

**Statement for the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service  
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Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Commission, it is an honor to be here today, to speak with you all about one of the most important and neglected aspects of K-12 Education in our nation, the historic and essential Civic Mission of our Nation's Schools.

There is a quote by a very distinguished American Patriot that neatly and succinctly describes this mission, "Knowledge of our system of government, our rights and responsibilities as citizens is not passed down through the gene pool, it must be taught, and we have work to do!" So says Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, co-chair of the organization I represent and founder of Dr. Humphries' iCivics Program.

At the dawn of our Republic there was a recognition that the citizenry must be educated about the new-fangled form of government the Founders gave us. One of the principal animating reasons for public education in our nation was to provide this essential civic education. For the better part of the two centuries plus history of the United States, this has been the case.

Effective civic education is the cornerstone of civic engagement. Done correctly, civic education includes service to the community and helps the student develop a disposition for civic engagement.

Sadly, over the past four to five decades we have witnessed a significant erosion in the time and resources afforded to civic learning. You can date the beginning of this decline to an October night in 1957, the night the Soviet Union launched a basketball sized 'thing' into space called Sputnik. That began a series of periodic national panics about how well our students were learning Math and English and to a lesser degree Science.

From disputes over how to best teach Math and English, through the Standards and Assessment in Education movements to the 'No Child Left Behind' era, well-intentioned education reforms have emphasized two subjects over all others and have marginalized civic education.

As a result:

**Only nine states and the District of Columbia require one year of U.S. government or civics.** Thirty-one states only require a half-year of civics or U.S. government, and 10 states have no civics requirement. It's little better in Middle School and time for Elementary social studies and civics has been cut by over 1/3 since 2000. And in this era of High Stakes testing, it is a sad fact that less than ten states have any meaningful assessment in civics. Commissioners, if it isn't tested, it isn't taught, isn't trite, it's the reality in education today.

**State civics curricula are heavy on knowledge but light on building skills and agency for civic engagement.** An examination of standards for civics and U.S. government courses found that 32 states and the District of Columbia provide instruction on American democracy and comparison to other systems of government; the history of the Constitution and Bill of Rights; an explanation of mechanisms for public participation; and instruction on state and local voting policies. However, no states have experiential learning or local problem-solving components in their civics requirements. This leads to the oft expressed complaint that civics courses are dry, boring stuff.

**Importantly for this Commission, while almost half of states allow credit for community service, almost none require it.** Only one state—Maryland—and the District of Columbia require both community service and civics courses for graduation.

**Less than Quarter of High School and Middle School students achieved a proficient score** on the last, most reliable national measure we have, the 2014 National Assessment of Educational Progress Civics Test. Scores on that test have been stagnant since it was first administered in 1998.

**Alarmingly, there is a significant Civic Learning and Achievement Gap,** Students attending schools serving majority minority school populations, lower SES communities, those schools performing poorly on standardized tests and those serving rural populations receive less civic learning opportunities than students attending schools serving higher SES communities, Suburban and white students. This threatens to disenfranchise less advantaged sectors of our populace by not providing opportunities to attain critical civic knowledge and civic skills.

Those, distinguished Commissioners, are the results of the nearly six-decade decline in civic education. No wonder our fellow citizens show an appalling lack of basic civic knowledge in survey after survey.

During the same time this decline was occurring, a remarkable group of non-profits has been revolutionizing and innovating how to teach the subject. The non-profit supplemental civic learning community has developed new, innovative teaching strategies and methods to make the subject engaging and interesting to students. Employing experiential learning, models and simulations of democratic practices, digital and on-line learning and service learning linked to classroom learning, all help students develop both civic knowledge and civic skills essential to informed civic engagement.

The benefits of effective civic learning, with the new innovative methods, such as experiential learning, simulations and service learning are clear:

According to research compiled by our colleagues at Tuft University's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement:

- Youth exposed to service learning through civics courses are more likely to go to college than those who were not. Additionally, high-quality civics activities foster the collaboration, communication, and critical thinking skills in demand by employers;

- The more teens are exposed to high-quality civic education in high school and through extracurricular activities, the more likely they are to be engaged in community service and voting as adults.
- Youth receiving high-quality civic education have more confidence in their ability to make informed political decisions, increased knowledge about history and how to register to vote, increased ethical awareness and empathy, and a positive belief that their vote matters.

Those are but a few of the benefits to the individual and to society from the new style, effective civic learning we promote.

Now, what can be done to reverse the decline in civic learning; to ensure that the new innovative teaching strategies & methods are the reality for all students; and to encourage more community service and engagement by our youth?

As is appropriate to the American tradition of local and state control of education policy, most of the remedies we seek are to be found in the nation's statehouses and school district headquarters.

We, with the new CivX Now! Coalition are engaged in a great crusade to persuade every state to increase the time and resources devoted to civic learning, including increasing course requirements and instituting mandatory consequential testing in civics at the Upper Elementary, Middle and High School levels.

In the area of testing, we strongly encourage the states to employ both a paper/pencil type test, measuring civic knowledge attainment and also a Portfolio Assessment, that includes a student's community engagement, to measure student civic skill development.

We are pushing the states to adopt and use the Six Proven Practices of the '*Civic Mission of Schools*' Reports published in 2003, 2011 and 2017; that includes service and community learning, linked to classroom learning; experiential learning and models & simulations of governmental and democratic processes. These new innovative learning methods should be thought of as Civic Labs, much like laboratory work done in Science education.

We promote the involvement of youth representatives in all appropriate state and local governmental boards and commissions, including school boards (state & local) to provide the authentic voice of youth and to encourage more community engagement.

We strongly encourage more community involvement with civic learning. Community actors can be an invaluable resource in civics classes and can help the student to think of their place in the community.

We believe that Service Learning in the community is essential to effective civic education. Learning We note that to be educationally valid, Service Learning must be linked to classroom learning. Picking up trash on a highway is noble and good but unless its linked to classroom learning about the environment, it is not educationally valid.

At the Federal level, we advocate for more Federal investment in innovation in civic learning. Sadly, currently, Federal investment in civics is at \$3million annually, down from \$45million in 2011 and funding for American History is around \$10million, down from \$103million in 2011. This compares with several Billion spent on Math and English at the Federal level.

We are also advocating that the National Assessments of Educational Progress test results be provided by state, so that state policymakers can compare their state's performance with other states. This would also have a certain forcing function on the states to improve civic learning, as no state wants to be 45<sup>th</sup> or 50<sup>th</sup> in any academic subject.

Those are the highlights of our 'Platform' to restore the essential civic mission of our nation's schools.

de Tocqueville's observations about American's penchant for solving problems through voluntary associations can be as valid and relevant today as they have been in previous periods of our history. Putnam's observations of a nation "bowling alone" must be reversed for the health of our Republic.

Effective, student-centered civic learning, with opportunities for community engagement, is an essential foundation for community service. Effective civic learning encourages community service.

At the close of the 1787 Constitutional Convention, Dr. Benjamin Franklin was asked what sort of government the Framers had given us. "A Republic," he replied, "If you can keep it!" For over two hundred years, civic education has been an important ingredient in keeping faith with Dr. Franklin's charge to 'Keep' our Republic.

We hope you will join with us in calling for and causing, the restoration of the historic and essential Civic Mission of our Nation's Schools.

Thank You.

Respectfully submitted,  
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References:

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<https://www.carnegie.org/publications/the-civic-mission-of-schools/>

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*'The Republic is (Still) At Risk – and Civics is Part of the Solution'* (CivX Now Coalition with Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement) 2017  
<https://civxnow.org/documents/CivXNowPDF/SummitWhitePaper.pdf>  
(includes updated chart of current state policies on civic learning)

Research cited may be found at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement at Tufts University: [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)

Brown Center at Brookings Institute: “2018 Report on American Education: An Inventory of state civics requirements” <https://www.brookings.edu/research/2018-brown-center-report-on-american-education-an-inventory-of-state-civics-requirements/>