

EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY

California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools

Towards a Rebirth for Civics

by

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California's highly regarded framework of instruction for history-social science describes knowledge and cultural understanding, democratic understanding, and civic values and skills attainment and social participation as the three broad goals of history-social science in the curriculum. Even so, large numbers of our students are not well prepared for effective citizenship. In a recent survey of graduating seniors, conducted by the California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, one half of the sample could not correctly identify the function of the Supreme Court, and 33% could not correctly identify even one of California's two senators from a list of options. Less than half agreed, "Being actively involved in state and local issues is my responsibility." Especially disturbing was that these 12th graders had recently completed a course in U.S. government during their senior year.

The emphasis the framework gives to the goals of promoting student understanding and preparation for participation in our democracy is very clear. However, if you were to begin to examine the framework with its course descriptions, it would be easy to miss the point that preparation of young people for citizenship is a key reason history-social science is part of the curriculum. There are, of course, standards at nearly every grade level that deal with civic outcomes. However, there is no clearly developed civics strand that would assure that young people are prepared to participate effectively in our democracy or make informed decisions regarding civic life. Neither does California have a commitment to provide staff development for teachers to help them achieve this result.

In 2001, the Center for Civic Education was funded by the state to develop the *California Civic Education Scope & Sequence*. Developed with broad input from practitioners, the *Scope & Sequence* is keyed to the History-Social Science Framework and Standards. This publication, which has been distributed since 2003, is an outstanding guide for teachers, showing how civic education can be introduced at each grade level. It includes sample classroom applications and resources, which are both practical and specific. This scope and sequence is a great resource and could serve as the basis for a revival of civic education in our schools. However, a scope and sequence can change practice only if it is used as a guide for widespread professional development. Without that vital link, connecting the book and the teacher, this terrific guide will have little impact on how we teach.

At about the same time the *Scope & Sequence* was being developed in California, Cynthia Gibson, a senior program officer at The Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Maryland began a study of the growing disengagement of American citizens from civic life. In seeking solutions to the problem, she and her colleagues concluded that, “one of the most promising approaches to increase young people’s informed engagement is school-based civic education.” (Civic Mission of Schools, 2003)

In an effort to determine what form school based programs should take, Carnegie and CIRCLE convened the top scholars and practitioners in the field to identify effective practices for school programs. According to their report, *The Civic Mission of Schools*, this group, “representing a diversity of political views, a variety of disciplines and various approaches...disagree about some aspects of how civic education should be conducted, but nevertheless share a common vision of a richer, more comprehensive approach to civic education in the United States.”

Among a wide range of suggestions, the report recommended six research-based practices as elements of an effective civic education program. (The full report can be found at www.civicmissionofschools.org.)

The six recommendations focus on classroom practice, extra-curricular activities, and linking schools with the community. It is important to point out this range of settings for the implementation of the six practices. Too often classrooms, school life, and engagement with the community are viewed as totally separate spheres of effort rather than as a continuum where students learn to be participants in civic life. As this report makes clear, in the area of civic education, these distinctions are not only meaningless, they can limit both the vision and the impact of what an effective civic education program should include.

The six recommended practices are:

Provide formal instruction in government, history, law and democracy. The first recommendation, focusing on the content of the curriculum, urges the use of interactive and dynamic teaching methods, warning that more traditional approaches can alienate and turn students away from civic participation. For many Americans, the memory of civics class is of the teacher lecturing from a very large textbook about the brilliance of our political system, and the use of charts to illustrate “how a bill becomes a law” and the organization of our system. If local government was touched upon at all, another chart was often used showing strong and weak mayor forms of government and the city manager system. In this traditional course, issues or problems facing government were almost never the focus of attention. A more compelling approach would be the use of real issues facing democratic government to illustrate how the structures of government work to address problems and case studies describing the results of various choices by government.

Incorporate discussion of current local, national and international issues and events in the classroom. Guided discussion of current local, national and international issues and events both motivates students and encourages them to develop an understanding of multiple points-of-view. Techniques such as guided academic controversy help students develop analytical skills,

understand viewpoints other than their own, and clarify areas of agreement and disagreement. These practices, as compared to more traditional presentations of “current events,” can help develop skills needed to deal with complex civic issues that face society and every level of government.

Provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.

Connecting the classroom to the community through service learning is another key element recommended by the report. Under the leadership of a skilled teacher, students, either individually or in groups, can identify community problems of importance to them, analyze the causes and effects of the problems, conduct research on public policy affecting the problems, and design, implement, and evaluate efforts to address the problems. Service-learning opportunities of this sort can be created for students at all grade levels and can build student knowledge, skills and a sense of efficacy, all of which are important elements in helping individuals get involved in civic life.

Offer extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities.

Encouraging active involvement in campus life beyond the classroom can have strong impact on an individual’s later involvement in civic life. All students have interests that can be stimulated by clubs or in other volunteer aspects of school life. It is frequently the case that encouragement is needed to overcome shyness or anxiety regarding putting oneself forward as a participant in these activities. Schools should encourage student involvement since it can have such powerful influence on later civic participation.

Encourage student participation in school governance. Student government rarely involves large percentages of the student population. However, involvement in student government can be a strong predictor of civic engagement in later life. The use of student government to deal with the general problem of alienation from school should be considered by every school. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) has begun disseminating a program designed to broadly involve students called Raising Student Voice and Participation (RSVP). According to Rocco Marano, NASSP director of student activities and National Association of Student Councils director, “Student council was originally designed to be the practicum of civic education, RSVP will give all students a feeling of being involved and earn respect for the student council from the student body and school administration.” (NASC, 2006) RSVP also fits into the NASSP reform concepts of *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*, which stresses student personalization, collaborative leadership, service learning, civic education, and positive school culture.

Encourage students’ participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.

Simulations, another of the recommended strategies, provide students with an opportunity to learn about and put in motion various elements of the system. Mock city councils, legislative hearings, mock trials and appellate hearings, or a simulation of a state budget development process provide practical, real-life examples for students to grapple with and help them develop problem-solving and critical-thinking skills.

In an effort to ensure implementation of the recommended practices, The Carnegie Corporation, has been supporting a national civic mission of schools campaign through various

grants. In addition, sub-grants have been made to a number of states with the purpose of influencing policy changes to support an increased emphasis on civic education. Several grants have also been made to fund the implementation of curricula consistent with the six recommendations.

Also underway at the national level, and supported by funds made available through the United States Congress, The Alliance for Representative Democracy, the National Association of State Legislators, and the Center for the Study of Congress at Indiana University, under the leadership of the Center for Civic Education, have been working in all 50 states to promote a resurgence of civic education. Its work is described in another article of this issue.

In California, supported by grants from The Carnegie Corporation, The Annenberg Foundation, the William Randolph Hearst Foundation and the Skirball Foundation, a state campaign for the civic mission of schools has been underway since 2004. Under the leadership of the Constitutional Rights Foundation, in collaboration with the Center for Civic Education, and with the endorsement and involvement of nearly 100 statewide organizations and individuals, an on-going effort to effect policy and to implement the six recommended practices is now in its 3rd year.

Articles in this issue discuss what is going on nationally and the activities of the California Campaign. Included are articles on its policy agenda and research activities, a progress report on ten schools around the state working to strengthen their civic education programs, and resources for schools and classrooms.

REFERENCES

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.

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