

The Civic Mission of our Nation's Schools
by
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“Democracy needs to be reborn in each generation and education is its mid-wife”
--John Dewey, leading 20th Century Education Theorist

**OUR NATION IS CONFRONTED BY TWIN PROBLEMS:
DISENGAGEMENT AND LACK OF CIVIC EDUCATION**

Americans value and cherish the ideals of democracy. Yet many reports and surveys have confirmed that far too many citizens do not understand the basic workings of our government or are cynical and distrustful of our political institutions and processes. A library full of books, studies and reports such as Robert Putnam's *“Bowling Alone,”* and the research institute CIRCLE and Carnegie Corporation's *Civic Mission of Schools* report (www.civicyouth.org/research) highlight the decline of civic engagement in the United States. The question is where to start to reverse the dangerous decline of civic participation and engagement. Many leading educators and policymakers believe that restoring the civic mission of schools in this nation is the most effective method of positively impacting civic engagement.

Research proves that effective civic education policies and practice dramatically affects citizens' civic knowledge and dispositions. While many institutions such as the family, the church, and social institutions help forge a person's civic character and propensity to participate, civic education in the schools is the one common experience American citizens have that helps them acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives. This is the **historic civic mission of schools**. A mission considered so important by those who established a free universal system of public education in the United States that they termed civic education as one of the central purposes of education. Unfortunately, as the indicators of civic engagement are dropping so too is the amount of time and attention devoted to civic education in our schools.

The results of a decline in civic education are shown by the 1999 release of the most reliable measure available on how well our schools are preparing student's for citizenship, the 'National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Report Card in Civics,' which revealed that just 25% of America's schoolchildren could achieve a proficient score in their knowledge of civics and government. The results of the 2006 NAEP Report on Civics are expected to be the same or worse. During the past several decades, education policy and practice appear to have focused more and more upon developing the “worker” at the expense of the “citizen.” Although every state notes the need for civic education, the subject is seldom given sustained and systematic attention in the K-12 curriculum. For many students, their only explicit exposure to civic education is a one-semester course at the secondary level, which is too little and too late. Research reveals that most states and districts give lip service to the importance of civic education, but in reality, state policies and school practices often fail to provide students the civic education they deserve.

The failure of students do well in the NAEP study and other studies is a direct consequence of:

- inadequate policy support or inadequate implementation of policy when it exists;
- inadequate curricular requirements;
- inadequate teacher preparation; and
- distorting effects on the entire curricula of a focus on testing in math, science, and reading.

Unfortunately study after study shows that our schools are devoting less and less attention to preparing students for competent citizenship. Overwhelmed by a school reform movement that emphasizes a few subjects over all others, our schools have been forced to cut the time and resources devoted to civic education. The overwhelming majority of what passes for state standards and curricular frameworks for civic education are overly complex and contain far more material than a teacher can cover in the time currently allotted to the subject. The old maxim “if it isn’t tested it isn’t taught” is quite true; civic education is assessed in far too few schools which has grave consequences for the development of students’ civic competencies. These are all reasons why civic education is disappearing from our schools at the same time it is desperately needed to combat disengagement, cynicism and apathy.

THE DECLINE OF CIVIC LEARNING IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS

In recent years, civic learning has been increasingly pushed aside. Until the 1960s, three courses in civics and government were common in American high schools, and two of them ("civics" and "problems of democracy") explored the role of citizens and encouraged students to discuss current issues. Today those courses are very rare. What remains is a course on "American government" that usually spends little time on how people can – and why they should – participate as citizens.

This remaining course is usually offered in the 12th grade, which is both too little and too late. And, it completely misses the large number of students who drop out before their senior year and who are arguably in the greatest need of understanding their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

In the elementary grades civic learning used to be woven through the curriculum. Today, slightly more than a third of teachers report covering civic education-related subjects on a regular basis. (1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress in Civics, administered by the National Assessment Governing Board)

Although all states but one have adopted Standards of Learning in civics and government or Standards that address civic education in other subjects, a 2003 study by the Albert Shanker Institute found that the majority of what passes for state standards in the subject are overly broad, concentrate too much on the historical aspects of civic learning rather than the relevance of citizenship and civic participation to students lives, and are unrealistic for coverage in the amount of time a teacher is allowed to spend on the subject. (*Educating Democracy: State Standards to Ensure a Civic Core*, by Paul Gangon, released by the Albert Shanker Institute in 2003)

In a 2005 study of school district policies, the New Jersey Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools found that only 39% of districts had a required course in civic education. The same survey found that just 35% of districts offered in-service training opportunities for teachers in civic learning. In a 2005 study of Arizona school districts, the Arizona Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools found that 53% of teachers had never been given in-service professional development in civic learning. The same survey found that 64% of responding districts were just “somewhat satisfied” that their civic education programs were creating informed active and engaged citizens; only 17% of districts reported being “highly satisfied” that their programs were having the desired result.

IF IT ISN'T TESTED, IT ISN'T TAUGHT

Arguably, the greatest factors undermining high quality civic education in schools today are the requirements of state assessments and the Federal ‘No Child Left Behind’ Act (NCLB) which largely ignore the civic mission of schools in favor of concentrating on Math and Reading.

In a 2006 study by the Center for Education Policy (CEP) of 299 representative school districts in all fifty states, 71% of the surveyed districts reported they have reduced instructional time in at least one other subject to make more time for reading and math. In some districts struggling to meet the requirements of the NCLB Act, they have had to double the amount of time allotted for reading and math, sometimes cutting out other subjects all together. In the CEP study some districts reported the extra time allotted to math and reading was essential to help low achieving students catch up in these subjects. A majority of districts however reported negative effects, such as shortchanging students from learning important subjects, squelching creativity in teaching and learning, or diminishing activities that might keep students interested in schools.

A NATION-WIDE MOVEMENT TO RESTORE THE CIVIC MISSION OF SCHOOLS

The National Conference of State Legislatures, the Center for Civic Education and the Center on Congress at Indiana University have joined together, acting as the Alliance for Representative Democracy, to spearhead a national movement to restore the civic mission of our schools and strengthen civic education policies and practice in every state. .

Leading state officials, legislators, and education leaders from throughout the country gathered in Washington, DC September 20-22, 2003 for the First Congressional Conference on Civic Education. The Conference was sponsored by the Alliance for Representative Democracy. The Majority and Minority Leaders of the United States Senate as well as the Speaker and Democratic Leader of the United States House of Representatives serve as hosts for the event.

The conference was the first of five planned annual Congressional Conferences on Civic Education (2003 – 2007) funded by the U.S. Department of Education by an act of Congress. The Second Congressional Conference was held December 4-6, 2004; the Third Congressional Conference took place September 24-26, 2005, and The Fourth convened November 18-20, 2006.

More than 400 delegates from all 50 states and the District of Columbia participated in each of the first three conferences, at which they began mapping out strategies to increase the teaching of civics in their states and change state education requirements and practices. The typical state

delegation is composed of a member of each chamber of the state legislature, the chief state school officer or a senior officer of the state Department of Education, a member of the state Board of Education, representatives from education and civic engagement organizations as well as influential individuals from the private sector.

The goals of the Congressional Conferences are to bring together teams of policymakers and educators from each state for a thorough examination of the state of civic engagement in America and the critical role civic education plays in fostering civic engagement, and to inform the delegates on what the experts in the field have to say concerning good civic education policies and practice. The most important goal of the Conference is to motivate each state delegation to form a team with a plan and commitment to taking action in that state to strengthen and improve civic education policies, requirements, and programming.

Independent evaluation, participant feedback and state level action prove the goals of the Conferences are being met. After attending the first four Congressional Conferences the state delegations progress in the vital work of changing policy and raising professional and public interest in the issue through a variety of ways.

State Activities:

- Nearly every state delegation has formed an inclusive active state coalition, with membership that includes the delegation, other policymakers, representatives of education and civic engagement organizations, front-line administrators and teachers, representatives of higher education, students, and interested members of the media and concerned citizens.
- Twenty-six delegations have held state summits, conferences, joint legislative sessions and symposiums on civic education modeled on the Congressional Conference. These state summits have generally included small group discussion on the current state of and desired state of civic education in the state and agreement on ambitious plans of action to restore the civic mission of schools. Ten other state delegations have similar events planned.
- Twenty-five states have conducted thorough surveys of the current policies affecting civic education as well as existing district and state practice. These benchmark surveys, which have often reached down to the district level, have identified deficiencies the state coalitions have decided to correct through advocacy to policymakers at the district and state level. These surveys have also been used to publish web based and hard copy directories of state resources in civic education. An additional 10 states have surveys underway.
- Arizona, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Nebraska, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont and Virginia have created officially sanctioned state Commissions on Civic Education or Civic Literacy.
- Legislators attending the Congressional Conferences, and other legislators supportive of civic education, from 34 states introduced legislation to strengthen civic education during the 2003-2006 legislative sessions. Twenty-four pieces of legislation have passed into law. These measures have included directives on specific course requirements, funding measures, creation of official state commissions on civic education and legislation calling for increased attention to civic education.

- Policymakers who attended the Conferences have taken action within their authority. For example, Idaho State Superintendent of Public Instruction Marilyn Howard added civic education to the subjects assessed in the state's annual school building accreditation report. The New York State School Boards Association worked with the New York delegation to develop a model policy for the civic mission of schools for all New York school districts. West Virginia School Board Member Priscilla Haden (coordinator of the West Virginia Delegation) worked with the West Virginia School Board to implement a civic education course requirement for high school graduation and to re-draft the State's civic education Standards of Learning.

A **Conference Statement** was endorsed by an overwhelming majority of the delegates at the First Conference and has been subsequently reaffirmed. The statement contains four principles to guide states in strengthening civic education. Key points in the conference statement are:

- Civic knowledge and engagement are essential to maintaining our representative democracy. While many institutions help to develop Americans' civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, schools must have the capacity to prepare students for engaged citizenship. Civic education should be a central purpose of education essential to the well being of representative democracy.
- Civic education should be seen as a core subject. Well-defined state standards and curricular requirements are necessary to ensure that civic education is taught effectively at each grade level from kindergarten through 12th grade. Strengthening the civic mission of schools must be a shared responsibility of the public and private sectors at the community, local, state, and national levels.
- Policies that support quality teacher education and professional development are important to ensure effective classroom instruction and raise student achievement.
- Well-designed classroom programs that foster an understanding of fundamental constitutional principles through methods such as service learning, discussion of current events, or simulations of democratic processes and procedures are essential to civic education.

CALIFORNIA'S ROLE

California is playing a leading role in this national effort. The California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools has formed a dynamic coalition comprised of education stakeholders, policymakers and concerned citizens. The California Campaign is lead by the Constitutional Rights Foundation and the Center for Civic Education. The many significant activities of the California effort include passage of a bill by the California Legislature which calls on each board of education in the state to develop a plan to insure high quality civic education in all grades K-12; and the publication of a well-received survey of high school students measuring the graduating seniors' knowledge of and attitudes towards civic engagement. This survey, conducted by Dr. Joseph Kahne of Mills College, has been replicated in several states across the nation.

For more information:

To learn more about each state's activities to restore the civic mission of schools please visit **www.representativedemocracy.org** or contact the Alliance for Representative Democracy on (202) 861-8800 or via email at **mcconnell@civiced.org**.