



## **The Second Annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education**

A Project of the Alliance for  
Representative Democracy

*A presentation by*  
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### **The Status of Civic Education: Making the Case for a National Movement**

#### **The historic civic mission of the schools**

*A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to Farce or Tragedy or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own Governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. James Madison (1788)*

This quotation from James Madison and similar statements by thoughtful people throughout our history are evidence of the longstanding belief that our schools have a civic mission. This is the belief that from the earliest grades through the college years, our schools should be responsible for playing a significant role in the preparation of young people to become competent and responsible participants in our system of self-government.

Competent and responsible participation requires as a foundation a profound understanding of and a reasoned commitment to those fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy contained in such documents as our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, our Bill of Rights, and speeches such as Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. These fundamental values and principles of our system should serve citizens as a moral compass to guide their deliberations, positions, and participation.

#### **Are our schools fulfilling their civic mission?**

An acknowledgement of the civic mission of the schools raises the question of whether or to what degree our schools are fulfilling this mission. I am pleased to say that in my opinion the answer is not the resounding "No!" that some people give and many might expect. There are skilled, dedicated, and competent teachers and school administrators as well as effective school systems throughout the United States that are doing an

outstanding job of preparing our young people to participate competently and responsibly in our political system.

The results of these commendable efforts are substantiated by studies that show that civic education has a positive effect on civic knowledge, skills, and engagement. For example,

- A 1998 study by Professors Richard Niemi and Jane Junn showed that civic education increased civic and political knowledge.
- An extensive international study by Professor Judith Torney-Purta in 2001 revealed increased civic knowledge and civic engagement among students who studied civics-related topics in schools.
- A study sponsored by the National Conference of State Legislatures and presented at the first congressional conference in 2003 revealed that
  - Members of the younger generation who have taken a course in American government or civics see themselves as personally responsible for improving society, and they have a broader concept of the qualities of a good citizen.
  - These young people are two to three times more likely to vote, stay informed about public issues, and to contact a public official about an issue that concerns them.
  - Finally, in an excellent article entitled “Civic Education and Political Participation” published in the *Phi Delta Kappan*, Professor William Galston reports that “today’s young people are patriotic, tolerant, and compassionate. They believe in America’s principles and the American Dream”; “they are more willing to give of themselves to others”; and that “college freshmen are reporting significantly increased levels of volunteering.”

I believe that there is abundant evidence that good civic education produces desirable results. When students receive a sustained and systematic education in civics and government they become

- more knowledgeable about their government;
- more interested in politics and government;
- more knowledgeable about their own interests and more consistent in their views;
- more critical of politics and government, developing a healthy skepticism that does not alienate them from participation, but instead motivates them to participate in improving the system;
- more likely to participate in political and civic activities; and
- more committed to fundamental values and principles and more tolerant of those who differ.

We also know that there is abundant evidence that knowledgeable, skilled, and dedicated teachers are one of the most important factors, if not the most important single factor in providing a sound civic education for our students. You will have an opportunity to meet some outstanding teachers and their students later in this program when they demonstrate some examples of the many effective civic education programs that exist in our country today.

Although it is clear that many factors influence civic knowledge and civic involvement, such as the family, religious institutions, the community, and the media. Schools, however, are the most practical way for us to introduce programs that can have a positive effect on the more than 50 million students in our nation.

Given the well-documented and incontrovertible evidence of the positive impact of civic education, why are we here today? What are we worried about? The answer, stated briefly, is that too few of our students are receiving systematic and sound civic education and we must and can do better for our youth and our nation.

### **Civic knowledge**

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is conducted periodically in mathematics, reading, and science and less frequently in other subjects such as civics. It is a reliable test of the nationwide level of students' knowledge in such fields. NAEP focuses on knowledge and skills and not on civic attitudes, civic commitments, or civic engagement. The most recent NAEP test of civic knowledge reported in 1998 that only 25% of twelfth-grade students were proficient in civics and government. *Proficient* means that these students were considered to have an "adequate" knowledge of the field. These results are not acceptable. They reveal that 75% of our twelfth-grade students were below proficient; that is, they did not have adequate knowledge of their own system of government. And 35% of students scored at a level that indicated, in the words of Professor William Galston, "near total ignorance." This shortcoming is compounded by the fact that this was a test of twelfth-graders and that approximately 15% of our students do not complete high school. It is not unreasonable to assume that these students, typically the least privileged members of our society, have received little or no civic education at all, leaving them at a distinct disadvantage in the political arena.

There are a number of other studies that reveal shortcomings in our students' civic knowledge as well as their civic attitudes, skills, and engagement. I will not discuss those studies today, but you may find them documented in the materials that have been distributed at this conference and on the websites of some of our participants, such as the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), and the Center for Civic Education.

### **Civic participation or civic engagement**

According to studies that have been conducted by the University of California, Los Angeles, the political engagement of young people has diminished by about 50% since 1966. Studies have also revealed an increase in nonpolitical voluntarism among students who appear to see such activities as a desirable alternative to political involvement.

The increased engagement of young people in the recent election contrasts with this decades-old trend. A preliminary analysis of the participation of 18–30 year olds by CIRCLE indicates that the percentage of eligible voters aged 18–30 who voted increased,

in round figures, from 42% to 52%, a 10% increase from the election of 2000. In the ten most contested states, youth turnout was 63%, up 13% from 2000. In the remaining forty states, youth turnout was 47%. It should be noted that the increase in participation by this age group was paralleled by similar increases by other age groups and that despite the increase only about half of the 18-30 year olds voted.

The increase in participation among 18–30 year olds is certainly encouraging, but it is not grounds for complacency. Given what we know of the education of our youth, there remains the question of to what extent the participation of many of these young voters was well informed, was based on relevant criteria, represented a coherent political philosophy, and was guided by a commitment to basic values and principles of our constitutional democracy.

### **What needs to be done to provide sound civic education programs for all of our students?**

Before we can institute widespread improvement of civic education in our schools, we need to remedy some specific shortcomings. These include inadequate policy support, inadequate implementation of supportive policy, the lack of or inadequacy of standards in civics, inadequate curricular requirements, inadequate teacher preparation, and the lack of or inadequacies of assessment programs in civics.

A study sponsored by the Albert Shanker Institute in 2003 found that although most states note the importance of civic education in their constitutions and policies, only 50% of the states have at least partially fostered the implementation of these policies with adequate standards, curricular requirements, curricular materials, teacher preparation, and assessment programs.

When I first taught elementary school in the distant 1950s and 1960s, there was a place on the report card for history, civics, and geography that clearly conveyed the assumption that I would teach those subjects. In fact, until the 1960s, students were commonly required to take three semester-long courses in civics and government. Today it is rare to find a required course in civics at elementary and middle schools. When civics is required at the elementary and middle school levels, it is usually “infused” in the social studies curriculum, meaning that it is not treated rigorously, sequentially, or systematically and is often not even visible to the observer.

Today most students who make it to their senior year get a one-semester course in civics. Although this twelfth-grade course is often an elective, studies have shown that about 85% of our students who graduate from high school do take such a course. Unfortunately, this is too little and too late. Add to the 15% of students who do not take a civics course the 15% of the students who do not finish high school and we find that many of the students who arguably need civics 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?

Understanding politics and government in the United States and developing the capacity to participate competently and responsibly requires a far more systematic and sustained treatment of the subject such as what is required in math and reading.

One factor that diminishes the role of civic education in our schools and the effective implementation of what is provided is the preparation of too many of our teachers who have not had enough coursework themselves in such relevant fields as political science, political history, and constitutional law. And far too many of our teachers do not have opportunities for professional development which could help keep them abreast of new scholarship in their field. A second factor is the call for accountability and widespread testing in mathematics and reading which tends to crowd out other subjects.

The Education Commission of the States' National Center for Learning and Citizenship (NCLC) State Policies for Citizenship Education Database is an excellent source for information on state policies and civic education. The database, available at [www.ecs.org/citizenshipeducationdatabase](http://www.ecs.org/citizenshipeducationdatabase), provides descriptions of state policies that support citizenship education for K–12 students and allows users to generate profiles of individual states' policies for citizenship education, create comparisons of specific types of citizenship education state policies across several states, and view reports on state policies for citizenship education.

### **The national movement to improve civic education**

The first congressional conference brought together delegations from the states and delegates-at-large that are similar and in many cases the same as those here today. The conference closed with a nearly unanimous approval of a mission statement and a dedication to follow up the conference with the implementation of action plans to further the civic mission of the schools at the state and local levels. We are pleased to note that the congressional leadership lent their names to this initiative, the only time in history this has been done on behalf of a subject area. This Second Annual Congressional Congress on Civic Education should be seen in the light of a growing and increasingly effective movement at the local, state, and national levels to improve civic education in our nation's schools.

This effort to improve civic education, led by the Alliance for Representative Democracy—composed of the Center on Congress at Indiana University, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the Center for Civic Education—is one significant component of a nationwide effort that includes parallel and cooperative efforts from both the public and private sectors at local, state, and national levels.

Other prominent and productive elements of this movement at the national level include the following:

- The Bush Administration's recognition of the importance of civic education and its sponsorship of the first White House Conference on History, Civics, and Service. The administration has also launched an initiative in history and civics

entitled “We the People” that is administered by the National Endowment for the Humanities and funded by Congress.

- The First Annual National Conference on Citizenship, which convened on December 3, 2004 and hosted by the Honorable John Bridgeland, Assistant to the President of the U.S. and Director of both the Domestic Policy Council and USA Freedom Corps
- The work of CIRCLE to conduct and sponsor research in civic education and foster communication among leaders the field. Their publication the *Civic Mission of the Schools* is a landmark in the field.
- The establishment of the Civic Mission of the Schools (CMS), funded by the Carnegie Corporation and led by former Congressman David Skaggs of Colorado. The CMS project is funding efforts to promote the civic mission of the schools in a number of states represented here today.
- The bill introduced by Senator Lamar Alexander and Congressman Roger Wicker to support the establishment of national academies in history and civics for teachers and students.
- Finally, the work of the Alliance for Representative Democracy, the conveners of this conference, which has been cooperating with national organizations and leaders at the state and local levels since the first congressional conference. Some of the principal achievements of participants from last year’s conference are as follows:
  - In thirty-four states, teams have developed inclusive coalitions of policymakers and representatives of educational institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and the media. The principal purpose of these coalitions is to promote the adoption of policies that support civic education and then support their implementation.
  - In nineteen states, teams are conducting benchmark surveys to determine what needs to be done to improve civic education. The results of these surveys are brought to the attention of policymakers at district and state levels.
  - In twenty states, teams have hosted, or soon will host summit conferences, joint legislative sessions, and symposia similar to this congressional conference.
  - In eight states, supportive legislation has been introduced. Legislation has passed in Kentucky, Louisiana, and Utah.

The achievements of these state delegations over the past year are evidence that there is growing recognition of the need to improve civic education. There is increased support at local and state levels for such improvement. Together, efforts at local, state, and national levels now constitute a national movement in this field.

## **Conclusion**

Although the federal government and national organizations can provide assistance, the capacity and responsibility to improve civic education lie at state and local levels, which is why we have created and sponsored this series of conferences to bring together leaders

from all of our states. I hope that this conference and the continued support that will be generated by it will result in civic education gaining its rightful place in the curricula of schools throughout the nation. Civic education can help preserve and improve our system of self-government and narrow the gap between the ideals of our nation and our achievement of those ideals.