



# The Return of Civic Education

NCLB is only the latest nail in the coffin of civic education, whose demise began in the 1960s. However, Mr. Walling reports, organizations such as the Center for Civic Education are beginning to achieve success in their efforts to revive the subject.

BY DONOVAN R. WALLING

**T**'S STANDING room only in the fourth-floor hearing room in California's state capitol. The packed gallery is hushed. Five individuals in dark suits sit at a long table in front of a three-judge panel. The judges pepper them with tough questions, but these witnesses' answers are complete, succinct, and utterly convincing. When the grilling ends, the gallery erupts in applause.

No one clamors for order because this is not just another hearing in Sacramento. The "witnesses" are high school seniors, and the "hearing" is part of an academic competition testing students' knowledge of the Constitution and other founding documents at the *We the People* state finals.

*We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution* is a core civics curriculum developed by the Center for Civic Education for fourth- through 12th-grade students. It is designed to teach students about their constitutional heritage so that they will become knowledgeable, thoughtful citizens of our democracy, and it does so in a way that is engaging and exciting.

The California finalists' enthusiasm bears witness. Usually this degree of excitement among high school students is associated with annual athletic tournaments. But this is State with a capital S. The students have come to Sacramento in February from across California, some 350 high-schoolers (mostly seniors), along with their teachers and coaches and many of their par-

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ents. They represent 12 schools, all regional winners, from communities large and small, wealthy and poor. The class of 15 students that takes first place at State will join winning classes from the other 49 states and the District of Columbia — nearly 1,200 students in all — when the national finals take place in Washington, D.C., in April. This annual sequence of hearings and competitions has been going on for 20 years.

For these students in these schools, civic education is alive and thriving. This isn't universally true across the country. But civic education is making a comeback. It's returning from a wilderness also populated by the arts, social studies in general, physical education, and all of the other subjects that fall outside the narrow national focus prescribed by No Child Left Behind, subjects that once were deemed vital for a well-rounded, dare I use the term "liberal," education. As prominent civic education scholar Margaret Stimmann Branson recently commented, "Although No Child Left Behind legislation speaks of 'core learning,' only reading and mathematics are used as measures of schools' success. Science is a poor third. And civic education is forgotten."<sup>1</sup>

## THE DECLINE OF CIVIC EDUCATION

Truth be told, civic education began wandering in the curricular wilderness in the 1960s, when, according to Center for Civic Education Executive Director Charles Quigley, "Vietnam and then Watergate brought disenchantment, rebellion, experimentation, a loss of faith in traditional institutions and traditional leaders, the breakup of consensus, the weakening of the core culture," and ultimately the erosion of curricular requirements in civic education.<sup>2</sup> In 1990 the National Assess-

ment of Educational Progress “Report Card in Civics” concluded that America’s students had only a superficial knowledge of civics. But it wasn’t until the late 1990s that many educators began to take notice.

In 2002 the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), in partnership with the Carnegie Corporation of New York, convened a series of meetings involving leading scholars and civic education practitioners to consider the current state of young people’s civic learning and engagement. The participants’ conclusions and recommendations were summarized in a 2003 report titled *The Civic Mission of Schools*. The authors stated the matter bluntly: “School-based civic education is in decline.”<sup>3</sup>

“The movement for high-stakes testing,” the authors wrote, “has had a huge impact on education nationally: schools are under unprecedented pressure to raise student achievement, which is now measured by standardized examinations of reading and mathematics.” They further noted, “Even the National Assessment of Educational Progress in civics, sometimes called the ‘nation’s report card,’ is offered only about once every ten years.”<sup>4</sup>

It would be easy simply to blame NCLB, which must share some responsibility for the marginalization of civic education. But there are other reasons why civic education was shoved into the curricular wilderness. In addition to the factors cited by Quigley, the CIRCLE report points to fear of criticism “or even litigation” if teachers choose to tackle topics that “may be considered controversial or political,”<sup>5</sup> budget cuts that target school-based extracurricular programs (such as the *We the People* hearings), and school administrations that discourage experimentation with alternative approaches to civic education, such as giving students greater voice in school governance.

But the key reason that the CIRCLE report cites is lack of institutional commitment to formal civic education. Today’s high school students often graduate having taken only one semester of government, “compared to as many as three courses in democracy, civics, and government that were common until the 1960s.”<sup>6</sup> It is no surprise that students’ knowledge and civic engagement have declined.

However, the report’s authors do not advocate a return to the stereotypical civics classes in which teachers concentrate on “the minutiae of federal legislative procedures or election law” — a move, they say, more likely to alienate students from political participation than to engage them. Instead, the report suggests strategies such as a focus on “civic outcomes” (what it means

to vote or to work on local problems as volunteers), explicit advocacy of civic and political involvement, engaging students in active learning (for example, service-learning projects), and emphasizing principles that are essential to constitutional democracy.<sup>7</sup>

## THE LONG TREK BACK

The CIRCLE report provides a number of specific suggestions for schools, policy makers, colleges and universities, scholars, and researchers. And CIRCLE certainly hasn’t been alone in this effort. Many of the scholars and practitioners in the 2002 meetings represented organizations also directly or indirectly engaged in efforts to bring civic education back from the wilderness to its rightful place in the core curriculum. As yet, however, the road remains rocky, and it’s likely to be a long trek back.

One step has been to work with state policy makers, legislature by legislature, to institutionalize higher expectations for students’ civic learning. For example, one participant in the CIRCLE meetings was Ted McConnell, who directs the Campaign to Promote Civic Education at the Center for Civic Education. The campaign, initiated in 1997, works to strengthen instruction in civics and government and to reaffirm the traditional civic mission of the schools by promoting the establishment (or reestablishment) of curricular requirements and instruction for all students, K-12. But the work doesn’t stop there.

The campaign is a nationwide effort by concerned citizens and organizations within each state who recognize the need for improvement in civic education and seek to affect education policy by working with influential individuals and groups. According to McConnell, in April 2007 the campaign was tracking 18 measures in 15 state legislatures, all of which were designed to strengthen civic education. In fact, three of the measures had already passed, in New Mexico, West Virginia, and Virginia. These included, for example, the creation of a council on civic education or civic literacy (West Virginia) and the creation and funding of a special civic education professional development fund (New Mexico).<sup>8</sup> While these measures do not directly affect civic education course requirements, they are likely over the long term to influence the return of civic education to the core curriculum.

Such measures can be thought of as “nurturing,” a term used by the authors of *America’s Civic Health Index: Broken Engagement*. This report by the National Conference on Citizenship (in association with CIRCLE and Saguro Seminar) recently concluded that, after a

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“steep decline” in civic health over the past 30 years, “there are some signs of civic recovery. . . . The most hopeful signs are a rebound in volunteering, especially youth volunteering, over the past decade, and increasing political engagement since the 1990s. But even these trends must be nurtured or they may fizzle out.”<sup>9</sup>

The index of civic health looks at 40 indicators in nine categories and is based on nationally representative data from 1975 to 2004. The categories include:

- connecting to civic and religious groups,
- 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 report’s authors point out that each of the 40 indicators has declined an average of 7 percentage points over the past 30 years. This “substantial and troubling pattern,” they say, “is only partly offset by less than a 3-point recovery since 1999.”<sup>10</sup>

Among the upward trends is a rise in political activity and expression, though the report’s authors don’t see this as necessarily positive. It may be attributable, they aver, to the divisive nature of American politics. While distrust can motivate people to participate in politics, they reason, it doesn’t help people work together to address common problems. For instance, while political engagement is up, community engagement is down, having “declined consistently and almost relentlessly since the 1970s.”<sup>11</sup>

It would be easy to read the civic health report, especially with *Broken Engagement* as a subtitle, as yet another doom-and-gloom view from the curricular fringe — not that this reading would be wholly inaccurate. But, in fact, there are hopeful signs — those “trends that must be nurtured” of which the authors write. For example, young people (high school seniors as a group and 16- to 24-year-olds in general) *are* volunteering at higher rates today than their predecessors did a few years ago. The increase from 2001 to 2005 is statistically significant. But the authors of the civic health index also suggest that the increase may be, in part, a “9/11 effect on youth, evidenced,” according to

the report, “by significant increases in political engagement and volunteering in the years after this pivotal event.”<sup>12</sup>

### WHERE DOES CIVIC EDUCATION STAND NOW?

It’s still a dark, bumpy road, but the lampposts are getting closer together. Civic education requirements vary widely among the states. The Education Commission of the States provides an online summary report that highlights high school graduation requirements for civic education and is updated as states raise their requirements. Some states, such as Colorado, still require as little as a half-credit (one semester) of civics or government. Others require far more. For example, the District of Columbia requires one-half credit of D.C. government and history, one-half credit of U.S. history, one-half credit of U.S. government, and 100 hours of community service. Idaho requires five credits: two each of government and U.S. history, and one of economics.<sup>13</sup>

Other states fall somewhere in between. Most encouraging is that many states are in the midst of ramping up their requirements. For example, Arkansas and Florida recently required as little as a half-credit of civics or government. Arkansas will hold to the half-credit for the class of 2008, but beginning with the class of 2010, students will need three credits — one of world history, one of U.S. history, and one of civics or government — in order to graduate. High school grads in Florida also will soon need three units: one of world history, one of U.S. history, a half-unit of economics, and a half-unit of American government.<sup>14</sup> For those of us whose high school years were during the 1960s, these changes clearly mark the road back to when civic education was integral to the core curriculum.

Much of the current success in moving civic education back to the heart of schooling can be attributed to advocacy efforts such as the Campaign for Civic Education and other initiatives of the Center for Civic Education and like-minded organizations (for more information, see the sidebar on page 288). While many of the groups involved in advocating for civic education and offering instructional materials were founded in the 1990s and later, the Center for Civic Education has been at the forefront of these efforts since its founding in 1969 under the leadership of Charles Quigley, who

# ORGANIZATIONS PROMOTING CIVIC EDUCATION

## American Civics Center

[www.americancivicscenter.com](http://www.americancivicscenter.com)

Nonpartisan civic education organization committed to preparing citizens for active participation in democracy through visitation and education programs for middle and high school students who come to Washington, D.C.

## American Constitution Society for Law and Policy

[www.acslaw.org](http://www.acslaw.org)

Network of lawyers, law students, scholars, judges, policy makers, and others; aims to revitalize and transform legal and policy debates occurring in law school classrooms, federal and state courtrooms, legislative hearing rooms, and the media through student and lawyer chapters, programs, and projects at national and local levels.

## Bill of Rights Institute

[www.billofrightsinstitute.org](http://www.billofrightsinstitute.org)

Provides curricular materials to educate middle and high school students about the ideas of America's founders, the liberties guaranteed in the nation's founding documents, and how those principles affect and shape a free society.

## Center for Civic Education

[www.civiced.org](http://www.civiced.org)

Nonprofit, nonpartisan education corporation promoting a responsible citizenry committed to democratic principles and actively engaged in the practice of democracy in the United States and other countries; produces and disseminates curricular programs, provides professional development, and advocates for civic education.

## Center for the Constitution

[www.montpelier.org](http://www.montpelier.org)

Foundation-supported teaching academy, founded in 2003 at James Madison's Montpelier, offers activities in which teachers and other participants read, think, and discuss ideas related to the theory and meaning of the American Constitution.

## Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)

[www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)

Conducts, collects, and funds research on the civic engagement, political participation, and civic education of young Americans from its base in the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland.

## Center on Congress

[www.centeroncongress.org](http://www.centeroncongress.org)

Nonpartisan education center located at Indiana University helps improve the public's understanding of Congress and increase civic engagement, especially among young people, as a way to strengthen basic institutions of U.S. government.

## Choices Program

[www.choices.edu](http://www.choices.edu)

Educational outreach program of the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University that provides curricu-

lar resources, professional development programs, and special projects for secondary-level students.

## Civnet

[www.civnet.org](http://www.civnet.org)

Online resource for civic education practitioners, scholars, policy makers, civic-minded journalists, and nongovernmental organizations promoting civic education around the world; website of Civitas International, maintained by the Center for Civic Education.

## Close Up Foundation

[www.closeup.org](http://www.closeup.org)

Conducts programs to increase civic involvement, promote civic achievement, and encourage civic awareness in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere through print and on television.

## Constitutional Rights Foundation

[www.crf-usa.org](http://www.crf-usa.org)

Nonprofit, nonpartisan, community-based organization dedicated to educating young people about the importance of civic participation in a democratic society; develops, produces, and distributes programs and materials to teachers, students, and public-minded citizens across the United States.

## Education Commission of the States

[www.ecs.org](http://www.ecs.org)

Helps states develop effective policy and practice for public education by providing data, research, analysis, and leadership and by facilitating collaboration, the exchange of ideas among the states, and long-range strategic thinking.

## First Amendment Center

[www.firstamendmentcenter.org](http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org)

Works to preserve and protect First Amendment freedoms through information and education; serves as a forum for the study and exploration of free-expression issues, including freedom of speech, of the press, and of religion, and the rights to assemble and to petition the government.

## National Alliance for Civic Education

[www.cived.net](http://www.cived.net)

Provides resource materials to groups and individuals in order to help citizens across the United States better understand the significance of effective civic education for a well-functioning democracy.

## National Conference of State Legislatures

[www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org)

Provides research, technical assistance, and opportunities for policy makers to exchange ideas on state issues; bipartisan, effective, and respected advocate for the interests of state governments before Congress and federal agencies.

## National Conference on Citizenship

[www.ncoc.net](http://www.ncoc.net)

National network of leading organizations working to strengthen American history and civics education; community, national, and public service; and civic and political participation. — DRW

continues to guide the organization with a steady hand. The center is a nonprofit, nonpartisan education corporation, in its own words, “dedicated to promoting an enlightened and responsible citizenry committed to democratic principles and actively engaged in the practice of democracy in the United States and other countries” ([www.civiced.org](http://www.civiced.org)).

The center’s flagship program is *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution*, the curriculum mentioned at the outset of this article, designed to promote civic competence and responsibility among elementary and secondary students. Its success stems from its instructional design. *We the People* textbooks are adaptable to provide either a complete curriculum or individual units that can be integrated into existing courses. At each level — elementary, middle, and high school — the innovative culminating activity is a simulated congressional hearing, in which students “testify” before a panel of judges. Students demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of constitutional principles and then evaluate, take, and defend positions on current and historical issues. At the high school level, students become involved in the series of competitions described above.

Program-specific federal funding allows the center to provide multiple classroom sets of *We the People* textbooks to schools in every congressional district at no cost to the schools and to offer free professional development opportunities to K-12 educators, college and university professors, and members of the legal community.

Among the organizations working to restore the core status of civic education in schools, the center has staked out a clear leadership position. Since the inception of the *We the People* program in 1987, more than 28 million students and 90,000 educators have participated in this innovative course of study. The program enjoys the active participation of members of Congress, as well as support from professional, business, and community organizations across the nation.

In communities where schools participate in the program, their citizens also take an active role. For example, one class in Sacramento for California’s *We the People* state finals in 2007 came from a small community with many low-income families, including a substantial number of migrant workers and undocumented immigrants. Citizens of this community raised the funds to buy their students business suits for the competition, because the students’ families could not afford the expense. A number of the Hispanic students had learned English as a second language. Overcoming all the odds, this underdog team took second-place honors at the statewide

competition. At the announcement during the awards banquet, their fellow students from across California, many from affluent school districts, cheered them with a standing ovation that was never more well deserved.

These students and many others across the United States are on the road to becoming better-informed citizens of our democracy as a result of rising standards for civic education, stronger graduation requirements, and innovative programs that make learning about the Constitution and our democratic system of governance relevant and, indeed, exciting. Follow-up research on *We the People* alumni shows that these students also become active in civic life as adults. In 2004-05, for example, researchers at the Center for Civic Education surveyed 522 alumni, ranging in age from 18 to 34, and compared their voting participation to a national probability study from the *2004 National Election Studies* (NES) of other young Americans their age. Ninety-two percent of alumni reported voting in November 2004, in contrast to 78% of those surveyed in the NES study.<sup>15</sup>

All of these indicators, from increasing graduation requirements to renewed engagement in civic life among young people, point to the return of civic education. There’s still a way to go, but civic education is on the road back to the core of the American school curriculum, where it belongs.

1. Margaret Stimmann Branson, presentation to the Idaho State Civic Learning Summit, Boise, 4 December 2006.

2. Charles N. Quigley, “Civic Education: Recent History, Current Status, and the Future,” paper presented at the American Bar Association Symposium, Public Perception and Understanding of the Justice System, 25 February 1999, Washington, D.C.

3. Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, *The Civic Mission of Schools* (New York: Carnegie Corporation, 2003), p. 14.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

8. Ted McConnell, personal communications, 21 March and 6 April 2007.

9. *America’s Civic Health Index: Broken Engagement* (Washington, D.C.: National Conference on Citizenship, 2006), p. 4.


10. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 10.

13. Education Commission of the States, “State Notes: High School Graduation Requirements — Citizenship,” 2007, available at <http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=115>.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Suzanne Soule, “Voting and Political Participation of *We The People: The Citizen and the Constitution* Alumni in the 2004 Election,” Center for Civic Education, May 2005, available at [www.civiced.org/research/html/ExecSumm-Alumni2005.html](http://www.civiced.org/research/html/ExecSumm-Alumni2005.html). 

File Name and Bibliographic Information

**k0712wal.pdf**

**Donovan R. Walling, The Return of Civic Education, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 89, No. 04, December 2007, pp. 285-289.**

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