

# EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY

## California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools

### **The California Survey of Civic Education**

by

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*The qualifications for self-government are not innate. They are the result of habit and long training.*

Thomas Jefferson

### **DEMOCRACY'S HEALTH AT RISK**

Throughout the history of our country's public education system, a primary mission has been the civic education of young people to prepare them to be informed, committed, and participatory citizens. In recent years, this central purpose has received increasingly less attention. Yet, the need for civic education is as great as ever.

On the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in civics, only a quarter of high school students were judged to be proficient and only 4 percent scored at the advanced level. A third of the students failed to demonstrate even a basic level of understanding. In the NAEP for U.S. history, only 11 percent scored at the proficient or advanced levels. (Civic Mission of Schools, 2003)

Similarly, a recent national survey of secondary students conducted by CIRCLE found that 57 percent were disengaged from civic life and found that only 5 percent of entering college freshmen regularly followed public affairs. (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002)

Unfortunately, as the civic knowledge and commitments of young people has declined, so has the emphasis on civic education in America's schools. Although, the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* mentions social studies as a core subject area, its current testing in reading and math has put pressure on school districts to give emphasis to these subjects often to the detriment of civics and history.

In short, many of today's young people lack the basic knowledge and skills to effectively participate as citizens, and they often lack the dispositions to do so. Great international and domestic challenges face the United States today and in the future. Only with strong democratic institutions, wise leadership, and a thorough and intelligent debate on crucial issues can these challenges be met. All of them require the participation of an enlightened citizenry. Without this, the health of our democracy is truly at risk.

## THE CALIFORNIA SURVEY OF CIVIC EDUCATION

In 2004, the California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools was convened by Constitutional Rights Foundation in collaboration with the Center for Civic Education and a statewide coalition of nonprofit educational, business, governmental, and civic groups. Funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Annenberg Foundation, and the W. R. Hearst Foundation, the goals of the campaign are to strengthen civic education throughout the state by working with schools, building public support, and conducting research to determine the effects of current educational practices.

To advance these goals, we constructed the California Survey of Civic Education. The survey assesses the prevalence and impact of civic education practices in California high schools on graduating seniors throughout the state.

The survey examines students' civic knowledge, skills, and commitments. It also identifies opportunities schools have provided to promote these outcomes and the impact of these opportunities. The study establishes a baseline for comparison with national findings and facilitates identification of particularly effective civic education practices, especially those research-based contained in the Carnegie/CIRCLE report titled *The Civic Mission of the Schools* (2003).

In 2005, the project administered a survey to some 2,366 graduating seniors who had completed the 12th grade U.S. government course mandated by the California History/Social Science Framework and Standards. Participating schools were selected from various geographic areas to provide a portrait of current conditions representing a range of factors including student race and ethnicity and academic performance. The survey concentrated on high school seniors to get a clearer sense of student civic capacities and commitments as they reach voting age and complete their experience in public schools.

### CALIFORNIA'S EMERGING CITIZENS

What level of civic knowledge and attitudes toward civic engagement do California's young people possess as they begin to assume the rights and responsibilities of adult citizenship?

Among the major findings of the study are:

- **California high school seniors care about those in need and are willing to help.** Eighty-six percent of the students surveyed agreed with the statement, "I try to help when I see people in need." Only 5 percent disagreed. Also, 84 percent of all high school seniors reported volunteering while in high school.
- **Students are not well prepared for effective citizenship.** Although a high percentage of students reported that they intended to vote, they were less likely to say they were informed enough to vote. Their confidence declined further when asked about specific issues: Iraq, the economy, taxes, education, health care, and the like. Similarly, one half could not correctly identify the function of the Supreme Court, and 33 percent could not correctly identify even one of California's two senators from a list of options. While these results are consistent with national assessments, they are especially disturbing considering that the 12th graders surveyed had taken a course in U.S government during their senior year.

California students also show limited commitment or capacity to become politically involved. For example, less than half (only 47 percent) of high school seniors agreed that, “Being actively involved in state and local issues is my responsibility.”

- **California high school students express very little trust in government.** Only 33 percent of the high school seniors surveyed agreed with the statement, “I trust the people in the government to do what is right for the country.” Only 28 percent agreed with the statement, “I think that people in government care about what people like me and my family need.”

- **Volunteering does not translate to other forms of civic and political life.** While those surveyed were willing to volunteer or do charity work, they did not engage in more formal aspects of civic and political life. Sixty-four percent of all students said they volunteered more than once during their four years in high school, but only 9 percent could say the same thing when asked how often they had worked to change a policy or law in their community, the state, or the nation. Even when asked how often they had worked to change a school policy or school rule, only 12 percent responded “more than once” – with 67 percent saying not at all.

These results are consistent with national findings demonstrating that rates of volunteering are up dramatically from previous decades. Unfortunately, in California at least, these experiences have not led to greater commitments to civic and political participation.

### **CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

To determine the effect of various school and classroom practices on the development of civic competencies, we asked students about what happened in their high schools and classrooms. We then analyzed the relationship of these opportunities to various outcomes. (Regressions were performed to assess the relationship between the civic outcomes and classroom/school opportunities described in the report. In addition to including all relevant classroom/school opportunities in these regressions, we also included various demographic controls (race/ethnicity, gender, mothers’ education, student GPA, and post-secondary educational plans). All of the relationships described in this section were found to be statistically significant  $p < .05$ . Readers interested in the specific regression results can contact Joseph Kahne at [jkahne@mills.edu](mailto:jkahne@mills.edu) or may write or call him at Mills College.)

What we found was quite heartening. Numerous opportunities in classrooms, schools, and in after-school settings were related to desired civic outcomes. We found that:

- **Classroom content and practices matter.** A curricular emphasis on the importance of civic engagement and relevant content regarding civic and political structures and functions help students develop the skills and knowledge they need for effective citizenship. In addition, as students develop knowledge and interest in issues, their commitment to participate grows. For example, 52 percent of students in government classes that frequently emphasized why it is important to be informed and to get involved in political issues agreed that they should be actively involved in state and local issues. In classes where students did not have this opportunity, only 35 percent agreed they should be involved in this way.

Similarly, discussing current events is important – particularly when such discussions are tied to students’ interests. In classes where students frequently talked about current events, 61 percent reported they were interested in politics compared to only 32 percent in classes with no discussion of current events.

Curriculum that gives students the chance to find and analyze different perspectives on the same topic or issue was also very valuable. Students who had the chance to do this a lot were more likely to endorse the idea that everyone should participate in the political process (68 percent) than those who did not report ever having this opportunity (43 percent).

In addition to what is studied, how it is studied also matters. Indeed, 36 percent of students who frequently had opportunities in classes to take part in role-plays or simulations modeling democratic processes reported being involved in politics, compared to only 13 percent of students who had not had these classroom opportunities.

One particularly effective instructional strategy was having students work on projects with students from different backgrounds. Among students who had opportunities to do this a lot, 54 percent agreed that being involved in state and local issues was their responsibility, compared to only 29 percent of students who did not report having his opportunity. These experiences also promoted their commitment to vote, their political knowledge, and their interest in politics more generally.

- **Student voice in the school matters.** Students who reported having a chance to voice their opinions about school policies were more committed to participate than those who said they had few opportunities to voice their opinions about school policies.

- **Multiple opportunities matter.** No one experience can provide all that is needed. And while some aspects of a schools’ curriculum, such as the high school government course, clearly have the potential to significantly support multiple goals, it’s also clear that educating for democracy should not rely on a one-semester course taken during the senior year. Rather, opportunities to educate for democracy exist throughout the high school curriculum and they build upon each other. A school-wide commitment is therefore necessary. (Figure 1)

The promising approaches we’ve identified occur in California schools, but not often enough. When we asked students how often they’d had the kinds of opportunities that supported the development of committed, informed, and effective citizens, the most common answer was “a little.” This finding is consistent with the recent International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement study (IEA), which found that 90 percent of U.S. students said that that they most commonly spent time reading textbooks and doing worksheets. (Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, & Hahn, 2001)

## UNEQUAL ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES

It is inevitable that students will have different experiences depending on the teachers they happen to have for particular subjects. Unfortunately, some systemic inequalities also appear to exist, particularly with respect to students’ academic trajectories. Seniors who did not expect to take part in

any form of post-secondary education reported significantly fewer opportunities than those with post-secondary plans. This may well mean that students in higher track classes get more opportunities to develop civic knowledge, skills, and commitments than those in lower track classrooms. For example, 25 percent of students who were planning to attend a four-year college reported that they had frequently been part of simulations in their classrooms; only 17 percent of students who planned on vocational education after high school could say the same thing. Only 10 percent of those with no post-secondary plans reported frequently having such opportunities in their classrooms.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Are California's public schools fulfilling their civic mission? Do graduating seniors have the knowledge, skills, and commitments they will need to be informed and engaged participants in our democracy?

The California Survey of Civic Education can't fully answer these questions, but the portrait it paints of students and schools is worthy of attention. The survey provides indicators of students' civic and political commitments, of their capacities, and of the prevalence of related school-based opportunities. It also gives us an evidence base from which to assess the efficacy of varied educational strategies. Specifically, analysis of findings indicate:

- Young people have a strong **desire to help** their communities as evidenced by their volunteerism and commitment to charity work.
- Young people express **less commitment to forms of civic and political engagement** that relate to the policies and practices of schools and government.
- Despite taking a course in U.S. government in their senior year, students' **knowledge** of structures and functions of government and of current political issues is modest, at best.
- The survey also indicates that **there is much schools can do**. Our survey indicated that the school and classroom practices emphasized in *The Civic Mission of Schools* report and related strategies can significantly improve students' civic capacities and commitments.
- **Access to school-based opportunities** to develop civic commitments and capacities are uneven. Moreover, those intending to go to four-year colleges have significantly more access to these opportunities than others.

The findings of the survey prompt and support three specific recommendations for further action:

**1) All California schools should be encouraged to assess their current civic education practices and identify ways to strengthen them.** The survey demonstrates that the research-based promising approaches contained in Carnegie/CIRCLE's *The Civic Mission of Schools* report do strengthen civic outcomes.

**2) A state-funded teacher professional development program for civic education should be**

**developed and implemented.** The program should support teachers and schools throughout California in incorporating the research-based promising approaches described in the Carnegie/CIRCLE report.

**3) Further research should be conducted.** We need to better define the effects of various promising approaches on desired civic education outcomes, distinguish dispositions and effects as they relate to various groups in our diverse state, and provide educational leaders and policy makers with the ability to make evidence-based decisions regarding policy and practice. In addition, research should be conducted to determine teacher and administrator perspectives on these practices. We are also currently conducting a longitudinal follow up to this survey so that we can assess how dispositions that develop in high school are related to behaviors among young adults.

The California Civic Survey, as well as other reports and studies can be found in the Research section on the California Campaigns website ([www.cms-ca.org](http://www.cms-ca.org)).

## REFERENCES

Baldi, S., Perie, M., Skidmore, D., Greenberg, E. & Hahn, C. (2001). *What democracy means to ninth graders: U.S. results from the International IEA Civic Education Study*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Keeter, S., Zukin, C., Andolina, M., & Jenkins, K. (2002). *The civic and political health of the nation: A generational portrait*. Retrieved October 24, 2005, from the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement Website:  
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*The Civic Mission of Schools*. (2003). New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. Retrieved October 24, 2005 from the Civic Mission of Schools Website:  
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Figure 1

| <b>Classroom Practices Associated with Desired Civic Outcomes</b> |  | <b>Commitment to Participate</b> | <b>Intend to Vote</b> | <b>Informed to Vote</b> | <b>Civic Skills</b> | <b>Social &amp; Political Trust</b> | <b>Political Knowledge</b> | <b>Political Interest</b> |
|---|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>CMS Promising Approaches</b>                                   | Instruction in Govt, History, Law          | *                                | *                     | *                       |                     |                                     | *                          |                           |
|   | Discussion of Current Events               |                                  |                       |                         | *                   |                                     |                            | *                         |
|   | Service Learning                           |                                  |                       |                         | *                   |                                     |                            |                           |
|   | Extra-Curricular Activities                | *                                | *                     |                         | *                   |                                     |                            |                           |
|   | Student Voice in School/Class Governance   | *                                |                       |                         |                     | *                                   |                            |                           |
|   | Simulations/Interactive Methods            |                                  |                       | *                       | *                   |                                     |                            | *                         |
| <b>Other Practices</b>  | Discuss Politics with Parents              | *                                | *                     | *                       | *                   | *                                   | *                          | *                         |
|   | Parents are Active in Community/Politics   | *                                |                       |                         | *                   | *                                   |                            |                           |
|   | Analyzing Different Perspectives on Issues | *                                | *                     |                         | *                   |                                     |                            | *                         |
|   | Exposure to Role Models                    | *                                |                       |                         |                     | *                                   |                            | *                         |
|   | Exposure to Diversity                      | *                                | *                     | *                       |                     |                                     |                            | *                         |
|   | Opportunities to Practice Civic Skills     |                                  |                       |                         | *                   |                                     |                            | *                         |