

EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY: WHY THEY MUST GO HAND IN HAND

A presentation by
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The two issues with which this conference is concerned—representative democracy and the education of an informed, engaged citizenry—have long been on the American agenda. To better appreciate why those twin issues continue to be matters of concern, it may be useful to look back briefly to the founding era.

The question of representation was the first serious intellectual debate to come between England and the American colonies. The British held that representatives to Parliament were to sit “not merely as parochial representatives, but as delegates of all the commons of the land.” Its members virtually, if not actually, spoke for all, as well as for the groups that had chosen them. They stood for the interest of the whole—of the entire realm. Edmund Burke’s words immortalized the “whole” concept of representation. He contended that Parliament was *not* “a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests, which interests each must maintain as an agent and advocate against other agents and advocates; but Parliament is *deliberative* assembly of *one* nation, with *one* interest, that of the whole, where, not local purposes, not local prejudices ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole.”*

* Quoted in Bernard Bailyn’s *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, enlarged edition, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 163.

Although the American colonists had reproduced English institutions in miniature, they were unwilling to accept that interpretation of representation. They rejected the idea that they were “virtually represented” in Parliament and they moved to keep the voices of local interests clear and distinct. In Massachusetts and elsewhere it became customary to require representatives to be not only residents but property owners in the localities that elected them. What is more, the colonists followed up by checking on their elected delegates to be sure that their interests were attended. The colonists were not always satisfied with the performance of their representatives. Some disgruntled constituents complained that their assemblies were composed “of plain, illiterate husbandmen whose views seldom extended farther than to the regulation of highways, the destruction of wolves, wildcats and foxes, and the advancement of other little interests of particular counties which they were chosen to represent.”

More thoughtful Americans began to be concerned with the qualifications of a representative other than that he be “a resident of the township for which he is elected.” A representative, one constituent argued, ought to exhibit more telling qualities. A representative ought to be “a gentleman of good natural interest ... a man of reading, observation, and daily conversant with the affairs of policy and commerce.” Such a man he insisted “is certainly better qualified for a legislator than a retailer of rum and small beer called a tavern keeper in a poor, obscure country town remote from all business.”

James Madison and Alexander Hamilton also were concerned with the qualifications that a representative ought to have. They addressed their concerns in a number of *The Federalist Papers*. While Madison hoped for representatives who possessed “the wisdom, patriotism and love of justice” to serve the true interests of their

country, he was well aware that men were not angels. As he famously wrote in *Federalist* 51, “If men were angels no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.” Madison concluded that “a dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government.” But if the people were to exercise that control, they must be both informed and engaged as citizens. How then could what Madison described in *Federalist* 57 as “the vigilant and manly spirit actuating the people of America—a spirit which nourishes freedom and in return, is nourished by it” be sustained? The answer, in large part, depended upon the education of its citizens and the civic mission of its schools.

The founding generation took seriously the need for education as insurance against the loss of liberty. The history of the Roman Republic served as both an example and a warning to them. The thoughts and actions of Thomas Jefferson will serve here as one example of how that generation promoted the civic mission of schools. In 1779, Jefferson introduced his “Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” in the Virginia legislature. It proposed dividing each county into wards of sufficient size and population to support an elementary school in which all children would be taught at public expense. Each year “impartial examinations” would be administered to children completing the elementary course. Those among the “best and most promising genius and disposition,” but too poor to afford it, would proceed to higher education, again at public expense.

The purpose of this ladder-like educational system was to collectively cultivate each individual’s innate capacities and to thereby promote a more just and harmonious society. It was essential that the system be publicly financed in order to cultivate “those talents which nature has sown liberally among the poor as the rich, but which perish without use,

if not sought for and cultivated.” This system, Jefferson contended would contribute to the public good by educating the people to participate directly in local community affairs and to intelligently select political leaders and their representatives. For Jefferson an “ignorant democracy” was a contradiction in terms. As he wrote to a colleague, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and what never will be.” He emphasized that point again in *Notes on the State of Virginia* declaring “Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers.... The people themselves therefore are its only safe depositories. And to render *even them* safe, their minds must be improved.”*

As we reread the words and contemplate the admonitions of our forebears, it seems paradoxical that after more than two centuries have elapsed, it still is necessary to reassert and demonstrate the interconnection of education and democracy. In 1983, a national commission on the public schools wrote a widely publicized report entitled *A Nation at Risk*. It referred to “a rising tide of mediocrity” and warned of “unilateral educational disarmament.” A flood of commentary ensued urging all manner of reforms, including some in civic education. Schools were encouraged to teach a better understanding of democracy and to contrast its superior values and principles to what was then seen as the competing and false doctrine of communism. In 1987, Allan Bloom wrote *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students*.** It remained on the New York Times Bestseller List for many weeks.

* Sheldon, Garrett Ward. *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) pp. 62–67.

** National Commission of Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative of Education Reform*, 1983.

More recently Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has written about the symbiosis between education and democracy. In the July–August, 2008 issue of *Foreign Affairs* she contends that access to education now is “a critical national security issue.”

Indeed one challenge to the national interest is to make certain that we can provide quality education to all, especially disadvantaged children. The American ideal is one of equal opportunity, not equal outcome. This is the glue that holds together our multiethnic democracy. If we ever stop believing that what matters is not where you came from but where you are going, we will most certainly lose confidence. And an unconfident America cannot lead. We will turn inward. We will see economic competition, foreign trade and investment, and the complicated world beyond our shores not as challenges to which our nation can rise but as threats we should avoid. That is why access to education is a critical national security issue.*

Just three months ago in April 2008, The Forum for Education and Democracy, an education think-tank, issued a new report entitled *Democracy at Risk: The Need for a New Federal Policy in Education*. It was purposely released on the 25th anniversary “of the landmark *Nation At Risk* report. The Foreword to the report sets forth the need for and the purposes of the reforms it endorses. It charges that:

- “Inequities in educational opportunity have increased, public commitment to democracy has waned, the scope of education has narrowed and our rankings internationally in educational achievement and attainment have fallen.
- We have failed to meet the goals our leaders set for education two decades ago.
- We believe federal policy can enable local educators and communities to create educational opportunities that will provide every child with the skills

* Rice, Condoleezza. “Rethinking the National Interest.” *Foreign Affairs* 87 (July–August 2008):23.

needed for a life of citizenship, intellectual growth and economic productivity—the skills they must have if our democracy is to survive.”

What are the reasons this Report gives for claiming that “democracy is at risk” and that “education for a life of citizenship:” is a much-needed curative?

The Report first alleges that:

The problem is *not* that America’s schools are doing worse than they were in the “good old days.” In fact, they are—on most counts—doing as well as they ever did for a greater number of students: Basic literacy rates have risen over the last half-century and more students are participating in a greater range of educational opportunities at the secondary and postsecondary levels than they were decades ago. Schools are more diverse and inclusive places than they were 50 years ago, when nearly half of all high school students dropped out, handicapped students were largely excluded, and students who did not speak English coped on their own or left. Instead, the problem is that these achievements have not been systemically embraced and are unevenly spread through the system. While many exciting initiatives have been developed, a strategic long-term policy that would take them to scale has been missing.*

A second reason for concern is that international studies confirm that the United States educational system not only lags behind most other industrialized nations in academic achievement by high school, it also allocates more unequal inputs and produces more unequal outcomes than its peer nations. As the Report puts it:

The U.S. has dropped from first in the world in higher education participation to 14th, as other countries make massive investments in their futures, subsidizing more and more young people to go to college. Although about 60 percent of our high school graduates go off to college, only about half of these are well-enough prepared and supported to graduate with a degree—far too few for the knowledge economy we now operate. In the end, about 30 percent of an age cohort in the U.S. gains a college degree, as compared to nearly 50 percent in OECD countries currently For students of

* The Forum for Education and Democracy. *Democracy at Risk: The Need for a New Federal Policy in Education*, p. 3, www.forumforeducation.org/upload_files/files/FED_ReportRevised415.pdf

color, the pipeline leaks more profusely at every juncture. Only about 17 percent of African American young people between the ages of 25 and 29—and only 11 percent of Hispanic youth—had earned a college degree in 2005, as compared to 34 percent of white youth in the same age bracket.¹⁶ Although these young people of color will be a majority of public school students by 2025, investments in their education remain inadequate to meet today’s demands for the kinds of learning needed.^{*}

A third disquieting reason is that under-education is a threat to democracy. The loss to society from under-education has been well documented in terms of income and productivity, but what the Report terms “the grave loss to democracy” is not fully appreciated.

The enduring gap in participation between the groups with the least and most education suggests that the education debt that begins in school continues to accrue throughout the individual’s life and eats into our nation’s civic life as well. The students most poorly served by the educational system go on to be adults with the least voice, involvement, and influence in their communities. With unequal education, we set up a cycle where today’s young people—ill served by public schooling — become tomorrow’s adults who are ill equipped to make other public institutions work for them. Unless we make progress toward education for democratic participation, today’s underserved students will be tomorrow’s disenfranchised citizens—and quite possibly the parents of the next generation of underserved students as well. . . . Existing policies and laws that construct education largely as a set of external standards, tests, and requirements tend to neglect this civic mission of schools. . . . The challenge is clear: Improving education and improving democracy go hand in hand.^{**}

II. How Can Educational Remedies Translate into Improving Students’ and the General Public’s Understanding, Participation, and Commitment to the Principles of Representative Democracy?

^{*} The Forum for Education and Democracy. *Democracy at Risk: The Need for a New Federal Policy in Education*, p. 7. www.forumforeducation.org/upload_files/files/FED_ReportRevised415.pdf.

^{**} The Forum for Education and Democracy. *Democracy at Risk: The Need for a New Federal Policy in Education*, pp. 11–12. www.forumforeducation.org/upload_files/files/FED_ReportRevised415.pdf.

Throughout American history every generation has wrestled with the challenge of establishing and maintaining a system of public education that will provide for individual advancement at the same time that it nurtures a citizenry that is informed, engaged, and committed to this nation’s ideals and values. Wendy Puriefoy, President of the Public Education Network (PEN) tells us that

Historical images of effective public engagement tend to be dramatic: suffragists chained to the White House gates; civil rights activists marching on Washington; war protesters burning flags and effigies. And therein lies one of the biggest challenges of public engagement—the idea that, in order to effect change, there has to be a huge turnout, a dramatic event, or a constitutional amendment. Such misconceptions, along with the fuzzy terminology of engagement, have kept the vast majority of “ordinary” people from seeing a role for themselves in public engagement.*

Historical images to the contrary, there are a number of educational remedies that “ordinary” Americans can employ every day. Thanks to recent research we now know effective ways and means that can be employed to enhance the understanding, participation, and commitment to democratic values of students and the citizenry at large. For the sake of both convenience and brevity, we will group them into two categories:

- Remedies that are effective and needed in the classroom.
- Remedies needed at local, state, and/or national policy-making levels.

Looking first at classroom “remedies,” evidence of what constitutes “best practices” has emerged from a plethora of studies. The *Civic Mission of Schools* has grouped them into what it calls “**Six Promising Approaches To Civic Education.**”**

* Puriefoy, Wendy D. “The Education of Democratic Citizens: Citizen Mobilization and Public Education” in *The Public School*. Susan Fuhrman and Marvin Lazerson, eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) p. 238.

** Carnegie Corporation and CIRCLE. *The Civic Mission of Schools*, (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003) p. 6.

They are:

1. Instruction in government, history, law, and democracy,
2. Discussion of current local, national and international issues and events, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.
3. Programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through community service linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.
4. Extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to be involved in their school and communities.
5. Student participation in school governance.
6. Students participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures, such as legislative hearings, mock trials, debates, and role-playing.

The climate of a school is another factor of importance to the development of a competent and caring citizen. A positive school climate is one in which there is an identifiable, open, and nurturing ethos, as well as one in which democratic processes and procedures are learned and practiced.

A positive climate for citizenship education in schools and classrooms is characterized by:

1. Official recognition and community acceptance of the civic purpose of education.
2. Learning of civic-related knowledge that builds on and enhances academic and participation skills.

3. Cooperation and collaboration in approaching civic-related learning and problem-solving.
4. Mutual trust and positive interactions among diverse students, faculty, and administrators.
5. Engaging students in participatory problem-solving.
6. Deliberation and dialogue about issues that are thoughtful and respectful.
7. Engagement within the school community and commitment to learn about and interact with the broader community.*

Those interested in assessing the climate in their own school can avail themselves at no charge of an excellent tool, *School Citizenship Education Climate Assessment*.**

Developed by researchers at the University of Maryland, there are no right or wrong answers to this survey. It is a self-assessment instrument designed to measure how well one's own school supports students' personal and civic development. The results of this survey could serve as a springboard to fruitful discussions of how civic learning and education for citizenship could be enhanced in one's own institution.

Turning now to policy issues at the local, state, or national levels, at least three areas are in need of "remedies."

First, the need to restore balance to the school curriculum and to recommit schools to their civic mission.

Second, the need to insure that all students are taught by teachers who know their subjects and how to teach them.

* See CIRCLE Working Paper 48. Homana, Gary, Carolyn Barber, and Judith Torney-Purta. *Assessing School Citizenship Climate: Implications for the Social Studies*, www.civicyouth.org.

** *School Citizenship Education Climate Assessment*, www.ecs.org/QNA/docs/assessment.pdf.

Third, the need to develop improved measures of desired civic outcomes.

The notion that a well-balanced curriculum is essential is not new. Across the centuries, philosophers and great educators have insisted that schools should serve the twin purposes of developing the talents of individuals and of educating for citizenship. Aristotle wrote that education should be concerned with developing the “democratic type of character” that “creates and sustains democracy.” He believed in “a uniform system for all and it should be a system of public education.” The young should not only learn reading and writing but drawing, gymnastics, and music as well.*

Cicero contended that a well-educated individual should exhibit “mastery of rhetoric, literature, history, government, law and philosophy.” The purpose of education should be to develop individuals into “worthy, competent and cultured citizens.”**

Erasmus advocated a curriculum which focused on the teaching of geography, history, science and “good citizenship.”***

Humanists in both England and Germany stressed the need for an inclusive curriculum in which literature, history, sports, music, and dancing were taught to all students. These humanists decried drill work, narrow formal analysis and the memorization of subject matter. Schools should instead stress broad ideas, cultural values, the attainment of the individual, and the promotion of a harmonious and responsible citizenry.

* Aristotle. *Politics* Book VIII Chapters 1 and 2. In Aristotle, *Politics*. Translated by Ernest Barker, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) pp. 298 and 300.

** Smith, Samuel. *Ideas of the Great Educators*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1979) pp. 35–36.

*** *Ibid.*, p. 73.

The idea of a well-balanced curriculum has found support for many years among prominent educators and the American public generally. Recently, however, there has been a shift in the public's view of the purposes of public schools. A national survey asked respondents to rate the purposes they deemed "very important." More than 80% said "teaching basic reading, math, and science skills" while 65% said "preparing students for the workforce and employment." Only 54% said "developing positive character traits" was very important. "Preparing students to be competent and responsible citizens in our democratic society" was "very important" to just 53%. Developing an appreciation for art, music, and culture" came in last, with less than 35% of those surveyed believing that to be a significant or necessary part of the curriculum.*

It has become popular to place all the blame for our currently unbalanced curriculum on the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002. Teachers and schools now spend time on what they must test, especially if the tests have high stakes. NCLB requires testing in reading, mathematics, and science, but not in civics—much less in the arts. Blame, however, needs to be more broadly shared. Our unbalanced curriculum is a reflection of public attitudes. Those attitudes and the No Child Left Behind Act do need to be corrected. As a principal of a rural school in Appalachian Ohio has put it

We agree that math and reading skills are important for citizens. So is the study of history, the ability to create a reasoned argument, the arts, research skills, the list goes on. An education system must not narrow itself to the lowest common denominator of improving test scores in the so-called basics if it is to be worthy of the democracy it serves.**

* Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools and Alliance for Representative Democracy, "From Classroom to Citizen: American Attitudes on Civic Education," (December, 2004) p. 5. Reprinted in Peter Levine. *The Future of Democracy*, (Medford, Mass. Tufts University Press, 2007) p. 101.

** George Wood also serves as the Executive Director of the Forum for Education and Democracy. www.forumforeducation.org.

A second policy area of concern is the quality of teacher.

A recent research underscores what we've known intuitively for a long time. The single most important school influence on student learning is the quality of the teacher. The effects of a very good—or a very poor teacher—last long beyond a single year, influencing their students learning for years to come.

Reflect for a moment on your own experience. Can you recall one very good teacher who has influenced your career path or your outlook on life?

Can you think of a poor teacher who not only made you dislike his subject but convinced you that you had no aptitude for it? Has your aversion to that subject continued to this day?

Studies have consistently found that teacher effectiveness is a strong determinant of student learning. It far outweighs the effects of class size, homogeneity or socioeconomic status (SES).^{*} Students who are assigned to several ineffective teachers in a row have significantly lower achievement and gains in achievement than those who are assigned to several highly effective teachers in sequence. In other words, teacher effects appear to be both additive and cumulative. They seldom are compensatory.^{**}

The federal government now plays no direct role in the preparation of teachers, their licensure or their on-going professional development. Concern with a perceived lack of teacher quality did prompt the addition of a provision to the Higher Education Act of

^{*} For a summary of studies, see Darling-Hammond, Linda & John Bransford. *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World: What Teachers Should Learn and be Able to Do*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005); Darling-Hammond, Linda. "Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A Review of State Policy Evidence," *Educational Policy Analysis Archives* 8, no. 1 (2000) www.epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n1/; Wilson, Suzanne M., Robert Findan, & Joan Ferrini-Mundy. "Teacher Preparation Research: Current Knowledge, Gaps, and Recommendations," (Research Report for the U.S. Department of Education, Seattle: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington, 2001).

^{**} Darling-Hammond, Linda. "Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A Review of State Policy Evidence," *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*. (January, 2000). ISSN 1068-2341.

1998. It requires states to report the percentage of prospective teachers who pass state licensure examinations by higher education institutions. In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act requires states to establish criteria for a “highly qualified teacher and to ensure that every child is taught by individuals who are certified to have subject matter expertise in courses they teach. Meeting this requirement is a particularly difficult challenge in middle schools across the country, as most middle school teachers are certified in elementary education and not in a subject area. Meeting the requirement for “highly qualified teachers” also is extremely difficult in rural and high-poverty urban high schools. In the year 2000, one-third of students in high-poverty schools took at least one core academic course with a teacher who did not have either a major or a minor in that subject.*

In many states, schools serving the highest-needs students experience a revolving door of inexperienced teachers and of teachers who are not trained in their subjects. A survey of more than 2,500 California high school juniors and seniors over a two-year period (2005–2007) found that their civic learning opportunities depended to a large degree on four factors:

- the student’s race,
- the student’s academic track,
- the school’s average socioeconomic status (SES), and most importantly,
- the quality of its teachers.**

* *Education Week, Quality Counts 2003*. “To Close the Gap, Quality Counts,” analysis by Richard Ingersoll of the National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (1999–2000), Vol. 22, no. 17 (2003) p. 14.

** Kahne, Joseph and Ellen Middaugh. *Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School*. CIRCLE Working Paper 59. February, 2008, www.civicyouth.org, pp. 12–13.

The study also found that students in urban, high-poverty schools were less likely to report having civically oriented government courses, discussion of social problems and current events, and experiencing an open, positive classroom climate. These students also were less likely to report experiences with decision-making and simulations of civic processes.

The need to address the problem of teacher quality and the distribution of teachers qualified in the subjects they teach is urgent. The report of the Forum for Education and Democracy concludes that:

While we worry about the supply of doctors, engineers, and technicians we seem to ignore the supply of teachers who will educate the highly skilled workers and thoughtful citizens of the future. We lack a national policy to increase the supply of good teachers, to support teachers while on the job, or to distribute good teachers to all our children. When we do not tend to those who will nurture our young in the skills and abilities that make engaged citizenship possible, we put our future democracy at risk.*

Finally, let's address an area that almost everyone agrees needs remediation—testing and assessment. Our concern here is specifically with appropriate measures for desired civic outcomes.

Albert Einstein is said to have hanging above his desk at Princeton a sign that read, *“Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.”*

That certainly is true about civic education. We can “count” the number of facts a student knows and we can measure some civic skills. But testing the understanding of and the commitment to democratic values, as well as the willingness to act upon those values, eludes us. That is most unfortunate, because as Kermit Hall often reminded us, a

* *Democracy at Risk: The Need for a New Federal Policy. op. cit.*, pp 16–17.

democracy needs *affective*, as well as *effective* citizens. Habits of the heart may be the most important outcome of good civic education.

Yes, democracy and education *do* go hand in hand. We need to restore civic learning and the civic purposes of our schools to do what the Founders knew was essential—foster “a spirit which nourishes freedom and in return is nourished by it.”