

Civic Education for Responsible Citizens

To further our tradition of government by the people and to preserve our nation's well-being, education for citizenship is not an option—it's what schools are for.



Thirty years ago, the Soviets' launch of Sputnik touched off this country's last big push for school reform. We wanted scientists to compete in the space race and, given the Cold War climate of the day, children were bundled off into physics and chemistry classes, slide rules in hand, to assure that America would remain militarily secure.

This time, the reform movement has been driven almost exclusively by economic threats and by the growing recognition that without good schools the financial well-being of the nation is imperiled. Education and the economy are inextricably interlocked, and it is now widely agreed that if the United States is to regain its competitive advantage, mind power is the key.

No one denies that America's work force must get better. But there's another imperative. While economic purposes are being vigorously pursued, civic priorities also must be affirmed. Indeed, unless we find better ways to educate ourselves as *citizens*, America runs the risk of drifting unwittingly into a new kind of dark age, a time when specialists control the decision-making process and citizens will be forced to make critical decisions, not on the basis of what they know, but on the basis of blind belief in so-called "experts."

The Decline in Civic Education

From the earliest days of the Republic, schools accepted the obligation to participate in the building of a nation. Benjamin Rush, writing in 1786, insisted that youth should be educated to "watch for the state as if its liberties depended on [their] vigilance alone." And when Jefferson was asked if mass opinion could be trusted, he responded:

I know 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* by education (italics added).¹

The establishment of a network of common schools in the 19th century was, in large measure, an attempt to strengthen democracy. The push for universal education was driven less by

Civic education means helping students develop responsible ways of thinking, believing, and acting.

individual gain than by the desire to promote the social and civic advancement of the nation, based on the belief that we had, in this country, a rich heritage to be shared and a vision of participatory government to be sustained and strengthened.

The problem is that today the Jeffersonian vision of grass roots democracy fueled by education increasingly is viewed as utopian, and what's especially disturbing is that the school reform movement of the 1980s has paid insufficient attention to educating students about our nation's history and institutions.

An indication of the problem's proportion is found in a recent National Assessment of Educational Progress survey, which found that only 53 percent of 8th graders and just 57 percent of high school seniors were aware that the Declaration of Independence affirmed the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And only 44 percent of the 8th graders and slightly more than half the 12th graders knew that the right to religious freedom is found in the amendments to the Constitution.²

Adding to the worry is a critique of civics textbooks issued by James Carroll of the Brookings Institution, who concluded:

many of the books are largely disembodied expositions of principles and facts, lacking the passion of the conflicts that infuse politics and government with meaning and significance. The student is asked only to master knowledge of the subject rather than to put his knowledge to use. Thus, the participatory side, the side that requires the individual to analyze democratic values, processes, and choices, is largely ignored.³

Little wonder that voter participation is falling off. Turnout in the 1988

presidential election campaign was only 50 percent, the lowest in 64 years. A recent report by the Markle Commission on the Media and the Electorate noted that "American voters today do not seem to understand their rightful place in the operation of American democracy" and "act as if presidential elections belong to somebody else."⁴

The good news is that efforts to strengthen citizenship education are emerging. For several years, the National Commission on Social Studies has brought together school and college leaders to define priorities for the study of government and other social institutions. Further, the Council for the Advancement of Citizenship and the Center for Civic Education have been working collaboratively on a curriculum framework called "CIVITAS," which stresses critical thinking and participation skills. In addition, efforts in several states, California among them, are seeking to strengthen the social science curriculum.

But, with all of this, there remains a widespread concern that education for citizenship has been neglected, and for those who care about government "by the people," the decline in civic education cannot go unchallenged. In a world where human survival is at stake, ignorance about public issues is not an acceptable alternative. What we urgently need today are groups of well-informed, caring individuals who band together in the spirit of community to learn from one another and participate, as citizens, in the democratic process. But how should we proceed?

What Civic Education Must Provide

To help students become responsible citizens, civic education programs should have several important characteristics.

Civic education is concerned, first, with communication. The work of democracy is carried on through thoughtful discourse—town meetings, city councils, study groups, informal conversation, the television screen—and citizenship training, if it means anything at all, it means teaching students to think critically, listen with discernment, and communicate with power and precision.

So You Want to Begin Community Service . . .

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The why and what of combining service and learning is addressed in Volume I, including a useful section on principles of good practice for developing new programs and evaluating existing ones.

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Combining Service and Learning focuses on programs with service as a main component. The set should prove useful for all faculty, teachers, and directors of experience-based learning because most of the issues addressed are applicable to all forms of experimental education.

Combining Service and Learning is available from the National Society for Internships and Experimental Education, 3509 Haworth Dr., Suite 207, Raleigh, NC 27609 (919-787-3263). Softcover prices: Volume I and II are \$54 each; Volume III is \$15 (discounts are available).

If students learn to listen and speak more carefully, as well as read and write, they will not only be civically empowered; they also will know how to distinguish between the authentic and the fraudulent in human discourse. Indeed, the destiny of this country may be threatened not so much by weapons systems but by the inclination of public officials to send messages that obscure truth.

Civic education also must provide students with a core of basic knowledge regarding social issues and institutions to give their understanding of democracy perspective. In the Carnegie report *High School*, we recommended that all students study American history and government. We urged that they be introduced to political thinkers, from Plato and Locke to John Adams and James Madison, and that they study the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the *Federalist Papers*. Equally important, students should learn about the heritage of other cultures as they prepare to take their places in a world of diverse peoples whose destinies have become intertwined.

Further, civics classrooms should be active, not passive, places. Unfortunately, teaching about government and its functions all too often has focused on textbooks, without involving students sufficiently in the processes of decision making. The National Assessment of Educational Progress found that textbook reading assignments were, by far, the most common method of instruction in civ-

ics classrooms. Other activities, such as writing papers and working on group projects, were less prevalent.⁵

When 12th graders were asked how often they participated in mock trials, imitation elections, or governmental bodies, more than half said they had never done so. And yet the National Assessment reported that students exposed to such learning performed better than peers who had only occasionally, or never, participated in these activities.⁶

I'm suggesting that for civic education to come to life, theories of government must be tested. Students should become knowledgeable about contemporary issues and be asked to thoughtfully weigh the options. For example, each student might take a contested issue currently being considered by the Congress, a state legislature, or local government body and report in depth on the history of the problem, define points of tension, and propose plausible solutions. The classroom itself should become a town meeting.

We must deal thoughtfully with our deepest differences. All of this sounds fine in principle, but what about issues that appear too hot to handle? The harsh truth is that the national consensus on many issues seems to have eroded. Society today is characterized by such divisiveness that consensus seems almost impossible, and this puts the nation's schools squarely in the middle. Educators are often confused—even abused—if they try to examine touchy social problems and to help students debate what constitutes

the common good. Yet to ignore controversial issues is to offer students an incomplete education, an incapacity to think carefully about life's most important concerns. I remain convinced that even in matters where society is sharply divided, schools have an especially important role to play, one that goes beyond silence or the extension of the status quo.

If we hope to make progress toward resolving deep conflicts in the culture, we must encourage open and sensitive classroom discussion about choices, even in such controversial areas as sex, drugs, cultural differences, and religious beliefs. Finding a way to deal thoughtfully with our deepest differences is perhaps the greatest challenge citizenship education now confronts. And in the guidance of such inquiry, teachers must be trusted.

Civic education must be taught in other ways as well. *Students, while they are in school, are members of an institution, and they should understand how it works and participate, within the school itself, in decisions that affect their lives—just as they will be asked to do later on.* In *Classroom Life as Civic Education*, David Bricker makes the essential point that much of what young people learn about citizenship comes to them "indirectly as they draw out ideas about how people should conduct themselves in public, from the ways their teachers manage classroom life."⁷

If we postpone such involvement for students while they're young, there is a good probability that it will be deferred for a lifetime. Clearly, citizenship is not something to be deferred. It should be demonstrated in every institution in which the student is involved, especially at school.

Finally, education for citizenship means helping students make connections between what they learn and how they live. During our study of the American high school, we found that too many young people feel unwanted, unneeded, and unconnected to the larger world. Further, there is a serious gap between the young and the old in our society, an intergenerational separation in which youth and their elders are not seriously engaged in common discourse.

CIVITAS: A New Curriculum Framework for Civic Education

Elaine Craig

What should students learn in school, kindergarten through 12th grade, to be good citizens? That question is being addressed by CIVITAS, a project sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts. Over 25 distinguished scholars, including R. Freeman Butts, Fred Newmann, and John Patrick, have written sections of the CIVITAS curriculum framework, intended for use by curriculum planners in state departments of education, local school districts, and private schools. The framework is being developed by the Center for Civic Education, Calabasas, California. When completed early in 1991, it will be disseminated by the Council for the Advancement of Citizenship, Washington, D.C.

The draft framework has been critiqued at several meetings of a National Review Council chaired by Ernest Boyer, at which representatives of education and civic organizations, including ASCD, have commented and offered suggestions. The project also has a Teachers Advisory Committee made up of selected social studies and civics teachers.

CIVITAS seeks to revive the idea of Civic Virtue, which, in its classical version, meant putting the public good before private interest. CIVITAS expands the notion to include such values as individual responsibility, self-discipline, open-mindedness, patience, and compassion. The document also lists goals and objectives under the headings of Civic Knowledge and Civic Participation. It notes the close relationship between the two:

Knowledge is often best assimilated in the process of solving a problem considered important by the student. For example, rather than studying provisions of the First Amendment abstractly as part of the Bill of Rights, one might present students with a case involving school censorship of a student newspaper. After discussing students' opposing viewpoints on the issue, one could then introduce the First Amendment and relevant court decisions that would presumably help students to further understand or resolve the problem of whether the school's action was justified. Civic participation is more likely to be well-informed if the knowledge base itself is learned in the process of addressing real issues of civic action.

Because knowledge is pointless without participation, the CIVITAS framework advises that "students should be introduced to a wide range of forms of participation and given experience in their use." Still, in keeping with the tenets of democracy, "the student's decision to participate in any given activity with any particular frequency should be a matter of individual choice. The goal of the CIVITAS framework is to enhance the competence and opportunity of students to participate, while leaving choices as to where, when, and how to participate up to the adult citizen."

Especially useful to curriculum developers will be the Civic Knowledge and Skills section, which attempts to summarize everything of a nontechnical nature that citizens ideally need to know. Few, if any, adult citizens will in fact have this knowledge, and it is certainly not expected that any high school student will acquire all the knowledge contained in the framework. The purpose of such a comprehensive list is to provide curriculum planners with a broad spectrum of civic knowledge from which to choose as they make curriculum decisions. To help local developers decide what knowledge and skills to teach at the different stages of development, the framework offers a suggested scope and sequence.

For more information, contact the Council for the Advancement of Citizenship, 1724 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20036; (202) 857-0580.

Elaine Craig is Director of Testing and Evaluation, Center for Civic Education, 5146 Douglas Fir Rd., Calabasas, CA 91302.

I'm convinced that students, as an essential part of civic education, need to understand that learning is for living, that education means developing the capacity to make judgments, form convictions, and act boldly on values held. In response to this challenge, we proposed in *High School* a new Carnegie unit, one based on service. The idea is that every student should be asked to volunteer his or her time at retirement villages, daycare centers, or youth camps, or to tutor other kids at school.

But there's a caution here. While such projects can generate within students a sense of worth, they must be viewed as part of the educational experience and not just an after-school activity. Specifically, service projects should include a written evaluation by the student, linking community activity to classroom theory.

I'm suggesting that civic education, by its very nature, means helping students confront social and ethical concerns and apply what they have learned. We must help them understand that not all choices—in thought and action—are equally valid. Such an education does not dictate solutions or suggest that there are simple answers for every complicated question. Rather, it means helping students develop responsible ways of thinking, believing, and acting.

Today's Window of Opportunity

We stand at a strategic time in the history of public education. Interest in schools has run high during the past six years. But public attention cannot be indefinitely sustained. Today's window of opportunity hinges to a great extent on the ability of the schools to pursue, not just the economic, but the civic ends of education.

When all is said and done, the nation's schools should encourage each student to develop the capacity to judge wisely in matters of life and conduct. Time must be taken in classrooms to explore ambiguities and reflect on the consequential social issues of our time. The goal is not to indoctrinate students but to provide a climate in which civic choices can be thoughtfully examined and convic-

tions formed. These are the characteristics by which, ultimately, the quality of public education must be measured. □

¹T. Jefferson, *Letters*, arranged by W. Whitman, (Eau Claire, Wis.: E.M. Hale, 1940), pp. 338, 339.

²The National Assessment of Educational Progress, (1990), *The Civics Report Card*, (Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service), p. 65.

³J. D. Carroll et al., (1987), *We the People: A Review of U.S. Government and Civics Textbooks*, (Washington, D.C.: Peo-

ple for the American Way), p. iv.

⁴R. Rothman, (May 16, 1990), "Panel Urges Education to Revitalize Citizens' Participation," *Education Week*, p. 8.

⁵The National Assessment of Educational Progress, *The Civics Report Card*, p. 87.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁷D. C. Bricker, (1989), *Classroom Life as Civic Education*, (New York: Teachers College Press), p. 1.

Ernest L. Boyer is President, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 5 Ivy Lane, Princeton, NJ 08540.

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