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STATEMENT ON THE NATION'S REPORT CARD:
NAEP 2010 Civics

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The NAEP Civics Report Card issued this morning has mixed results. There is a strong upward trend at grade 4, particularly at the *Basic* achievement level and among lower-scoring students. That is encouraging news, and it is part of a pattern in other NAEP assessments. These also show significant gains over the past decade in mathematics and reading in our elementary schools. As measured by NAEP, elementary education in the United States is making clear progress, and civics is part of that upward trend.

In eighth grade, however, student achievement in civics has been flat since the current NAEP Civics assessment was first given in 1998. And at grade 12, the news is even more discouraging. Civics achievement has slipped since 2006 from levels that already were disappointing. Unfortunately, these results too are part of a broader picture—stagnation or mixed results in other NAEP subjects at both eighth and 12th grades.

The gains in civics achievement at fourth grade have been substantial, and they have been made over a decade in which student enrollment has become substantially more diverse. All racial/ethnic groups have made gains since 1998, and, overall, 77 percent of fourth graders now reach the *Basic* achievement level in civics and 27 percent reach *Proficient*. Those at the *Basic* level show “some understanding of what government is and what it does” and how national holidays and symbols, such as the flag and the Statue of Liberty, reflect American values. At the *Proficient* level students should have “a good understanding of what the American government does and of the reasons why it is not allowed to act in certain ways.”

At 12th grade, of course, the expectations on the NAEP Civics assessment are more demanding, as they certainly ought to be. Unfortunately, a smaller proportion of students can meet them. Sixty-four percent scored at or above the *Basic* achievement level, and just 24 percent reached *Proficient* even though almost 40 percent of 12th graders were already 18 years old and eligible to vote when the NAEP Civics assessment was given in the winter of 2010. The results were equally disappointing for male and female students, and over the past few years, the average score for female students at 12th grade has dropped slightly so it now is just as mediocre as that of males.

The gap between White and Hispanic 12th graders has narrowed—a positive change—as the average score for Hispanics has risen significantly since 1998 while the performance of Whites has stayed about the same. Unfortunately, the performance of Black students has stalled as well, and the achievement gap between Whites and Blacks has remained unacceptably large. In terms of achievement levels, 30 percent of White 12th graders have reached the *Proficient* level in civics and 29 percent of Asian/ Pacific Islanders. But for other racial/ethnic groups, the proportion reaching 12th grade *Proficient* is much less—16 percent of American Indians, 13 percent of Hispanics, and just 8 percent of Blacks.

Does it matter what students know about the U.S. Constitution and about the rule of law, about how the American government is organized and how it functions? These are some of the topics in the NAEP Civics assessment, and they do matter—not only because our 12th graders are voters or soon will be, but also because as citizens in a democracy they will all share in the responsibility for deciding how well our government functions and how well our society deals with the problems we confront.

Many of the issues are complex, and involve trade-offs and conflicts. To reach the *Proficient* level on the 12th grade Civics assessment students should have a good understanding of our constitutional system and how it evolved. But they also should be able to identify issues where values and principles are in conflict—between majority rule and minority rights, between liberty and equality. They should be able to take positions on these issues, and to defend them with evidence and logic. It is here that many students fall short, and, unfortunately, many adults too.

One major theme of the NAEP Civics assessment is that students should understand the importance of citizen participation at the local, state and national levels and should be able to explain how citizens can work to influence public policy and make sure it works well. I believe in this deeply, and have tried to do my part, as a Girl Scout leader and a local PTA president, as a member of the Maryland State Board of Education several years ago and now as a member of this Governing Board. I have approached all these positions from the viewpoint of my most important role, that of a parent.

Recently, I accepted the chairmanship of a new Ad Hoc Committee of the Board on Parent Engagement. Over the next year it plans to develop recommendations on the steps the Board and the NAEP program can take—by itself or by supporting the efforts of others—to make NAEP data more readily available to parents and to increase parent awareness about the need to raise student achievement and to reduce achievement gaps. The NAEP Civics Report Card is another illustration of that need in an area which bears directly on the health of our democracy.

There have been gains in our elementary schools. We should applaud them, and hope these fourth graders are part of a pipeline of students destined to become engaged citizens in our democracy. But, as it stands now, too many of the 12th graders in American schools fall short of the civics knowledge and understandings they need for full participation as citizens and voters. The NAEP Civics Report Card is a wake-up call that much more must be done to prepare them.

We are a diverse and unified American society. Our citizens are free to work individually and collectively to shape public policy. But, as our fourth President, James Madison, put it so well: “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

Thank you very much.