

## EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY: THE CALIFORNIA CAMPAIGN

Educating for Democracy: California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools represents a group of concerned California individuals and organizations seeking to enlist support of education, business, law, veterans, labor, parents, and service groups around the state to promote civic education in California.

Convened by Constitutional Rights Foundation, a Los Angeles-based, non-profit, non-partisan educational organization, and funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Annenberg Foundation, Los Angeles Office, the goal of the coalition is to strengthen civic education in California's public schools consistent with the recommendations in the Civic Mission of Schools report.

Joining Constitutional Rights Foundation in this effort is the Center for Civic Education, which is also a member of the Alliance for Representative Democracy, a national partnership, involving the Congress of the United States, working to strengthen representative democracy in America. The two organizations will be cooperating in all phases of the project, including the creation of the project steering committee and will jointly publicize project activities through their program networks. In California, for over 40 years, Constitutional Rights Foundation and the Center for Civic Education have each provided programs and materials and been represented on statewide committees and commissions promoting the civic mission of schools.

Specifically, the California Campaign will:

- Conduct research to determine the effect of current educational practices in California on the development of student civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes and their capacity for effective civic engagement.
- Work with schools to assess their current civic education practices and improve them by developing and implementing promising practices and providing teacher preparation and resources.
- Build public support to make effective civic education a greater priority in California public schools and adopt policies to implement more effective practices.

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Endorse the recommendations of the Civic Missions of Schools and their implementation in California.
- Join the California Campaign and lend your support to our efforts to implement policies to make civic education a core subject in California schools.
- Work with your local schools and communities to assure that every student has the opportunity for a quality civic education.

Working together we can achieve civic renewal in California. By doing so, we can "secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity."

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### EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY

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# EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY

California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools



A project of Constitutional Rights Foundation  
in collaboration with the Center for Civic Education  
and the Alliance for Representative Democracy



## THE CHALLENGE

For over 200 years, American democracy has served as a model for the world. Conceived as a bold experiment by our founders, it has survived wars and economic crises.

Central to the founding generation's vision for American democracy was that government requires the consent of the governed and that the people must be active and responsible participants in their own governance. Abraham Lincoln brilliantly captured this idea at Gettysburg when he said ours is a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Today, this vision is threatened and so is the health of our democracy.

Today, many eligible voters do not vote and increasing numbers of Americans avoid political participation in the institutions of government. Even participation in the voluntary associations of civic life—religious congregations and service clubs—is in decline. Fewer and fewer stay informed about critical issues facing their communities and the nation.

Young people reflect these trends. Young people between 18 and 25 vote at lower rates than any other age group. Polls show that the vast majority distrust political institutions and processes. Studies demonstrate that an overwhelming majority of students lack a proficient understanding of civics, U.S. history, or our constitutional heritage.

Without an involved and educated citizenry, our democracy is in danger. If we lose the consent of the governed and the will to sustain our democracy, can we hope to address the serious domestic and foreign challenges facing our nation now and in the years to come?

These trends are disturbing to policy makers and citizens alike. In 2003, the president of the United States called for new initiatives to promote a greater commitment of youth in the civic life of America through volunteerism and engagement in political and civic institutions. He has been joined in this call by teachers, scholars, jurists, civic and business leaders, and elected officials at all levels of government.

## CIVIC EDUCATION IS THE KEY

Since its beginning, a primary mission of American public education has been the civic education of young people. Our founders believed that informed, committed, and participating citizens are the life's blood of our democratic system. They also believed that education was the best method for preparing each new generation of patriots. Even today, 40 state constitutions acknowledge the importance of civic literacy among citizens and 13 make the promotion of good citizenship, democracy, and free government the central purpose of their educational system.

Yet, civic education is no longer a priority in our overburdened public schools. In California, history and civics have all but disappeared in many elementary schools as educators concentrate on teaching reading and math. At the high school level, few students even have social studies in the ninth grade. Entrance requirements to the University of California and the Cal State systems call for only two years of history and government while requiring four years of English literature and three years of math.

Research indicates that there is also a problem about how civics and government are sometimes taught. Government courses rank lowest in student interest. For some people, a stereotypical "civics class" reminds them of dull lectures and rote learning of facts about the federal legislative process with little attention paid to larger public-policy issues, underlying democratic principles, or the methods of active civic participation. In fact, studies show that students are often less willing to participate in political life after taking a government course than before.

## THE CIVIC MISSION OF SCHOOLS

In 2001, the Carnegie Foundation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) convened a distinguished group of educators, researchers, and scholars to study the problem of civic education in America and make recommendations for its improvement. After extensive deliberations, the panel identified four goals of civic education and recommended six promising approaches to improve it. These practices are consistent with much that both Constitutional Rights Foundation and the Center for Civic Education have long advocated as basic to effective preparation for civic engagement.

### *Goals of Civic Education*

Civic education should help young people acquire and learn to use knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will prepare them to be **competent and responsible** citizens throughout their lives. Citizens:

1. Are informed and thoughtful; have a grasp and appreciation of history and the fundamental processes of American democracy; have an understanding and awareness of public and community issues; and have the ability to obtain information, think critically, and enter into dialogue among others with different perspectives.
2. Participate in their communities through membership in or contributions to organizations working to address an array of cultural, social, political, and religious interests and beliefs.
3. Act politically by having the skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to accomplish public purposes, such as group problem solving, public speaking, petitioning and protesting, and voting.
4. Have moral and civic virtues such as concern for the rights and welfare of others, social responsibility, tolerance and respect, and belief in the capacity to make a difference.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Research shows that schools can help develop competent and responsible citizens when they:

1. **Provide formal instruction in government, history, law, and democracy.** This in itself increases civic knowledge, but schools should avoid teaching only rote facts and dry procedures, which are unlikely to benefit students and may actually alienate them from political participation.
2. **Incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.** This practice increases civic knowledge and interest in politics, improves critical thinking and communication skills, and translates into more interest in discussing public affairs outside of school. Discussions should be well moderated to encourage a variety of viewpoints.
3. **Give students the opportunity to apply what they learn through community service linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.** While service programs are now common in many schools, ones able to develop engaged citizens are those that are linked to what students are studying, consciously pursue civic outcomes, and allow students to engage in meaningful work on serious public issues consistent with laws that require schools to be nonpartisan.
4. **Offer extracurricular activities that involve students in their schools and communities.** Long-term studies show that students who participate in such activities in high school remain more civically engaged, even decades later, than students who do not.
5. **Encourage student participation in school governance.** Studies show that student participation in the management of their own classroom and schools builds their civic skills and attitudes.
6. **Encourage student participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.** Recent evidence indicates that simulations of voting, trials, legislative processes, and diplomacy in schools can lead to heightened political knowledge and interest.