



Talking Points on the Need to Restore the Civic Mission of Schools

Congressional Conferences on Civic Education Fifty-State Campaign to Promote Civic Education

*“Democracy needs to be reborn in each generation and education is its midwife.”
John Dewey, Twentieth Century Education Theorist*

Preparation for citizenship and the workplace are the twin missions of public education in the United States

- Recognizing that individuals do not automatically become responsible, participating citizens but must be educated for citizenship, the founders of our universal system of free public education made education for citizenship a core part of their mission, equal to workplace preparation. This determination to educate young Americans about their rights and responsibilities as citizens is known as the “civic mission” of schools.
- Each state’s constitution or public education establishment statutes and codes acknowledge the civic mission of schools.
- Americans profess that the civic mission of schools is an essential—if not *the* essential—purpose of education. Over the course of thirty-three years of Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polling on American attitudes on education, Americans have been shown to overwhelmingly concur with the statement that “educating young people for responsible citizenship” should be the primary goal of our schools. Their conviction that the school’s central mission is educating young people for citizenship has not wavered over time, and it is consistent whether or not respondents have children in school and whether or not their children are in public or private school. (*Annual Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*)
- In a 2004 poll, 91 percent of adults responded that they were more likely to support policymakers who support strengthening civic education in the schools. (“Citizenship: A Challenge for All Generations,” available at www.ncsl.org, ‘Trust for Representative Democracy’)
- Civic education helps form the attitudes of students in ways that employers report seeking in potential employees. Students who experience high quality civic learning are more tolerant of others, more willing to listen to differing points of view, and take greater responsibility for their actions, including ways to improve their communities. (Research available at www.civiced.org)

The decline of civic learning in American schools

- In recent years, civic learning has been increasingly pushed aside. Until the 1960s, three courses in civics and government were common in American high schools, and two of them ("civics" and "problems of democracy") explored the role of citizens and encouraged students to discuss current issues. Today those courses are very rare. What remains is a course on "American government" that usually spends little time on how people can – and why they should – participate as citizens.
- This remaining course is usually offered in the twelfth grade, which is both too little and too late. And it completely misses the large number of students who drop out before their senior year and who are arguably in the greatest need of understanding their rights and responsibilities as citizens.
- In the elementary grades, civic learning was once woven throughout the curriculum. Today, slightly more than a third of teachers report covering civic education related subjects on a regular basis. ("Civics 2006: the Nation's Report Card," National Assessment of Educational Progress, administered by the National Assessment Governing Board)
- Two-thirds of students scored below "proficient" on the last national civics assessment administered in 2006, and 72 percent of eighth-grade students surveyed could not identify the historical purpose of the Declaration of Independence. ("Civics 2006: the Nation's Report Card," National Assessment of Educational Progress, administered by the National Assessment Governing Board)
- Although all states but one have adopted standards of learning in civics and government (or standards that address civic education in other subjects) a 2003 study by the Albert Shanker Institute found that the majority of what passes for state standards in the subject are a) overly broad, b) concentrate too much on the historical aspects of civic learning rather than the relevance of citizenship and civic participation to students lives, and c) are impossible to cover in the amount of time a teacher is allowed to spend on the subject. ("Educating Democracy: State Standards to Ensure a Civic Core," by Paul Gagnon)
- In a 2005 study of school district policies and practice, the New Jersey Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools found that only 39 percent of districts required a course in civic education. The same survey found that just 35 percent of districts offered in-service training opportunities for teachers in civic learning.
- In a 2005 study of Arizona school districts, the Arizona Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools found that 53 percent of teachers had never been given in-service professional development in civic learning. The same survey found that 64 percent of responding districts were just somewhat satisfied that their civic education programs were creating informed active and engaged citizens; only 17 percent of districts reported being highly satisfied that their programs were having the desired result. (Both Arizona & New Jersey surveys are available by contacting mcconnell@civiced.org.)

If it isn't tested, it isn't taught

Arguably, the greatest factors undermining high quality civic education in schools today are the requirements of state assessments and the Federal ‘No Child Left Behind’ Act (NCLB) which largely ignore the civic mission of schools in favor of concentrating on reading and math:

- In a 2006 study by the Center for Education Policy (CEP) of 299 representative school districts in all 50 states, 71 percent of the surveyed districts reported they have reduced instructional time in at least one other subject to make more time for math and reading. In some districts struggling to meet the requirements of the NCLB Act, they have had to double the amount of time allotted for reading and math, sometimes eliminating other subjects altogether.
- In the CEP study some districts reported that the extra time allotted to reading and math was essential to help low-achieving students catch up in reading and math. A majority of districts, however, reported negative effects such as shortchanging students from learning important subjects, squelching creativity in teaching and learning, or diminishing activities that might keep students interested in school.

High quality civic education courses and programs work effectively

When students receive a sustained and systematic civic education they become more knowledgeable about their government and how it affects them; more interested in politics, the news, current events, and government; more capable of identifying public policies that do or do not serve their interests and the common good; more consistent in their views on policies; more critical of politics and government—developing a healthy skepticism that does not alienate them from participation but instead motivates them to participate in improving the system; more likely to participate in political and civic activities; more committed to fundamental democratic values and principles; and more tolerant of those who differ in their opinions. (Research at www.civiced.org.)

- In a 2004—2005 study of alumni of the Center for Civic Education’s “We the People: the Citizen and the Constitution” Program (aged 18—34), 92 percent reported voting in the 2004 elections, in contrast to the under 40 percent of their peers who reported voting; 85 percent reported voting in all previous elections for which they were eligible to vote.
- The same study showed that 83 percent of alumni held it was essential or very important to keep current with the news and political affairs, in contrast to just 34 percent of college freshmen that felt the same.
- In a 2003 study undertaken by the Alliance for Representative Democracy on the attitudes of students who experienced civic education courses versus students who reported not being offered civic education courses (aged 15—26), 55 percent of students who took civics stated that it was important to take personal responsibility for making things better in their community and nation versus 32 percent of those who did not take a civics course; 54 percent of those who took a civics course agreed it was important to contact elected officials on issues versus 39 percent of those who did not study civics. (Available at www.ncsl.org, ‘Trust for Representative Democracy.’)

What should be done to restore the civic mission of schools?

In 2003, more than 40 leading civic learning, social studies, and civic engagement organizations joined in the publication of “The Civic Mission of Schools,” a consensus report on the problems confronting civic education along with recommendations for policymakers and educators on how to restore the civic mission of schools. The report is available at www.civicmissionofschools.org.

To spark a nationwide movement to restore the civic mission of schools, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Center on Congress at Indiana University, and the Center for Civic Education have joined together, acting as the Alliance for Representative Democracy, to sponsor a series of national summit conferences on the critical role civic education plays in fostering civic engagement. These summit conferences, known as the Congressional Conferences on Civic Education, are funded by the United States Department of Education, and the four leaders of the United States Congress serve as co-hosts.

Delegations from all 50 states have attended the Congressional Conferences. These delegations are comprised of elected officials, policymakers, and educators. The Congressional Conferences have resulted in 50 state campaigns to restore the civic mission of schools and promote civic education.

- Every state delegation has formed inclusive active state coalitions, with membership that includes the delegation, other policymakers, representatives of education and civic engagement organizations, frontline administrators and teachers, representatives of higher education, students, interested members of the media and concerned citizens.
- Twenty-nine delegations have held state summits, conferences, joint legislative sessions and symposiums on civic education modeled on the Congressional Conference. These state summits have generally included small group discussions on the current and desired state of civic education in the state and agreement on ambitious plans of action to restore the civic mission of schools.
- Twenty-six states have conducted thorough surveys of the current policies affecting civic education as well as existing district and state practice. These benchmark surveys have identified deficiencies the state coalitions have decided to correct through advocacy to policymakers at the district and state level.
- Alaska, Arizona, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Nebraska, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, and Virginia have created officially sanctioned state commissions on civic education or civic literacy.
- Legislators attending the Congressional Conferences (and other legislators supportive of civic education) from 36 states have introduced legislation to strengthen civic education during the 2003—2007 legislative sessions. Thirty-five pieces of legislation have passed into law. These measures have included directives on specific course requirements, funding measures, creation of official state commissions on civic education, and legislation calling for increased attention to civic learning.

More information about the state campaigns to restore the civic mission of schools may be found at www.representativedemocracy.org or by contacting Ted McConnell at mcconnell@civiced.org