

An Open Letter to President Barack Obama from C. Frederick Risinger

Dear President Obama,

I am sending this letter by both e-mail and by regular mail. I am writing about an issue related to K-12 education that I believe to be crucial to both the educational system, and, more importantly, for the health and future of the United States democracy.

First let me introduce myself. I am long-time precinct committee chair in Monroe County, Indiana. Originally, I was thinking of a Biden/Bayh ticket in 2008, but changed my mind after reading one of your speeches I received in a mailing. I supported you strongly throughout the campaign...at least enough to have a “Member of President Obama’s Honorary Kitchen Cabinet” magnet on my refrigerator.

I taught high school history, government, and social studies and coached for nearly 15 year in a suburban Chicago high school, where our program was praised in a front-page article in the *New York Times*. I came to Indiana University in 1973 on what I thought was a one-year program. I stayed. I retired from IU in 2004 after 31 years of service in the School of Education working with both undergraduate and graduate students seeking to be social studies teachers. During that time, I served as president of the National Social Studies Supervisors’ Association, a board member and President of the National Council for the Social Studies, and co-authored five U.S. history textbooks and one K-6 social studies textbook series.

I am writing to express my concerns about the increasing emphasis on mathematics and science education along with the continued emphasis on reading/language arts while a fourth major curriculum area—social studies—is being marginalized by lack of funding and reduced interest on the part of the U.S. Department of Education, state departments of education, and the movement toward national common educational standards. The Association for Curriculum Development has characterized the current No Child Left Behind Act as having a “singular focus on student performance in reading and math” and the current Elementary and Secondary Education blueprint and FY11 budget request, which “continue to prioritize reading and math over other subjects.” You recently

gave a speech calling for increased emphasis on educating more science and mathematics teachers.

Mr. President, where is citizenship education? I have never seen such political animosity; inability to work together, name-calling, and extreme political polarization...even in the 1960’s during the anti-Vietnam War era. I have never seen such political apathy among our student-age population—an apathy that extends into adults of all ages. I have never seen such unwillingness to enter into discussions of issues and agree on policies that are in the best interests of all Americans. I believe that a major factor in this deterioration of what I term as pluralistic citizenship behavior is the marginalization of social studies/citizenship education in the pre-K-12 curriculum throughout the nation.

A recent academic study of time spent on various subject areas in K-6 classrooms found that nearly 32% of students were receiving only 25 minutes of social studies/citizenship education per week. In many states, including my home, Indiana, statewide tests are given in reading/language arts, science, and mathematics...but not in social studies/citizenship education. If you’re a classroom teachers, it becomes clear in which curriculum area(s) you are going to spend your time—those that are tested.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) identifies the role of social studies teachers as: “Social studies educators teach students the content knowledge, intellectual skills, and civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy. The mission of National Council for the Social Studies is to provide leadership, service, and support for all social studies educators.” Mr. President, this nation needs a renewed and enhanced emphasis on social studies/citizenship education.

NCSS, along with the Civic Mission for the Schools recently convened a meeting of national organizations in civics, economics, geography, and history to discuss working on Common State Standards for Social Studies. NCSS is also working with the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers on these issues.

Mr. President, when I heard your recent speech focusing exclusively on encouraging science and mathematics educa-

tion and teacher recruitment, I knew that I had to write this letter. I understand the significance of continued progress in science and mathematics for the U.S. economy and world leadership. However, if we do not teach our young citizens about history, geography, economics, civics and other social studies areas, our nation will lose its national bearings...it will lose its soul.

I know that you will understand the issues and their significance for the nation. What can be done? I have a recommendation. I believe you should appoint a Presidential Commission on Citizenship Education to thoroughly review the role of citizenship education in America's schools and to make recommendations for its improvement and returning it to one of the core curriculum areas in preK-12 education. I absolutely and sincerely believe that this is critical for the future of the United States form of democracy.

I would recommend two distinguished U.S. citizens to be co-chairs of this Commission. One is former Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and the other is former Congressman Lee Hamilton. (Both, coincidentally, are currently co-chairing the Civic Mission of the Schools organization.) I know that, since her retirement from the Supreme Court, Justice O'Connor has been extremely active in a variety of groups that want to bring about a resurgence of citizenship education in America's schools. And, former Congressman Lee Hamilton, director of the Center for Congress, came to Hanover, a little town on the Ohio River in southern Indiana in the early-1980's, to serve as a judge for the first Indiana History Day when I directed the program. He has worked and spoken eloquently for improved citizenship education throughout his long career. These two co-chairs would provide the visibility and influence this Commission would need to succeed.

I apologize for the length of this letter. I know that you have, in many ways, the weight of the world on your shoulders.

But, from reading your autobiography, I also know that you understand the importance of citizenship education for the future of this nation...and the world. Thank you for your time and your consideration. My sincere best wishes for you, your family, our nation, and the world.

Respectfully,

—C. Frederick Risinger, Emeritus
Indiana University, Bloomington

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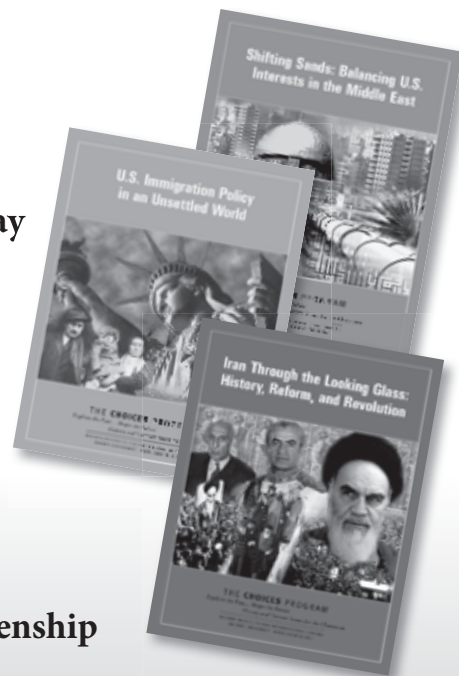
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