

# **Promoting Civic Education**

*by*

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The noted scholar Paul Gagnon recently wrote that “a modern democratic society has three distinct reasons for schools because there are three persons in each of us: the worker, the citizen, and the private individual...” He goes on to say that, “The Declaration of Independence evoked the three aims: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. Work sustains life, citizenship sustains liberty, and personal cultivation can allow the pursuit of happiness, however that may be defined.”

The development of the worker, the citizen, and the private individual may be fostered by a balanced curriculum in schools that must include, among other offerings, a vigorous education in civics and government. During the past decade or so, educational policy and practice appear to have focused more and more upon developing the “worker” at the expense of developing the “citizen” and the “private individual with a meaningful life.”

A colleague of mine who works to promote civic education is fond of asking superintendents, “Where is your math program, your history program, your science program, and so forth?” This is an easy question and superintendents can invariably show where these programs are placed in their curricula. My friend then asks, “Where is your civics program?” It is usually not such an easy question to answer. Although every state notes the need for civic education, the subject is seldom given sustained and systematic attention in the K-12 curriculum. Inattention to civic education stems in part from the assumption that the knowledge and skills citizens need emerge as by-products of the study of other disciplines or as an outcome of the process of schooling itself. This assumption, in my opinion, is not correct.

While it is true that history, economics, literature, and other subjects may enhance students' understanding of government and politics, they cannot replace sustained, systematic attention to civic education. One of the major reasons students did not do well on the 1998 NAEP Civics Report Card is that the vast majority are either not being taught civics and government at all or they are being taught too little, too late, and inadequately. Under these conditions, you can hardly expect them to do well on such a test. One of the major reasons why civics is not taught adequately is that most of our states and school districts do not have sufficient requirements for instruction in civics and government. Therefore, I believe the following criteria should guide the development of educational policy in every state and school district in the nation.

- Education in civics and government should not be incidental to the schooling of American youth but a central purpose of education.
- Civics and government should be seen as a subject on a level with other subjects.
- Civics should be taught explicitly and systematically each year from kindergarten through twelfth-grade either as separate units and courses or as a part of courses in other subjects.
- Effective instruction in civics and government requires attention to the content of the discipline as well as to the intellectual and participatory skills required for competent and responsible participation in our democratic system.

We now know what works. We know the characteristics of good civic education programs. These characteristics may be found, among other places, in the *National Standards for Civics and Government*, the literature of the Center for Civic Education's Campaign to Promote Civic Education, and most recently in the Carnegie/CIRCLE report entitled "The Civic Mission of the Schools."

We know that formal instruction in civics and government should provide students with a basic understanding of civic life, politics, government, and the fundamental values and principles underlying American constitutional democracy. It should help them understand the workings of their own and other political systems as well as the relationship of American politics and government to world affairs. Such instruction provides students a basis for understanding their rights and responsibilities and a framework for principled, competent, and responsible participation.

The formal curriculum should be augmented by related learning experiences, in both school and community, that enable students to learn how to participate in their own governance. Finally, we know that no matter how well designed instructional programs may be, their success ultimately relies upon knowledgeable, skilled, and dedicated teachers.

You will have an opportunity later today to observe the students of an outstanding teacher demonstrate one of a number of civic education programs that provide such formal instruction. It is the *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution* program funded by the U.S. Department of Education and authorized by Congress under the Education for Democracy Act which is a part of the No Child Left Behind Act. Research has shown that this program has significantly improved student achievement in civics and their participation in civic life. After having observed the program's national competition on Capitol Hill David Broder wrote that it is the "place to come to have your faith in the younger generation restored."

In addition to the formal curriculum, the importance of the informal curriculum should be recognized. The informal curriculum refers to the governance of the classroom and the school community and relationships among those within it. These relationships should embody the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy.

Classrooms and schools should be managed by adults who govern in accordance with constitutional values and principles and who display traits of character worth emulating. Students should be held accountable for behaving in accordance with fair and reasonable standards and for respecting the rights and dignity of others, including their peers.

Since the 1960s there has been a growing movement to develop better approaches to civic education. As a result, today there are numerous curricular programs of proven effectiveness available to interested teachers, schools, and school systems. These programs have been developed by educational leaders throughout the nation, many of whom are present today.

It is important to note the extent of cooperation among these programs. There is considerable overlap among the national networks that have been established. These networks of skilled and experienced educators, the various curricular offerings, and the widely accepted *National Standards for Civics and Government* provide a base for the expansion of proven civic education programs throughout the nation.

The decision by President Bush to include civics along with history and service in his initiative is very timely and encouraging. During these past four decades, civic education has received much needed support from both Congress and federal agencies. This is, however, the first time during this period that a president has given it such a high place on the national agenda. For this we are very grateful. President Bush's leadership provides grounds for optimism about the prospect for good civic education for all American students.

It is obvious that the capacity and responsibility to improve civic education lie at local and state levels. I sincerely hope that this conference and the continued support of the Bush administration will result in civic education gaining its rightful place in the curricula of schools throughout the nation. For it is civic education that can help us to narrow the gap between the ideals of our nation and the reality of our daily lives.

Civic education can help to promote and preserve liberty which, as President Bush recently said is "God's gift to humanity." It is widely recognized today that no child should be left behind in reading and mathematics. It should be equally widely recognized that no child should be left behind in history, service, and civic education.