

The civic mission of **SCHOOLS**

The goal of preparing young people to become thoughtful and informed citizens who participate in their communities is often not a priority for the nation's overburdened public schools. We can change that.

For more than 200 years, American democracy has served as a model for the world. Central to the founders' vision was that government requires the consent of the governed that the people must be active and responsible participants in their own governance.

Today, this vision is threatened and so is the health of our democracy. Many eligible voters do not vote, and increasing numbers of Americans avoid political participation. Participation in the voluntary associations of civic life is in decline. Fewer people stay informed about critical issues facing their state and the nation.

Young people reflect these trends. Those 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 find that most students lack a proficient understanding of civics, U.S. history or our Constitution.

Civic education is the key

A primary mission of American public schools has been the civic education of young people. Yet, civic education is

no longer a priority in our overburdened public schools. In California, while we do have a K-12 history/social science framework and course standards, 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 system 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 with how civics and government are sometimes taught. Government courses often rank lowest in student interest. A stereotypical "civics" class can consist of dull lectures and rote learning of facts with little attention paid to larger public policy issues, underlying democratic principles, or the methods of

By Marshall Croddy

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 problems of civic education. After extensive deliberations, the panel's report identified four goals of civic education and recommended six promising approaches to improve it.

The goals of civic education are to help prepare young people to become citizens who are informed and thoughtful; participate in their communities; act politically and have moral and civic virtues.

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

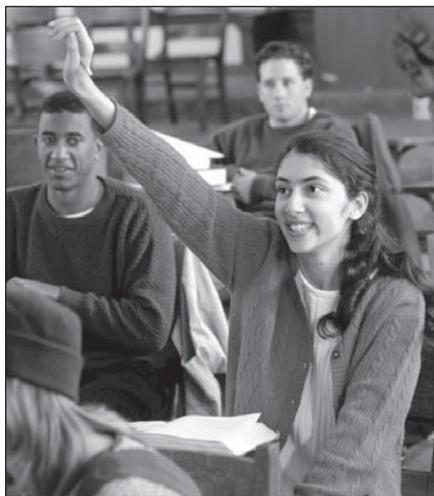
- Provide formal instruction in government, history, law and democracy.
- Incorporate discussion of current local, national and international issues and events into the classroom.
- Have students apply what they learn through community service linked to the curriculum and classroom instruction.
- Offer extracurricular activities that involve students in their schools and communities.
- Encourage student participation in school governance.
- Encourage student participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.

The California Campaign

Educating for Democracy: The California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools represents concerned California individuals and organizations seeking to enlist support of government, education, business, law, veteran, labor, parent and service groups to renew civic education in California.

Currently, 73 organizations and institutions are represented. Convened by Constitutional Rights Foundation in

collaboration with the Center for Civic Education (non-profit, non-partisan educational organizations), and the Alliance for Representative Democracy (a national partnership involving the Congress of the United States), the effort is funded by The Carnegie Corporation of New York; the Annenberg Foundation, Los Angeles Office; and the William Randolph Hearst Foundation.



The campaign is co-chaired by Gary K. Hart, Institute for Education Reform, CSU Sacramento; David W. Gordon, superintendent, Sacramento County Office of Education; and Darline P. Robles, superintendent, Los Angeles County Office of Education.

The campaign's goal is to strengthen civic education in California with the recommendations in the Civic Mission of Schools report. Specifically, the campaign is:

- Conducting 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.
- Working with 10 school districts to assess their current civic education practices and improve them by developing and implementing promising practices and providing teacher preparation and resources. Districts include Elk Grove, Eureka, Kern, Los Angeles, Montebello, Pleasanton, Sacramento, San Mateo, Shasta and West Contra Costa.
- Building public support to make ef-

fective civic education a greater priority in California public schools and to adopt policies to implement more effective practices.

Over the last year, much has been accomplished in furthering these goals. Here are some highlights.

Concurrent Resolution

Early on, the campaign crafted and circulated a draft legislative resolution to urge California public schools toward a renewal of civic education. The resolution prompted several local educational agencies to draft and pass their own versions directing greater attention to this important matter. The final language of the resolution was approved at the campaign's coalition meeting in February 2005. The campaign then worked with Assemblyman Kevin McCarthy, Republican minority leader, who introduced it.

The resolution "urges the State Board of Education and all local school governing bodies to examine current practice and develop plans to increase and broaden emphasis on principles and practices of democracy." In the session just concluded, Assembly Concurrent Resolution No. 30 was approved by both houses of the California Legislature and signed by the governor.

Survey's preliminary findings

In 2004, the campaign commissioned Professor Joseph Kahne of Mills College to construct the California Survey of Civic Education. During the 2004-2005 school year, nearly 2,400 California high school seniors took the survey to assess the prevalence and impact of civic education practices in the state. At the Sept. 20 State Summit, the campaign released preliminary findings. They include:

- Young people have a strong desire to help their communities as evidenced by their involvement as volunteers and their commitment to charity work.
- Young people express considerably less commitment to other forms of civic and political engagement that relate to the policies and practices of schools and government. Fewer than half (only 47 percent) of high school seniors agreed with the statement that "being actively

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involved in state and local issues is my responsibility.”

• 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. Students only averaged a little over 60 percent correct on the commonly used survey items designed to test civics content knowledge, a low “D” on common grading scales.

• The survey also indicates that there is much schools can do. School and class-

Access to school-based opportunities to develop civic commitments and capacities is uneven. Students intending to go to four-year colleges have significantly greater access.

room practices emphasized in the Civic Mission of Schools Report and related strategies can significantly improve students’ civic capacities and commitments.

• Yet, access to school-based opportunities to develop civic commitments and capacities is uneven. Those intending to go to four-year colleges have significantly more access to these opportunities than others.

Many of the preliminary findings of the survey correspond with national survey data and reinforce the promising approaches described in the Civic Mission of Schools report. A final survey report was expected in November.

State summit

During Constitution Week on Sept. 20, 2005, the campaign conducted a summit at the State Capitol to galvanize statewide support for civic education. It was attended by more than 175 educators, policymakers and representatives of the bench, bar, business, higher education and youth serving organizations from around the state.

Speakers included Lee H. Hamilton, co-chair of the 9/11 Commission; California Secretary of Education Alan

Bersin; State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell; California Secretary of State Bruce McPherson and California school board member Jonathan Williams. All of the speakers endorsed the need for improved civic education and offered support for the campaign. In a productive afternoon session, participants in the summit formed focus sessions to discuss key challenges facing the campaign and made recommendations about next steps.

Following the summit, a California delegation led by the campaign’s co-chairs, David Gordon, Gary Hart and Darline Robles, traveled to Washington D.C. to attend the Third Annual National Congressional Conference on Civic Education. There they met with delegations from all 50 states to discuss mutual efforts to improve civic education nationally and help set an agenda for further efforts in California.

How can you help bring civic renewal to California?

• Urge boards of local education agencies to pass a resolution endorsing the campaign and the recommendations of the Civic Mission of Schools.

• Encourage all schools to assess their current civic education practices and identify ways to strengthen them with reference to research-based practices contained in the Carnegie/CIRCLE report. Visit the campaign’s Web site, www.cms-ca.org and click on “Schools” to find all the tools you need to engage administrators, faculty, students, parents and the community in strengthening civic education.

• Join the coalition and lend your support to our efforts to implement policies to make civic education a greater priority in California schools. To join, contact either Todd Clark, executive director, Constitutional Rights Foundation, (213) 316-2103, todd@crf-usa.org, or Roy Erickson, Director of Justice Programs, Center for Civic Education, (916) 863-6614, cacoord49@aol.com. ■

Marshall Croddy is director of programs for the Constitutional Rights Foundation.