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**STATEMENT ON THE NATION'S REPORT CARD:
*NAEP 2010 U.S. History – Grades 4, 8, and 12***

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I have been advocating for better history curricula and instruction for the past 25 years. So when I first saw the upward movement in some of the NAEP scores in U.S. history, I felt excited and gratified.

But when I took a closer look at the patterns and the sample questions, I saw less reason for joy.

The improvement in fourth-grade U.S. history is concentrated among the lowest-scoring groups, which is good news. But I suspect that the gains reflect an improvement in reading skills, not an improvement in knowledge of history. Fewer than half of the students at this grade level have had more than two hours a week devoted to social studies, which may or may not mean history. More likely, they have learned about a few iconic figures and major holidays.

When fourth-grade students were asked to identify a photograph of Abraham Lincoln and give two reasons why he was important in American history, only 9 percent were able to do so. I suspect that many children recognized Lincoln but were not too sure about why he was important.

When children in this grade were asked the meaning of President Kennedy's famous line, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," about one-half correctly responded that it meant you should "use your skills to help the United States." I am willing to bet that many more than half the fourth-graders have no idea who President Kennedy was, but about half were able to deduce the correct response by being able to read the question and the possible answers. Similarly, 43 percent of fourth graders correctly answered a multiple-choice question about a quote

from Aung San Suu Kyi, the human rights leader in Myanmar. This probably happened not because the students had any idea who she was, but because the answer was contained in the question and the students could read well enough to figure it out.

It should concern us all that twelfth-graders' knowledge of history has barely changed since 2001. This is found across almost every group that was sampled, including low-performing students, high-performing students, and those in the middle ranges. White high school seniors saw a score gain from 2001 to 2006, but not from 2006 to 2010. Among every other demographic group, average scores have been virtually flat over the past nine years.

History should inform our political decision-making and intelligence. In 2010, seniors were asked about the Brown decision of 1954, which is very likely the most important decision made by the U.S Supreme Court in the past seven decades. Students were given an excerpt including the phrase, "We conclude that in the field of public education separate but equal has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." NAEP asked, "What social problem was *Brown v. Board of Education* supposed to correct?" The answer was right in front of them, yet only 2 percent of the students in the sample were able to give a complete answer, and another 26 percent offered only a partial answer. The rest gave an inappropriate response or didn't answer. This is alarming. Bear in mind that virtually every student takes American history, usually in the eleventh grade.

It's worth noting that of the seven school subjects tested by NAEP, history has the smallest proportion of students who score *Proficient* or above in the most recent results available. Among twelfth graders, for example, only 12 percent reach *Proficient* in U.S. history, compared to 21 percent in science, 24 percent in both civics and writing, 25 percent in geography, 26 percent in mathematics, and 38 percent in reading. As the report explains, *Proficient* on NAEP means "solid academic performance ... [that] demonstrates competency over challenging subject matter." It expresses the Governing Board's judgment of what students should know and be able to do in a particular subject and grade, not the current weak averages for grade level performance.

Why does history matter? All of these students will be voters in a year, and almost 40 percent were already eligible to vote when they took the assessment. They will be making decisions in the voting booth that influence our lives. They should be well informed and capable of weighing the contending claims of candidates, especially when the candidates rest their arguments on historical precedent.

The results of this assessment tell us that we as a nation must pay more attention to the teaching of U.S. history. We should make sure that there is time for it in the school day, that those who teach it have a strong history education, that there is time for students to write research papers and to use primary source documents and documentaries, and that schools have the resources they need to engage students in this important study.