

# CONTINUING CHALLENGES

IN

# CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

**Educators in a free society must stress both the rights and the responsibilities of citizenship.**

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Citizenship in a free society is paradoxical and contradictory. It entails both obedience and constructive skepticism, respect for authority and constructive criticism of authorities. Good citizens in a free society are both compliant and independent.

Consider the comfortable simplicity of citizenship education in an authoritarian society. The purpose is clear cut: the schools are expected to contribute powerfully to the creation and maintenance of a particular orthodoxy that citizens must learn to accept without question. In such a society, citizenship education is inculcation of political beliefs, rote learning of prescribed political attitudes and roles, and glorification of national heroes and deeds.

In the United States, however, we have not been prisoners of any rigid ideology. We have not been frozen into a closed system. We have not been a nation of "true believers." The late senator from Illinois, Everett Dirksen, expressed the spirit of American citizenship very aptly when he said, "I am a man of fixed and unbending principles, the first of which is to be flexible at all times" (Morgan, 1978).

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The qualities of citizenship in our free society pose at least three continuing challenges to American civic educators: (1) the challenge of developing respect for majority rule and minority rights; (2) the challenge of teaching civic ideals and civic realities without sacrificing candor or fostering cynicism; and (3) the challenge of developing open-mindedness and the ability to take a stand.

To cope with these challenges, educators must reconcile two conflicting positions that have existed from the earliest days of our republic. One position has emphasized the preservation of tradition and a particular view of the American heritage. The other position has stressed competence to think critically and creatively about traditions.

Civic educators might counteract popular tendencies to accept one-sided views of good citizenship by emphasizing in the curriculum the central paradox of any free society, which is respect for majority rule and minority rights. Jefferson tried to instruct the nation about this paradox in his first inaugural address. He said, "All, too, will bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will to be rightful must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal law

must protect, and to violate would be oppression" (Jefferson, 1968). Can we, as American citizenship educators, meet the persistent challenge of teaching Jefferson's ideal so that it is meaningful and acceptable to our youth? There can be no higher aim in American citizenship education.

The challenge is more difficult than it may seem. Research studies have shown, again and again, that Americans support, in the abstract, the ideals of majority rule and minority rights. However, most children, adolescents, and adults are unwilling to apply these ideals to certain instances. Most of us seem unwilling to extend particular civil liberties and opportunities to certain unpopular minority groups or individuals (Patrick, 1977).

Superficial understanding of civil liberties and civic intolerance can be mitigated by sound teaching strategies. For example, research by Zellman and Sears provides workable suggestions for developing students' comprehension of and support for the paradoxical ideals of a free society (Zellman and Sears, 1971). They tested an experimental civics curriculum in grades five through nine with lessons that emphasized case studies about civil liberties issues. The outcome was increased student understanding and acceptance of public controversy and the civil rights of various minority groups. Several other studies have supported similar conclusions (Patrick, 1977).

Educators who want to teach majority rule and minority rights effectively should emphasize pertinent public issues. They should teach students to analyze and appraise persistent and fundamental controversies about civil liberties in the American heritage. Their lessons should include candid examples of American shortcomings, as well as instances of success, in practicing the ideals of freedom.

American civic educators also face the challenge of fostering comprehension of social realities—by teaching accurately about history, government, and economics. As James Madison emphasized long ago, "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance. And a people who mean to be their own Governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives" (Richardson, 1976).

Educators will fall short of their

responsibilities, however, if they teach only the facts; if they fail to inspire students to think and dream about what constitutes virtuous citizenship and a just society. They may encourage cynicism and apathy if they focus only on sordid realities or expedient solutions to practical problems. Cynicism corrodes good citizenship because it damages confidence in institutions and lowers self-esteem. People who lose confidence in themselves are no longer fit to move ahead, to exert leadership, or ultimately, to defend themselves against enemies. American civic educators must nurture healthy self-confidence based on commitment to ideals about civic virtue.

The challenge is to develop civic virtues—high ideals about human dignity and social justice—without distorting civic reality. We must also teach accurately about civic realities—the ugly truths along with the glorious accomplishments—without inspiring cynicism or apathy.

Open-mindedness is the best defense against the temptation to maintain unwarranted civic beliefs. However, the development of open-mindedness, if carried to an undesirable extreme, can result in lack of conviction and paralyze the will to decide and to act on the basis of decisions. Civic educators must teach youth the importance of suspending judgment, of entertaining alternatives, and of respecting differences. At the same time, they must teach young people that at some point, in response to some issue, one must make a choice and assume the consequences of a decision, which may include orderly conflict with those who have chosen differently.

In a free society, citizens necessarily are faced with significant choices about public issues. Freedom entails both the right and the capability to make decisions. Thus, making, judging, influencing, and implementing decisions are certain to be enduring tasks of citizenship as long as Americans maintain a free society (Remy, 1976).

We must recognize the complexities of educating citizens to be competent decision makers. In a free society, competent decision making involves open-mindedness and a propensity to choose and act. It involves the ability to recognize and entertain alternatives and to defend a choice. It involves

willingness to accept the right of others to make different decisions, ability to stick to a reasonable choice in the face of social pressures, and readiness to alter our choices when confronted with compelling arguments and evidence. However, it also involves resistance to persuasive appeals that may, in the end, prove to be shallow or incorrect (Remy, 1980).

Teaching students to be capable decision makers who are fit to be citizens of a free society is an enormous challenge. It subsumes the need to teach accurately about social realities, to encourage commitment to high ideals, and to prevent cynicism and apathy. Competent decision makers in a free society must be knowledgeable, confident, pragmatic, and committed to the ideals of majority rule with minority rights.

Each of the basic challenges in citizenship education is complicated. There is no "yellow brick road" that leads inevitably to a resolution of the complexities inherent in these challenges. Furthermore, exact responses to them are likely to change from one generation to another as conditions and needs change. Yet, the challenges will persist. They have permeated our heritage as a free people. They will remain on the public agenda as long as educators continue to value civil liberties in a free society.

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