



Human
Rights
Educators
USA

A national network dedicated to building a culture of human rights.

Docket ID ED-2021-OESE-0033

PUBLIC COMMENT FROM Human Rights Educators USA (HREUSA) Steering Committee, through

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As a national network dedicated to advancing human rights education within the US, HREUSA (www.hreusa.org) supports the spirit and intent of the Department of Education's Proposed Priorities for American History and Civics Education Programs, and suggests revisions to include explicit acknowledgement of the central role of human rights education in American History and Civics generally, and in the proposed priorities specifically.

Human Rights Education (HRE) is grounded in internationally-recognized principles and standards that are woven into the fabric of American history and life, from the Declaration of Independence's invocation of "inalienable rights" to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s recognition in 1967 that the Black Liberation Movement had "moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights, an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society. (quoted at <https://kairoscenter.org/quotes-from-rev-dr-kings-last-years/>" from Report to SCLC Staff, May, 1967). At this moment, these "basic questions" can and must include, how we prepare young people for democratic citizenship and engage in the shared responsibility of forging a more perfect union.

This understanding of the relationship between Civic education and HRE underlies the Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, which holds that "Education for democratic citizenship and human rights education are closely interrelated and mutually supportive. (Sec. 1, Art. 3)" The CoE Charter also recognizes the relationship between preparing all students for democratic civic participation and the creation of human rights friendly environments within school communities that "support the promotion of social cohesion and intercultural dialogue and the valuing of diversity and equality, including gender equality.." through the development of knowledge, personal and social skills and understanding that "...build mutual respect for human dignity and shared values." (Sec. 2, Art. 5.f), a purpose which mirrors the expectation of this ED proposed policy, that projects funded pursuant to the policy should "incorporate[] teaching and learning practices that ..(e) contribute to inclusive, supportive, and identity-safe learning environments. (ED-2021-OESE-0033, Priority 1.e)." Thus, specific incorporation of reference to HRE in the proposed policy will guide educators to a wealth of resources both for democratic civics education and for socio-emotional resources for practicing respectful, inclusive teaching and learning.

Human rights education is also a US responsibility under international law, and the proposed priorities are a welcome advance in meeting those. Specifically, the US is party to the

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International Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ratified with the consent of the Senate in 1994), which is a core human rights treaty at the heart of the international system. Article 7 obliges countries

“to adopt immediate and effective measures, particularly in the fields of teaching, education, culture and information, with a view to combating prejudices which lead to racial discrimination and to promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations and racial or ethnical groups, as well as to propagating the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and this Convention.”

To ensure the Department’s proposed Priority 1 contributes to fulfilling this obligation, the priorities should reference the CERD obligation as background, as well as make express reference to the parameters of Article 7 in the priority’s enumerated rule.

Finally, the National Council for the Social Studies has recognized HRE as “a necessity for social and civic learning,” because of the emphasis on empowering students “with the knowledge, values and attitudes, skills, and dispositions to be engaged, reflective citizens and responsible, aware members of the world community.” As such, we believe these priorities should include reference not only to the need to confront the difficult history of “systemic marginalization, biases, inequities, and discriminatory policy and practice,” but also the histories of solidarity, social mobilization, civic action and engagement that provide models and inspiration for young people to make change in their communities and the world. An effective civic education in grades K-12 must include human rights education so that Abraham Lincoln’s vision in the Gettysburg Address of a government “of the people, by the people and for the people” can truly be realized.

It cannot be overemphasized how much is at stake as educators in the United States work to rebuild a sense of common civic purpose in our society that continues to experience polarization. To once more quote the analysis of Martin Luther King, Jr.,

[I]f we don't get this thing straightened out here in America, I'm worried about the rest of the world. God has allowed more people of different races and national backgrounds to live in this nation than any nation on the face of the earth. So, America is the world in miniature, and the world is America writ large. And, if we can't get it straight here, the world is in trouble." (quoted in T.F. Jackson, From Civil Rights to Human Rights, 2007, p.328.

We urge The U.S. Department of Education to specifically employ the tools of human rights education, to, indeed, “get this thing straightened out here in America.”