

The Civic Mission of Schools

BY PETER LEVINE

Everyone who cares about America's civic condition should be deeply concerned about the state of civic education in our schools. We are not doing as well as we used to in educating students for citizenship, which is one reason we see a less engaged population of young Americans. Conversely, we know better than ever what works; effective civic education is well within the reach of our schools.

These are the central messages of *The Civic Mission of Schools*, a report released on February 13, 2003, by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). The report was written and endorsed by more than fifty of the nation's leading experts on civic education, including distinguished scholars, teachers, and students, and representatives of groups as diverse as both of the national teachers' unions, the National Council for the Social Studies, the American Bar Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the Heritage Foundation.

Participants agreed on a goal: schools should help to prepare "responsible, engaged citizens"—that is, people who know relevant facts and principles, participate in politics and civil society, and are committed to certain moral values, such as concern for the public good.

There is no evidence that young people are less knowledgeable today than they were in the past. The report argues, however, that they are less engaged in civic and political life than previous generations were at the same point in their lives. For example, voter turnout by young Americans (ages eighteen to twenty-five) has dropped by roughly one third since the voting age was lowered to eighteen in 1972. This drop accounts for virtually the whole decline in overall voter turnout since the 1970s. Likewise, young Americans are far less attentive to current events than they used to be. The proportion who say they regularly follow the news has fallen from one quarter to just 5 percent since 1972. One might suspect that young people are getting information in new ways—such as online—but this is not the case. Half say they *never* look on the Web for news.

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More young people say they volunteer than in the past, but the growth in service has mostly taken the form of occasional (rather than regular) volunteering. At best we can say that young people are turning to direct, personal service as a *substitute* for political activity or membership in organizations.

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These trends do not prove that schools should be involved in civic education. After all, families, religious congregations, the news media, political parties, and other institutions also educate youth for citizenship. Schools, however, are the only institutions that reach everyone, touching people during a period in their lives when they form lasting habits and attitudes. Furthermore, we know that schools can improve students' civic knowledge, skills, and commitment. Effective civic education is not utopian; it takes place in actual schools, although too many now put their attention and resources elsewhere.

Research from *The Civic Mission of Schools* report indicates that schools educate effectively for citizenship by offering high-quality versions of the following six forms of civic education.

Classes on Civics, Government, and American History. "If you teach them, they will learn." Students who take social studies classes perform better on high-quality tests of civic skills and knowledge than students who do not. Unfortunately, civics courses have become considerably less common in recent years, driven out of the curriculum by a narrow focus on reading, writing, and mathematics.

While government classes remain common at the twelfth-grade level, ninth-grade civics has virtually disappeared and there has been a big decline in social studies instruction in grades K–8. Meanwhile, the reading texts used in elementary schools tend to avoid social or political content because of political opposition from both right and left. This means that it is difficult to teach social studies as part of the drive for higher reading scores.

Discussion of Current Issues.

Students who report having discussed current events and issues have more interest in politics, are more knowledgeable than their peers about the political arena, and have more developed intellectual and personal skills related to politics. Perhaps most important, they are more likely to volunteer. Until the early 1970s, it used to be common to offer a whole course devoted to such discussions, but now many teachers say they are under pressure from all sides not to introduce controversial issues into their classrooms at all.

Service Learning. Service learning is a combination of community service with academic instruction on the same topic. There is little doubt that high-quality service learning increases students' civic

skills and attitudes, including a sense of responsibility for helping others, tolerance, and commitment to volunteering in the future. In the best cases, service learning is a transformative experience, reorienting young people to public purposes. There are some doubts, however, about the average quality of service-learning programs and the advisability of increasing their prevalence dramatically.

Extracurricular Activities. Students who participate in extracurricular organizations are much more likely to join nonprofit groups even decades later. This relationship is so strong that it doesn't seem to be merely the result of self-selection. In other words, it is not just that some people are "joiners" who participate in civil society both when they're fourteen and when they're forty. Participating in extracurricular groups actually turns some people into lifelong participants. Thus it is unfortunate that most high school groups, with the exception of sports teams, have shrunk dramatically since the 1960s—victims of budget cuts and competing priorities.

Student Participation in School Governance. Students who feel they have a voice in the way their own schools are governed tend to have more political knowledge and

interest, and more commitment to critical thinking and public service. No one argues that schools should be turned over to the students, but constructive student participation in school governance provides important practical experience and nurtures engagement in civic life long after graduation.

Simulations of Voting, Campaigning, Legislation, or Diplomacy. Several experiments with simulations have yielded impressive gains in students' knowledge and skills. Compared to actual service or participation, a simulation of a political campaign or a United Nations session has the advantage that it can be designed to maximize learning opportunities. At the same time, it has the disadvantage that it treats students merely as *potential* adult citizens, not as current participants in politics and civil society. Still, simulations have demonstrated value for civic education.

There are nonprofit organizations that provide training and materials to support these six approaches. Consequently, schools now have access to excellent textbooks, fine

service-learning programs, admirable simulations, and additional resources such as student competitions and summer institutes for teachers—all available free or at subsidized rates.

However, profound barriers prevent these materials and approaches from being widely used in schools. Many teachers lack the necessary background to manage such difficult activities as classroom discussion of controversial issues or service-learning projects. Service learning has the additional disadvantage of being expensive and time-consuming. The national drive for high-stakes testing in English and mathematics not only forces schools to divert resources from social studies and extracurricular activities; it also makes it more difficult for students to exercise meaningful voice in their own schools (because so many major decisions are driven by the tests). Textbooks and curricula tend to emphasize the procedures of government rather than the substance and importance of issues, because textbook adoption committees consider almost any treatment of political issues to be excessively con-

troversial. Communities demand success in sports, which of all the extracurricular activities seem to have the weakest connection to civic participation later in life.

Opportunities exist to address each of these problems at both the state and federal levels. The Education Commission of the States, the Center for Civic Education, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the National Council for the Social Studies, and many other groups are advocating for better civic education, and their work is attracting new allies. Probably the most valuable change, however, would be for Americans to remember that schools do not exist only to produce productive workers; they must also help to make citizens. This is a civic mission for which we should hold them accountable.

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