
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Preparation for active citizenship not on education agenda

Original Reporting | By Diana Jean Schemo | Education



October 19, 2010 — At a time when educators and parents, politicians and advocates are all focused on re-inventing public education — ushering charter schools into the mainstream, formulating new models of what and how teachers should teach, experimenting with everything from class size to teacher pay — one subject has remained strangely absent from the national discussion, left behind, with a handful of exceptions, by education activists on the left and right.

That is preparation for active citizenship: an understanding of the nation’s founding principles and documents, the structure of government, and the ability to analyze and think critically about politics and power.

Education in these tools of democracy is not among the subjects tested under [No Child Left Behind](#), the massive federal law that demands schools close the achievement gap in reading and math by 2014. It is not a part of the Obama Administration’s [Race to the Top](#), which offers billions of dollars to states that raise academic standards and tie teacher salaries to student performance, in the drive to make students “college- and career-ready.”

Across the spectrum of corporate leaders, colleges, and education advocacy groups — those that have either built the accountability bandwagon, jumped aboard it, or criticized its dominance — the need to educate young people to become active participants in the nation’s political life is seldom mentioned.

The idea that education is democracy’s incubator has deep roots in the United States, going back to the belief of Thomas Jefferson, considered the nation’s father of public education, that “democracy cannot long exist without enlightenment.” Why, then, aren’t education groups, or the federal government itself, demanding a third “c” alongside “college- and career-ready?” What about insuring that students are “citizenship-ready?”

Broadly speaking, preparation for active citizenship really connotes two related areas: civics and citizenship education. Civics, said Mary McFarland, past president of the National Council for the Social Studies — one of the few voices calling for greater attention to training for citizenship — gives young people the scaffolding to become active, aware citizens. It teaches them about the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, and the Federalist papers, among other key documents. Civics explores the relationship between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government, and the role of a free press. It explains the tension between state and federal law, the role of judicial precedent and what kinds of issues might turn up at the ballot box.

The second area, what is often called citizen education, is more comprehensive, according to McFarland. It develops the practical skills for students to become full-fledged participants in the political life of their community or their country. It teaches them to distinguish between fact and opinion and between fact and fictions masquerading as facts. Citizen education teaches students to evaluate the strength of arguments on a given issue, to separate reason from emotion, and to challenge assumptions.

In examining the attitudes and actions of advocacy groups and others, Remapping Debate asked about both civics and citizen education (with the latter connoting, for example, the many ways that power is exercised to shape which bills are considered and which are enacted, and exploring the consequences of citizen silence and inaction).

McFarland said that the National Council for the Social Studies, whose members include nearly 28,000 social studies and history teachers, places “civic competence” at the pinnacle of education, describing it as the purpose of study in all the social sciences, from politics to religion, and from archaeology to anthropology.

“It isn’t like a democracy can just roll on and sustain itself. It has to have people who care about it, and want to sustain it and serve it,” McFarland said. But the group’s efforts to secure a more prominent role for “civic competence” in the nation’s broader education agenda have drawn little support among advocates with more general, system-wide approaches to overhauling education. Judging from the work of educators and advocates engaged in school reform efforts across the political and ideological spectrum, training for citizenship is but an afterthought.

Nothing, perhaps, more clearly illustrates the stepchild status of civics as its placement within the federal Education Department, where civics falls not under the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, but under the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools. There, said Rita Foy Moss, the program officer, civic education is seen as a way to “build character” and something that “improves the climate” in a school.

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She added that the federal government could not dictate curriculum, and that participation of states in the programs was entirely voluntary.

But the federal government can, and does, demand attention to selected subjects. Race to the Top, for example, rewards states that emphasize strategies to improve achievement in science, technology, engineering and math. Why wasn't civics or citizenship education also part of the initiative?

Moss could not say, instead referring the question back to the Department's spokeswoman, Jo Ann Webb, who did not make any official available to respond, after more than a week of repeated requests.

At the state level, a high profile [“Common Core”](#) of state standards, drawn up by the nation's governors, state school superintendents and prominent advocacy groups, with backing from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, charts what schools should teach at every grade. The ambition of the standards: “to define college and career readiness.” The standards focus primarily on math and English language arts.

The English language arts standards spell out what schools should teach students in reading and writing at every stage of the road to high school graduation. They do include tasks relevant to active citizenship, such as “distinguishing among fact, opinion and reasoned judgment in a text.” The standards also incorporate what is described as “literary non-fiction” into illustrative reading lists (texts like Thomas Paine's “Common Sense” and George Orwell's “Politics and the English Language”).

But the standards are not designed to apply these skills to particular subject areas, civic education included. Thus, the words “civics” and “citizenship” do not appear once in the body of the standards, and the word “power” appears once, and only in reference to the power of a literary text.

LIMITED PROFICIENCY

The 2006 civics report card of the National Center for Education Statistics, part of the U.S. Department of Education, found that only 27 percent of 12th graders scored at or above the “proficient” level. According to the assessment's standards, a 12th grade student achieves proficiency if he or she:

- has a good understanding of how constitutions can limit the power of government and support the rule of law;
- is able to describe similarities and differences among constitutional systems of government;
- is able to explain fundamental American democratic values, their applications, and their contribution to expanding political participation;
- understands the structure of American government and is able to evaluate activities of political parties, interest groups, and media in public affairs;
- is able to explain the importance of political participation, public service, and political leadership; and
- is able to describe major elements of American foreign policy and the performance of major international organizations.

David Coleman, a contributing author to the Common Core literacy standards, asserted that he very much kept citizen education in mind, though the group's charge was not to write standards for civics or citizen education, but to insure students were literate in these subjects. "We were thinking about it all the time," Coleman said. "I think that we feared that in this democracy, attention to detail and evidence, the careful understanding of another person's claims, were not in a healthy state. The standards are focused quite intentionally on every kid developing those habits."

Former Gov. Bob Wise of West Virginia, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, which was involved in the inception of the common standards, said, however, there was no discussion of creating explicit standards for civics or citizen education: "I don't remember it even coming up." He added, "I don't think you can embed civics or citizenship in one course. It has to be woven into every course."

Asked whether, as a practical matter, that meant no deliberate focus on educating young people for citizenship, Wise said, "You have to walk before you run." It was always possible, he said, to "add it later." The state of education was so dire as to largely elbow civics and citizenship education off the agenda of advocates.

"Whether you're talking to Hewlett[-Packard] or others, people are saying we need skills for the 21st century," Wise added. "We don't talk about civics specifically. I'm trying to get 1.2 million kids graduated each year with a curriculum that makes them college- and career-ready. I got to be honest. We've got 2,000 high schools with a graduation rate that's less than 60 percent. A third are going to drop out, another third are going to graduate without the kinds of skills they need for college and the workplace."

"Getting them the skills they need to succeed, I would submit, would be a strong civic experience," Wise said.

That is a view McFarland strongly disputes. "Actually, almost every society is interested in having students be able to read and write, and they're admirable goals, but that doesn't make for a democratic society," she said. "You can find totalitarian systems that teach their citizens to read and write."

A number of advocates have criticized the standards and accountability movement for narrowing the curriculum, saying that the emphasis on math and reading is so intense as to relegate subjects like civics to the equivalent of an academic attic: out of sight and seldom visited. Some 153 organizations, banded together as the Forum for Educational Accountability, have signed a joint statement decrying No Child Left Behind's reliance on standardized tests, and blaming it for the decline of subjects beyond reading and math.

But the forum has taken no stand on the inattention to civics or training for citizenship, said Monty Neil, the president of FairTest, an education advocacy group that spearheaded the effort. Neil said the forum drew support from many sources, and to favor civics or citizenship education would have slighted other

subjects. “The consensus might have broken down if we tried to prioritize them,” he said. “We want a comprehensive curriculum for kids. We believe that’s feasible and doable.”

Given that resources may be scarce? “Then you have to fight for resources,” Neil said.

“The state then has the responsibility . . . to make sure that it’s available to the kids. And that needs to be fought for. That’s the fight. It’s not civics instead of art.”

Neil added that his own organization, FairTest, did consider education for active citizenship a priority, but it also believed that teachers, not state education officials or school boards, should decide what citizen education meant and how to teach it. Asked how parents and school officials would judge whether teachers were succeeding, Neil said he preferred assessments that were not standardized, but that judged, say, portfolios of students’ work. “In the end, you don’t know until you see them as adults.”



Lincoln Memorial (text of Second Inaugural Address)
Credit: Gregory F. Maxwell

“Isn’t it too late by then?” I asked.

“It’s messy,” he conceded. “I don’t think there are any clean lines here. I don’t think all that top-down works.”

At the polar opposite from FairTest in terms of education advocacy stands The Education Trust, a non-profit advocacy group that helped write the No Child Left Behind law. Ed Trust, as it is commonly called, represents poor schools in cities across the country. Its president, Kati Haycock, staunchly defends the law’s insistence on closing the achievement gap in reading and math, with a regime of tests to chart the progress schools make in reaching this goal by student race, income, gender and disability.

“It’s a myth that concentrating extra efforts in reading and math compromises achievement in other areas,” Haycock said when [the largely dispiriting results](#) of the national assessment in civics were last released, in 2007. She would not address questions about civics and citizen education. Instead, Education Trust’s spokeswoman, Lauren Stephens, said in response to requests for answers that Haycock was “traveling.” Days later, she was “still traveling.”

McFarland said the National Council for the Social Studies is working to extend the Common Core standards to social studies. “The organization has done and does do all it possibly can to raise the aware-

ness of social studies and particularly the civic mission,” she insisted. She dated the wane of civics to the start of the standards movement around 1988, when the nation’s governors first began working on common standards.

Did she mean to suggest that before 1988, all was fine with instruction designed to teach tools for active citizenship?

“We are really embracing an incredibly impoverished notion of education,” said Frederick M. Hess of American Enterprise Institute.

“There was certainly more emphasis on it,” she said, adding, “In recent years, the only support for social studies education at all has been within the realm of the Teaching America History Project,” a federal grant program. McFarland’s organization, she maintained, has been “a very, very steady voice for advocacy, and used every avenue that it can.” But it has been swimming against a tide, she said.

Across the country, only about half the states test high school students in social studies or government (related fields in which fragments of civics turn up), according to the Education Commission of the States, a non-profit that tracks state practices. An even smaller number tests students in citizen education. The most recent results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in civics suggest that roughly three in four high school seniors were not “proficient” in civics, and one third lack even rudimentary knowledge. That means three in four could not apply a constitutional principle to a hypothetical scenario, and did not know that state law must cede to federal law when the two conflict.

A [recent survey](#) of high school history and social studies teachers, commissioned by the conservative American Enterprise Institute, found that only 24 percent are “very confident” that their students could cite the protections of the Bill of Rights by graduation, and only 15 percent are very confident that their students understand federalism and the separation of powers.

“As the tangible economic benefits of schooling have become central to policy thinking, the teaching of citizenship has become increasingly peripheral,” the report said.

“Americans have entered the twenty-first century, an epoch punctuated by debates over immigration, religious tolerance, and the role of government, with their schools devoting remarkably little attention to the formation of sound democratic citizens,” the American Enterprise report added. “A focus on academic performance, along with concerns about provoking controversy, have in many places demoted talk of citizenship to assemblies, ceremonies, or the occasional social studies lesson.”

In an interview, Frederick M. Hess, American Enterprise’s policy expert on schools and an author of the report, said he had been decrying the inattention to civics for the last 10 years. But over that time, education advocates — himself included — were more consistently attacking public schools for defi-

ciencies in math and reading, shifting the “center of gravity” in policy discussions toward measuring performance on a narrow set of measures. “We saw this wholesale shift in focus toward numeracy and literacy that was in one sense laudable and appropriate, but rather than wrestle with the implications of that, we tended to turn a blind eye to them,” Hess said.

The current mantra in advocacy circles, that students should emerge “college and career ready,” redefines education as a “private good: are we preparing this student to go to college or get a job?” Hess said. As a consequence, advocates are largely divorcing education from its historic role of instructing young people for citizenship.

“We are really embracing an incredibly impoverished notion of education,” Hess said.

To press its case, American Enterprise hoped to persuade a handful of “trend setter” charter schools to embrace citizenship education. Doesn’t that strategy effectively bypass the 97 percent of public school students who don’t attend charter schools? Hess said that in this case, he was skeptical of attempting grand changes. “Actually trying to move systems, with their competing factions and conflicting demands, is an incredibly muddy, incremental process,” Hess said. Charters, he argued, have the agility to “modify their cultures” quickly.

Susan Ohanian, author of “Why is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools,” and an early and irrepensible critic of the standards and accountability movement, hesitated when asked why she never spoke up about the eclipse of civics in the classroom.

“I can’t even answer it,” she said. “We really are missing the boat if we don’t educate kids to be members of the community. That’s a really good point.”

“THE PUBLIC AGENDA”

From the “National Standards for Civics and Government” of the Center for Civic Education:

Students should be able to evaluate, take, and defend positions about how the public agenda is set.

To achieve this standard, should be able to:

- explain that the “public agenda” consists of those matters that occupy public attention at any particular time, e.g., crime, health care, education, abortion, national debt, environmental protection, international intervention
- describe how the public agenda is shaped by political leaders, political institutions, political parties, interest groups, the media, individual citizens
- explain how individuals can help to shape the public agenda, e.g., joining interest groups or political parties, making presentations at public meetings, writing letters to newspapers and government officials
- explain why issues important to some groups and the nation do not become part of the public agenda.

Ohanian interpreted civics as a subject aimed at instilling pride and patriotism, and confessed mixed feelings about banging that drum. “I really believe our society is corrupt and there’s such a gap between rich and poor,” she said. “If we don’t solve that, we can’t solve anything else in education. How do you tell a poor high schooler to be a good citizen in this kind of society? It’s kind of hypocritical.”

“Civic Ideals and Practices”

From the curriculum framework of the National Council for the Social Studies:

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic...

[Among the “processes” for high school students, learners will be able to]:

- Ask and find answers to questions about how to become informed and take civic action;
- Compare and contrast the roles of citizen in various forms of government past and present;
- Identify examples of civic ideals and practices throughout history and in a variety of cultural settings;
- Research primary and secondary sources to make decisions and propose solutions to selected civic issues in the past and present;
- Identify assumptions, misconceptions, and biases in sources, evidence and arguments used in presenting issues and positions;
- Identify, seek, describe, and evaluate multiple points of view about selected issues, noting the strengths, weaknesses, and consequences associated with holding each position;
- Develop a position on a public policy issue and defend it with evidence;
- Evaluate the effectiveness and importance of public opinion in influencing and shaping public policy development and decision-making;
- Evaluate the degree to which public policies and citizen behaviors reflect or foster their stated civic ideals;
- Participate in the process of persuading, compromising, debating, and negotiating in the resolution of conflicts and differences.

Asked about teaching civics not as an avenue to boosterism, but to political awareness, Ohanian said, “Quite frankly, I think it’s probably piling too much on teachers, because by and large, teachers are pretty conservative. Teachers, by and large, teach the way they were taught. A more radical perspective would be difficult.”

McFarland, of the National Council for the Social Studies, rejected the notion that civics is somehow not for students in poverty. “It’s not that we have a perfect country, and everything is fine for every person, but to me our standards represent a laying out of the opportunity to learn, and the opportunity to be engaged and involved. And those opportunities should be available to all students, regardless of whether they’re students in privileged situations or in underprivileged situations. It’s about increasing the efficacy of students, and giving them the knowledge and the tools to make a difference.”

Cathy Corbo, president of the Albany Teacher’s Union, maintained that teachers had their hands full in New York State with the current raft of academic requirements. Why would they demand yet more?

“It’s already a full boat, in terms of getting kids through high school. In urban areas, we’re struggling already with graduation rates that are not acceptable. And a lot of that has to do with the rigor of what people need to do to graduate. Adding something else would probably be a bit of a burden, unless you’re going to pull something else off.”

To a large extent, Corbo said, teachers teach whatever the state curriculum requires. A Baby Boomer herself, Corbo said today’s new teachers lack the political fire of her generation at a similar age. Corbo’s generation famously marched for civil rights and against the Vietnam War. It joined sit-ins up north to end Jim Crow segregation down south.

Did she think that the apathy of today’s young teachers was related to a lack of education for their roles as citizens when they were students?

Corbo said she was not sure. “When they do protest, it is usually over something related to their working conditions.” They worry about the rise of charter schools, which, she said, siphon students away from neighborhood schools only to send them back when problems arise.

I asked Corbo whether she thought it had any direct impact on her and her colleagues when students graduate and become voters unequipped with the tools to evaluate claims and counterclaims in the political arena.

“I guess I’m sure it does,” Corbo said, and paused a moment, before adding, “civics has never come up as an issue.”