

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

For more than 250 years, Americans have shared a vision of a democracy in which all citizens understand, appreciate, and engage actively in civic and political life. In recent decades, however, increasing numbers of Americans have disengaged from civic and political institutions such as voluntary associations, religious congregations, community-based organizations, and political and electoral activities such as voting and being informed about public issues. Young people reflect these trends: they are less likely to vote and are less interested in political discussion and public issues than either their older counterparts or young people of past decades. As a result, many young Americans may not be prepared to participate fully in our democracy now and when they become adults.

Recognizing that individuals do not automatically become free and responsible citizens but must be educated for citizenship, scholars; teachers; civic leaders; local, state, and federal policymakers; and federal judges, have with the encouragement of the president of the United States, called for new strategies that can capitalize on young people's idealism and their commitment to service and voluntarism while addressing their disengagement from political and civic institutions. One of the most promising approaches to increase young people's informed engagement is school-based civic education.

In late 2002, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and Carnegie Corporation of New York, in consultation with the Corporation for National and Community Service, convened a series of meetings involving some of the nation's most distinguished and respected scholars and practitioners in this area to determine, based on solid data and evidence, the components of effective and feasible civic education programs. Representing a diversity of political views, a variety of disciplines, and various approaches, these individuals disagree about some aspects of how civic education should be conducted, but nevertheless share a common vision of a richer, more comprehensive approach to civic education in the United States. This report is a powerful statement of their vision.

GOALS OF CIVIC EDUCATION

Civic education should help young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives. Competent and responsible citizens:

- 1 are informed and thoughtful; have a grasp and an appreciation of history and the fundamental processes of American democracy; have an understanding and awareness of public and community issues; and have the ability to obtain information, think critically, and enter into dialogue among others with different perspectives.
- 2 participate in their communities through membership in or contributions to organizations working to address an array of cultural, social, political, and religious interests and beliefs.
- 3 act politically by having the skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to accomplish public purposes, such as group problem solving, public speaking, petitioning and protesting, and voting.
- 4 have moral and civic virtues such as concern for the rights and welfare of others, social responsibility, tolerance and respect, and belief in the capacity to make a difference.

WHY SCHOOLS ARE IMPORTANT VENUES FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

- It is crucial for the future health of our democracy that all young people, including those who are usually marginalized, be knowledgeable, engaged in their communities and in politics, and committed to the public good.
- Encouraging the development of civic skills and attitudes among young people has been an important goal of education and was the primary impetus for originally establishing public schools.
- Schools are the only institutions with the capacity and mandate to reach virtually every young person in the country. Of all institutions, schools are the most systematically and directly responsible for imparting citizen norms.
- Schools are best equipped to address the cognitive aspects of good citizenship — civic and political knowledge and related skills such as critical thinking and deliberation.
- Schools are communities in which young people learn to interact, argue, and work together with others, an important foundation for future citizenship.
- Many non-school institutions that used to provide venues for young people to participate in civic and political affairs (such as political parties, unions, nonprofit associations, and activist religious denominations) have lost the capacity or will to engage young people. Schools, as major community institutions, can help reverse this trend and have an impact on other institutions (political, economic, religious, and family), by providing quality education that improves young people's civic knowledge, skills, and intentions to vote and volunteer.
- Forty state constitutions mention the importance of civic literacy among citizens, and 13 of them state that a central purpose of their educational system is to promote good citizenship, democracy and free government.

WHY THIS IS AN IMPORTANT TIME FOR SCHOOLS TO FOCUS ON CIVIC EDUCATION

- **Schools can capitalize on several positive trends related to youth civic engagement**, including an increase in the number of young people involved in community service and volunteering and in the percentage of young people who are tolerant and committed to free speech.
- **Schools can help address disturbing trends related to youth civic engagement**, including a decrease in young people's interest in political discussion and public issues; their tendency to be more cynical and alienated from formal politics, more materialistic, and less trusting; and a decline in their voter participation rates.
- **School-based civic education is in decline.** Most formal civic education today comprises only a single semester course on government — compared to as many as three courses in democracy, civics, and government that were common until the 1960s.
- **Numerous factors work against even the best intentions educators may have to promote civic engagement among young people.** These obstacles include fear of criticism and litigation if educators address topics that may be considered controversial or political in nature; pressures to meet the goals of high-stakes testing, which now measures reading and mathematics skills (civic education is rarely included); and budget cutbacks in extracurricular programs that help children gain civic skills and attitudes.

SIX PROMISING APPROACHES TO CIVIC EDUCATION

Research shows that schools can help to develop competent and responsible citizens when they:

- 1 Provide instruction in government, history, law, and democracy.** Formal instruction in U.S. government, history, and democracy increases civic knowledge. This is a valuable goal in itself 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 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.** When young people have opportunities to discuss current issues in a classroom setting, they tend to have greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communications skills, more civic knowledge, and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school. Conversations, however, should be carefully moderated so that students feel welcome to speak from a variety of perspectives. Teachers need support in broaching controversial issues in classrooms since they may risk criticism or sanctions if they do so.
- 3 Design and implement programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.** Service programs are now common in K-12 schools. The ones that best develop engaged citizens are linked to the curriculum; consciously pursue civic outcomes, rather than seek only to improve academic performance or to promote higher self-esteem; allow students to engage in meaningful work on serious public issues; give students a role in choosing and designing their projects; provide students with opportunities to reflect on the service work; allow students—especially older ones—to pursue political responses to problems consistent with laws that require public schools to be nonpartisan; and see service-learning as part of a broader philosophy toward education, not just a program that is adopted for a finite period in a particular course.
- 4 Offer extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities.** Long term studies of Americans show that those who participate in extracurricular activities in high school remain more civically engaged than their contemporaries even decades later. Thus, everyone should have opportunities to join high school groups, and such participation should be valued.
- 5 Encourage student participation in school governance.** A long tradition of research suggests that giving students more opportunities to participate in the management of their own classrooms and schools builds their civic skills and attitudes. Thus, giving students a voice in school governance is a promising way to encourage all young people to engage civically.
- 6 Encourage students' participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.** Recent evidence indicates that simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberation, and diplomacy in schools can lead to heightened political knowledge and interest. The data are not conclusive, but these approaches show promise and should be considered when developing programs and curriculum.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report concludes with numerous recommendations for schools and school systems, state and national policymakers, colleges and universities, researchers, and private funders. Following are some major recommendations in brief form:

- 1 **Schools** should work with state education departments and local school district officials to develop and establish civic education curricula based on combinations of the six promising approaches noted above. These curricula should be parts of every student's school experience at every grade level.
- 2 **School administrators** should allow and encourage educators to facilitate discussions of complex and/or controversial current events and issues in the classroom.
- 3 **The federal government** should increase the amount of federal funding available to states for civic education. The government should further consider establishing a new federal entity with responsibility for civic education, perhaps a "National Civic Education Foundation," which would commission research on civic education, encourage the development of model programs, help design and implement curricula, and serve as a national clearinghouse on civic education for teachers and schools across the country.
- 4 **Standards should be implemented for civic education.** This can be done by 1) more frequently offering the National Assessment of Educational Progress's (NAEP) Civics Assessment, in states as well as nationally, and/or 2) reexamining existing state social studies and civic education standards with a goal of ensuring that the promising approaches and goals of civic education outlined in this report are realized by the establishment of supportive standards and curricular policies.
- 5 **Schools of education** should strengthen the civic dimensions of pre-service and in-service education for teachers and administrators. Those who are already working in schools should also be offered the opportunity to acquire continuing education credits related to civic education so that they can become more skilled at inculcating the civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes students need to become responsible and engaged citizens.
- 6 **Researchers** should develop and implement more rigorous studies (including longitudinal research) about effective service-learning and other civic education approaches. Researchers should also develop indicators for civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes at each phase of K-12 schooling.
- 7 **Funders** should support efforts to build national and state coalitions of educators, policymakers, parents, young people, and community leaders to advocate for better and more civic education in schools.

This report provides a framework for creating more effective civic education programs in our schools and represents, for the first time, consensus about this issue among the nation's leading scholars and practitioners. We hope that the concrete recommendations provided in this report will help us move from rhetorical expressions of concern about youth civic engagement to implementing richer and more comprehensive civic education programs that will not only help schools fulfill their civic missions, but also ensure that young Americans have the tools they need to participate fully in the political and civic processes that are the hallmark of U.S. democracy.



INTRODUCTION

For more than 250 years, Americans have shared a vision of a democracy in which all citizens understand, appreciate, and engage actively in civic and political life—taking responsibility for building communities, contributing their diverse talents and energies to solve local and national problems, deliberating about public issues, influencing public policy, voting, and pursuing the common good. Americans know that it is a rare and precious gift to live in a society that permits and values such participation.

In recent decades, concern has grown about the increasing numbers of Americans who are disengaging from civic and political institutions such as voluntary associations, religious congregations, and community-based organizations. This disengagement extends to political and electoral processes such as voting and being informed about public issues.

In many ways, young people reflect these trends. Americans under the age of 25 are less likely to vote than either their older counterparts or young people of past decades. Surveys have shown that they are not as interested in political discussion and public issues as past generations were at the same point in their lives. In addition, there are gaps in young people's knowledge of fundamental democratic principles and processes. As a result, many young Americans are not prepared to participate fully in our democracy now and when they become adults.

At the same time, young people are volunteering and participating in community activities at high rates. Some experts, in fact, argue that this generation is among the most engaged in history, evidenced by the growing number of young people involved in community-based civic renewal or volunteer projects.

Recognizing that individuals do not automatically become free and responsible citizens but must be educated for citizenship, there has been in recent years a growing call for new strategies that can capitalize on young people's idealism while addressing their disengagement from political and civic institutions so that we can better preserve and enhance America's tradition of citizen involvement. How to achieve this goal, however, has been a matter of considerable debate among experts representing various perspectives and disciplines. Political scientists, for example, focus on the political; educators focus on what happens in or near the classroom; service-learning advocates focus on service and volunteering; and youth development specialists focus on the developmental experience of the young person.

In short, there has been common interest in increasing youth civic engagement but no common ground as to how to do this effectively.