

The Civic Mission of the Schools: What Constitutes an Effective Civic Education?

Education for Democracy: The Civic Mission of the Schools

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Aristotle said, "If liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in a democracy, they will be attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost." This statement conveys an important thought. It might be the height of hubris to do so, but I would like to add something to it. What is missing from Aristotle's statement is the idea that participation alone is not enough. We need to develop enlightened participation and the best way to do that is through effective civic education programs.

To identify what constitutes an effective civic education, I think it is useful to begin by identifying what we hope would be some of the most desirable outcomes of civic education programs. I suggest the following.

Desirable outcomes of effective programs. Students who have received an effective program in civic education should become informed, responsible, and competent participants in the political

life of their communities, states, and the nation. To be such a participant,

- They should possess a reasoned commitment to those fundamental values and principles of our political heritage that are contained in such documents as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and Bill of Rights, the Gettysburg Address, and the “I Have a Dream” speech of Martin Luther King Jr.
- Their commitment to these values and principles should serve as a moral compass guiding their participation in both their private and public relationships.
- They should have acquired the knowledge of politics and government and the intellectual and participatory skills that are required for informed and competent participation.
- And finally, they should have developed the public and private dispositions or traits of character such as civility, tolerance, and compassion that enhance their inclination and capacity to participate in political life in a manner that is conducive to the healthy functioning of the body politic and the improvement of society.

Demonstrable results of effective programs. There is abundant evidence both from research and everyday observations that good

civic education produces desirable results. When students receive a sustained and systematic education in civics and government they become

- more knowledgeable about their government;
- more interested in politics and government;
- more capable of identifying public policies that do or do not serve their interests and the common good, and more consistent in their views on policies;
- more critical of politics and government—developing a healthy skepticism that does not alienate them from participation, but instead motivates them to participate in improving the system;
- more likely to participate in political and civic activities; and
- more committed to fundamental values and principles and more tolerant of those who differ in their opinions.

Role of teachers. There is also abundant evidence that knowledgeable, skilled, and dedicated teachers are one of the most important factors, if not the most important single factor, in providing a sound civic education for our students. Teachers need adequate preparation in both the substance and methodology of

civic education as well as the support of their administrations and their communities.

Teachers in public schools in general, and teachers of civics and government in particular, must be committed to education, not indoctrination. Teachers should help students develop the knowledge and skills required to come to their own thoughtful positions on matters about which reasonable people differ. To do otherwise, that is, for teachers to try to convert students to their own points of view on such matters is to violate the student's rights to freedom of belief, conscience, and choice, and is incompatible with the proper role of public education in a free society. It should be needless to say, but it isn't, that teachers in public schools are responsible for avoiding partisan bias when teaching their students.

Civic education must be given adequate attention. The most basic requirement for civic education programs to be effective is for them to exist in the school curriculum. All too often, civic education is simply not taught at all or taught too little or too late. Civic education must not merely exist in our schools: it must occupy a prominent role. It must be given enough attention for its demonstrable, beneficial effects to occur. This requires, among other things, that

- education in civics and government should be seen as a central purpose of education;
- civics and government should be considered a core subject on a level with others such as history, geography, mathematics, and science:
- civics and government should be taught explicitly and systematically from kindergarten through twelfth grade either as separate units and courses or as a component of courses in other subjects.

Foci of civic education. Civic education should take into account both the formal and informal curriculum of the schools. For example:

- Formal classroom instruction in civics and government should focus on the content of such relevant disciplines as political science, political philosophy, history, and law. It should also focus on the essential intellectual and participatory skills required for participation in our political system. Classroom instruction should also provide for related learning experiences in the school and community, including civics-oriented service learning opportunities.

- In addition to the formal curriculum, the importance of the informal curriculum should be recognized. The informal curriculum refers to the governance of the school community and relationships among those within it. This requires that classrooms and schools are managed by adults who govern in accordance with constitutional values and principles and who display traits of character worth emulating.

Elements of effective programs. In a publication entitled *The Civic Mission of the Schools*, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Maryland identifies approaches to civic education that research has determined to be effective. Stated briefly, the report suggests that

1. **Schools should provide sound formal instruction in government, history, law, and democracy.** Such instruction increases civic knowledge which research shows contributes to young peoples' long-term political engagement. The report cautions, however, that schools should avoid teaching only "rote facts about dry procedures that are unlikely to benefit students and might actually alienate them from politics."

- 2. Schools should include discussion of current events at local, national, and international levels and particularly those events that students see as important to their lives.** Such practices have been demonstrated to develop among students a greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communications skills, greater civic knowledge, and more interest in discussing public affairs outside of school. The report cautions that classroom discussions of current issues should be carefully moderated by the teacher so students feel free to speak from a variety of perspectives and positions, and that their right to hold and express different positions or opinions is respected not only by other students but by teachers as well.
- 3. Schools should provide students with opportunities to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.** Community service programs that are best at developing engaged citizens are those that (1) provide students meaningful experiences in working on serious matters of public policy, (2) allow students to choose, design, and implement their own projects, and (3) provide opportunities for students to reflect upon their experiences.

4. **Schools should provide students opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities focused on civic life.** Studies have shown that students who join high school extracurricular groups remain more civically engaged than their contemporaries decades later.
5. **Schools should provide students opportunities to participate in student government that give them a meaningful voice in the management of their own classrooms and schools.**
6. **Schools should provide students opportunities to take part in simulations of democratic processes and procedures such as simulations of legislative, administrative, and judicial hearings; lobbying; coalition building; negotiation; and seeking consensus or compromise.**

Programs that embody the six elements I have just described are those that research has shown to be effective in fostering the attainment of the goals of civic education I have outlined at the beginning of this paper.

Conclusion

Effective civic education programs foster desirable outcomes. We know their characteristics, we know that effective programs are

available, and we know how to implement them. Unfortunately, for reasons that should be familiar to all in this audience—such as the emphasis placed by our schools on those areas of the curriculum in which there are high-stakes testing programs—too few of our students have the opportunity to receive sound instruction in civics and government.

We are all familiar with the anecdote about the woman who asked Benjamin Franklin as he left the Constitutional Convention what kind of government he and the other Framers had created. He replied, “A republic, if you can keep it.” I think that there is little question that over the past two hundred and some odd years we have not only kept the Republic, but in many ways we have improved it. Think of the rights those of us in this room would have had about 150 years ago: more than half of us would not have had the right to vote or run for public office; none of us would be protected from unfair and unreasonable actions of state and local government under the due process and equal protection clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Our Republic has continued to exist and there is little evidence that we are going to lose it anytime in the foreseeable future. However, this should not allow us to be complacent and neglect the obligation we have to ensure that the next generation is not only

capable of preserving the Republic, but of improving it. Each generation must work to preserve the fundamental values and principles of its heritage; to work diligently to narrow the gap between the ideals of this nation and the reality of the daily lives of its people; to more fully realize the potential of our constitutional, democratic republic. I trust that this conference will further this goal.