

OVERVIEW

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)

The Vital Importance of Civic Education

A free society must rely on the knowledge, skills, and virtue of its citizens and those they elect to public office. Civic education is the primary way our citizens acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for informed and engaged citizenship. While many institutions such as the family, the church and social organizations help forge a person's civic character and propensity to participate, civic education in the schools is the one common experience American citizens share that helps them acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge and attitudes that prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives. This is the **historic civic mission of schools**. A mission considered so important by those who established a free universal system of public education in the United States that they termed civic education as one of the central purposes of education. Unfortunately, as the indicators of civic engagement in our nation are dropping so too is the amount of time and attention devoted to civic education in our schools.

In keeping with its mission of promoting an enlightened, competent and responsible citizenry, the Center for Civic Education has launched a **Campaign to Promote Civic Education** and a companion project, the [Congressional Conferences on Civic Education](#). This Campaign has two important objectives. The first is to reaffirm the civic mission of our nation's schools and the second is to encourage states and school districts to devote sustained and systematic attention to civic education from kindergarten through twelfth grade.

Why This Campaign is Necessary

Although every state acknowledges the need for civic education, this vital part of a student's education is seldom given sustained and systematic attention in the K-12 curriculum. The [NAEP 1998 Civics Report Card to the Nation](#) has revealed that only 25 percent of American children are receiving an adequate education in

civics and government. An updated 2006 NAEP Report Civics Report Card will be released in the Spring of 2007. Most experts believe the results will be the same or worse.

For many students, their only explicit exposure to civic education is a one-semester course at the secondary level which is too little and too late. Research reveals that most states and districts give lip service to the importance of civic education but in reality, state policies and school practices often fail to provide students the civic education they deserve.

The failure of students do well in the NAEP study is a direct consequence of:

- ❖ inadequate policy support or inadequate implementation of policy when it exists;
- ❖ inadequate curricular requirements;
- ❖ inadequate teacher preparation and professional development opportunities; and
- ❖ distorting effects on the entire curricula of a focus on testing in math, science, and reading.

Unfortunately, study after study shows that our schools are devoting less and less attention to preparing students for competent citizenship. Overwhelmed by a school reform movement that emphasizes a few subjects over all others, our schools have been forced to cut the time and resources devoted to civic education. The overwhelming majority of what passes for state standards and curricular frameworks for civic education are overly complex and contain far more material than a teacher can cover in the time currently allotted to the subject. The old maxim “if it isn’t tested it isn’t taught” is more true than ever before; civic education is assessed in far too few schools which has grave consequences for the development of students’ civic competencies. This is evidence of how civic education is disappearing from our schools while civic learning is desperately needed to combat disengagement, cynicism and apathy.

How the Campaign to Promote Civic Education Will Be Won

The Campaign seeks to strengthen instruction in civics and government and to reaffirm the traditional civic mission of the schools by promoting the establishment of curricular requirements and instruction in accord with the following principles:

- Education in civics and government is a central purpose of education, essential to the well being of American democracy.
- Civics and government is a subject on a level with other subjects. Civics and government, like history and geography, is an integrative and interdisciplinary subject.

- Civics and government should be taught explicitly and systematically to all students kindergarten through twelfth grade, whether as separate units or as readily identifiable parts of other subjects.
- Effective instruction in civics and government requires attention to the content of the discipline as well as the essential skills, principles, and values required for full participation in and reasoned commitment to our democratic system.

The Campaign is a fifty-state effort run by concerned citizens and organizations within each state that recognize the need for improvement in the civic education of American youth. As is appropriate to the American tradition of local control of the schools, the Campaign seeks improvement in each state and school district's approach to civic education in civics. The Center's [network of civic educators](#) and other concerned citizens have organized efforts in each state to bring about the appropriate changes in the educational policies of every state and school district in the nation.

The [Congressional Conferences on Civic Education](#), (a joint project of the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Center on Congress at Indiana University and the Center) complement the Campaign by bringing teams of state policymakers and educators together for a national summit on the civic mission of schools. Delegations to the Congressional Conferences help spearhead the Campaign in each state.

The Campaign targets key policymakers as well as individuals and groups that influence education policy, specifically curriculum policy. These include legislative and executive bodies of state and local government, administrators and boards of education of state and local education agencies, parent's organizations and other community organizations, and professional associations.

What You Can Do To Help

Join us in this Campaign. Your involvement is welcome and needed. This is a state-by-state effort focusing on the civic education improvements needed within each state, led by concerned citizens in each state. Please join with those in your state who are spearheading the Campaign. [Click here](#) for a list of campaign leaders in each state or contact Ted McConnell at mccconnell@civiced.org to get involved with the effort in your state or for more information on the Campaign.