

Not by Votes Alone...

The Vital Imperative of Restoring the Civic Mission of Schools

Ted McConnell

With celebrities imploring young people to “Rock the Vote,” and with youth poised to vote in record numbers this fall, it would be easy to assume that we are entering a golden age of youth civic engagement. Youth turnout rose in almost every state this primary season, and news networks regularly run segments on the power of the “millennials.” Two troubling trends underlie the increase in youth turnout. First, we risk being lulled into the false assumption that youth voting is all we need to ensure a healthy democracy for the next generation. Second, the young people who do vote are disproportionately white and middle or upper class. Both these trends represent serious threats to the legitimacy of American democracy.

Active citizenship demands far more than spending a few minutes in a voting booth each November. To ensure the health of our democracy, we need to ask more of our young people. Are they keeping up with the news? Are they discussing politics and public policy with friends and family? Are they engaged in local politics? Are they participating in community service?

Despite the signs of hope, the answer to these questions is “not enough.” Two-thirds of students scored below proficient on the last National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in civics, administered in 2006. Less than a third of eighth graders surveyed could identify the historical purpose of the Declaration of Independence, and less than a fifth of high school seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy.

These findings are not surprising, given that civic education has been in steady

decline over the past generation. Schools are offering fewer civics classes as high-stakes testing and an emphasis on literacy and math dominate school reform discussions. As a result, too many young people do not understand how our political system works, and therefore lack the tools to improve our communities and the nation through political engagement.

The other untold story of increasing youth turnout is the widening civic achievement gap. The NAEP test results reveal the extent of the gap: African American and Hispanic students are twice as likely as their white counterparts to score below proficient on national civics assessments, and a similar gap exists based on a student’s economic class.

The civic achievement gap represents not only differences in civic knowledge, but also differences in attitude toward government and the political process. The race and class of citizens is a key determinant of their trust in govern-

ment and trust in each other, resulting in vast differences in political participation based on racial and socioeconomic status.

The low participation rates of these demographics means that their priorities will be the first to be neglected. The young citizens most likely to be directly affected by government policy—from the war in Iraq to the housing crunch, to the lack of affordable healthcare—are also the least prepared to speak up.

This widening chasm is a significant threat to democratic ideals and practice, since we are failing to empower poor, minority, and immigrant individuals most in need of high quality civic education. Without giving every citizen the tools to make his or her voice heard, how can we expect our national discourse to represent the values of the entirety of “We the People”?

Under the cloud of No Child Left Behind, civics has taken a backseat to reading and math, leading to the decline in civic knowledge we witness today. This trend is especially severe in less advantaged communities, where the pressures of school assessment are far more acute.

We need more and better classes to impart the knowledge of government, history, law, and current events that students need in order to understand and participate in a democracy. In order to infuse

civic virtue in our youngest citizens, civic learning should be incorporated throughout students' academic careers.

A healthy democracy requires the informed and active participation of its citizens. For self-governance to work, citizens must understand and actively engage in the process. Gaining civic knowledge and skills doesn't just happen. People must be taught how their government and the political system work as well as their rights, role, and responsibilities. Since the earliest days of our republic, schools have had the twin missions of educating students for the workplace and for active and informed citizenship; the latter mission is the civic mission of our schools.

Schools, districts, states, and the federal government should work together to restore the civic mission of schools. Only through partnerships among the stakeholders will schools have the funding, flexibility, and institutional support

necessary for effective civic learning to take place.

No, an increase in youth voting is not enough. The stakes are too high to allow us to be satisfied with a small increase in youth turnout. Our commitment to civic learning will determine whether or not we sustain a healthy democracy well beyond this November's election. Only through effective civic learning for every child can we create the type of informed and engaged citizens who will preserve a dynamic democracy for generations to come. 🌐

TED McCONNELL is executive director of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. Prior to joining the Campaign, he directed the Center for Civic Education's Campaign to Promote Civic Education, an initiative to persuade each state to strengthen its approach to civic learning, and was co-coordinator of the Congressional Conferences on Civic Education.

Civic Mission of Schools

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) is a founding and active member of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. The Campaign has a simple and straightforward goal—to strengthen every school's capacity, commitment and performance in educating America's young people as citizens of our democracy. Recently, NCSS became the administrative home of the Campaign.

The Campaign's website, www.civicmissionofschools.org, offers the Campaign's Civic Learning Online database of innovative examples of curricular programs, practice examples and professional development opportunities that illustrate each of the Civic Mission of Schools Report's six promising practices. In addition to Civic Learning Online, www.civicmissionofschools.org also provides contact information for each affiliated state campaign, the latest research and news on civic learning, examples of effective civic learning policies, and toolkits for schools, policymakers and civic learning advocates.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, former Congressman Lee Hamilton and former Governor Roy Romer serve as co-chairs of the Campaign's National Advisory Committee.



Online Master of Education Degrees

American Public University education programs:

- **M.Ed., Teaching – Social Studies**
(with teaching certificate)
- **M.Ed., Teaching – Instructional Leadership**
- **M.Ed., Administration & Supervision**

Respected. Affordable. Online.

- Affordable graduate tuition: \$275 per credit / \$825 per course (no registration or application fee)
- Online, weekly course schedules allow you to balance course assignments with other obligations
- Faculty combine academic excellence with professional experience
- Regionally accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association



LEARN MORE AT
apu.apus.edu/education
OR CALL
877.777.9081

American Public University