

# **Character Development and Democratic Citizenship**

*A presentation by*  
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Americans have never doubted that the development of character and democratic citizenship are closely linked. John Adams, one of the nation's founding fathers, wrote in 1780, what is now the oldest functioning written constitution in the world. In that Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Adams advanced two powerful arguments for both character and civic education. Interestingly enough, subsequent scholarly writing and research has corroborated Adams' basic contentions. Adams insisted that the state has an obligation to educate its citizens because:

1. "Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue diffused generally among the body of people is necessary for the preservation of rights and liberties." In other words, if a people wants to be free and to enjoy the rights and liberties that characterize a democratic society, the people—all of them—must be educated. It's not enough for a society to educate only the elite or only males, "wisdom, knowledge, and virtue" must be "diffused generally."
2. Schools, private societies, and public institutions—all have an obligation "to inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and

frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings, sincerity, good humor, and all social affections, and generous sentiments among the people.”\*

Adams’ language may be that of the eighteenth century, but his message is as pertinent today as it was when it was written. It is both refreshing and perhaps surprising to see that a man of that time called for an educational mission that presaged many of today’s mission statements. Adams not only called for the education of those whose gender or family station in life might mark them for positions of leadership. He called for “the **general** diffusion of wisdom, knowledge, **and** virtue.” A purpose of education is to impart knowledge and to evoke wisdom. **But it must do more than that.** Education is seen as a process that must nurture “the principles of humanity and general benevolence.” It must include virtues such as honesty, charity, sincerity, and even good humor—and for a very good reason. A democratic society is a social compact in which the whole people covenants with each citizen and each citizen with the whole people. Such covenants can only be entered into by an educated citizenry imbued with virtue, as well as with wisdom and knowledge.

More than two centuries have elapsed since John Adams penned his clarion call for character *and* citizenship education. He understood the connection between private or personal traits of character and public or civic virtue. He cautioned that if a nation wishes to be free and democratic it must rely on the knowledge, wisdom, and virtue of all of its people. He also realized that both character and citizenship are learned behaviors. No one is born knowing right from wrong any more than knowing what a democratic citizen is or how a democratic citizen should act. It is interesting to note that what Adams understood and expressed continues to be underscored by the United States most recent presidents. Consider the 1996 State of the Union Address in which President Bill Clinton insisted that every school should teach character

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\* Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Chapter 6, Section 2.

education, good values, *and* good citizenship, or George W. Bush's second inaugural address. In it he, too, urged character education, and he called on his fellow Americans to be "citizens not spectators."

The pairing of character and civic education also is echoed in the work of present day scholars and curriculum developers. They may "modernize" the language they use, but they essentially endorse the same concepts. As an example, consider the "Six Pillars of Character" identified by the well-known "Character Counts" program. Those pillars are

- Trustworthiness,
- Respect,
- Responsibility,
- Fairness,
- Caring, *and*
- Citizenship.

We today speak of caring where Adams spoke of benevolence. We today speak of responsibility which Adams called "honesty and punctuality" in one's dealings with others. What Adams described as "social affections and generous sentiments among the people," we today would encompass in the concept of a caring community.

While conviction about the need for and connection between character education and democratic citizenship remains unchanged and enduring, there are some imperatives to which we currently need to be attentive.

- First, there is what William Damon, the Director of the Center of Adolescence at Stanford University, calls "a new wind blowing." He writes:  
"We have entered a new era in character education, marked by broad public

acceptance of the ideas and endorsements by top elected officials of opposing political parties. This is a good start, a window of opportunity that could stay open long enough to allow worthwhile efforts to enter. But all such windows eventually shut, if worthwhile efforts stall or get pushed aside by less serious ones.”\*

- Second, we need to be wary of what are called “skin deep” character and civic education programs. Such programs do nothing more than post slogans on classroom bulletin boards or exhort students to be “good citizens.” They are content when students merely recite virtuous words such as honesty, respect, or compassion that do nothing more than pass in one ear and out the other. Such half-hearted messages mock character and citizenship education. Young people will reject or neglect ideas that adults present superficially or ambivalently. Adolescents are brilliant at picking up subtexts. Character and citizenship education must have a positive side. It must elicit a deep understanding of and a voluntary commitment to the values and principles essential to a democratic society. Character and citizenship education also must call for and provide opportunities to be civically engaged, to serve others, and to promote the common good.
- Third, we need to be attentive to long-term trend data about civic health. When an American blue-ribbon Commission on Civic Renewal issued its report in 1998, it recommended an annual civic health index be promulgated. The Commission argued that just as an annual physical check-up is beneficial to individuals, so, too, would be a collective check-up on the nation’s health.” Happily, that recommendation was taken seriously, and last September 2006 a Civic Health Index for the United States

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\* William Damon, editor. *Bringing In A New Era in Character Education*. Stanford University, Hoover Institution Press, 2002, p. IX.

was released. It was a joint endeavor of the National Conference on Citizenship and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning—better known as CIRCLE. This Index includes a variety of civic indicators in an effort to alert Americans to lacks in their civic life, but it also is an index useful to people in other democratic societies. The Index is intended to inform and to motivate citizens, leaders, and policymakers such as you gathered here to strengthen and improve character and civic education in their own communities.

Nine of the Civic Index indicators to which we here should be particularly heedful are

- Connecting to Civic and Religious Groups or Membership in Civil Society,
- Trusting Other People,
- Connecting to Others through Family and Friends,
- Giving and Volunteering,
- Staying Informed,
- Understanding Civics and Politics,
- Participating in Politics,
- Trusting and Feeling Connected to Major Institutions, and
- Expressing Political Views.

The overall conclusions or key findings of the Index also should command our attention.

- “While there are some signs of civic recovery in the last few years, our civic health shows steep declines over the last thirty years.”
- “The most hopeful signs are a rebound in volunteering, especially youth volunteering, over the last decade and increasing political engagement since the late 1990s. But even these trends must be nurtured or they may fizzle out.”

- “Some aspects of civic health have modestly improved since 2000. Many more have worsened. And a few have remained stable.”\*

In short, the Index of Civic Health shows that we have a lot of work to do. It is imperative that we continue to develop not only the character traits that are essential to **personal** integrity, but those that go beyond the personal level to include a civic component. **Both** private and public character matter.

- Finally, we need to broaden our conception of what constitutes civic health today. We all have responsibilities for the civic health of our own schools, communities, and countries, but we also have responsibilities as citizens of the world community. We need to be engaged in promoting civic health more broadly. That means we need to be engaged in addressing the great problems of our times—problems that transcend national boundaries and national, ethnic, or religious allegiances. Our concerns should include
  - Fair access to resources from clean air and water to medical care and education,
  - Safeguarding the environment,
  - Ending all forms of discrimination because of gender, religion, or minority group membership,
  - Stemming corruption and addressing the problem of failing states,
  - Ensuring the rule of law, and
  - Promoting human rights and social justice.

To resolve those problems requires citizens of moral character and civic competence.

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\* America’s Civic Health Index. Broken Engagement. A Report by the National Conference on Citizenship in Association with CIRCLE and Saguaro Seminar, September 18, 2006.