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November 29, 2012

The Honorable Arne Duncan  
United States Department of Education  
400 Maryland Ave., S.W.  
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the U.S. Department of Education's Road Map for civic learning, "Advancing Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy." ASCD applauds the department's call to action to reinvigorate civic learning and engagement for students; families; communities; and leaders in education, business, labor, philanthropy, and government. A comprehensive approach to learning recognizes that successful young people are intellectually active, emotionally and physically healthy, motivated, civically inspired, and ready for the world beyond their own borders.

Launched in 2007, ASCD's Whole Child Initiative is an effort to change the conversation about education from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the long-term success of each child. Civic learning is a crucial component of a whole child approach to education and is particularly important in ensuring that students gain an understanding of their opportunities in and obligations to their school, their community, and the nation. Although the mantle of citizenship may be acquired by birth or naturalization, becoming an active U.S. citizen must be learned. Our schools are uniquely equipped to provide this learning as well as the opportunities for practicing civic discourse and engagement in a safe and supportive environment.

Since the founding of the U.S. public school system, students have been taught about the ideals that set our country apart and upon which it is built. Implementation of policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act have forced schools to devote more time to math and language arts instruction and assessment, which means diminished time spent on subjects such as civics. The result is that too many students graduate ignorant of our governmental structure, its historical significance, and their role in ensuring a workable



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republic. We look forward to working with the Department of Education to reverse this trend.

There are numerous benefits of school-based civic learning to individuals, schools, and society, including

- Giving students a voice, particularly those in disadvantaged populations, because they will have greater understanding of the importance of being informed and participating in civic discourse;
- Instilling 21st century competencies, including communication, collaboration, and appreciation of diversity in opinions;
- Improving school climate through engagement, thereby reducing school dropout rates;
- Understanding the need for and increasing participation in community service; and
- Increasing the accountability of elected officials, because an informed citizenry will and should question and check public decisions.

According to the Civic Mission of Schools' [Guardian of Democracy Report \(PDF\)](#), "Students who receive effective civic learning are:

- More likely to vote and discuss politics at home
- Four times more likely to volunteer and work on community issues
- More confident in their ability to speak publicly and communicate with their elected representatives." (p.6)

The Department of Education asks for feedback on four of its nine objectives to support civic learning. ASCD offers feedback on three of these objectives:

1. **How to best convene and catalyze the education community to increase and enhance high-quality civic learning and engagement opportunities.** ASCD proposes the following:
  - a. Prioritizing civic learning in federal policy to encourage states, districts, and schools to
    - i. Provide classroom instruction in history, government, economics, law, and democracy;
    - ii. Encourage discussion of current events and controversial issues;



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- iii. Ensure that students have the opportunity to participate in service-learning programs;
    - iv. Offer outside-the-classroom opportunities for civic engagement;
    - v. Encourage students' participation in school governance; and
    - vi. Provide opportunities for students to participate in simulations of the democratic process.
  - b. Ensuring civic learning is recognized as a core academic subject within the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.
  - c. Increasing opportunities for ongoing teacher professional development in civics.
  - d. Encouraging states to adopt high standards in civic learning, with student assessments based on these standards that include portfolios and group projects.
  - e. Supporting civic learning through federal competitive grant opportunities to fund innovation; research; and dissemination of model programs and best practices, especially for low-income schools and disadvantaged students.
  - f. Creating a school award program that best models civic learning achievement by students and schools.
  - g. Requiring more frequent administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in civics and history.
  - h. Encouraging civic learning in colleges and universities.
2. **How to best identify civic learning and engagement indicators to measure student outcomes and encourage further research to learn more about appropriate and effective program design.** ASCD proposes aligning student outcomes with the [National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies](#), as well as the [National Standards for Civics and Government](#). These standards documents provide schools with a solid framework for instruction, assessment, and teacher professional development, which will help inform research on effective programming.
3. **How to best highlight and promote civic learning and engagement opportunities for students, families, and other stakeholders as collaborators and problem solvers in education.** ASCD proposes the following:



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- a. Requiring schools, districts, and communities to measure and report student and family engagement activities and outcomes (e.g., participation in after-school programming, community-based learning opportunities, and extracurricular activities; volunteer rates; parent involvement data).
- b. Encouraging schools and districts to establish course-credit systems that award students' credit for participating in service learning, internships, and apprenticeships.
- c. Recognizing and rewarding schools and communities that offer students rich and relevant real-world learning experiences.

ASCD appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education's call to action to reinvigorate civic learning and engagement and stands ready to partner with you to further this important work. We look forward to working with you and offer the expertise of our membership and the resources of our association toward that goal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'David Griffith'. The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

David A. Griffith  
Public Policy Director