

NEW REPORT PROVIDES RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO REFORM CIVIC EDUCATION

In 2003, CIRCLE and Carnegie Corporation of New York jointly produced an important report entitled *The Civic Mission of Schools* that was widely covered in the press and launched the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, the nation's leading advocacy campaign in civics. Last fall, the Campaign issued a successor report (to which CIRCLE contributed), entitled "*Guardians of Democracy*". The new report draws on eight years of additional research and experience and a broader network of groups and individuals dedicated to improving civic education. In addition, it provides specific policy recommendations for the various players needed to reform civic education, including: schools and administrators at the local levels; federal and state policymakers; scholars and researchers; postsecondary institutions responsible for teacher training; funders of civic education; and parents, media, and all other citizens.

From the Guardians of Democracy Report:

"Self-government requires far more than voting in elections every four years. It requires citizens who are informed and thoughtful, participate in their communities, involved in the political process, and possess moral and civic virtues. Generations of leaders, from America's founders to the inventors of public education to elected leaders in the twentieth century, have understood that these qualities are not automatically transmitted to the next generation—they must be passed down through schools. Ultimately, schools are the guardians of democracy."

Gould, Jonathan, Ed. 2011. *Guardians of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*. Lenore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center and the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools: Philadelphia. <http://civicmissionofschools.org/site/documents/ViewGuardianofDemocracy/view>

NEW RESEARCH CONFIRMS THE SIX PROMISING APPROACHES

The *Civic Mission of Schools* report suggested six practices for effective civic education. In the eight years following the release of the report, many researchers focused their inquiries on these approaches and confirmed that these practices "constitute a well-rounded and high quality civic learning experience." Following is a summary of the six approaches and examples of some of the latest research findings supporting the approaches.

1. Provide Instruction: *Providing classroom instruction in government, history, economics, law and democracy is a fundamental element in effective civic education.* However, not all instruction is created equal: instruction focused on rote fact memorization is not as effective as other more engaging approaches. The authors note, "While students should, of course, learn the factual foundation of American democracy, understanding these foundations is not sufficient without attention to skills, values, and practical applications."

2. Discussion of Current Events and Controversial Issues: *Schools should 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.* Ten years ago, the biggest barrier to incorporating this educational approach was seen as the difficulty of managing controversial issues. According to the authors, "Research has added a sophisticated picture of how the most skilled teachers promote these discussions and how students experience and learn from them." Furthermore, more studies have confirmed that high quality discussion of current events leads to greater student outcomes.

3. Service-Learning: *Schools should 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.* New research is helping to paint a picture of what constitutes effective service-learning. The latest findings suggest that the best service-learning programs for developing engaged citizens are linked to the curriculum and include the following components:

- *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*



• 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. Extracurricular Activities: Schools should offer opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities outside of the classroom. The latest research suggests three key components for successful extracurricular programs. First, adults should allow students to pick the activity based on their own interest (as opposed to assigning the activity). Second, activities should be led by an adult in a structured manner that includes regular meetings. And finally, activities should require effort on the part of the student. According to the authors, “Given that the goal of civic learning on the whole is to prepare students for knowledgeable, engaged citizenship, extracurricular activities can serve as a vital bridge between classroom learning and the world at large.”

5. School Governance: Schools should encourage student participation in school governance. School governance can come in many different forms, from the traditional student government to programs that divide schools up into clusters to participate in democratic deliberation exercises. Research by the National Association of Student Councils provides some basic tenants for providing an enriching student governance experience. Activities should be structured, students must invest time in each activity and be able to see tangible results, and activities must engage students’ interests.

6. Simulations of Democratic Processes: Schools should encourage students to participate in simulations of democratic processes and procedures. Games and simulations directly teach civic skills and other skills necessary for functioning in today’s workplace. Examples of programs that use games to teach civic lessons include iCivics, Legislative Aide, and ICONS. Recent research suggests that these types of programs lead to heightened political knowledge and interest. The report concludes, “As school and district leaders look to provide their students with well-rounded civic learning, simulations of democratic processes are powerful tools.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Guardians of Democracy calls for a broad approach to civic education which includes the six proven practices. The report includes a full menu of policy recommendations for a variety of stakeholders. But it places assessment and professional development at the top of the list for immediate action. The authors note, “Policymakers must ensure that civic learning is included alongside English, math, and science as a core subject, emphasized by standards and assessments at the federal, state, and local levels.” They note that currently only 16 states require meaningful assessment of social studies and that number has declined over the past five years. They recommend that assessments focus on three civic outcomes: knowledge, skills and dispositions. Presently, the majority of state civics standards emphasize rote memorization of historical facts and dates as opposed to a broader view of civic engagement that includes testing for knowledge, skills and dispositions.

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The authors also call for increased training and professional development for social studies teachers. Research shows that a teacher’s professional development in civics is predictive of students’ civic knowledge and attitudes. The authors note, “Only effective teacher professional development can cultivate effective civics teaching, guaranteeing that a solid grounding in civics is a reality for every child and not dependent on variables specific to a given teacher, school, or community.” The report suggests that effective teacher training programs must include the following components: be rich in content, provides active learning opportunities and ongoing opportunities for development, fit with curriculum and standards, and be collaborative in nature.

To download the full report, please visit: <http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/GuardianofDemocracy.pdf>



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FOLLOWING IS A SAMPLING OF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS

Local Schools and Administrators:

- Change how civic learning is taught, from the dry facts of history and the structure of government to an emphasis on how citizens can and must participate in civic life.
- Treat civic learning as an interdisciplinary subject to be employed across the curriculum.

State Policymakers:

- Develop common standards and assessments in the social studies through a state-led effort, and hold schools and districts accountable for student civic learning achievement by inclusion of civic learning in state assessments and accountability measures.
- Utilize alternative forms of assessment such as group projects and activities or portfolio assessments. These assessments are better suited to assessing student achievement in civic learning than traditional “paper and pencil” tests.
- Require and support high quality, on-going professional development for all social studies and civic learning teachers.

Federal Policymakers:

- Establish a competitive grant program for civic learning within the US Department of Education that would fund innovation in civic learning, provide research on effective civic learning strategies, allow for the replication of successful programs that are proven by research, and develop of programs to serve currently under-served school populations.
- Provide state level data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests in Civics and History, thereby allowing states to know whether they are meeting the civic mission of schools and whether they are adequately serving traditionally underserved student populations.
- Support the establishment of an award program recognizing civic learning achievement for students and schools. Model this program on the “Blue Ribbon Schools” program to increase attention paid to civic learning at the school level.

Colleges and Universities:

- Require all students, regardless of major, to take at least one engaging civic learning course to overcome any lack of basic civic knowledge and skills and to ensure that all students leave higher education prepared to be informed and engaged citizens.

Scholars and Researchers:

- Develop and implement rigorous studies on innovative civic learning and teaching approaches, and provide data backed evidence of the effectiveness of civic learning approaches, programs, and teaching strategies.

Funders:

- Corporate foundations need to become more engaged in funding civic learning, especially given that high quality civic learning helps build the 21st century skills that business community needs in the next generation of workers.
- The philanthropic sector should consider developing a consortium of foundations to coordinate and help fund high quality civic learning.

Parents and Citizens:

- Parents are the first and best civics teachers. Parents should encourage their children to develop an interest in keeping themselves informed on current events, encourage their children to take an interest in and volunteer in their community, and help their children develop civic skills and habits.
- Citizens from all walks of life can help their schools by volunteering time and resources to help schools provide effective civic learning.

