

Congressional Conference on Civic Education

Results in the Making | Summary of Activities



Representative
DEMOCRACY
in America
Voices of the People

A Project of the Alliance for Representative Democracy; funded by the U.S. Department of Education by Act of Congress



Why Was the Congressional Conference on Civic Education Initiated?

Americans value and cherish the ideals of democracy. Yet many reports and surveys indicate that far too many citizens do not understand the basic workings of our government or are cynical and distrustful of our political institutions and processes. Many institutions help to develop Americans' civic 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. This is the historic civic mission of our nation's schools. According to the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly referred to as the Nation's Education Report Card, only about 25% of our students receive an adequate civic education. These findings are grounds for concern, and they call for a national response to remedy a serious deficiency in the education of American citizens.

For these reasons, the Alliance for Representative Democracy initiated a series of five congressional conferences to generate a national movement designed to improve the status of civic learning and practice in America's classrooms. The Alliance consists of three leading national organizations: the Center for Civic Education, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the Center on Congress. The Joint Leadership of the Congress serves as the conference honorary host.

At best, most students receive only a single course in American government, usually in their senior year, which is too little and too late.

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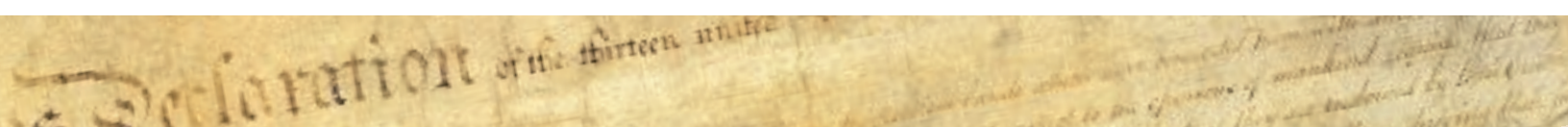
Major Problems Confronting Civic Learning

During the past several decades, education policy and practice appear to have focused more and more upon developing the "worker" at the expense of the "citizen." Although every state notes the need for civic education, the subject is seldom given sustained and systematic attention in the K–12 curriculum. The failure of students to do well in civics is a direct consequence of

- inadequate policy support;
- inadequate implementation of policy, where it exists;
- inadequate curricular requirements;
- inadequate teacher preparation; and
- the distorting effects on the entire curricula resulting from the focus on testing in math and reading.

More Americans aged 15–25 can name the hometown of TV's "The Simpsons" than can name the party that controls Congress or who is the speaker of the House of Representatives.

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF STATE LEGISLATURES SURVEY, 2003





Building a National Movement to Improve Civic Learning

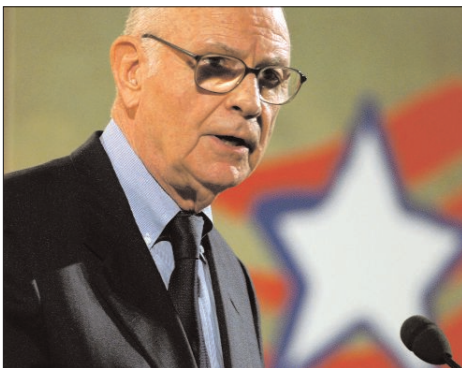
The First Congressional Conference on Civic Education was held September 20–23, 2003, in Washington, D.C. Two additional conferences have taken place with two more planned for 2006 and 2007. The conferences bring together key education policymakers and stakeholders from each state to examine the critical role civic education plays in fostering civic engagement and the current status of civic education in America’s schools. The first conference inspired the participants to take action to improve the quality and quantity of civic learning in each state through improved policies. Subsequent conferences have allowed the delegates to focus their efforts on developing specific policy objectives and share information across the nation.

In a 2005 study of school district policies and practice, the New Jersey Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools found that only 39% of districts had a required course in civic education. The same survey found that just 35% of districts offered in-service training opportunities for teachers in civic learning.

The Role of State Delegations

As a result of the Congressional Conferences, every state and the District of Columbia have created delegations composed of state legislators, state and school district superintendents, state and local boards of education members, secretaries of state, members of the state judiciary, representatives of education organizations, and concerned citizens. Reflecting the education policy in their state, these state delegations have formed coalitions to enhance the awareness of the general public and policymakers of the need to restore the civic mission of schools and to enact policy changes to improve civic learning.

In a 2005 study of Arizona school districts, the Arizona Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools reported that 53% of teachers had never been given in-service professional development in civic education. The same survey found that 64% of responding districts were only somewhat satisfied that their civic education programs were creating informed, active, and engaged citizens; only 17% of districts reported being highly satisfied that their programs were having the desired results.



When we fail to educate our children about our history and our representative democracy, we miss an opportunity to enrich our children’s lives. We also miss an opportunity to enrich our country through their involvement. Our responsibility is to teach our children the American story. We must instill in our young people a deep and abiding understanding and appreciation of our heritage.

THE HONORABLE LEE H. HAMILTON, EXCERPT FROM “WHAT WE OWE OUR CHILDREN,” THIRD ANNUAL CONGRESSIONAL CONFERENCE ON CIVIC EDUCATION





State Campaigns to Restore the Civic Mission of Schools: Results in the Making

The important work of restoring the civic mission of schools takes place at the school district and in the statehouses of our nation. Since the inaugural conference in 2003, an impressive array of activities and accomplishments have occurred at the critical state and school district levels to strengthen and improve civic learning. The Congressional Conference on Civic Education has been successful in achieving its primary goal of serving as a catalyst for reform and in sparking a nationwide movement.

- Each state delegation has formed an active and inclusive coalition of policymakers, education professionals, and stakeholders, as well as concerned citizens.
- Twenty-two states have held state summits, joint legislative hearings, or meetings modeled on the Congressional Conferences. Twelve states have similar events planned.
- Twenty-three states have conducted benchmark surveys of current policies and practices in civic education and identified deficiencies that need to be addressed. An additional fourteen states have surveys planned or in progress. Official state commissions on civic learning have been established in Arizona, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, and Virginia, with several other states exploring the establishment of legislatively created commissions.
- Legislators from thirty-four states have introduced sixty-three pieces of legislation to strengthen civic education in schools. Twenty-three of these measures have passed.

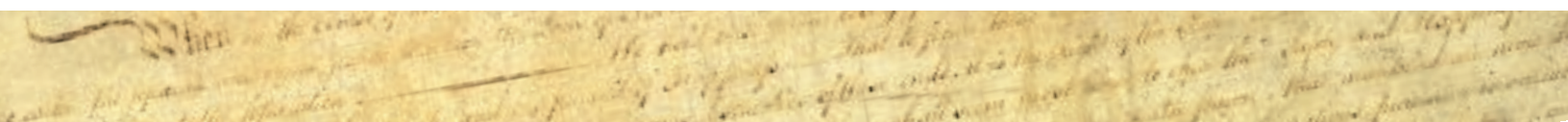
[E]ducation is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments.... It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities.... It is the very foundation of good citizenship.

EARL WARREN, *BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION*
347 U.S.483, 493 (1954)

Policymakers who attended the conferences have taken action within their authority. The Idaho State Superintendent of Public Instruction added civic education to the subjects assessed in the state's annual school building accreditation report. The New York State School Boards Association has worked with the New York delegation to develop a model policy for the civic mission of schools for all New York school districts. The West Virginia School Board implemented a civic education course requirement for high school graduation and revised the state's civic education standards of learning. The Washington State Department of Public Instruction has developed and is mandating the use of a method of capturing authentic assessment of students' civic knowledge and dispositions.

Democracy needs to be reborn in each generation and education is its midwife.

JOHN DEWEY





Conference Statement Adopted by the Delegates to the First Congressional Conference on Civic Education

SEPTEMBER 22, 2003, WASHINGTON, D.C.

The participants at the First Annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education acknowledge that there is an urgent need to address the low level of civic engagement in America. We recognize that

- Civic knowledge and engagement are essential to maintaining our representative democracy. While many institutions help to develop Americans' civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, schools must have the capacity to prepare students for engaged citizenship. Civic education should be a central purpose of education essential to the well-being of representative democracy.
- Civic education should be seen as a core subject. Well-defined state standards and curricular requirements are necessary to ensure that civic education is taught effectively at each grade level from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Strengthening the civic mission of schools must be a shared responsibility of the public and private sectors at the community, local, state, and national levels.
- Policies that support quality teacher education and professional development are important to ensure effective classroom instruction and raise student achievement.
- Well-designed classroom programs that foster an understanding of fundamental constitutional principles through methods such as service learning, discussion of current events, or simulations of democratic processes and procedures are essential to civic education.

In recognition of these findings, we resolve to take action to reaffirm the historic civic mission of our schools.

State Efforts to Restore the Civic Mission of Schools: The Road Ahead

Civic learning must be restored to equal importance with workplace preparation as a principal goal of public education. To restore the civic mission of schools, several shortcomings in policies and classroom practice must be remedied—inadequate policy support and curricular requirements, lack of effective teacher preparation, impediments to effective teaching strategies and programs, and lack of resources. States and school districts must establish a systematic approach to the implementation of effective civic learning through civic education.

Together, efforts at the local, state, and national levels have resulted in a movement to restore the civic mission of our schools. The accomplishments of the state delegations to the Congressional Conferences on Civic Education and the vital state-level coalitions they have formed are evidence that there is a growing awareness of the need to strengthen and improve civic learning. An impressive foundation has been established through the activities of the state delegations and state campaigns on which to build increased awareness at the state and local levels for such improvement. Through the Congressional Conferences, a base has been built in every state to sustain the effort to restore the civic mission of our schools. Much more remains to be done to ensure that adequate policies and support are in place in each state, school district, and schoolhouse in the nation. Each American schoolchild must be ensured a clear understanding of their rights and responsibilities as citizens and recognize the importance of civic participation. Our young people deserve no less than our greatest efforts to achieve this worthy goal.





How to Get Involved

Concerned Citizens

Contact schools in your area to find out how much civic learning students in your community are receiving. Volunteer to help social studies and civics teachers. Consider offering students experiential, extracurricular, and service-learning opportunities. Contact the facilitator for your state and volunteer in your state's effort to restore the civic mission of schools.

Public Officials

Work with other policymakers to determine if schools in your community and state are meeting their civic mission. Conduct a survey to find out course requirements and offerings, extracurricular and service-learning opportunities, as well as local policies that affect civic learning. Work with other policymakers to strengthen civic-learning policies and practices. Use your "bully pulpit" to campaign for civic learning. Contact your state facilitator for more information and suggestions on how to make a difference.

Community and Professional Groups

Volunteer in schools to ensure students receive service, experiential, and extracurricular civic-learning opportunities. Work with your state's campaign to strengthen civic-learning policies and practices. Contact your state facilitator for more information about how to get involved.

Business and Industry

Effective civic learning teaches the very traits that employers say are highly sought in new employees—traits such as teamwork, tolerance for the point of view of others, and personal responsibility. Volunteer with schools in your area to ensure students receive high-quality civic-learning experiences. Work with policymakers to strengthen civic-learning policies and practices. Contact your state facilitator for suggestions and strategies for meaningful involvement.

Foundations

Ensure there is equitable opportunity for all students to receive high-quality civic learning. Consider funding programs that promote civic learning. Help train teachers and provide instructional material.

Contact your state facilitator for suggestions on effective participation. For the national effort, contact the Center for Civic Education at (202) 861-8800 and speak with Mark Molli or Ted McConnell. They may also be reached by email at molli@civiced.org and mcconnell@civiced.org.

www.representativedemocracy.org

We will strive increasingly to quicken the public's sense of civic duty.

ATHENIAN OATH



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October 2006

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Additional Resources

Citizenship: A Challenge for All Generations

This report by the National Conference of State Legislatures provides new evidence that civic education makes a big difference in attitudes toward citizenship, knowledge, and civic engagement of young people. The report is based on a national public opinion survey designed to discover how civic attitudes, knowledge, and participation of young people—the DotNet generation between 15 and 26 years of age—compare to those of older generations. (<http://www.ncsl.org/public/trust/citizenship.pdf>)

How the American Public Views Congress

The Center on Congress at Indiana University conducts an annual nonpartisan national public opinion survey, filling a knowledge gap about how citizens learn about Congress and evaluate its performance. The 2005 inaugural survey results suggest that civic education programs designed to provide information about the role of democratic institutions, such as Congress, can foster better informed, more politically engaged citizens. (http://congress.indiana.edu/pdf/COC%20Survey%2008_2005.pdf)

Civic Mission of Schools Report

Written and endorsed by more than 50 scholars and education practitioners, the Civic Mission of Schools report summarizes the status of and need for civic learning in schools in kindergarten through twelfth grade. It analyzes trends in American political and civic engagement; identifies promising approaches to educating students for democracy; and offers recommendations to educators, policymakers, government officials, and funders. (http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/site/campaign/cms_report.html)

Policy Checklist

This checklist describes some of the most important policy and practice elements needed to ensure that students acquire the essential competencies of informed, responsible, effective citizenship. Policymakers and educators can use this tool to assess the extent to which their districts or states currently support citizenship education and the areas in which work still needs to be done. (<http://representativedemocracy.org>)

Campaign Talking Points

The points present a brief outline of the key issues and supporting data that highlight the need for improved civic learning in our schools. The points help make the argument that the neglect of civic learning in our schools has significant consequences for the future of our democracy. (<http://representativedemocracy.org>)

State Activities Report

This report is an annually updated compendium of the activities of each state delegation participating in the Congressional Conference on Civic Education and the coalitions they have created. The report provides a snapshot of the impact of the Campaign to Promote Civic Education throughout the states. Each state campaign reflects its unique character and resources. (<http://representativedemocracy.org>)

Questions and Answers for Policymakers

A series of briefs designed to address a particular area of concern to policymakers are developed annually by the National Center for Learning and Citizenship at the Education Commission of the States. In 2004, the focus was on “Why Civic Education?” and in 2005, “How Districts Can Be Supported by the State.” (<http://representativedemocracy.org>)

Educating Democracy: State Standards to Ensure a Civic Core

In this study, sponsored by the Albert Shanker Institute, historian Paul Gagnon analyzes the relevant academic standards of each state and provides concrete suggestions for how they could be improved to provide all students with the skills and knowledge they need to become committed, thoughtful citizens. Gagnon proposes that states adopt a rich, common core of historical and political learning for all students and provides a model of what such a core might look like. (<http://www.shankerinstitute.org/Downloads/gagnon/contents.html>)