

**What is a Civic-Based Education?  
Citizenship as the Core of Education in  
the 21<sup>st</sup> Century\***

**By**

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## Introduction

*“Today, the American public believes that educating young people about democracy should be a central mission of schools. American citizens think that civic learning can be an effective tool both in preparing students to be responsible citizens and in developing a broad array of character traits of value to society. Yet most Americans also feel public schools are not fulfilling their civic mission and are not doing an adequate job preparing students to become good, engaged, active citizens. Likewise, they view young people as being unprepared to participate in the nation’s civic life.”<sup>1</sup>*

So begins a report that indicates a majority of Americans believe that civic education is important, and that they support the creation of strong civic education programs in schools. It is clear to most Americans and many educational experts that active citizenship becomes increasingly important in a world where issues become more complex and young people are less involved in the political process.

While the current standards movement tends to promote the broad goal of citizenship, state history/social studies standards are often unfocused and confusing. They generally promote the learning of a broad array of knowledge, skills and ideas that may or may not support effective citizenship. In addition, in most school districts, there is no coherent vision as to what constitutes a strong citizenship education program. For example, the typical district has an uncoordinated, fragmented social studies program that includes an “expanding environment” curriculum in the elementary grades (i.e. self, local community, city and state, etc), with separate, yearly or semester courses in geography, World and American history, world cultures, government, economics, electives and Advanced Placement at the middle and high school levels. Unfortunately, these typical social studies programs, based on state standards, voluminous or vacuous textbooks, and traditional instructional approaches, do not adequately prepare students for productive citizenship in a 21st century world.

## What is Citizenship Education?

Citizenship education provides citizens with background knowledge of democratic principles and ideals, develops a core understanding of public issues, promotes the ability to think and reason at high levels, and builds “information literacy” skills that enable citizens to constantly update their information and knowledge about citizenship issues. Citizens develop key “habits of mind”, including curiosity, an openness to new ideas, problem solving skills, and a willingness to discuss issues and examine a variety of perspectives. Citizenship education fosters ‘active’ citizens who, at minimum, vote in

elections, but also participate in grass roots activities that help to sustain and improve a democratic society and the lives of its people.

### **How does this knowledge base and these abilities and attributes develop?**

The recommendations in both the *Civic Mission of Schools*<sup>2</sup> and *Educating Democracy*<sup>3</sup> reports provide a beginning framework for implementing a comprehensive civic education program K-12. As outlined in *Social Education*<sup>4</sup>, the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Journal, the *Civic Mission of Schools* report highlights six components that should be implemented by schools. This article merges and simplifies the six areas into the following four critical categories:

1. *Provide a top quality civic education curriculum.*
2. *Examine current issues*
3. *Expand community service programs*
4. *Provide extracurricular activities that encourage civic engagement*

The purpose of this article is to suggest a realistic framework that incorporates and synthesizes these four components into a coherent civic education program. The author believes that citizenship – civic education -- should be a major goal of an effective social studies program (and of the total school mission), and that social studies and other subject area educators must find ways to integrate these components into the school program so that students are prepared to live as citizens of a 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

#### **1. Provide a top quality civic education curriculum**

At the heart of a civic education program is an understanding of democratic principles and ideals, how they were developed and formed, and the struggles and sacrifices to get them and keep them. How do teachers, schools and districts create citizenship-based programs that focus on these principles and ideals? One way is to develop a set of big ideas and essential questions that enable teachers to explore the historical concepts and questions that focus on the struggles toward, and the growth and development of, democratic values and institutions. While there are many ways to answer this question, a core set of ideas for teaching history is embodied in a report developed by the Center for Civic Education and included in *Educating Democracy* report.<sup>5</sup> Based on these ideas, World and American history courses would focus attention on how democratic values and institutions developed, examine the individuals, groups and episodes that helped to shape the struggle for democratic institutions, and explore the conflicts that arose as this struggle developed.

Maintaining a focus on these ideas is key to a successful civic education curriculum. For example, early world history (before 1800) might focus on the origins of democratic ideas and institutions. How did ancient teachings, ancient civilizations, develop the rudiments of democratic ideas and institutions? What individuals contributed to this development, and what happened to them? The continued development of democratic

ideas and institutions through Constitutional rule of law and other means, and the role that individuals and groups played in this development should also be explored as continuing narrative through World and American history courses. Obstacles to this development should also be included.

What about facts? This approach does not denigrate the learning of facts, but suggests that factual learning occurs within a framework of important ideas and questions, focused around the development and maintenance of democratic ideals and institutions. Placing facts into a context helps the learner to make connections and understand the relevance of what is learned. For example, the study of the factual information about the Depression and efforts to solve it involve students in a study of the role of government – what should be the role of a democratic government in the lives of American citizens? This controversy is still central to our society, so it easily transfers to many issues that are currently being debated in America today.

A second curricular goal is to foster learning of processes and skills that foster civic learning and understanding. Citizens in a democratic society need to learn how to effectively inquire and investigate public issues, write informed and persuasive arguments, intelligently discuss points of view and issues with those that disagree with them. In our Era 3 learning work, we identified five skill sets that we think not only are critical for general life success, but also for becoming an effective citizen. The five skills are described in figure one, below:

[Insert figure one here]

The frequent use of interactive, engaging instructional strategies in many subject areas (including the library) that enhance the development of these critical skills – the development of good questions, the ability to define challenges, the use of research skills to find and organize information, graphic organizers that help students learn how to organize knowledge and ideas, simulations that foster problem solving and decision making, research projects, interpretive discussions and debates, persuasive writing exercises – all of these characterize classrooms where the learning of civic education processes and skills are emphasized.

## **2. Examine Current Issues**

To be a good citizen, students must have a grasp of current issues and problems, knowledge of a range of points of view, and habits of mind that develop from continual reading, discussion and analysis. Systematic emphasis on current issues and problems is more likely to produce citizens that develop the “habits of mind” necessary for good citizenship. The *Civic Mission of Schools* report indicates that students who participate in current issues discussions have a greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communications skills, more civic knowledge and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school<sup>6</sup>. They also are more likely to say that they will vote and volunteer as adults. Yet few schools and districts have a coherent current events program integrated into the curriculum.

**FIGURE ONE**  
**FIVE KEY SKILL SETS FOR AN ERA 3 WORLD**

**1. Ask questions, formulate problems and challenges**

It is a rare school or program that enables students to examine and develop profound questions, solve complex problems on a regular basis, or work from/develop challenges that are worthy of critical study.

Imagine studying the American Revolution by enabling students to brainstorm questions and choose (with the teacher's input) to examine some profound and critical questions, such as "Why revolution, not evolution?" "Did they really have to revolt?" or "Is war ever justified?"

**2. Search for and Process information and data**

Information processing enables students to learn a broad variety of skills appropriate for a world of information overload and instant access. These series of skills assure that students can search for information from many sources, sort and select for importance, evaluate information for reliability, read for understanding, analyze data, and summarize, categorize, and conceptualize information, ideas and data from texts.

**3. Think deeply and flexibly**

Students are provided with the opportunity to extend their thinking – for example, to compare and contrast, interpret, apply, infer, analyze, synthesize, and think creatively.

**4. Draw conclusions, apply learning**

Students draw conclusions, solve problems, make decisions, answer key questions. They are often asked to apply learning to new and novel situations, problems, and issues.

**5. Communicate effectively.**

Students communicate effectively in a number of ways, such as through writing a persuasive essay, demonstrating how to solve a math problem, or creating a powerpoint presentation in order to explain the results of a science experiment. Learning how to read a text is important, but so is learning how to find big ideas and connect them to facts, how to find, read and synthesize multiple sources, and how to evaluate multiple types of information for reliability. The importance of argument and discussion –taking thoughtful positions, supporting these with evidence, sharing and discussing points of view – are critical skills for citizens in a democratic society. Students need to listen to many points of view and then communicate their ideas and arguments in a coherent, logical way frequently through writing and presentations.

The author is proposing three different ways to provide opportunities to incorporate current events: tie the larger big ideas and essential questions of social studies units to a study of current issues on a regular basis, initiate a capstone social studies (or interdisciplinary) course that focuses on current issues and problems, and set aside a regular amount of time in the curriculum for separate study and discussion of current events.

***a. Learn about current issues through the curriculum***

Imagine that social studies courses were developed around big ideas and essential questions tied to civic education, and one big idea focused around the role of government in the lives of the individual citizen (what role should the government play in restricting or enlarging the freedoms of Americans? What rights are protected under the Constitution?) Think about the current issues that are involved in this big idea – issues related to “warrantless” surveillance of Americans, to the treatment of prisoners (e.g. convicted felons losing their right to vote) and issues related to the treatment of foreign combatants. Gay marriage and the legal rights of gays is also tied this issue. Timeless issues focused around big ideas and essential questions help to integrate current issues and problems into history and social science courses. It makes more sense to periodically examine and discuss them when an American history course is focused around larger civic education ideas and issues and can easily transfer to discussions of contemporary issues and challenges.

***b. Develop A Capstone Social Studies Course***

From a civic education perspective, a critical addition to the typical social studies curriculum is the inclusion of a capstone civic education course at the high school level that both integrates previous social studies (and other subject) learning and highlights current problems and issues. Unfortunately, a current organizational feature of many social studies programs is the inclusion of a variety of electives into the senior social studies curriculum, instead of capstone social studies courses and experiences that integrate and synthesize social studies learning K-12. In the last year of a social studies program, students are often given a choice of elective courses in areas such as psychology or sociology. Many also take Advanced Placement social studies courses. Sometimes economics and government courses are required, one taken in each semester.

The author believes that these types of courses, while interesting, diverse, and rewarding, are not sufficient for the development of a strong civic education program. What’s really needed is a course required of all students that reviews and integrates prior learning and creates an opportunity to explore and examine American and World issues that every citizen needs to understand. This course should focus on integrating historical and other learning through the study of issues and challenges that every citizen has to have, and insuring that all students have a working knowledge of the complex skills necessary to explore issues and problems in a democratic society. It should also examine how individuals and groups try to effect change, and promote student projects in which

students have the opportunity to work on a major issue and examine ways that they can make a difference in helping to resolve major challenges (e.g. violence, abuse, health issues, discrimination, climate change, etc.).

A capstone course should focus primarily on current important and significant issues tied to democratic institutions and ideals, and might include the following:

*What should be the relationship between states and the federal government?*  
*What should be the role of the federal government? In education? In the economic life of the country? In eliminating poverty? In maintaining competition?*  
*How do we strike a balance between liberty and security in times of war?*  
*How should a society create and distribute wealth?*  
*What is “equal opportunity”? What role should government play in creating equal opportunity?*  
*What should be our foreign policy in a post-Communist era?*  
*When is war justified?*  
*Should the United States intervene in foreign affairs when they are unrelated to national security (such as Darfur)?*  
*How do we continue to stay informed? How do we become active citizens?*  
*What is the role of advocacy groups in a democratic society? Of political parties?*  
*Can one person make a difference?*  
*What is the “real” way that laws are made? Who influences the development of these laws?*

In real life, students will need to use a variety of sources and resources and think on their own to maintain and develop their understanding of citizenship based issues. Therefore, this course should not use a textbook, but rather multiple sources that encourage students to read and view text critically, such as many different magazines, newspapers, Internet and media sources. Much of the course should revolve around interpretive discussions that enable students to discuss and debate issues, argue for and against points of view, and write position papers.

This course should also reinforce the challenge of civic engagement for each individual. Students should discuss their role as citizens in a democratic society and learn different ways to become involved. All students should understand the responsibility of voting and intelligently exploring the issues of the day. If possible, students who are 18 should be registered to vote during the course. They should have the opportunity to join and become involved with organizations that promote civic engagement.

This course should also emphasize research and investigation, critical thinking, creative problem solving and conflict resolution skills – finding information and discussing solutions to difficult issues and problems, developing position papers, and demonstrating the complexity of the issues and problems citizens face as they consider their role in society and their active role as citizens in a democratic society.

### *c. Study and discuss current events at all levels*

Finally, while current issue discussions in history courses tied to the big ideas and essential questions of the course, and a high school capstone course, would help to develop civic knowledge and skills, regular, on-going exploration of current issues and problems at every grade level should be a mainstay of every school and district. When I was teaching social studies in a middle school, my students were required to bring in a newspaper article related to a critical issue or problem every Friday and to critically write a commentary about them. The articles and commentaries were shared and led to some fascinating discussions. At times we tracked certain issues, so that students had to find an article related to a war zone, a problem in a specific country, or an international issue.

### *Current Issues - Summary*

Unfortunately, because of time constraints and lack of priority, schools today do very little to systematically develop an understanding of current issues and problems and to read about and discuss them over time. Few school districts have written policies regarding the implementation of current events programs at every grade level. Few districts have programs and courses that help students to learn how to read newspapers and watch the news programs critically.

If we believe that a good citizen is an informed citizen, then current events should become a key part of the curriculum. It should be threaded throughout the curriculum and be tied to ongoing social studies and other course learning at every level. Beginning in elementary school, the study of current events should be a regular part of the curriculum through the study of “big ideas” and key essential questions. Students should be introduced to a wide range of issues through a variety of resources, including newspapers, magazines and other media. Key skills should be emphasized, such as information literacy, reading for understanding, checking resources for reliability, critical thinking, creative problem solving, and persuasive thinking and writing. Issue discussions should be ongoing.

## **3. Expand Service Learning Experiences**

A third way to develop citizenship education is through service learning. Service learning builds knowledge and skills about how outside organizations and agencies provide services and work with governments. It provides an understanding of how organizations are involved in the political process, helps students to develop problem solving skills, and promotes caring and service.

Service learning involves students in two different types of experiences, both of them important. The first requires students to work on an issue or problem in the community. Students discuss the problem, conduct research, develop a core question, examine alternatives, and develop their best solution. They decide on how to implement the solution, develop proposals to share with community leaders, raise funds to support a solution, and so on. They learn how to take a problem from an initial question to the

implementation of a solution. This problem based learning approach enables students to work on important challenges, suggest solutions, and develop action plans to implement solutions.

A second approach to service learning requires students to contribute their time and intelligence to community organizations in a meaningful way – collecting materials and resources for the poor, volunteering in a hospital or social service agency, or working in a political action or government agency. Each student selects a community organization, develops a proposal as to what they will do in the organization, volunteers for the organization, and keeps a reflective log on their learning.

Many school districts understand that service learning is an important component of their program, and have developed policies and programs for their middle and high school students that promote service learning. Some are voluntary, some are required. Any strong civic education program needs to have a service learning component.

#### **4. Provide “Extracurricular” Programs That Encourage Civic Engagement**

Extra-curricular programs that encourage civic engagement can take many forms. After school programs that engage students in civic education provide opportunities to students to expand their understanding of citizenship in ways that they cannot do so in the classroom. For example, the *Presidential Classroom* enables students to visit Washington DC and to work on projects, meet with leaders, debate problems of critical importance, and engage with teachers and mentors.<sup>7</sup> Some “extra curricular” programs not only may be conducted after school but even during the school day. For example, *KidsVoting* is a program that provides resources to help students learn about current events, issues, and candidates, and then have them take part in a voting experience using the same ballot as adults use, with the same candidates and issues.<sup>8</sup> The *Future Problem Solving Program* enables students each year to explore problem situations involving local, state, national and international challenges, and to use a creative problem solving process to find solutions to these problems<sup>9</sup>. The *Center for Civic Education* runs a “*We The People*” program for upper elementary, middle and high school students. A competition provides the opportunity for students to participate in a culminating activity at the local, state and national levels in most states.<sup>10</sup> School districts should promote the development of these and other similar programs and incorporate them on a regular basis.

### **Conclusion**

A critical need in a democratic society is to educate our students about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Schools have a major obligation to provide students, K-12, with the knowledge, skills, habits of mind and understandings that enable them to fulfill their civic obligations.

For a variety of reasons, schools generally do not do well in providing a coherent, comprehensive, holistic program that fulfills this responsibility. For one, there is no

emphasis on this goal in No Child Left Behind, the standards movement, or in any other major educational forum. For the most part, schools provide a fragmented, limited program revolving around the key areas of citizenship education.

This paper suggests that four areas need to be focused on and strengthened if civic education is to take a more prominent place in the school curriculum:

- *Strengthen the civic education curriculum.*
- *Incorporate the regular, on-going study of current issues*
- *Create or expand community service-learning programs*
- *Provide extracurricular activities that support the above goals and encourage civic engagement*

These four areas form the essential components of a K-12 citizenship education program. School districts need to analyze their programs in light of these areas to discover if they have comprehensive programs in place in all four areas. My guess is that most will be wanting – which weakens our democracy in the long run.

## FOOTNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> From Classroom to Citizen, American Attitudes on Civic Education (2004). Washington, DC: Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools and the Alliance for Representative Democracy, page 1.
- <sup>2</sup> The Civic Mission of Schools (2003) A Report from Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Washington, DC.
- <sup>3</sup> Gagnon, Paul (2003). Educating Democracy: State Standards to Insure a Civic Core Washington, D.C.: Albert Shanker Institute ([www.ashankerinst.org](http://www.ashankerinst.org)) See Appendix A for the historical ideas focus.
- <sup>4</sup> The Civic Mission of Schools, Social Education, November/December 2005, pp. 414-415.
- <sup>5</sup> See footnotes #3, Appendix A.
- <sup>6</sup> See footnote #2, pp. 24-25.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Presidential Classroom* program information can be found at: <http://www.presidentialclassroom.org/>
- <sup>8</sup> The *kids Voting* program can be examined and explored at: <https://netforum.avectra.com/eWeb/StartPage.aspx?Site=KVUSA&WebCode=HomePage>
- <sup>9</sup> *Future Problem Solving Program* information and resources can be found at: <http://www.fpspi.org/>
- <sup>10</sup> Information and resources on the *We the People* and other programs and resources from the Center for Civic Education can be found at: <http://new.civiced.org/index.php>