

Citizenship Education: *The Goal of Education*

C. Frederick Risinger

Just a few days ago, I attended a 90th birthday party for Jim Becker, a long-time colleague at Indiana University, and widely-known as “the father of global studies.” It was a small party, but three others in the room were Howard Mehlinger, John Patrick, and Carole Hahn. There were three former NCSS presidents there, and all of us had worked on several citizenship and civic education projects since the 1960s or 70s. As we discussed our efforts, I thought about this column. I knew I was going to write about civic education and citizenship education because it fits the theme of our annual meeting: “Dreams and Deeds: The Civic Mission of Schools.” But it dawned on me that despite all the efforts of thousands of dedicated social studies educators and organizations, such as NCSS, its affiliated groups, and state councils, we are still struggling to have our students, their parents, and the American people understand and acknowledge the importance of social studies education and its primary mission: “... to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.”¹ I know that we—social studies educators and classroom teachers—believe these words. But we have not convinced others that this is what we do; or, more importantly, that our mission should be the primary goal of the U.S. educational system.

Look at the facts: (1) The No Child Left Behind Act does not even pretend to look at social studies or civic education, only mathematics and reading; (2) Most states do not have statewide testing for social studies; (3) the number of hours devoted to social studies instruction at the K-6 level has declined, as teachers spend more time on reading and math; and (4) several studies of both students and parents show that social studies is considered less relevant and important than the three other major curriculum areas—English/language arts, mathematics, and science.

Finally, in September 2006, the University of Connecticut’s Department of Public Policy and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute issued a report called “The Coming Crisis in Citizenship” that

pointed out an alarming lack of civic knowledge among students at the country’s most elite universities. The majority of incoming freshmen and college seniors surveyed scored barely higher than 50 percent on an exam covering basic concepts in American history, politics, and government. Some say that this speaks volumes to the dearth of civic education requirements in schools, at the K-12 levels as well as in college.

There are some heartening signs and I’ll tell you about them a little later. But my primary purpose for this column is to address classroom teachers, department heads, and supervisors who have direct contact with students and what they learn. We need to tell students, parents, policymakers, and everyone else that social studies is critical and that the

NCSS mission statement is not just a nice set of words, but absolutely crucial to America’s future. We need to advocate for our field—to take our message that citizenship is not *a* goal of education, it’s *the* goal of education.

I took the title for this column from a book written by Diana Reische and published by the American Association of School Administrators in 1987. Her first chapter is titled “Citizenship is not a Spectator Sport,” and includes this prescient question:

How can schools, already overloaded with assignments from society, find the time and techniques to produce citizens who are committed to democratic values and processes, who understand the compromises and tolerance required in a pluralistic mass society, who have the skills and judgment required for participatory democracy?

So, the websites recommended in this column include information about this dilemma that I hope will give you some knowledge to become an advocate for our field, our life’s work. Some will be familiar, because the field of civic/citizenship education includes groups that have been around for a long time, and I’ve frequently recommended them. There will be some lesson plans and classroom activities that will help you deliver this message to students and parent groups. But don’t forget our non-social studies teaching colleagues. They

need to hear this message too. And, how many of us ever send an e-mail or letter to a policymaker or a member of a congressional committee dealing with education? We need to practice what we preach. We also need to be informed and active citizens. Here are some websites that I hope will help.

Education Week

www.edweek.org



Go to the Education Week home page and type “Celebrities Lend Hand” in the search box at the top right. This takes you to a story about how some celebrities and top politicians, including Richard Dreyfus, Sandra Day O’Connor, former Senator Bob Graham, and others are “lending a hand” to promote civic education. I hope the entire article is accessible. I read it when it first appeared, but when I went back to check on it, I was only able to read the first page or so. However, there are other great resources on civic/citizenship education that you can find by typing the terms in the same search box. You can get excerpts from former Justice O’Connor’s appearance on the *Daily Show*—which could be used in the classroom.

OurCourts.org

www.ourcourts.org/

This is a great site for learning about the need for more effective civic education and to access excellent lessons, simulation games, and ideas for action regarding civic education. Visitors are welcomed by Justice O’Connor, whose vision was the inspiration for this website. It calls for more attention to civic

education and gives suggestions for teachers, lawyers, and others to work for the cause.

Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools: Educating for Democracy

www.servicelearning.org/etrcncs-link/?popup_id=552



This site is superb. It will help social studies educators make the case for civic/citizenship education to their colleagues, their students and their students’ parents, administrators and school boards, policymakers, and anybody else. The home page highlights a survey presented by Vermont’s secretary of state that illustrates the effectiveness of interactive civic learning. It’s a great study and shows how today’s students are engaged in more service learning and how this approach is helping to develop thoughtful, participatory citizens. There are some excellent Opinion Editorials sent out to newspapers nationwide on or about Constitution Day, September 17. Writers include Sandra Day O’Connor (again), former Congressman Lee Hamilton, Senator Richard Lugar, and former Majority Leader Dick Gephardt.

Minnesota Civic Education Matters

www.mnciviced.org/

This is a good example of what one state can do about civic education. It has a “For Teachers” section with some great lesson plans on teaching about government and citizenship. In the “For Students” section, there’s a very good page on “What is

Civic Education and Why Should You Care?” While it’s written at a secondary reading level, K-6 teachers can re-write or discuss the ideas with their students. There are also instructions for contacting public officials (national, state, and local), and some interactive simulation games.

I would be remiss if I didn’t suggest that you visit or re-visit some of the organizations that have civic/citizenship education as their primary focus. All have great lesson plans. All have other links to lessons, activities, and other resources. They include The Constitutional Rights Foundation (www.crf-usa.org/), The Center for Civic Education (www.civiced.org), Ben’s Guide to U.S. Government for Kids (<http://bensguide.gov.org>) (especially good for K-6 grade levels), and the Center for International and Social Studies Education (www.indiana.edu/~ssdc/civ-links.html).

When I taught civics in high school, all of my students wrote a letter to our representative or to one of our senators about a specific issue that was being discussed. I bought a roll (or two) of stamps (they were only about 11 cents then) and we mailed them out. When students brought in their reply letters, they were surprised and excited about them. Several wrote additional letters responding to the legislator’s reply. I think they remembered that activity for a long time. It’s not all that creative, but it worked. Ok, I’ve preached enough. Now it’s your turn. Go out and tell people why we do what we do!

Note

1. *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*, Bulletin No. 89 (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1994).

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