



THE FIRST ANNUAL CONGRESSIONAL CONFERENCE ON CIVIC EDUCATION
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A presentation by
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WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO ENSURE A PROPER CIVIC EDUCATION?

Introduction

About two years ago, sixth-graders in a class at Bryan Elementary School in Morris, Alabama, took part in a civics project to get a traffic light installed at a busy intersection near their school. The school administration and parents groups had tried and failed to get the light installed for several years. The class learned that what they thought was a simple task would eventually involve the local city council, the police department, the county sheriff's office, the county planning office, the state department of transportation, and other agencies. The students completed their project, presented their recommendations to their city council and police chief, and were promised the light by a certain date. However, when it was not installed at that time, the students developed a lobbying plan and called the officials every week until the light was finally installed.

Six months later, the county commission announced its intention to locate a new jail on Turkey Creek next to Bryan Elementary School. Turkey Creek was an area that the school used as an outdoor science laboratory. A group of parents objected to the building of the jail. They tried a number of approaches and received a lot of media attention but had very little effect on the county commission.

Then the parents asked themselves, "How did our children get that stoplight?" They talked with their children and their teacher, got copies of the textbook they had been using, and, with the help of their children the parents learned how to participate effectively. Shortly thereafter, the County Commission found another location for the jail.

These students learned in their civics class how to participate competently and responsibly in the political life of their community. Not only did the students gain from the experience, but they helped their parents learn how to participate effectively.

This is one of the success stories of civic education in our schools. It shows what can be accomplished by competent and dedicated teachers with the support of their administrators and their communities. And there are many other stories such as this and thousands of teachers throughout this country who are providing such experiences for their students. But there are still not enough of them. Our schools are not fulfilling their civic mission for the vast majority of our students.

The civic mission of the schools

The Founders understood that a free society must rely on the knowledge, skills, and virtue of its citizens and those serving in public office on their behalf. However, the knowledge and skills required for competent and responsible citizenship in our sophisticated and complex system of government are neither inherited nor gained by untutored experience. Each generation must be taught anew through systematic, rigorous, and stimulating instruction in civic education.

The goal of civic education is informed, responsible participation in political life by competent citizens committed to the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy. To be effective, a citizen must acquire not only a body of knowledge and skills, but also certain dispositions. These are dispositions or traits of

character such as civility, tolerance, and compassion that enhance the individual's capacity to participate in the political process and contribute to the healthy functioning of the political system and the improvement of society.

Many institutions help to develop Americans' knowledge and skills and shape their civic character and commitments. The family, religious institutions, the media, and community groups exert important influences. Schools, however, bear a special and historic responsibility for the development of civic competence and civic responsibility. Schools must fulfill that responsibility through both formal and informal curricula beginning in the earliest grades and continuing through the entire educational process.

The need for increased attention to civic education

In a recent report commissioned by the Albert Shanker Institute, the noted scholar Paul Gagnon wrote that "a modern democratic society has three distinct reasons for schools because there are three persons in each of us: the worker, the citizen, and the private individual." He goes on to say that, "The Declaration of Independence evoked the three aims: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. Work sustains life, citizenship sustains liberty, and personal cultivation can allow the pursuit of happiness, however that may be defined."

The development of the worker, the citizen, and the private individual may be fostered by a balanced curriculum in schools that must include, among other offerings, a vigorous education in civics and government. During the past several decades, educational policy and practice appear to have focused more and more upon developing the "worker" at the expense of developing the "citizen" and the "private individual with a meaningful life."

Although every state notes the need for civic education, the subject is seldom given sustained and systematic attention in the K-12 curriculum. Inattention to civic education stems in part from the assumption that the knowledge and skills citizens need emerge as by-products of the study of other disciplines or as an outcome of the process of schooling itself. This assumption, in my opinion, is not correct.

While it is true that history, economics, literature, and other subjects may enhance students' understanding of government and politics, they cannot replace specific attention to civic education. One of the major reasons students did not perform well on the 1998 Civics Report Card of the National Assessment of Educational Progress is that the vast majority are either not being taught civics and government at all or they are being taught too little, too late, and inadequately. Under these conditions, you can hardly expect them to do well on such a test. One of the major reasons why civics is not taught adequately is that most of our states and school districts do not have sufficient requirements for instruction in civics and government. I believe the following criteria should guide the development of educational policy in every state and school district in the nation.

- Education in civics and government should not be incidental to the schooling of American youth but a central purpose of education.
- Civics and government should be seen as a subject on a level with other subjects.

- Civics and government should be taught each year from kindergarten through twelfth-grade either as separate units and courses or as a part of courses in other subjects.
- Effective instruction in civics and government requires attention to the content of the discipline as well as to the intellectual and participatory skills required for competent and responsible participation in our democratic system.
- Effective instruction in civics and government requires teachers who are well-grounded in the required subject matter and interactive methodology.

What works?

We know that good civic education programs work—they have the desired effects. The recent report of a public opinion survey conducted by the National Conference of State Legislatures “provides new evidence that civic education makes a big difference in the attitudes toward citizenship, knowledge, and civic engagement of young people.” We also know the characteristics of good civic education programs. These characteristics have been set forth in many places including the *National Standards for Civics and Government*, the Center for Civic Education’s Campaign to Promote Civic Education, and most recently in the Carnegie/CIRCLE report “The Civic Mission of the Schools.”

Formal instruction in civics should provide students with a basic understanding of civic life, politics, government, and the fundamental values and principles underlying American democracy. It should help them understand the workings of their own and other political systems as well as the relationship of American politics and government to world affairs. Such instruction provides students a basis for understanding their rights and responsibilities and a framework for principled, competent, and responsible participation.

The formal curriculum should be augmented by related learning experiences in both school and community that enable students to learn how to participate in their own governance. Ultimately, no matter how well-designed instructional programs may be, their success relies upon knowledgeable, skilled, and dedicated teachers.

Later today you will have an opportunity to observe the students of such outstanding teachers as they demonstrate two of a number of civic education programs that work. The first is a program called Earth Force in which young people are implementing lasting solutions to environmental issues in their community. The second is the *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution* program funded by the U.S. Department of Education and authorized by Congress. These programs have significantly improved student achievement in civics and their participation in civic life.

In addition to the formal curriculum—how the classroom and school community are governed—the informal curriculum is also important. Classrooms and schools should be managed by adults who govern in accordance with constitutional values and principles and who display traits of character worth emulating. Students should be held accountable for behaving in accordance with fair and reasonable standards and for respecting the rights and dignity of others, including their peers.

Since the 1960s there has been a growing movement to develop stimulating and effective approaches to civic education, resulting in a number of curricular programs of proven effectiveness available to interested teachers, schools, and school systems. These programs have been developed by educational leaders from throughout the nation, many of whom are present today.

There is considerable cooperation among the state and national networks that implement these programs. These networks of skilled and experienced educators, the various curricular offerings, and the widely accepted *National Standards for Civics and Government* provide a base for the expansion of proven civic education programs throughout every state and community in the nation.

The decision by the congressional leadership to support this Congressional Conference on Civic Education is timely and encouraging. During the past four decades, civic education has received support from Congress and various federal agencies. This is, however, the first time that civic education has been given such a high place on the national agenda both by Congress and by the administration, which has launched its own initiative in civic education. Such support provides grounds for optimism about the prospects for good civic education for all American students.

However, I'm sure that it's obvious to everyone here that, as important as federal support may be, it is not enough. The capacity and responsibility to improve civic education lie at local and state levels. I sincerely hope that this conference will increase the efforts at all levels to give civic education its rightful place in the curricula of the nation's schools.

What needs to be done?

Before we can improve civic education, we need to remedy some specific shortcomings—inadequate policy support, inadequate curricular requirements, and inadequate teacher preparation. And we also must address the problem caused by assessment in a few subjects diverting attention from other worthy subjects, including civics.

We need to establish a systemic approach to the implementation of sound civic education programs. Such an approach must include the establishment of standards, the development of curricular frameworks and curricular materials, teacher training, and an assessment program.

What do we have to gain?

I began with an anecdote about the work of an outstanding teacher in Alabama. To demonstrate what we can gain by supporting good programs in civics and government, I would like to conclude with excerpts from e-mail correspondence between an outstanding teacher in New Hampshire and one of his students. He teaches a high school constitutional law class that is open to all juniors and seniors from all levels of academic ability and social and economic status.

About two years ago, he enrolled a girl who was a fair student from a poor home environment and who worked at her uncle's garage after school and on weekends. When she saw how rigorous the class was and learned that most of the students were far more advanced, she talked with her teacher about withdrawing from the class. He encouraged her to stay and give it her best and told her that's all she could ask of herself. She chose to stay. In class, she jumped into conversations to try and fit in. Since her writing skills were poor, she felt by contributing verbally she could at least try to achieve in that way. After three months, she dropped out of school. Her teacher didn't know what happened to her until he received this message:

Dear teacher,

About a year ago I was in your constitutional law class. I really loved your class. I ended up dropping out of school and joined the United States Army. I held on to your books because they were my life. I continued studying after I got out of basic training, and thought about going to college for law, because I enjoyed your class so much.

One day a sergeant of mine borrowed my book and we went to the field. When I got back after a month he and my book were gone. He went to Germany and I tried finding him so I could get my book back, but I just kept hitting dead ends. The reason I am writing to you is because I was wondering if it would be possible to get another copy of the book. I will pay anything in the world to have it. The only problem I face right now is that I am deploying overseas to fight. I leave at the end of this month and it takes 7 days for packages to reach me from New Hampshire. I will have my dad deliver a check or something. If something could be worked out please write back to me and let me know what I would have to do, and if not I understand completely. I'm still working on the essay of what the American flag means to me. I'm up to 8 pages and it needs more work. Thank you for inspiring me!

Sincerely,
PFC *student*

Her teacher wrote back, sent her the book, and invited her to visit his class when she returned from Iraq. She responded,

Dear teacher,

I would be more than happy to visit the school and tell everyone how truly important your class is, even if they don't think so at the time. Your class will stay with them for the rest of their lives, as it will open up more doors than they would know. There was more than one time I stood out in the Army because of simple stuff I learned in your class. I was the only one in basic who could recite the Preamble, and then go into depth of what it actually meant. Later that day two drill sergeants told me that I had explained it in a way they had never looked at it. It has also helped me in promotion boards. My friends have also brought up simple things in daily conversations such as burning the American flag, and I showed them the handout you gave us. They are now also intrigued

about the Constitution. I'm glad that I was able to show them some of what I have learned, and I thank you for giving me the opportunity for that. I don't know when I'll have the chance to take leave in the future, but I'll keep you informed.

Sincerely,
PFC *student*

I am pleased to report that this young woman recently arrived home safely from overseas.

Conclusion

The students in Alabama and our private from New Hampshire and many others like them, such as those who demonstrated for us at this conference, have been fortunate to have had outstanding and dedicated teachers and stimulating instruction in civics and government. I think that we have an obligation to do what we can to make it possible for all students to have the kind of opportunities enjoyed by these students. I hope that you will join me and others here who are dedicated to that end.