools**

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**Annie Hsiao, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Discretionary Grants and Support Services in  
the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, US Department of Education**

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*Introduction*

- Good morning, my name is Annie Hsiao; I am Deputy Assistant Secretary for Discretionary Grants and Support Services in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education and I am pleased to be here today on behalf of the Department.
- I commend the Commission on its mission to incorporate meaningful civic instruction and service learning opportunities into the educational experience at all levels.
- Our country's founders understood the importance of American history and civics to the success of our young nation. John Adams instructed, "You will ever remember that all the end of study is to make you a good man and a useful citizen."
- George Washington said, "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?"

*Overview of the Department's support for civic education*

- We, too, at the Department of Education, recognize the importance of civic education. Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, in 2017 remarks to the Madison Fellows Summer Institute, noted that "Civic education is not just an elective – it is essential for the health of our democracy. That means we must address the current and alarming lack of basic knowledge about our system of government."
- Secretary DeVos underscored the importance of developing students into engaged citizens, saying, "Education is necessary to equip citizens with the basic knowledge of our history, our institutions of government, and our political processes. Without that basic knowledge, there is little hope that the students of today will be engaged citizens tomorrow."
- Unfortunately, statistics about the state of civics education illustrate just how challenging the situation is.
- In 2018, according to the annual Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey, just 32% of Americans were able to correctly name all three branches of government.
- Only 23% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders performed at or above the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress civics exam.
- According to the American Council on Trustees and Alumni, only 17% of college graduates knew the source of the phrase, "Government of the people, by the people, for the people."

- The Department of Education has historically, and does to this day, support civic education through grant programs designed to enhance the quality of American history and civics education.
- From 2001 through 2010, the Department awarded a total of \$1 billion to local school districts through the Teaching American History grant program. This investment allowed school districts from every State – in partnership with scholars from universities, museums, history and humanities organizations – to provide content-rich professional development to K-12 teachers.
- Organizations – including the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the National Council for History Education, and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History – have worked as partners on Teaching American History grants. They have brought teachers together for intensive summer seminars as well as in-services throughout the school year to develop their expertise and bring the subject alive for students in the classroom.
- Institutions of higher education also served as key grant partners on the grants. History and government scholars worked alongside K-12 teachers during TAH workshops. The university faculty were trainers and mentors, but they also engaged these teachers as professional colleagues—something that these teachers said they had not experienced in countless other in-services and workshops during their careers. Several universities, as a result of their positive experiences with TAH, reformed their history and education courses to better align the coursework to the needs of the teachers (and students) in the K-12 schools.
- Ulster Board of Cooperative Educational Services (Ulster BOCES), a 2010 TAH grantee, partnered with several organizations including the State University of New York at New Paltz, the New York Historical Society and the FDR Presidential Library to provide professional development to History teachers in the Mid-Hudson Valley. Over a five year period from 2010-2015, these partners provided training at summer institutes and also provided teachers with primary source American history materials, lesson plans, and learning materials for use in their classrooms.
- Local evaluators observed that Teaching American History-trained teachers made increased use of primary source documents, document-based questions, and other tools that enhanced the study of history and improved student engagement.
- Case studies from some grants indicated that students taught by Teaching American History-trained teachers entered Advanced Placement history and government courses in greater numbers.
- In addition to providing grants to local school districts, Teaching American History funding also allowed the Department to use resources for national leadership activities. Through such funding the Department, through a contract to George Mason University, established a National History Education Clearinghouse. The clearinghouse is a rich collection of resources for K-12 teachers that provides access to history content, teaching strategies, resources, and research. The Clearinghouse builds on and disseminates the valuable lessons learned by more than 1,000 Teaching American History projects.
- Under the authorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act, the Department now administers two grant programs that address history and civics education: the American

History and Civics Academies program and the American History and Civics National Activities program.

- Through the Academies program, universities and other organizations work in partnership with local school districts, particularly high-need districts. They provide two to six-week intensive academy experiences for teachers called “Presidential Academies,” and they offer companion academies for high school students called “Congressional Academies.” Participants in these academies work with history and government scholars and are immersed in the study of American constitutional history and principles.
- I would like to highlight the great work being accomplished by one of our grantees, the Center for Civic Education. The Center is using grant funds to provide workshops that immerse teachers and high school students in the study of constitutional history and principles.
- History comes to life as teachers and students participate in field trips to National Park Service sites including Gettysburg National Military Park and Fort McHenry to instill an appreciation for civic engagement. The Center is developing a series of 8 online videos and 4 webinars on constitutional history that will help extend the teachers’ professional development and can also benefit students and the general public.
- The National Activities program is similar to the Teaching American History program, in that grant recipients provide a wide array of professional development to K-12 teachers in American history, civics, and geography.
- I would like to highlight the work the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History is doing through its “A More Perfect Union” project. Gilder Lehrman is providing intensive professional development to over 250 teachers to increase content knowledge and provide new and innovative pedagogical resources and strategies for these teachers to bring back to their classrooms. Teachers in the participating school districts are introducing students to local historic sites and landmarks to help foster an appreciation for their communities and cultivate an appreciation for historic preservation and civic responsibility. In fact, one of the exciting work products coming out of the grant is a history calendar, created by the students in Humboldt County, California, that depicts historic sites in their local area.

### *Closing*

- In closing, the Department has done significant work in supporting teachers with the training and tools they need to engage students more effectively in the study of American history, civics, and geography.
- On a personal note, I am a daughter of immigrants who both came to America because they saw America as a place where values like equality, freedom, democracy, and opportunity matter. My mother and her family left everything they knew and had in Laos, when the country was falling to communism and some of my relatives risked their very lives to come here. Why? Because they knew that America stood for freedom, for justice, and was a symbol of hope and opportunity. She instilled in me a love of and respect for this country by giving me books about Abraham Lincoln and George Washington at a young age. She didn’t know it at the time, but she was my first American history and civics teacher. And I am so thankful for her and for so many other countless teachers who have helped inspire a commitment to local and national service.

- Several years ago, I worked at the National Endowment for the Humanities, and I will never forget joining a trip with the First Lady, Laura Bush to visit Edna Karr High School in New Orleans, Louisiana, after Hurricane Katrina to highlight a program called “Picturing America,” which taught American history, through American art.
- She said, “America is defined by its trials as much as by its triumphs,” as she pointed to Dorothea Lange's haunting *Migrant Mother* photograph of a woman struggling to feed her family during the Great Depression. The nameless *Migrant Mother*, with her face, creased with deep lines from fear and distress, humanized the Great Depression, the economic downturn that caused one in four Americans to be unemployed. She pointed out how many of the boys and girls that grew up during this time went on to play a major role in World War II, and have been called “the greatest generation” for their great sacrifices.
- The suffering that those young people went through defined them and the character of the nation. Rather than becoming cynical or self-protective after suffering enormous loss, the “greatest generation” decided to answer the call to serve. The students in that classroom that day, were survivors of great loss and were still in the midst of recovering from Hurricane Katrina. And they said they could relate to how that generation must have felt, but more than that, you saw in their eyes and on their faces the comfort that came from knowing that someone else had been there before them, and had not only survived, but went on to do great things in service to others.
- When we study American history and civics, we not only learn about the heroic endurance of individuals but of our ideals. The United States has always been more than a mere address or a geographic location. It is, in its essence, an idea. And our nation has never been united by common ties of blood, race, or religion, but by our devotion to these shared ideas, first set forth by our Founders and now carried forward by us.
- Again, I thank you for inviting me to participate in today’s hearing, and I look forward to further discussion of this important issue.