



National Council for the Social Studies

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Revitalizing Civic Learning in Our Schools

A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies

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Introduction

As Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, John Dewey and other great educators understood, public schools do not serve a public so much as create a public.¹ The goal of schooling, therefore, is not merely preparation for citizenship, but citizenship itself; to equip a citizenry with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for active and engaged civic life. The National Council for the Social Studies firmly agrees with this premise and believes that no other subject area is better suited to achieve this essential goal in schools than the social studies.

Intended Audience

This position statement is intended for all audiences who are committed to preparing students for active and engaged citizenship in the 21st century. This includes the general public, the elementary, middle, and high school communities, social studies supervisors and directors, higher education, and all educators, pre-Kindergarten through graduate school.

Background

Globalization and rapid technological advancements in the 21st century are profoundly impacting our democracy and conceptualization of what it means to be a productive member of society. As schools reorient their goals and procedures for preparing students for success in college and career in the changing landscape, it is vital to the health and future of our democracy that our schools also prepare students for a lifetime of knowledgeable, engaged, and active citizenship. Our ability to create and sustain a robust democracy depends on our ability to achieve this goal.

Sadly, the narrowing of the curriculum that has occurred over the past several years combined with the scarce attention to civic learning in a number of state standards and assessment measures has had a devastating effect on schools' ability to provide high quality civic education to all students. Further threatening the civic health of our nation is the civic opportunity gap that emerges when

schools provide poor and nonwhite students fewer and less high-quality civic learning opportunities than they provide to middle class and wealthy white students--all of this at a time when democratic aspirations are surging across the globe.

There are a number of important benefits of high quality civic learning that are worthy of the attention of policymakers, school administrators, scholars, researchers, parents and families, colleges and universities, the business community, media, and the general public. Students who leave high school with civic competencies achieved through high quality civic learning practices are equipped to address complex challenges, work and study with diverse colleagues, and creatively solve problems that do not have easy solutions. ² **They are also more likely to vote and discuss politics at home, to volunteer and work on community issues, and are more confident in their ability to speak publicly and communicate with their elected representatives. Schools with civic learning programs are more likely to be safe, inclusive, and respectful, and in addition, experience fewer high school dropouts.** ³ For these reasons and many more, it is critically important to revitalize civic learning as the core purpose of education for all students at all grade levels.

Characteristics of Effective Citizens

The Civic Mission of Schools report,⁴ written by a coalition of scholars and practitioners, set forth the requirements of competent and responsible citizens. According to that report, competent and responsible citizens share four common traits:

Informed and thoughtful. They have a grasp and an appreciation of history and the fundamental processes of American democracy, an understanding and awareness of public and community issues, an ability to obtain information when needed, a capacity to think critically, and a willingness to enter into dialogue with others about different points of view and to understand diverse perspectives. They are tolerant of ambiguity and resist simplistic answers to complex questions.

Participate in their communities. They belong to and contribute to groups in civil society that offer venues for Americans to participate in public service; work together to overcome problems; and pursue an array of cultural, social, political, and religious interests and beliefs.

Act politically. They have the skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to accomplish public purposes--for instance, by organizing people to address social issues, solving problems in groups, speaking in public, petitioning and protesting to influence public policy, and voting.

Moral and civic virtues. They are concerned for the rights and welfare of others, socially responsible, willing to listen to alternative perspectives, confident in their capacity to make a difference, and ready to contribute personally to civic and political action. They strike a reasonable balance between their own interests and the common good. They recognize the importance of and practice civic duties such as voting and respecting the rule of law.

Character education is critical to the development of each student's academic potential and civic virtue. The Character Counts! approach from the Josephson Institute focuses on six pillars of trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.⁵ Civic dispositions identified by the Center for Civic Education include civility, respect, individual responsibility, self-discipline, civic-mindedness, open-mindedness, compromise, toleration of diversity, patience and persistence, compassion, generosity, and loyalty to the nation and its principles.⁶ Young students benefit from the development of social skills and habits such as civility, self-discipline, toleration, and responsibility that are necessary for working with others and sustaining a robust democracy.⁷ These character traits for older students should emphasize the development of a mature understanding of the fundamental principles of our shared civic life and their history, as well as on the dispositions and skills needed to engage in the public debate over the practice of these principles. They will serve students well in both their private and public civic lives.

Characteristics of Effective Civic Learning Implementation

Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools ⁵ identifies six proven practices that constitute a well-rounded high-quality civic learning experience:

1. **Classroom Instruction:** Schools should provide direct instruction in government, history, economics, law, and democracy in ways that provoke analysis and critical thinking skills. These subjects are vital to laying the foundation for civic learning and may also contribute to young people's tendency to engage in civic and political activities over the long term. However, schools should avoid teaching only rote facts about dry procedures, which is unlikely to benefit students and may actually alienate them from politics.
2. **Discussion of Current Events and Controversial Issues:** Schools should incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives. Engaging students in civil dialogue about controversial issues provides opportunities to foster character and civic virtue--important civic dispositions that are the habits of the heart and mind conducive to the healthy functioning of the democratic system. Examples include civility, open-mindedness,

compromise, and toleration of diversity, all of which are prerequisites of a civic life in which the American people can work out the meanings of their democratic principles and values.

3. **Service-Learning:** Schools should provide students with relevant and motivational opportunities to connect formal classroom instruction with the principles and processes of democratic life through practical community problem solving. With guided practice in collaborative problem solving through public policy approaches, students learn to make long-term differences that will be sustained over time. They learn firsthand about the advantages of working as a group, the influence of public policy on human lives, and the intricacies of local government and community politics. They also develop firsthand knowledge of such abstract concepts as justice, diversity, opportunity, equality, and the common good, while developing empathy and compassion for others. Most importantly, students learn that American society is "unfinished" and that they can play a key role in narrowing the disparity between our democratic ideals and the reality of daily life by registering to vote, voting in elections and influencing public policy.
4. **Extracurricular Activities:** Schools should provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities outside of the classroom. Extracurricular activities provide forums for students to practice civic skills and knowledge in purposeful ways while building important collaboration and communication skills. Civic activities such as mock trial, model congress, speech and debate, and model U.N. all have positive impacts on students' civic knowledge and engagement. Students who participate in these types of extracurricular activities are more likely to remain civically engaged well beyond high school.
5. **School Governance:** Schools should encourage student participation in school governance. Effective student governments serve a number of important purposes in our schools. They are laboratories in which students can learn and practice essential citizenship skills, respect for human dignity, and the value of the democratic process. They provide students with effective forums for advocating new ideas and initiating school improvements. Effective student governments also provide a platform for the orderly expression of conflicting viewpoints and procedures for resolving conflicts when students disagree with policies and decisions that affect their lives.
6. **Simulations of Democratic Processes:** Schools should encourage students to participate in simulations of democratic processes and procedures. Simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberation, and diplomacy in schools can lead to heightened political knowledge and interest. Students learn skills with clear applicability to both civic and non-civic contexts, such as public speaking, teamwork, close reading, analytical thinking, and the ability to argue both sides of a topic. All of these are skills that prepare students both for active citizenship and for future academic and career success.

Rationale for Recommendation and Recommendation

The framers of the Constitution understood well that advancing the ideal of "liberty and justice for all" requires a virtuous and engaged citizenry. In our society the principles of constitutional democracy protect and promote our individual rights and bind us together as a people.

Preserving and expanding the American experiment in liberty is a challenge for each succeeding generation. No profession plays a more central role in meeting this challenge than the social studies teachers in our nation's schools. At the heart of social studies is the obligation to teach democratic principles and to inspire civic virtue in the young people who will shape our future. And no institution plays a more central role in meeting this mission than schools. But schools cannot do this alone. It requires the political will and administrative commitment to create and enforce policies that ensure high quality civic learning for all students at all grade levels.

The aim of this position statement is to provoke a call to action for educators, policymakers, legislators, and the general public to prioritize civic learning as a primary function of America's schools. Introducing policies and implementing programs and practices as described in this paper is key. In doing so, we will instill civic competencies in America's youth to create a citizenry prepared to meet the demands of higher education, the challenges of a global society, the complexities of a highly skilled workforce, and the opportunities of a nuanced democratic society.

Implementation

A call to action for introducing policies and civic practices in schools needs to occur at local, state, and national levels. NCSS members are encouraged to use this position statement to urge their policymakers, educators, families, and communities to adopt a vision and plan for providing all students with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for effective civic life.

Conclusion

In a society such as ours, where citizens have been divided and diverse throughout history, it is essential that schools and communities foster a reasoned commitment to the founding principles and values that bind us together as a people. It is time to demonstrate our commitment to democratic principles, our willingness to engage in the democratic process, and our core values that join us as "We the People" to promote civic learning policies and programs that will guarantee "the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity."

Notes

1. N. Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (Vintage Books, 1995), 18. ↩
2. J. Torney-Purta and B.S. Wilkenfeld, *Paths to 21st Century Competencies Through Civic Education Classrooms: An Analysis of Survey Results from Ninth-Graders*. A Technical Assistance Bulletin. (Chicago, Ill.: American Bar Association Division for Public Education, 2009). ↩
3. *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools* (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, Educating for Democracy, Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics, University of Pennsylvania, CIRCLE, National Conference on Citizenship, American Bar Association Division for Public Education, 2011). ↩
4. *Ibid* ↩
5. *The Six Pillars of Character*, The Josephson Institute Center for Youth Ethics, www.charactercounts.org/sixpillars.html. ↩
6. *Civitas: A Framework for Civic Education* (Center for Civic Education, 1991). ↩
7. A. Gutmann, "Moral Education in Our Public Schools; We Need to Teach Our Children the Civic Virtues That Make Democracy Work," *The Washington Post* (June 5, 1988). ↩
8. *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*. ↩