

**Cong conf 2005**

**Conference Introduction and Overview  
Third Annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education  
September 25, 2005  
Washington, D.C.**

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Welcome to the third annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education hosted by the Alliance for Representative Democracy. The alliance is composed of the Center on Congress at Indiana University, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the Center for Civic Education.

We are pleased that Senator Howard Baker and Congressman Thomas Foley, both former leaders of the United States Congress, have joined us today along with Judy Woodruff, one of the most outstanding journalists of our time. At noon we will be addressed by the Archivist of the United States. Later this evening, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer will address the conference. The importance of today's topic is confirmed when such great Americans, including my colleague Lee Hamilton, the four leaders of Congress who serve as honorary hosts, and all of you, have come together to address the need to improve civic education in our nation's schools.

We are also pleased to greet distinguished delegates from Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Senegal who are participating in the Civitas International Civic Education Exchange Program. These friends and colleagues are leading efforts in their nations to promote the development of political cultures supportive of democratic values, principles, and institutions. We welcome them to this conference. Please stand and accept our greetings.

When we first began to plan this series of Congressional Conferences, we decided we didn't want to hold the typical conference where the activity ends with the final speech. We wanted to produce an initiative that would result in elevating civic education to its rightful place in the school curriculum. Since the inception of these conferences in September 2003, we have, with the help of many of you attending today, succeeded in creating a nationwide movement aimed at improving civic engagement and civic education in America.

Over the past two years, delegations from every state have worked together to develop and implement plans for strengthening civic education in our schools. Our agenda, as it has in past conferences, provides planning time for the delegations to discuss, evaluate, and strengthen their action plans for 2005–2006.

Another important group of participants here today is our at-large delegation which includes representatives of national organizations. They are important partners who, with

the assistance of their state and local affiliates, can help state delegations achieve their goals. A number of these organizations are already working closely with state delegations.

Since the inaugural conference, there have been a number of truly impressive achievements of this initiative.

- 34 delegations have formed inclusive active state coalitions.
- 17 delegations have held state summits or other meetings modeled on the Congressional Conference; 14 other states have planned similar events.
- 20 states have conducted benchmark surveys of current policies and practices in civic education and identified deficiencies to address. The surveys have also been used to create directories of state resources in civic education made available on the Web and in print. An additional 14 states have surveys underway.
- Legislators from 31 states have introduced bills to strengthen civic education. Fourteen bills have passed in 13 states. The introduction of supportive measures is planned for more state legislative sessions in 2006.
- Policymakers who attended these Conferences have taken action within the scope of their authority. For example:
  - Idaho State Superintendent of Public Instruction Marilyn Howard added civic education to the subjects assessed in the state's annual school building accreditation report.
  - The New York State School Boards Association is working with the New York delegation to develop a draft model policy for the civic mission of schools for all New York school districts.
  - West Virginia School Board Member Priscilla Haden (coordinator of the West Virginia Delegation) worked with the West Virginia School Board to implement a civic education course requirement for high school graduation.
  - Kentucky Secretary of State, Trey Grayson, has invited delegations from all Southern states to join the Kentucky delegation in forming the **Southern Coalition for Civic Literacy and Engagement**.

These are all impressive examples of how this initiative has engaged key policymakers across the nation who are working diligently for the benefit of all of our students.

## **Conference Overview**

Each year, participant evaluations of the Congressional Conferences have been very helpful in shaping subsequent conference agendas and providing focus for our organizers. We hope you'll continue to help us in this regard by completing the evaluation form in your packet at the end of the conference.

You will note that we have added a new feature to this year's agenda that provides an opportunity for state delegations to meet with their members of Congress. We hope that you will use this opportunity to inform your members of the progress of your campaigns and invite them to participate in your work. You might remember that last year, Senator Debbie Stabenow of Michigan addressed the conference and expressed her support for her state's campaign, led by Linda Start. We hope each delegation will engage its members of Congress in a similar manner—and we're pleased to report that a number already have.

## **The Problem**

It is important to briefly revisit why we started this initiative: the fact that, during the past several decades, educational policy and practice appear to have focused more and more on developing the “worker” at the expense of the “citizen.” The failure of students to perform well in national surveys such as the National Assessment for Educational Progress and the many polls documenting the apathy and alienation among our youth, highlight the problem that the vast majority of our young people are either not being taught civics and government at all or they are being taught too little, too late, and inadequately. Under these conditions, how could students help but fail?

A study sponsored by the Albert Shanker Institute in 2003 revealed 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. However, the tide is turning, largely as a result of the efforts of people in this room who are using their considerable influence to improve the quality of civic education in their states.

## **Inadequate time and policy requirements**

Let's begin with the first reason that civics is not taught adequately: most of our states and school districts do not have sufficient policy and curricular requirements.

- Today, most students who make it to their senior year get a one-semester course in civics that might well be the only explicit attention to civics they will have received in their 12 or 13 years of schooling. Although such courses are often elective, about 85% of students enroll. Unfortunately, this is too little and too late. Fifteen percent of our seniors do not take the course and 15% of students drop out of school too early to take it. And, of course, the dropout rate in our major cities is sometimes as high as 40

to 60 percent. So, some of our students who arguably need civic education the most do not get it at all.

- There has been a marked trend in recent years away from civics and social studies in the elementary grades. Currently, only slightly more than one-third of our elementary school students are regularly engaged in what is supposed to be the primary focus of the schools: preparing young people to be informed, effective, and responsible citizens.

It is clear that if we are going to address the problems in civic education, we must ensure that appropriate policies are in place and implemented so that civics is taught systematically beginning at the earliest grades.

### **Inadequacy of Standards**

It is essential for states to review existing civics and/or social studies standards to make sure they are clear and challenging statements designed to promote the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for competent and responsible participation.

In examining state standards, I think it would be useful for state delegations to refer to the study completed by the late Paul Gagnon entitled *In Pursuit of a Civic Core*. Supported by the Albert Shanker Institute, Gagnon found that, despite many good efforts, state standards for secondary-level social studies subjects are either too vague or the topic lists are too long—either way, “the core ideas and events that are indispensable to the formation of young democrats are impossible to discern.”

### **Inadequate teacher preparation and inadequate instruction**

A thoughtful high school government teacher recently took a four-week summer institute on the history of American political thought. When he completed the course, he wished that he could bring back all of the students he had taught over the past thirteen years so he could disabuse them of many of the misconceptions he had given them.

Several years ago, the Center for Civic Education conducted a small study to determine how well teachers of high school government courses could explain fifty-five key concepts in their field such as popular sovereignty, habeas corpus, judicial review, federalism, checks and balances, and the exclusionary rule. More than fifty percent of these teachers could not give adequate explanations of many of these key concepts. These were high school civics teachers: imagine how most elementary teachers would perform.

The National Center for Educational Statistics reported in 1996 that more than half of all students in history and world civilization classes are being led by teachers with neither a major nor a minor in history. No data currently is available on the subject matter qualifications of teachers of civics and government, but it is reasonable to assume that the numbers of teachers with majors or minors in political science or related fields would be

even fewer. I have little doubt that a study of the preparation of elementary teachers to teach civics would show it to be far less.

We need to provide more opportunities for teachers to take part in professional development programs that will enhance their knowledge of the subject matter for which they are responsible, as well as enhance their capacity to use interactive methods that have proven to be effective.

Knowledgeable, skilled, and dedicated teachers are arguably the most important factor in helping our young people develop the capacity and inclination to take part in the political life of our nation. You'll have an opportunity today to meet two outstanding teachers and their students whose efforts remind us of the promise of education.

### **Inadequacies of assessment programs in civics**

We must also ensure that civics is assessed with the same frequency as mathematics, science, reading, or any other core subject. Unfortunately, if civics is not assessed, the probability that it will be taught is greatly reduced.

### **The Solution**

We need to establish a systematic approach to the implementation of sound civic education programs.

Included in your Resource Kit is a document entitled *Elements of Systemic Reform* describing the tasks to be accomplished to institutionalize effective programs in civics and government. This document provides a roadmap of steps to be taken to achieve this institutionalization, such as the establishment of standards, the development of curricular frameworks and curricular materials, effective teacher training, credentialing, and an assessment program aligned with standards.

The Resource Kit also contains excellent materials provided by Terry Pickeral from the Education Commission of the States to help you make the case in your state for the improvements in civic education that we seek.

I would also refer you to the Education Commission of the States as an excellent source for information on state policies in civic education. Their database, available at their website, ([www.ecs.org/citizenshipeducationdatabase](http://www.ecs.org/citizenshipeducationdatabase)) provides descriptions of state policies that support citizenship education for K–12 students. It also allows users to generate profiles of individual states' policies for citizenship education, create comparisons of specific types of citizenship policies across several states, and view reports on state policies for citizenship education.

In one of the key sessions today, we have the opportunity to discuss in an open dialogue the key challenges faced by state coalitions in persuading state, school district, and school building policymakers to implement effective improvements to existing (or, in many cases, nonexistent) civic education policies and practice.

## **Conclusion**

We view this conference, the third of five on civic education, as taking place in a pivotal year. We want to further the momentum that has been established to provide all students in our nation the opportunity for a vital, stimulating, and effective civic education that promotes their productive engagement in political life. We have made considerable progress in the past two years, but more needs to be done and I believe that working together we, and our colleagues in our states and communities, have the capacity to do it.

Archimedes is reported to have said, “If you were to give me a lever long enough and a place to stand, I could move the world.” We hope these conferences will give all of us a place to stand. The lever is the potential power in the hands of the delegations. Let’s see if we can all work together to move the curricula in our schools to make a place for civic education. Moving the curricula might not be moving the world, but it could make a world of difference for our young people and the future of this nation.