



# Center for Civic Education

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## **Response to the May 16, 2007, Release of the 2006 National Assessment of Educational Progress Civics Report Card**

Today's release of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) *Civics Report Card* is a confirmation of the neglect that many professionals in the field of civic education have known about for many years: that the vast majority of our young people are either not taught civics and government at all, or they are taught too little, too late, and inadequately. The results confirm the fact that the past several decades of educational policy and practice have focused more and more on developing the worker at the expense of the citizen. These findings are grounds for concern, and they call for a national response to remedy a serious deficiency in the education of American citizens. A study by the Albert Shanker Institute in 2003 revealed that although most states note the importance of civic education in their constitutions and policies, only 50 percent of the states have taken initial steps to implement these policies. Under these conditions, how could students do anything but fail?

I will address four major topics in responding to the NAEP findings. They are as follows:

- (1) The inadequacy of existing curricular requirements, state standards and assessment
- (2) The lack of teacher preparation and expertise
- (3) The fact that research shows that well-designed programs in civics and government produce desirable results
- (4) The need to build upon the promising achievements of the Campaign to Promote Civic Education to ensure that education in civics and government is accorded the place in the curricula of our schools it deserves

### **1. Inadequate time and policy requirements, state standards, and assessment**

#### **Curricular Requirements**

Educators recognize that important and complex subjects such as mathematics, science, history, and language arts should be taught rigorously and with increasing sophistication from the elementary through the secondary years of school. Yet, this does not occur with civics and government. Today, most students who make it to their senior year get a one-semester course in civics that might well be the only explicit attention to

civics they have received in their 12 or 13 years of schooling. Unfortunately, this is too little and too late. Add the 15 percent of students who are not required to take a civics course to the 15 percent who drop out before the twelfth grade, and we find that many who arguably need civic education the most do not get it at all. Furthermore, imagine limiting the teaching of mathematics or a foreign language, for example, to one semester in the twelfth grade. How competent in these subjects would students become?

Even when students do receive instruction in civics and government over a number of years, it is often repetitive and does not progress sequentially from a basic to an increasingly sophisticated treatment of the subject. Nor should it be taught solely as an academic subject; it should be treated as a matter of participation and practice.

Civic education must not merely exist in our schools; it must occupy a prominent role. It must be given enough attention for its demonstrable, beneficial effects to occur. This requires, among other things, that

- Education in civics and government should be seen as a central purpose of education
- Civics and government should be seen as a core subject on a level with others, such as history, geography, mathematics, and science
- Civics and government should be taught explicitly and systematically from kindergarten through the twelfth grade either as separate units and courses or as a component of courses in other subjects

## **State Standards**

It is also essential for states to review existing civics or social studies standards to make sure they are clear and challenging statements designed to promote the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for competent and responsible participation in our constitutional democracy.

In examining state standards, it is useful for policymakers to refer to the study by the late Paul Gagnon titled *In Pursuit of a Civic Core*, which was supported by the Albert Shanker Institute. Gagnon found that despite many good efforts, state standards for secondary-level social studies subjects are either too vague or the topic lists are so long as to be impractical to teach.

## **Assessment**

We must ensure that civics is assessed with the same frequency as mathematics, science, reading, or any other core subject. Unfortunately, if civics is not assessed, the probability that it will be taught is greatly reduced. This has a distorting effect on the entire civics curriculum. Furthermore, we need to pursue more innovative assessment models, including performance-based assessment, that more accurately capture student knowledge, skills, and the dispositions they need to be informed and active citizens.

## **2. Lack of teacher preparation and inadequate instruction**

Teacher expertise has been shown to be one of the most important factors in raising student achievement. One study found that nearly 40 percent of the differences in student test scores were attributable to differences in teacher expertise, as measured by college degrees, years of teaching experience, and scores on teacher licensing examinations.

Unfortunately, teacher quality is a particularly acute problem in the social studies. The problem of out-of-field teaching, or teachers being assigned to teach subjects that do not match their training or education, is widespread and serious. It happens in considerably more than half of the secondary schools in the nation in any given year, both rural and urban, affluent and low income. More than half of all secondary school history students in the country now are being taught by teachers with neither a major nor a minor in history. No data currently are available on the subject-matter qualifications of teachers of civics and government, but one could surmise that the number of teachers with majors or minors in political science or allied fields would be even less.

One factor that diminishes the role of civic education in our schools is that many of our teachers have not had enough coursework themselves in such relevant fields as political science, political history, and constitutional law. And far too many teachers do not have opportunities for professional development that could help keep them abreast of new scholarship in their field. Therefore we must provide both pre-service and in-service training so teachers can master the content and teaching methods they need to bring the subject to life.

## **3. Good programs and dedicated teachers yield desirable results**

There is abundant evidence that good civic education programs produce desirable results. When students receive a sustained and systematic education in civics by skilled and dedicated teachers, they become more knowledgeable about, and interested in, their government. They also are more likely to participate, more tolerant of those who differ, and more committed to fundamental values and principles.

Many effective civic education programs exist in our country, including those administered by the Center; Street Law, Inc.; the Constitutional Rights Foundation; the American Bar Association; Close Up, and many other organizations that are helping students gain the important citizenship knowledge and skills they need. Unfortunately, these effective programs do not reach enough of our students because there is not sufficient time and policy support for their inclusion in the regular school curriculum.

An example of the positive impact these programs can have on students is the participation of students in the Center's **We the People: The Citizen and Constitution** National Finals, a three-day academic competition involving classes from each state and a total of about 1,200 students. The competition tests students' knowledge of constitutional issues and their contemporary relevance. Surveys conducted annually from 1999 to 2005 reveal that high school students who compete in

this event possess significantly greater knowledge of American democratic institutions and processes than the average American citizen.

Students surveyed in 2006 outperformed the national sample of high school students participating in NAEP in every category of civic knowledge delineated in the survey. Other surveys, such as one conducted by the National Conference of State Legislatures in 2003, found that students who have taken a civics course are “two or three times more likely to vote, follow government, and contact a public official about an issue that concerns them.” Other prominent studies reveal the positive connection between civic education and the development of civic knowledge, civic skills, civic engagement, and dispositions that are necessary for the healthy functioning of our political system.

**We the People** alumni, surveyed in 2004–05 following the presidential election, voted at higher rates than their peers, paid greater attention to the news, worked for candidates, and engaged in other political activities at much higher rates than other people their age. Sixty-five percent of **We the People** alumni thought that influencing the U.S. political structure is essential or very important, in contrast to only 20 percent of college freshmen.

#### **4. Campaign to Promote Civic Education**

In 1998, the last year the NAEP *Civics Report Card* was released, the Center issued a clarion call to professionals and policymakers in the fields of civics and government about the need for a national movement to improve civic education. I am pleased to report that the Center’s Campaign to Promote Civic Education has generated such a national movement to mobilize state efforts across the nation to improve civic education policy and practice. The campaign was given a significant boost by the convening of four consecutive Congressional Conferences on Civic Education, sponsored by the Alliance for Representative Democracy. The Alliance consists of three leading national organizations: the Center for Civic Education, the Center on Congress at Indiana University, and the National Conference of State Legislatures. The joint leadership of the Congress has served as the honorary hosts of the conferences for all four years.

Each state and the District of Columbia has sent delegations to the congressional conferences composed of educators and influential policymakers. These state delegations have in turn formed active campaign coalitions that are working to strengthen civic education policies and practice. The achievements of the state campaign coalitions over the past four years are evidence of the growing recognition of the need to improve civic education on the part of educators and state policymakers. These achievements include the following:

- Arizona, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Nebraska, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, and West Virginia have created officially sanctioned state commissions on civic education or civic literacy
- Twenty-nine measures supporting effective civic learning have passed legislatures in twenty-two states

- Twenty-six states have held state-level summit conferences on the importance of effective civic education
- Florida, West Virginia, and Idaho are among the states that have increased course requirements in civic education

I am also pleased to note other national efforts to strengthen civic education, such as the work of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at the University of Maryland to conduct and sponsor research in civic education, the National Conference on Citizenship, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, and the National Center for Learning and Citizenship at the Education Commission of the States, which is developing model service-learning and civic education policies. These organizations are adding immeasurably to the field and should be commended for their efforts.

## **Conclusion**

To remedy the findings in the NAEP survey, it is imperative that civic education be restored to equal importance with workplace preparation as a principal goal of public education. To restore the civic mission of schools, several shortcomings in policies and classroom practice must be remedied—inadequate policy support and curricular requirements or insufficient implementation of existing policy, lack of effective teacher preparation, and the distorting effects on the entire curriculum resulting from the focus on testing in math and reading.

The Founders of this great nation knew that participation alone is not enough. The realization of the promises of our democracy—and even its viability—depends upon the capacities and character of our citizens. Participation must be enlightened by knowledge and understanding guided by a commitment to the fundamental values and principles so eloquently set forth in essential documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Gettysburg Address, and the speeches and letters of such figures as Martin Luther King Jr.

Each generation must be taught anew through systematic, rigorous, and stimulating instruction in civic education. All of America's children must be ensured a clear understanding of their rights and responsibilities as citizens and recognize the importance of civic participation. Our schools bear a special and historic responsibility to make this a reality. But it is the collective responsibility of us all—policymakers, educational and business leaders, parents, and concerned citizens—to help our schools meet this challenge by providing the resources and policy support they need. America's youth, the next generation that will assume the responsibility of governing our great nation, deserve no less than our greatest efforts to achieve this worthy goal.