

**2008 World Congress on Civic Education
Plenary Presentation by Mark J. Molli
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“Building a National Civic Education Program”

**Ifrane, Morocco
May 27, 2008**

Good morning. The purpose of my presentation is to discuss the importance of developing a relationship between NGOs and the national government, and how this relationship can promote effective civic education programs and policies in the schools.

As some of you know our Center is primarily funded through grants from our federal Government, and major support is provided through the U.S. Department of Education. The Center receives these funds because the U.S. Congress, our legislative branch of government, and the U.S. Department of Education, have confidence in the Center’s expertise in administering national programs in civic education. But every year our Center has to fight to secure our funding in the legislative process because we are competing with many national priorities not only in education, but in health, energy, social services, and other critical needs that provide support to American citizens.

We thought it might be helpful to share with our colleagues the

strategies the Center has developed over the years to establish national recognition and how we continue to sustain that support.

These strategies are offered with the realization that all of our colleagues may have varying circumstances that affect the best way to engage their governments – whether it is from the grassroots level – or from the top down.

1. Develop a national program.

The first task is to establish a national program. In 1986, the Center initiated a national program called **We the People**, a program to help students better understand the principles and values of the American Constitution. In 1995, the Center launched another national program, **Project Citizen**, a program to help students understand how to identify problems in their communities, and how to seek solutions to those problems. **Project Citizen** is the same program that today many of our international colleagues have translated and adapted for use in their country – and it is widely used in the country of Morocco. And I can only say from the student Project Citizen presentations I saw yesterday – the future of Morocco is indeed in good hands.

The establishment of the Center’s national programs provided the rationale for their inclusion in legislation authorizing federal education programs because the benefits were available to every school district in the

United States; and most importantly because these programs were highly evaluated by educators and administrators regarding their beneficial impact on students.

2. Develop a network.

The second task is to develop and train a network of coordinators throughout the country that can serve as a delivery system for the national program. The Center has about 750 coordinators throughout the United States, including one or more in each congressional district. Many of the Center's coordinators are leaders in their communities and occupy positions of prominence in the education establishment.

As part of their responsibility to administer the Center's programs, these coordinators build educational support for our national programs and at the same time build political support with members of the U.S. Congress that represent these political districts.

3. Be Transparent. Once our national programs were well established our Center made a very strong effort to make frequent contact with key officials of our national government and tell them how our program was being administered and how the government funds were being put to good use. One of the many ways we facilitate this transparency is when the Center conducts an annual training conference in Washington, DC for its national

network. As part of the conference agenda the Center dedicates a half a day to let our coordinators visit the U.S. Congress and tell their elected representatives how they are implementing the We the People and Project Citizen programs in the states and districts represented by these officials.

By being transparent – you build political goodwill and you build trust and in doing so you build a national reputation that can lead to greater political support.

4. Involve elected officials in your programs.

A very important component to sustaining a program is to invite elected officials into the classroom or to a showcase, to let them observe in person the value and benefits of your programs. The Center's national network routinely involves the local offices of members of Congress by asking their Congressperson and Senator to speak at school events or have their staff serve as judges in student competitions. Once these officials see the positive effect of the programs at the school level they typically become instant supporters and advocates for the program.

5. Develop a National Showcase.

In addition to inviting politicians to local events the Center developed an annual national competition in Washington, D.C. where our national government is located. As such, all the key members of the federal government, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Congress can

observe our civic education programs to see its academic impact on students. These high level officials can then decide for themselves whether these programs are worth supporting or not.

6. Demonstrate the program's impact

It is important to convey to your supporters the impact of the national program on student achievement through research findings which in turn helps to validate the government's investment in that program. Our Center conducts extensive research and evaluation for their student programs which we summarize in a brief brochure that is easy to read and free of complex research jargon. The brochure clearly demonstrates to policy-makers and others the positive effect of the program on student civic knowledge, skills, and values. It also shows policy-makers that it is much better to invest in children when they are in school rather than later – that is, the cost of remediation to correct what should have been taught at an earlier stage is always harder and more expensive once they become adults. As someone said:

“If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.”

7. Be inclusive.

Broaden your support and legitimize your programs by forming an Advisory Committee of key political, business, and education leaders who will lend their name in support of your program. Our Center formed such a

committee many years ago. The members of this committee include public officials and national organizations of every political persuasion – liberal, moderate and conservative.

Support for education should not be unnecessarily politicized--- most people despite their political affiliation believe education is a passport to success in life. There is a quotation I heard once that reads – **“when the child is safe, everyone is safe.”** That means all societies have a stake in investing in education. So the Center strives very hard to be nonpartisan and inclusive in their approach and to reach out to diverse groups and individuals.

8. Be imaginative, bold and daring.

For many years our Center has been concerned about the state of civic education in America, specifically that there is not sufficient policy support for civic education to be taught systematically and with appropriate rigor. There is great need for improved time and policy requirements, standards, professional development and assessment in our field. To help address this problem, in 1994 the Center for Civic Education took the lead and developed National Standards for Civics and Government and this had a beneficial impact on our discipline. Then In 2003, the Center and two other prominent organizations initiated four national conferences on civic education that have

resulted in starting a wide-scale movement to improve civic education policy in the 50 U.S. States. These national conferences were endorsed by the leaders of the U.S. Congress and the funds were provided by the U.S. Department of Education ---- yet another example of how organizations of civil society can partner with government to promote excellence in education. But to undertake these initiatives took bold imagination.

9. Be persistent.

And finally be persistent. I know that some of our international colleagues who work in NGOs may have rigid governments that at times may be reluctant to assist you in the implementation of your programs but do not be discouraged – keep trying – and search for a voice of reason in your governmental institutions that can be an advocate for civic education. When circumstances look desperate and hopeless, when obstacles appear insurmountable, and when your situation may seem the darkest – there has to be one person who can light a candle. My two colleagues here today, Rahela Dzidic from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Zafar Kahn from Pakistan lit a candle of hope in their country as have many of our Civitas colleagues attending this conference have done --- and today their citizens now have a brighter and more hopeful future.

“Ask Not ...”

If you want your government to be responsive, if you want a voice in their decisions, if you want to fight inequities in society you cannot be a spectator, you have to be an active and fearless participant in the political process --- and only that way can effective programs be supported and sustained. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy challenged a generation of Americans to be participants in their government in his famous statement:

“Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country”.

That call to service by President Kennedy, still rings true to this day and has special meaning for all of us in the field of promoting education for democracy.

Let me close by simply saying that the partnership the Center for Civic Education has sustained now for more than 20 years with the U.S. government is a promising example of how government and institutions of civil society can work together as partners to pursue a common goal. It shows that a key ingredient of sustainability is to believe that there is no limit to the good we can do for our children. They show how together we can build the kind of society that we all need --- and the kind of society that we all want.

Margaret Branson, our esteemed colleague at the Center once reminded

me what that society should consist of --- and in fact, what we are all fighting for --- when she wrote in one of her papers: “this is a society:

- in which human rights are respected;
- in which the individual’s dignity and worth are acknowledged;
- in which the rule of law is observed; and
- in which the common good is the concern of all its citizens.”

Making that kind of society a reality is probably the most important challenge we face --- and the most important work that we can possibly undertake.