

**What Research Tells us About the Implementation of  
Education for Democracy Materials in Classrooms:  
A Review of Stated Goals and Achieved Results**

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The making of democratic citizens is a puzzling and complicated proposition. Good citizens require knowledge of the democratic system and how it works. They have the motivation to take part in government and community that is created through the development of strong positive feelings about the values and ideals of democracy. They have acquired the skills necessary to engage as citizens. Finally, most have received what amounts to an invitation to participate, an entre to activation facilitated by awareness of and acceptance by the institutions, actors, and networks that inhabit the political realm (Schier, 2002; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995).

Numerous democracy education programs with the end goal of creating knowledgeable and engaged citizens have been integrated into the American elementary, middle, and high school curricula. These programs employ a wide range of approaches, including standard textbook instruction, mock elections (e.g., Kids Voting USA), moot court (e.g., Mentor Moot Court), simulated congressional hearings (e.g., We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution), adult role modeling (e.g. Positive Youth Development, National Conference of State Legislatures), student-to-student mentoring (e.g., Democracy in Action), service learning, internships, web games (e.g., National Student/Parent Mock Election), interactive online community-building (e.g., Taking It Global), and video programming (e.g., Global Nomads), to name but a few.<sup>i</sup> The classroom materials used are as varied as the programs themselves.

Despite the proliferation of democracy education programs, the effectiveness of particular approaches and materials is often difficult to ascertain. Program evaluations are absent, incomplete, or proprietary. Evaluations of specific democracy education materials associated

with particular programs are difficult to locate in the public realm. In addition, measures tap only limited aspects of democracy education outcomes. This limitation is likely due to the difficulty of designing items that capture complex cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral dispositions, especially using survey research, the technique that is applied most frequently. More studies address knowledge acquisition than other aspects of democracy education. To a large extent, the focus on knowledge is justified due to its pivotal position in the learning process.

Knowledge indicators are more directly linked to the curriculum, and therefore more straightforward than attitudinal and behavioral measures. Further, Comber (2003) notes that studies mostly rely on student self-reports, which can be largely inaccurate. In particular, there is a tendency to provide the civically responsible answer to items, especially those concerning civic dispositions and engagement. Finally, most studies lack appropriate controls for school quality.

Schools with stronger academic standing--greater resources, better teachers, quality curricular materials, nicer facilities, and a significant program of extracurricular activities--are likely to produce students who score higher on democracy education-related survey items (Comber, 2003).

As Campbell (2006) has demonstrated, a school's social environment--its civic climate--is strongly related to students' development of democratic orientations. Schools that provide an environment where civic practices are routine generate students who are more likely to take part in politics and community affairs. Differences between schools, including the civics curriculums they offer, are vast, and have major consequences for democracy education (Gimpel, et al., 2003).

The paucity of good studies evaluating the extent to which programs generate understanding of democracy, instill civic skills, and encourage citizen engagement inhibits our

ability to ascertain the effectiveness of civics curricula. Assembling program goals and evaluation research on myriad individual democracy education programs is far beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will provide a macro-level overview of the general goals of education for democracy that are shared by many classroom programs. I will present data from a number of major studies that speak to the issue of how well American students are learning about democratic principles and practices. I will conclude with some recommendations for improving the state of evaluation research on democracy education.

### **Goals of Education for Democracy**

A review of literature, position papers, and curricular materials reveals a general consensus about the core elements of education for democracy. Successful programs, first and foremost, convey to students knowledge about democracy, associated institutions, and political processes. They impart an understanding of democratic ideals and principles, and how they are put into practice. They convey the skills necessary for meaningful civic engagement. Finally, they draw attention to opportunities for citizen activation, and emphasize the importance of students becoming civic participants (Albert Shanker Institute, 2003; CIRCLE and the Carnegie Corporation, 2003; Patrick, 2003). Implied in these goals is a rough hierarchy of achievement. Students must first gain basic knowledge of democracy in order to progress to democratic understanding, the development of dispositions and skills, and eventually engagement.

Knowledge of democracy—what it is and how it works—is the foundational goal of education for democracy. Basic knowledge of democracy is a precursor to meaningful civic engagement. As Delli Carpini and Keeter argue, the American system is frequently

mischaracterized as requiring little of its citizens beyond the “simple” act of voting, where not all are required or expected to turn out. Rather, there are countless and varied opportunities for citizens to engage in politics and government. However, in order to participate, citizens must navigate a complicated political world replete with arcane rules and norms. Factual knowledge about government and politics is essential if citizens are to discern their real interests and take effective advantage of the opportunities afforded them (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996).

The knowledge component of democracy education encompasses a range of factual and historical information. Students must grasp the basic definition of democracy and its requirements, and comprehend how a democracy is distinct from non-democratic systems. They should develop a familiarity with the documents that form the foundation of the democratic system, especially the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and the ideals and principles they convey. They need to learn about the organizational structure and function of government, as well as about the institutions associated with political life, such as parties and interest groups, and civil society, including voluntary associations. They should know how political processes, such as elections and jury duty, work. They must develop an understanding of the ideals and values of a free society, such as equal protection under the law, human rights, and social justice (Patrick, 2003). Knowledge of the nation's history is another key component of democracy education. Students should learn about their shared political heritage, which can create a sense of belonging and citizenship identity. History can impart the idea that democracy is not easy to achieve, and must be constantly worked at in order to succeed (Albert Shanker Institute, 2003).

In addition to factual knowledge, successful programs will aid students in forming an understanding and appreciation for democracy. This goal is achieved on several levels. First,

students should develop the ability to relate abstract democratic concepts and principles to concrete situations. For example, they should know how to apply First Amendment principles that protect individual freedoms to real-world experience, such as their right to express themselves through online discussions and 'zines. Students also should be made aware of the democratic dispositions, such as civic virtue, tolerance, and civility, and to explore the consequences that result when these dispositions are compromised (Patrick, 2003). Students should be taught the nuts and bolts of civic engagement, such as how to become an informed citizen and what it takes to cast a vote in an election. Finally, students should be made aware of avenues for engagement, which includes voting and beyond. Studies have shown that citizens who receive invitations to take part in politics and community are likely to respond (Schier, 2000). It is important for students to understand that civic empowerment does not have to begin with voting, and can take many forms, including contacting officials, attending community meetings, volunteering, and even producing their own political news. Simulated and real-world civic experiences, such as working with a town council to erect a skateboard facility, can help students to understand their role in community life. Achieving these goals, in conjunction with a strong knowledge base about democracy, can provide the motivation for present and future civic engagement.

## **Research Findings**

A majority of American students have received some instruction in government and civics, often in high school, although the percentage reporting they received this type of instruction varies widely from survey to survey.<sup>ii</sup> Research into the effects of this instruction

has yielded somewhat conflicting results. Political socialization studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s mostly showed that civics classes had little influence on students in either the short or long term (Langton and Jennings, 1968; Jennings and Niemi, 1974), with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Hess and Torney, 1967). However, large survey-based studies conducted over the past two decades provide some indication that civic education programs produce students who know more about politics and government, are more inclined to see the importance of democratic engagement, and are more likely to take part in civic life. Thus, there appears to be a correlation between civics instruction and the development of political knowledge, understanding, skills, and predispositions. Students who have learned about basic constitutional principles, the structure and organization of government and institutions, and political processes demonstrate greater understanding of the political world and policy issues. They also are more likely to report that they follow the news, and that they intend to participate in politics (Niemi and Junn, 1998; Comber, 2003; Kurtz, Rosenthal, and Zukin, 2003; Torney-Purta and Barber, 2004).

We now turn to some data from major surveys of American students addressing their civic education. The first section that follows reports the findings of research into general knowledge and understanding of democracy and civic life. The second section deals with research that is focused specifically on one important aspect of American democracy—the First Amendment to the Constitution.

### *Civic Knowledge and Understanding*

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as the “nation’s report card,” provides evaluations of students’ progress in a variety of subject areas, including civics. NAEP was instituted in 1969, and makes periodic assessments in each subject area. NAEP evaluations are conducted under the auspices of the Department of Education, although an independent board sets policy and test specifications (<http://nces.ed.gov/naep3/>). The latest NAEP civics evaluation of grades 4, 8, and 12 was fielded from January to March, 2006, and results will be released in early 2007. The civics exam for which data are available was administered in 1998, and tested the knowledge of civics and government of 22,000 students nationwide.<sup>iii</sup>

In addition to students’ scores on individual survey items, NAEP provides an index that assesses students’ overall competence in civics knowledge. The achievement levels are: 1) basic—partial mastery of requisite knowledge and skills; 2) proficient—solid performance, and competency over challenging subject matter, including the ability to apply knowledge to real world situations; and 3) advanced—superior performance. Table 1 presents the percentage of students falling into each achievement level by grade. The findings indicate that while over 70% of students exhibit basic competence in civics or above, more than 30% have not achieved even a cursory level of knowledge and understanding of democracy and government. Further, only about a quarter of the students had reached the proficient or advanced level.<sup>iv</sup>

Table 1  
1998 NAEP Civics Achievement Levels for Students by Grade  
(Percentage of students in each category)

	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
4 <sup>th</sup> Grade	31%	44%	23%	2%



8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	30%	46%	22%	2%
12 <sup>th</sup> Grade	35%	35%	26%	4%

Source: NAEP, 1998 <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/civics/findachlvs.asp>

NAEP affords a national baseline against which evaluations of democracy education programs have been compared, with appropriate caveats. Among the most widely implemented and respected democracy education programs in American elementary, middle, and high schools is the Center for Civic Education's We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution (WTP) curriculum. The program imparts the history and principles of the American Constitution, and engages students in a congressional hearing style competition that culminates in national finals in Washington, D.C., where the winners of competitions in the fifty states and the District of Columbia convene. Since its inception in 1987, the program has involved 28 million students and 90,000 educators (<http://civiced.org/wethepeople.php>, 2006). Studies conducted by Soule and Bennett in 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005 assessed the level of knowledge and support for democratic institutions of students participating in the WTP national finals. The findings consistently demonstrate superior knowledge and understanding of democratic principles and applications among WTP finalists, and lend support to the proposition that innovative instruction for democracy contributes mightily to the civic health of the nation.

We the People finalists in all four years demonstrated a high level of knowledge of American democracy and institutions, and were significantly more informed than the general student population as determined by the 1998 NAEP. Study participants' knowledge of American democracy was ascertained in five domains: 1) general rights of citizens; 2) state and local government; 3) political systems, parties, and interest groups; and 4) the basic structure and

functioning of the U.S. government. Table 2 provides a sample of questions in each of these four knowledge areas and the percentage of 2005 WTP participants and NAEP respondents getting the item correct. WTP students outperformed the NAEP national sample on every indicator, and a majority of WTP participants correctly answered each question. On average, WTP students gave the correct response to 18 of the 23 knowledge items, compared to 12 for the NAEP respondents. The knowledge gap on individual indicators ranged from 4% (on a question that asked if the American Association of Retired Persons would be most concerned about cuts in Social Security) to 41% (on a question about the Supreme Court's power to overturn unconstitutional laws). A stunning 96% of WTP participants knew that the primary purpose of the Bill of Rights was to limit the power of the federal government compared to 65% of NAEP respondents (Soule and Bennett, 2005).. These findings that WTP participants have higher levels of knowledge than the high school student average are in keeping with prior research conducted by the Education Testing Service (ETS) in 1988, 1990, and 1991.

Table 2  
 Knowledge of Democracy of Students Participating in *We the People* Compared to the NAEP  
 (Percentage of students answering the item correctly)

	We the People	NAEP	Difference
<b>General Rights of Citizens</b>			
The Supreme Court's Power to overturn unconstitutional laws is an example of the U.S. government's limit on majorities	71%	30%	41%
The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been opposed by some Americans because of fear that international agreements will force the U.S. to act in ways not consistent with its interest	82%	48%	34%
<b>State and Local Government</b>			
A state's increase in population that is proportionately larger than that of other states is likely to increase the number of its congressional districts	82%	59%	23%

A congressional district occupying a relatively small area may indicate that it includes a large urban area	75%	47%	28%
<b>Political Systems, Parties, and Interest Groups</b>			
Congress has two houses, one in which state representation is based on population and one in which all states have equal representation. This was outlined in the Connecticut Compromise.	86%	70%	31%
The best argument in favor of proportional representation systems is that the legislature is more representative of the popular vote.	55%	39%	31%
<b>Basic Structure and Functioning of the U.S. Government</b>			
The primary purpose of the Bill of Rights was to limit the power of the federal government.	96%	65%	31%
Most of the bills introduced in the House of Representatives are never sent by committees to the full House.	67%	31%	36%

Source: Soule and Bennett, 2005

### ***Knowledge and Understanding of The First Amendment***

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlines the fundamental rights of citizens.<sup>v</sup> Knowledge of the First Amendment is essential for students to acquire, as it pertains directly to their civic lives. Studies have consistently shown that Americans lack basic understanding of core First Amendment guarantees. A 2006 study of 1,000 adults nationwide conducted by the McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum found that although 69% of respondents could identify freedom of speech as a First Amendment freedom, only 25% could name freedom of religion, and 1% recognized the freedom to petition the government over grievances. 19% of respondents could not name a single First Amendment right. While 34% of respondents could list four of the five members of the Simpsons cartoon characters (with 62% correctly naming irritating son, Bart), only 1% could identify four of the five First Amendment freedoms. Further, as Table 3 indicates, respondents incorrectly

associated a variety of freedoms with the First Amendment, including the right to own pets (21%) and the right to drive a car (17%).

Table 3  
Percentage of Respondents Believing Rights Are Guaranteed By the First Amendment

<b>Rights Guaranteed by the First Amendment</b>	
Right to worship as you please	78%
Right to criticize the government	73%
<b>Not Guaranteed by the First Amendment</b>	
Right to trial by jury	55%
Right to vote	53%
Right to own a gun	45%
Right to an attorney	44%
Right against self incrimination	38%
Right of women to vote	36%
Public education	36%
Right to own and raise pets	21%
Right to drive a car	17%

Source: McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum, 2006

This lack of basic knowledge about the First Amendment demonstrated among adults is evident among high school students, as well. In April/May of 2004, the Knight Foundation

funded a landmark study of more than 100,000 students, 8,000 teachers, and 500 administrators in a representative sample of 544 schools nationwide. The study was updated in 2006 using a smaller sample of 34 schools, and included 14,498 students, 822 teachers, and 34 principals.

Students in 2004 expressed little appreciation for the First Amendment, with 73% claiming that they took it for granted or didn't know how they felt about it. While adults were more likely than students to personally think about the Constitution, 50% of teachers and 44% of administrators reported that they take the First Amendment for granted. After the First Amendment was read to the student participants, 35% expressed that they felt the First Amendment goes too far in guaranteeing rights, while another 21% said that they didn't know enough to give an opinion. 35% expressed that they felt the First Amendment goes too far in guaranteeing rights, while another 21% said that they didn't know enough to give an opinion. Further, many students provided erroneous interpretations of constitutional principles when applied to concrete situations. A full 75% of students believed that flag burning is illegal, while another 49% incorrectly thought that the government can censor pornography on the internet.

One of the more intriguing and troubling findings of the study highlights generational differences in interpretations of the First Amendment between students and adults represented by teachers and administrators. The right of free expression by individuals and the institution of the press guaranteed by the First Amendment is among the most prized provisions of American democracy. Although this freedom historically has been contested, including by the government, the military, and powerful corporations, the preponderance of societal choices favor free expression. As such, free expression is a trademark of American democracy (Starr, 2004). As Table 4 indicates, high school students are significantly less inclined than teachers or

administrators to believe that people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions, although they are more inclined to favor musicians being allowed to sing songs with lyrics others may find offensive. More striking are the generational differences in attitudes toward press freedoms. Only 51% of students feel that newspapers should be allowed to publish freely without government interference compared to 80% of teachers and administrators. This finding may be linked to the experience of students with high school newspapers. A mere 39% of teachers and 25% of administrators believed that high school students should be allowed to report controversial issues in their student newspapers without approval of school authorities. 58% of students concur with this position.

Table 4  
Percentage of Students, Teachers, and Administrators Supporting  
Expressions of First Amendment Freedoms

	Students 2004	Students 2006	WTP Students 2005	Teachers 2004	Administrators 2004
People should be allowed to express unpopular opinions	83%		98%	97%	99%
Musicians should be allowed to sing songs with lyrics others may find offensive	70%			58%	43%
Newspapers should be allowed to publish freely without government approval of stories	51%	54%	83%	80%	80%
High school students should be allowed to report controversial issues in their student newspapers without approval of school authorities	58%	64%		39%	25%

Source: Knight Foundation, 2005 for Students 2004, Teachers 2004, Administrators 2004  
Knight Foundation, 2006 for Students 2006  
Soule and Bennett, 2005 for WTP Students 2005

Soule and Bennett incorporated questions from the Knight Foundation study into their 2005 evaluation of We the People finalists. They discovered that WTP participants had a far greater appreciation for the First Amendment than the national sample, and they did not take these freedoms for granted. Further, as Table 4 shows, 98% of WTP students supported the core democratic ideal that people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions. 83% of WTP students believed that newspapers should be allowed to publish without government intervention, which represented an approximately 30% point gap in comparison with the national study.

The Knight Foundation study concludes that knowledge of and appreciation for the First Amendment can be conveyed in the classroom. Students who have taken a course dealing with the topic are substantially more likely to take the First Amendment seriously, and to correctly interpret constitutional provisions. However, only 58% of students reported that they had taken a course that addressed the First Amendment, while only 24% of history and social studies teachers stated that they had incorporated the First Amendment into their classes.<sup>vi</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The goals of education for democracy have been well-articulated by practitioners and scholars. At the same time, these goals are complicated, multifaceted, and difficult to achieve. The few major studies that evaluate the civic curriculum point to the effectiveness of democracy education. However, it is essential that research into the effectiveness of democracy education in general be continued and improved. Importantly, program-specific evaluations must be stepped up in order to truly ascertain the worth of particular endeavors.

Improving research and evaluation into the effectiveness of education for democracy programs should take place on a number of fronts. Survey based evaluations have incorporated useful measures of civic knowledge and understanding; however, there is room for improvement.

Study indicators should more closely tap into the various dimensions of democracy education, including those that are more difficult to measure, such as civic understanding, motivations, and experience. In addition, longitudinal studies that track the progress of students engaged in democracy education programs over time are few and far between.<sup>vii</sup> Studies also should make greater use of alternatives to surveys for evaluating the effectiveness of democracy education programs. Student interviews, “think-alouds,” focus groups, and even participant observation techniques would go a long way toward supplementing the survey-based studies (see Calavita, 2005).

Research on democracy education programs aimed at students from diverse racial/ethnic, immigrant, and socioeconomic groups is almost entirely absent. Access to knowledge of democracy, and therefore access to power, is inequitably distributed among different classes and groups (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). This gap originates in the formative years of individuals’ development and is exacerbated by inequities in democracy education in schools (see National Conference on Citizenship, 2006). Taking effective steps toward closing this gap requires a particular knowledge of the needs and requirements of this particular group, and what types of curriculum interventions are likely to be most successful.

Ideally, democracy education involves a sophisticated, interdisciplinary approach that moves beyond the boundaries that typically define history and social studies courses. A portrait of a vital civic life can be highlighted and reinforced through literature, geography, political



science, sociology, anthropology, theology, and a host of other fields. Further, education for democracy must acknowledge that citizens are now members of a global community, and must incorporate teachings that don't treat the United States as the center of the universe. As educators move in these directions, as a review of programs indicates is occurring, the challenges for evaluation will steepen as the need for quality research will increase.

## Notes

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i. Information on these programs can be found as follows:

Kids Voting USA <http://www.kidsvotingusa.org/>

Positive Youth Development <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/engagement.htm>

Mentor Moot Court <http://www.jrcnyc.org/mentorPages/mentorOverview.html>

We the People <http://www.civiced.org/wethepeople.php>

Democracy in Action <http://www.arsalyn.org/DIA.asp>

National Student/Parent Mock Election <http://www.nationalmockelection.org/>

Taking It Global <http://www.takingitglobal.org/>

Global Nomads <http://www.gng.org/>.

ii. For example, Niemi and Junn (1998) report that 92% of students have taken civics in high school compared to the 64% reported by Kurtz, Rosenthal, and Zukin (2003).

iii. The NAEP civics exam was administered in 670 4<sup>th</sup> grade schools, 697 8<sup>th</sup> grade schools, and 566 12<sup>th</sup> grade schools (<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/civics/>).

iv. It is interesting to note the differences in the way the statistics are interpreted by NAEP and by scholars and educators. The NAEP report highlights the 70% of students who achieved basic civics proficiency and above, while those concerned about the nation's civic health lamented the low scores.

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v. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances. (Ratified December, 1791)

vi. The 2006 findings indicate an increase in the proportion of students taking courses dealing with the First Amendment and an improvement in students' knowledge of free speech and press provisions. However, the study methodology indicates that the small sample of high schools participating in the study is to some degree of self-selected. It is plausible that the impressive improvement in First Amendment knowledge gained over the course of two years is an artifact due to sampling.

vii. A couple of notable exceptions are the series of studies of Kids Voting USA (McDevitt and Chaffee, 1998; McDevitt, et al., 2003) and We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution (Soule and Bennett, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005).

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