



**A Campaign to Promote Civic Education:  
A Model of How to Get Education for Democracy Back into U.S.  
Classrooms in All Fifty States**

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### Abstract

The founders of the U.S. universal system of free public education made education for citizenship a core part of the mission of public education. However, the amount of instructional time devoted to the study of civics has been dramatically reduced. This paper documents a national movement that is underway to restore the civic mission of America's schools through a broad coalition of groups in fifty states and will provide a model that may be of interest to those concerned about the decline of citizenship education in their schools.

In thinking about accomplishing effective reform of educational institutions, we benefit from looking at decades of research on broader social movements, for the same principles apply. Scholars have found that movements for change develop within existing institutions and stable social networks (McAdam 1993). Historical examples include the American civil rights movement, which relied in great measure on the organization and leadership that emerged from African American churches. More recently, evangelical churches have successfully mobilized their members to influence the political process and the public discourse. Social psychologists have found that although we are embedded in multiple worlds, each of us may have a community that we value most, where its members help us to find identity and meaning in life. It is this identity, coupled with the threat of an unwelcome outcome if you fail to participate, that mobilizes people to take action (McAdam 1993). Networks provide both a basis for recruitment and offer individuals incentives to participate (Snow and Rochford 1982; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1980). Individuals should be recruited in a manner that compellingly links the action to one's identity (McAdam 1986, 1993). Strong social support reaffirms and sustains an individual's decision to act. Further, actions themselves have the potential to invigorate and transform participants. Civil rights volunteers, for instance, were much more likely than nonparticipants to work as paid activists years later (McAdam 1986).

Educational reform movements may also be analyzed using findings from the literature on social movements because they excite and evoke passion from many segments of society. Repeated studies have shown that Americans possess strong beliefs about the

purposes of education and firm convictions about appropriate educational content. For example, over the course of thirty-three years, Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polling on American attitudes on education has found overwhelming agreement with the statement that “educating young people for responsible citizenship” should be the primary goal of our schools (Annual Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll of the Public’s Attitudes toward the Public Schools). This sentiment has held remarkably steady and has not been dependent on whether respondents have children in school or attend public or private school. Indeed, America’s universal system of free public education was based on the recognition that people do not automatically become responsible participating citizens but must be educated for citizenship. The “civic mission of the schools” then, refers to the important role that schools play in educating young Americans about their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

Despite consistent public support for the teaching of engaged citizenship, and states’ statutory acknowledgment of the importance of the civic mission of the schools, the amount of time devoted to the instruction of democratic citizenship has declined (National Center for Learning and Citizenship 2006, [www.ecs.org/nclc](http://www.ecs.org/nclc) ). In a 2006 study of 299 representative school districts in every state conducted by the Center for Education Policy, 71% of the surveyed districts reported they had reduced instructional time in at least one other subject to make more time for reading and math. Some districts, struggling to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, have had to double the amount of time allotted for reading and math, sometimes cutting out other subjects altogether.

Schools with high percentages of nonnative English speakers or disadvantaged youth may forgo social studies and civics courses to ensure their schools will meet mandated testing standards. A recent study of California high school seniors found large gaps between college-bound and non-college-bound students: only 40% of non-college-bound students had received instruction in government, law, and history, in contrast to the approximately 75% of students who intended to attend four-year colleges (Kahne 2005). Non-college-bound students were also 30% less likely than college-bound students to

discuss social problems or current events, 20% less likely to take part in service learning, and 40% less likely to make speeches. This study, which was also replicated in Oregon in 2006 with nearly identical results, shows that disadvantaged youth are not receiving opportunities in their formal education to acquire necessary civic knowledge or skills (*Oregon Civics Survey 2006*).

In contrast, 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 (State Citizenship Education Policies 2006, National Center for Learning and Citizenship at the Education Commission of the States, <http://www.ecs.org/nclc>). Today those courses are very rare. What remains now is a course called American Government that is usually taught at the twelfth grade. Students usually spend little time in this class learning how people can—and why they should—participate as citizens. This is ironic, given that researchers have identified solid, effective instructional methods to teach citizens skills, knowledge, and dispositions (Torney-Purta et al. 2001; Westheimer and Kahne 2004; [www.civiced.org](http://www.civiced.org) ; [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)). Effective methods depend on skilled and knowledgeable teachers and include service learning, discussion of current events, and simulations of democratic processes and procedures.

In the elementary grades, civic learning used to be woven through the curriculum. Today, slightly more than one-third of teachers report covering civic education–related subjects on a regular basis (1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress in Civics, administered by the National Assessment Governing Board). Two-thirds of twelfth-graders scored below “proficient” on the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress in Civics (NAEP), conducted in 1998, a test of civic knowledge that is administered to students nationwide approximately every eight years (National Assessment of Educational Progress in Civics 1998). Only 9% of NAEP respondents, for example, could list two ways a democracy benefits from citizen participation.

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 overly broad, concentrate too much on the historical aspects of civic learning rather than the relevance of citizenship and civic participation to students lives, and are unrealistic to cover in the amount of time a teacher is allowed to spend on the subject (Gangon 2003). Time is always an issue. In a 2005 study of school district policies and practices, the New Jersey Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools found that only 39% of districts had a required course in civic education. The same survey found that just 35% of districts offered in-service training opportunities in civic learning for teachers. In a 2005 study of Arizona school districts, the Arizona Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools found that 53% of teachers had never been given in-service professional development in civic learning.

The decline of instruction in civics has paralleled a decline in interpersonal trust, in connections to groups and family, in staying informed on public affairs, and in citizens' connections to political institutions (National Conference on Citizenship, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, and the Saguaro Seminar 2006). See also Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement and Carnegie Corporation's report "Civic Mission of Schools" ([www.civicyouth.org/research](http://www.civicyouth.org/research)) which document reduced civic engagement by Americans.

### **A Nationwide Movement to Restore the Civic Mission of the Schools**

In this paper, we describe efforts to counter this trend through the Campaign to Promote Civic Education. The campaign has two goals. The first goal is to reaffirm the civic mission of schools. This is defined as the obligation of schools to educate young Americans about their rights and responsibilities as citizens and to reaffirm the Founders' commitment to making education in democracy a central part of the mission of public education—equal to workplace preparation. The second goal of the campaign is to

encourage states and school districts to devote sustained and systematic attention to civic education from kindergarten through twelfth grade.

### **Alliance for Representative Democracy and the Congressional Conferences**

This movement is spearheaded by a coalition consisting of the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Center on Congress at Indiana University, and the Center for Civic Education. The coalition has joined together to form the Alliance for Representative Democracy. The Alliance is sponsoring five 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 U.S. Department of Education by an act of Congress. The National Center for Learning and Citizenship at the Education Commission of the States serves as a principal consultant to the conferences. The Majority and Minority Leaders of the U.S. Senate and the Speaker and Democratic Leader of the U.S. House of Representatives host the event.

In 2003, leading state officials, legislators, and education leaders from throughout the country gathered in Washington, D.C., for the First Annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education. The second Congressional Conference was held December 4–6, 2004; the third Congressional Conference took place September 24–26, 2005; and the fourth Congressional Conference took place November 18–20, 2006. The goals of the Congressional Conferences are to bring together teams of policymakers and educators from each state for a thorough examination of the state of civic engagement in America and the critical role civic education plays in fostering civic engagement. More than four hundred delegates from all fifty states and the District of Columbia participated in each conference. It is necessary to bring state delegates together given that educational policies are made at the state, or in some instances, the district level.

The typical state delegation is composed of a member of each chamber of the state legislature, the chief state school officer or a senior officer of the state Department of Education, a member of the state Board of Education, representatives from educational and civic engagement organizations, and influential individuals from the private sector.

In many instances, this is the first time policymakers and leaders from disparate institutions have come together for this purpose. Delegates have told us that the event allows them to meet and develop friendships with busy, powerful individuals they have never had an opportunity to work with in their respective states.

At the meetings, the delegates are exposed to experts' speeches, lectures, and breakout sessions that address good civic education policies and practices. Notable speakers such as former Congressman Lee Hamilton and former Senator John Glenn motivate participants through their passion and commitment. Indeed, messages of thanks and respect to the delegates from the House Speaker, Minority Leader, as well as the Senate Majority Leader and Minority Leader, reinforce the importance of the delegates' work.

The most important purpose of the Congressional Conferences is to motivate each state delegation to form a team with a plan and commitment to taking action in that state to strengthen and improve civic education policies, requirements, and programming. Their task is to map out strategies to increase the teaching of civics in their states and to change state education requirements and practices.

### **Actions Taken**

Delegations have begun the vital work of changing policy and raising professional and public interest in the issue through a variety of ways. An important first step at the first Congressional Conference was the affirmation of a statement that defined a common cause. The Conference Statement was endorsed by an overwhelming majority of the delegates and has been useful in drafting legislation and in explaining its mission to the media. The four key principles that guide states in strengthening civic education are the following:

- Civic knowledge and engagement are essential to maintaining our representative democracy. While many institutions help to develop Americans' civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, schools must have the capacity to prepare students for engaged citizenship. Civic education should be a central purpose of education essential to the well being of representative democracy.

- Civic education should be seen as a core subject. Well defined state standards and curricular requirements are necessary to ensure that civic education is taught effectively at each grade level from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Strengthening the civic mission of schools must be a shared responsibility of the public and private sectors at the community, local, state, and national levels.
- Policies that support quality teacher education and professional development are important to ensure effective classroom instruction and raise student achievement.
- Well designed classroom programs that foster an understanding of fundamental constitutional principles through methods such as service learning, discussion of current events, or simulations of democratic processes and procedures are essential to civic education.

At each subsequent conference, states have reported their progress, and shared their successes and challenges with one another. In thinking about this as a model for an educational reform movement, it is useful to include some of the actions taken by delegates from the fifty states.

- Nearly every state delegation has formed inclusive active state coalitions, with membership that includes the delegation, other policymakers, representatives of education and civic engagement organizations, front-line administrators and teachers, representatives of higher education, students, interested members of the media and concerned citizens. These coalitions provide community and support for activists.
- Twenty-three 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 discussion on the current state of and desired state of civic education in the state and agreement on ambitious plans of action to restore the civic mission of schools. Ten other state delegations have similar events planned.
- Twenty-five states have conducted thorough surveys of the current policies affecting civic education as well as existing district and state practice. These benchmark surveys, which have often reached down to the district level, have identified deficiencies the state coalitions have decided to correct through advocacy to policymakers at the district and state level. These surveys have also been used to publish web based and hard copy directories of state resources in civic education. An additional ten states have surveys underway. See <http://www.cms-ca.org/> for an excellent survey that has since been replicated in Oregon with nearly identical results.



- Arizona, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Nebraska, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont 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 thirty-four states introduced legislation to strengthen civic education during the 2003–06 legislative sessions. Twenty-four 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 education.
- Policymakers who attended the conferences have taken action within their authority. For example, former Idaho State Superintendent of Public Instruction Marilyn Howard added civic education to the subjects assessed in the state’s annual school building accreditation report. The New York State School Boards Association worked with the New York delegation to develop a model policy for the civic mission of schools for all New York school districts. West Virginia School Board Member Priscilla Haden (coordinator of the West Virginia Delegation) worked with the West Virginia School Board to implement a civic education course requirement for high school graduation and to re-draft the State’s civic education Standards of Learning.
- In 2005, the Campaign and the allied Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (CMS) supported the creation of a new database of civic education test items produced by the National Center for Learning and Citizenship at the Education Commission of the States. The questions are categorized by national civics standards that have been juried by civic learning experts for their clarity and meaningfulness in relation to the competencies of civic knowledge, skills and dispositions. The database is intended to help researchers, school administrators, and state and district leaders assess how their schools or districts are performing in terms of civic knowledge and skills, the dispositions that students are developing, and the students' views of their schools and classrooms, and may be used to address policymakers' requests for accountability. See (<http://www.ecs.org/QNA>).

Most states have developed websites and materials. The Alliance for Representative Democracy has put together a booklet entitled “Making Your Voice Heard: How to Work With Congress” as a resource for participants. Delegates have had the opportunity to share their progress with their federal representatives. At the most recent Congressional Conference, three outstanding government/social studies teachers received new awards developed by the Alliance for their excellent civics instruction. A number of states have received grants from the Center for Civic Education and Campaign for the Civic Mission

of Schools to further the work in their states. Several of these have resulted in valuable studies for the field of civic education at large (The California Survey of Civic Education 2005).

At the fourth Congressional Conference, delegates often mentioned two immediate challenges; lack of teacher preparedness, and debate over assessment. Many teachers do not possess the background knowledge to teach youth about American political institutions and how to engage successfully in the political process. Teachers may teach courses in government who do not have a credential in this field. As mentioned, the majority of what passes for state standards and curricular frameworks for civic education are overly complex, containing 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 quite true; civic education is assessed in far too few schools which has grave consequences for the development of students’ civic competencies. But should civic educators join the No Child Left Behind bandwagon, which assesses students’ knowledge, skills and competencies through multiple-choice items? Or would it be better to push for alternative assessments that utilize other formats? Are youth overburdened with testing as is? It is certainly the case that assessments in the United States are driving curriculum, so to ensure instructional time, some form of assessment is warranted. As of April 2005, only nineteen states’ assessments included knowledge of government or civics, while only eleven states include performance on civics/government or social studies assessments as part of their school or district accountability systems (<http://www.ecs.org/>).

The campaign has helped put together a compendium of the best civic test items from each state. These questions are available at <http://www.ecs.org/QNA/default2.asp>, and may prevent every state from having to develop its own test items. In 2006–07, the National Assessment Governing Board is administering the National Assessment of Educational Progress in Civics (NAEP). However, most civic learning experts believe the percentage of students (25%) who will demonstrate a proficient understanding in civics in

the 2006 assessment to remain the same or decline. This is undoubtedly going to be the case if over 70% of districts have cut time in this subject to meet testing requirements for reading and math.

In conclusion, the Alliance for Representative Democracy has built a solid basis for reform. If we return to the model of successful social movements posited at the outset of this paper, we find reasons to hope that the civic mission of the schools may be fully restored. First, the reform has originated within the structure of three leading institutions. These institutions have coordinated their efforts and come together to draw upon their networks of civic education leaders from each state. Next, the Congressional Conferences have provided a forum for leaders to assemble delegations of “champions” from their respective states, including: legislators, members of the state boards of education, members of departments of education, school board members, nonprofit leaders, members of the judiciary, teachers, and scholars. The conferences provide a venue whereby leaders are able to recruit new participants, energize their base, and build stable, broader social networks. Coming together as a group reaffirms participants’ commitment by exposing participants to positive role models who are also working for change. Delegates’ identity and enthusiasm increase via social bonding and in receiving acclaim for their work. Participants also learn about best practices, research, funding opportunities, and assessment tools. They witness student’s presentations from a wide variety of excellent programs, partake in panels of experts, and in the Fourth Congressional Conference, celebrated three teachers who received the first national awards for excellence in civics instruction. Most importantly, delegates learn from their peers about which avenues for school reform have worked well. Interstate cooperation in the form of regional associations has begun (i.e., the Southern Coalition). The Congressional Conferences have resulted in fifty state campaigns to restore the civic mission of schools and to promote civic education. This model may prove useful to others who are also concerned with instigating educational reform.

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