

# Overview and Preface

# Overview

The *National Standards for Civics and Government* were developed by the Center for Civic Education with support from the U.S. Department of Education and The Pew Charitable Trusts. Three thousand individuals and organizations participated in the two-year project to identify what students should know and be able to do in the field of civics and government when they complete grades 4, 8, and 12.

The content standards are organized around five significant questions:

- What are civic life, politics, and government?
- What are the foundations of the American political system?
- How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy?
- What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs?
- What are the roles of the citizen in American democracy?

The *Standards* have been endorsed by civic and professional groups, drawn praise in the press and in the Congressional Record, and are being used by states and local school districts throughout the country. The United States Information Agency (USIA) distributed an international edition of *National Standards for Civics and Government* to other nations through U.S. embassies and United States Information Service agencies throughout the world.

*Most remarkable in [the Standards] is the consensus reached around one vital axiom, that students must become informed citizens to perpetuate democracy and become effective participants in our system of government.*

Senator Mark O. Hatfield

*National Standards for Civics and Government offers a solid framework for teaching students about the ideas that underlie American democracy...and for conveying to students an appreciation or democracy and the steps necessary to sustain it. [This] will be an invaluable document.*

Albert Shanker, President  
American Federation of Teachers

# Preface

It has been recognized since the founding of the nation that education has a civic mission: to prepare informed, rational, humane, and participating citizens committed to the values and principles of American constitutional democracy. This civic mission of the schools has recently been affirmed in the National Education Goals included in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994.

## **Goal 3: Student Achievement and Citizenship**

By the year 2000, all students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including...civics and government... so that they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment...All students will be involved in activities that promote and demonstrate...good citizenship, community service, and personal responsibility.

## **Goal 6: Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning**

By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skill necessary to...exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

To help achieve these goals, the Center for Civic Education (Center) has developed these voluntary *National Standards for Civics and Government* for students in kindergarten through grade twelve (K–12) supported by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) of the U.S. Department of Education and The Pew Charitable Trusts.

These *National Standards for Civic and Government* are intended to help schools develop competent and responsible citizens who possess a reasoned commitment to the fundamental values and principles that are essential to the preservation and improvement of American constitutional democracy.

*I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.*

Thomas Jefferson (1820)

This document is limited to *content standards* specifying what students should know and be able to do in the field of civics and government. Content standards are *not* course outlines. They are *exit standards*; they specify what students should know and be able to do as they “exit” or complete grades 4, 8, and 12. Achievement of these standards should be fostered not only by explicit attention to civic education in the curriculum, but also in related subjects such as history, literature, geography, economics, and the sciences and by the informal curriculum of the school, the pattern of relations maintained in the school and its governance. To achieve the standards, students must be provided with the kinds of learning opportunities in the classroom, school, and community that foster the skills necessary for civic participation.

Standards alone cannot improve student achievement, teacher performance, or school quality, but they can be an important stimulus for change. They provide widely agreed upon guidelines for what all students in this nation should learn and be able to do in the field of civics and government. They are useful in the development of curricular frameworks, course outlines, textbooks, professional development programs, and systems of assessment. These national standards are voluntary. They are provided as a resource to state and local education agencies and others interested in the improvement of education in civics and government.

These standards should not be considered to be a static or finished document. They should form the basis for continuing discussion, and they will be revised periodically in light of research, new scholarship, and public commentary.

The Center wishes to express its appreciation to the many people who have contributed to the development of the *National Standards for Civics and Government*, and to the funding agencies that supported the project. The developmental process benefited from the comments of persons who have participated in more than one hundred-fifty open hearings and public discussions of the standards. Well over one thousand teachers and other educators, scholars, parents, elected officials, and representatives of public and private organizations and groups have provided critical comments on successive drafts in the two-year developmental period.

Leaders in civic education from numerous other nations also have shared the benefit of their experience and provided valuable insights in the standards-setting process. Names of all colleagues who have provided written critiques are listed in the appendices.

The Center has attempted to be responsive to the many excellent suggestions received. Our aim has been to provide a useful and balanced document reflecting a broad consensus among educators, scholars, and others who have contributed to the development of these standards. Any shortcomings in the standards are the responsibility of the Center.

Ultimately, the value of these standards will be determined in the classroom by knowledgeable, skilled, and dedicated teachers who have the capacity to make the study of civics and government the relevant, vital, and inspiring experience it should be. Teachers who foster students' natural, youthful idealism, and commitment to working together enhance the realization of the goals of American constitutional democracy.