

Promoting Civic Behavior through Civic Education

Richard A. Nuccio, Director of Civitas International Programs at the Center for Civic Education, discusses the experience of one NGO in promoting the return of civic education to a central place in a nation's schools

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The education of young people to assume their responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society should be the central mission of schools. For many contemporary educators this assertion may appear debatable in first part of the 21st century, but it would not have been for most of the history of the public education system in the United States. The primary impetus for establishing public schools in the United States was to educate a diverse American population into a literate and informed citizenry. Our public school system was established in order to make Americans one people, or as it says on the Great Seal of the United States printed on the back of each dollar bill, E Pluribus Unum, Out of Many, One.

In his farewell address, our first President, George Washington, argued for the creation of “institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge” and made a classic argument for investing in education in a democratic society. These were his words: “In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened.”

Let me put his words in more contemporary English for the sake of translation.

Washington was arguing that if the voice of the people is to be given significant weight in government then the people must be educated to play an enlightened and responsible role. The development of the American public school system in the 19th century was based on this vision that all education had civic purposes and that every teacher was a civics teacher. Evidence of the centrality of that vision to our school system is the fact that 40 of our 50 state constitutions underline the importance of civic literacy; 13 state constitutions identify the central purpose of their educational system as promoting good citizenship, democracy, and free government.[1]

The origin of the U.S. public school system in the search for civic literacy and virtue contrasts with the diverse missions these school systems identify as central today. Those missions include preparing students to be good economic units in an industrial production process; making students “happy” and “well-rounded;” preparing them to compete with other nations in science and math to ensure our technological and military superiority; and many others. Instead of occupying a central role in schools, civic education is relegated to the fringes of the educational curriculum, if it is included at all.

On May 16, 2007 the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Report Card was issued. In the words of the Center for Civic Education's Executive

Director, Charles N. Quigley, the NAEP study

...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.[2]

Those of us who are advocates for the centrality of civic education in schools believe that there is a relationship between the drift of civic education to the periphery of our schools' curriculum and the declining health of our democracy. Unfortunately, there are many signs of ill health in our democratic society. Increasing numbers of Americans are disengaged from civic and political institutions such as voluntary associations, religious congregations, community-based organizations, and political and electoral activities such as voting and being informed about public issues. Young people embody these trends and are less likely to vote and less interested in political discussion and public issues than either their older counterparts or young people of past decades.

As an advocate for civic education I believe that citizenship must be learned and can be taught. For me and for the Center for Civic Education the restoration of a vibrant democratic society in the United States must focus on the school-based education of young people in the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens. That is a task in which we have been engaged in the United States for some 40 years. What we have learned during that time is that the defects of traditional civic education, which allowed it to be so easily driven from prominence in the school curriculum, must be corrected if we are to restore civic education to its rightful place.

A new model of civic education must place the student at the center of the learning process. It must use good curriculum materials that encourage critical thinking, teamwork, and interaction with classmates, teachers, parents, and the community. Teachers must receive high quality training in the use of materials and in how to collaborate with students in their own education.

Descriptions of Project Citizen and Foundations of Democracy

Project Citizen, one of the Center's signature curriculum materials, reflects this improved model of civic education. It is used in more than 60 countries and is the Center's most widely adapted and implemented curriculum. Project Citizen equips students with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required for competent and responsible participation in the political life of their communities. It engages students in a series of structured, cooperative learning activities guided by teachers and adult volunteers.

Project Citizen has been recognized as a model community service program. An

independent assessment of civic education programs funded by USAID from 1990 through 2000 found that Project Citizen had many of the characteristics of the most effective civic education programs. “It is highly participatory, it relates to issues that affect the participants in their daily lives, it produces tangible as well as intangible results, and it is firmly rooted in the community in which it takes place.”[3] The author also notes that the program provides students with a variety of research and communication skills that inform their participation, teach consensus-building and teamwork, and enhance their sense of efficacy as community members.

Working in teams, students learn to interact with their government and community leaders through a five-step process that entails: (1) identifying a public policy problem in their community; (2) gathering and evaluating information about the problem; (3) examining and evaluating alternative solutions; (4) selecting and developing a public policy proposal to address the problem; and (5) developing an action plan to bring their proposed solution to authorities with the power to implement it.

Project Citizen typically culminates with a simulated public hearing. Students’ work is displayed in a class portfolio containing a display section and documentation section. Students present their proposals to panels of representatives of their community, often including representatives of governmental agencies and civil society organizations. As many as 50% of Project Citizen classes worldwide implement their action plans and approximately 20% are implemented by governments.

Project Citizen was designed initially to respond to a perceived need for greater knowledge of local government in the United States. It also reflected a concern that by focusing on national governmental institutions other curricula ignored the decentralized nature of American society and governmental authority. Students needed to understand their local governments better and to develop the skills necessary to interact with local authorities.

For a program that was developed initially for an American context, Project Citizen has proven remarkably adaptable to other cultures. It has been introduced as a curriculum to some 70 countries and is being actively implemented in more than 60 on every inhabited continent. Although it flourishes in fully democratic societies, it has been adopted and is being used in many “hybrid” societies in which authoritarian governmental institutions and political cultures coexist with modernizing and reformist structures.

Foundations of Democracy is a K-12 curricular program based on concepts fundamental to an understanding of politics and government, such as authority, privacy, responsibility, and justice. This multidisciplinary program draws upon such fields as political philosophy, political science, law, history, literature, and environmental studies to promote understanding, civic competence and responsible democratic citizenship.

* The Authority curriculum helps students (1) distinguish between authority and power, (2) examine different sources of authority, (3) use reasonable criteria for selecting people for positions of authority and for evaluating rules and laws, (4) analyze the benefits and

costs of authority, and (5) evaluate, take, and defend positions on the proper scope and limits of authority.

- The Privacy curriculum helps students (1) understand the importance of privacy in a free society, (2) analyze the benefits and costs of privacy, and (3) evaluate, take, and defend positions on the proper scope and limits of privacy.

- The Responsibility curriculum helps students (1) understand the importance of responsibility in a free society, (2) analyze the benefits and costs of responsibility, (3) evaluate, take, and defend positions on how conflicts among competing responsibilities should be resolved, and (4) evaluate, take, and defend positions on personal responsibility.

- The Justice curriculum helps students (1) understand and apply the basic principles of justice set forth in fundamental documents of democratic political and legal systems, (2) evaluate, take, and defend positions on the fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of society, on fair responses to remedy wrongs and injuries, and on fair procedures for gathering information and making decisions.

A brief review of the adoption of the Center's civic education programs region by region may help to explain why they have become such powerful tools for change.[4]

Central and Eastern Europe. The Center's programs and Project Citizen in particular were promoted internationally by the Clinton Administration's foreign policy as a way to respond to the emergence of numerous countries into democratic practice after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It fit into the existing school curriculum easily because countries such as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and the Baltic states had "gaps" in their curricula that previously were filled by courses on Marxism-Leninism. Clearly, that subject matter was irrelevant to newly emerging democracies. Project Citizen served as a rapid response to the need to establish a curriculum based on democratic values and practices.

In many societies, including the United States, civic education is contaminated by its association with traditional approaches to citizenship education that emphasize rote learning of national symbols and passive acceptance of governmental authority. Clearly, this could have been a problem for courses inserted into a space in the curriculum previously occupied by a discredited ideology imposed by an occupying power. However, Project Citizen because of its focus on the involvement and creativity of students in the learning process met with enthusiastic response on the part of most teachers and students. It did not "preach" democratic values, but rather showed students, teachers, parents, and the broader school and community how these values could be practiced to solve problems of significance to the students.

Latin America and the Caribbean. The Latin American and Caribbean region was another area experiencing a wave of democratic values and practices in the 1990s. In this case the region had not been subjected to an external ideology, but was emerging from years of military dictatorship, authoritarian rule, and civil war. Although democracy had long

been a part of Latin America's philosophical tradition and its constitutions and formal institutions sometimes aped Anglo Saxon models, practical politics often departed substantially from democratic ideals. Deep social and economic inequalities, lack of literacy and formal schooling, and a tradition of corruption by public figures all contributed to an extremely weak democratic political culture. Project Citizen did not find gaps in an existing curriculum that it could readily fill. Rather its appeal seems to have been due to the need to provide concrete examples of the practical advantages of democracy.

The Project Citizen curriculum faced problems in Latin America shared with many other cultures in which the language itself cannot easily express the concept of authoritative decisions taken by public institutions that affect significant numbers of people; what we call "public policy" in the English language. Neither Spanish, Portuguese, nor French, the most widely used languages in the region, distinguish between "politics" (the tactics and strategy of amassing and using power) and "public policy" (debating, creating, and implementing decisions that affect the public) and often require use of an English phrase or an extended definition to explain the concept. The region also does not have a tradition of drawing clear distinctions between the public and private spheres of life, another factor making explanation of public policy issues difficult. Project Citizen has, however, been able to overcome these obstacles and is used in more than 14 countries throughout the region.

Asia. The wide acceptance of Project Citizen throughout some of the most populous states of Asia provides one answer to the question of whether Asian "culture" is not suited to the theory and practice of "Western" liberal democracy. In only two years Project Citizen has grown from a limited pilot program to one that is used by hundreds of thousands of students in China and India. These two countries present quite different contexts for the introduction of civic education curricula. China has made a successful transition to a market economy within a formally Communist political system. Marxism-Leninism remains a formal part of the school curriculum, but is widely seen as anachronistic and irrelevant to the future direction of the country. School authorities at the provincial level, where most educational decisions are made and funded in China, are concerned that they may be raising a generation of children who reject the formal citizenship and value education they receive, but receive no alternative within the educational system. Project Citizen, used as an extracurricular subject, does not challenge the existing civic education structure directly, but offers a modern, engaging, and substantive alternative to it. At a recent training of teachers for a pilot Project Citizen program in a province of more than 80 million inhabitants, the number two educational official for the province admonished the teachers to take their training seriously as "what you are doing today will prepare our students to make the next important transition for China from an authoritarian system to one based on democracy and the respect for human rights." [5]

India, the world's largest democracy, has no fear of vibrant debate or expressions of public opinion. However, the size of its enormous political system and wide disparities of income and opportunity give few Indian children experience in grassroots democracy.

Indian educators were skeptical initially that the United States had much to offer to India in the field of democracy education. However, when they saw Project Citizen's implementation in neighboring countries such as Malaysia they recognized its potential contribution to Indian students. Project Citizen has spread there from pilot projects in eleven schools to hundreds of schools throughout the country. Most recently, it has been adopted by the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya (JNV) schools, founded by assassinated former prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi. The JNV schools are free academies with the mission of providing a good quality, modern education to talented children predominantly from rural areas. Many of the children are the first in their families to attend school.

Africa. African independence brought with it a wave of optimism and experiments in democratic rule that did not often endure. African schools usually reflected the repressive patterns of behavior practiced in the wider culture. Literacy levels are low and delivery of basic government services, including education, weak. Still, the Center's programs have found an enthusiastic audience in many African countries including Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Malawi, Mauritius, and others. Africa is one of only two regions that have so far held regional Project Citizen showcases.

Arab Civitas. You will hear from colleagues about the state of civic education in Jordan and Morocco. I will direct my comments specifically to the development and growth of Arab Civitas, a regional network of civic educators in the Arab Middle East and North Africa. Arab Civitas has its origin in a Civic Education Conference held at the Dead Sea, Jordan in 2003 where civic educators from a number of Arab countries pledged their support for a regional network to promote civic awareness of Arab persons and their aspirations in such a way that they will become active citizens who are aware of their rights and responsibilities and those of others.

From an initial three countries, Egypt, Jordan, and the West Bank and Gaza, Arab Civitas has grown into a network that includes Morocco, Lebanon, Yemen, Tunisia, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and the UAE. There are in general terms three levels of progress among the Arab Civitas countries. Jordan and Morocco have extensive national programs and broad support from educational authorities at the regional and national level. Lebanon, Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, and Algeria had had successful pilots of either Project Citizen and/or Foundations of Democracy and are working to develop national implementation of their activities. The remaining countries have introduced successfully Project Citizen or Foundations materials into selected schools. They face obstacles to national implementation either from limited funding and/or tentative support by national authorities.[6]

As in other parts of the world, the Center's Arab Civitas programs attract a talented group of reformers from backgrounds in journalism and civil society as well as the education field. They share common goals of wishing to improve the democratic participation of young people in their national life. The Arab Civitas network is a model of regional cooperation and is held up by the Center as an example to be emulated by other regions. Morocco should be as proud as we are at the Center of the outstanding

work being done by Elarbi Imad, the president of the Moroccan Center for Civic Education, who is finishing his term as the elected president of the Arab Civitas Board of Country Program Directors. Mr. Imad has represented Morocco and Arab Civitas at events in many countries, including Malaysia, the United States, and most recently Argentina, where he spoke to some 200 participants from 57 countries and 23 states at the Center's eleventh World Congress on Civic Education. The World Congress brings together civic educators from around the world who work with Center materials to share best practices and motivate each other to even greater achievements.

I hope that my remarks have given you some sense of the worldwide movement that civic education has become. The growth of that movement has inspired us to organize the first ever showcase of Project Citizen this summer in Washington, DC from July 14 to 18. More than 20 countries have committed themselves to raising the funds necessary to bring teams of eight students and two teachers/advisers to the event. An independent documentary filmmaker, Patrick Davidson, has decided to make the work of students around the world in Project Citizen the subject of a feature length film. He has just returned from filming in Indonesia, India, Jordan, Russia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Senegal, Colombia, and the United States where he is following the stories of those eight teams as they prepare for the showcase in Washington. Their participation in this summer's International Project Citizen Showcase will be the culminating event for the film due for release in 2008.

Unfortunately, the NAEP Report Card on Civics mentioned at the beginning of my remarks makes clear that the United States is not a model to be emulated. To the contrary, it emphasizes the inadequacy of civic education in my own country and the urgent need we have to restore health to our democratic system through greater attention to the education of the young for democratic citizenship.

The positive message I bring from the United States, however, is the lessons we have learned in our struggle to create a better model of civic education and to encourage its adoption in the United States. I can also assure you that over the last decade our Center has demonstrated that curriculum materials and teacher training techniques originally developed for US students and classrooms have great validity in translation and adaptation in other countries.

Here in Morocco in the short period since the first pilots were begun, thousands of students are participating in Project Citizen. They are identifying problems in their communities, challenging their teachers and public officials to live up to their responsibilities, and linking in solidarity their activities in the classroom, with their schools, families, communities, and local governments.

We at the Center have been overwhelmed by the positive response of Morocco to our programs. On behalf of the Center and of our executive director, Chuck Quigley, thank you for inviting the Center to work with you. We look forward to a long and productive relationship.

Endnotes

[1] The Civic Mission of the Schools, Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Education, 2003.

[2] Charles N. Quigley, Executive Director, Center for Civic Education, "Response to the May 16, 2007, Release of the 2006 National Assessment of Educational Progress Civics Report Card" Center for Civic Education, May 16, 2007

[3] Franca Brilliant, "Civic Education Assessment—Stage II. Civic Education Programming Since 1990—A Case Study Analysis." A Report for the U.S. Agency for International Development by Management Systems International. 2000, p. 38.

[4] It should be noted that the Center for Civic Education does not view adoption of Project Citizen or Foundations materials as a substitute for the development of a national curriculum by a country's educational system. Rather PC and Foundations can help to initiate a reform of civic education that could take many years and significant financing to complete. A fuller discussion of the strategy pursued by the Center domestically and internationally can be found in a publication available on the Center's web site entitled, "Guidelines for Country Coordinators in the Development of Plans to Promote the Sustainability/Institutionalization of Comprehensive Civic Education Programs in a Nation's Schools," Center for Civic Education, May 2007.

[5] Recorded by the author at a training session in October 2006. Unfortunately, the name and location of the official cannot be provided without some risk.

[6] The Center's work with the Teacher Creativity Center in Ramallah faces the additional problem of restrictions on the use of US funds since the election of the Hamas government. Civic education work with Center materials continues in the Palestinian territories, however, with non-US funding and outside formal school settings.