



Center for Civic Education

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Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the policy options that were outlined in your staff memorandum on civic education. We appreciate the important role that the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service is playing in strengthening American democracy through service and your particular attention to the importance of high-quality civic education in the schools.

We at the Center for Civic Education have been committed to the goal of an enlightened and responsible citizenry since our inception in 1965. The Center is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan educational organization based in California with programs in every state and eighty-four other nations that are mostly emerging democracies. The Center's mission is to promote an enlightened and responsible citizenry committed to democratic principles and actively engaged in the practice of democracy in the United States and other countries.

The Founders of our nation understood that a free society must rely on the knowledge, skills, and virtue of its citizens and those serving in public office on their behalf. However, the knowledge and skills required for competent and responsible citizenship in our sophisticated and complex system of government are neither inherited nor gained by untutored experience. Each generation must be taught anew through systematic, rigorous, and stimulating instruction in civic education.

Desirable Outcomes of Effective Programs—To identify what constitutes an effective civic education, I think it is useful to begin by identifying what we hope would be some of the most desirable outcomes of civic education programs.

Students who have received an effective program in civic education should become informed, responsible, and competent participants in the political life of their communities, states, and the nation. They should possess a reasoned commitment to those fundamental values and principles of our political heritage that are contained in such documents as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and Bill of Rights, the Gettysburg Address, and the "I Have a Dream" speech of Martin Luther King Jr. Their commitment to these values and principles should serve as a moral compass guiding their participation in both their private and public relationships.

They should have acquired the knowledge of politics and government and the intellectual and participatory skills that are required for informed and competent participation. Finally, they should have developed the public and private dispositions or traits of character, such as civility, tolerance, and compassion, that enhance their inclination and capacity to participate in political life in a manner that is conducive to the healthy functioning of the body politic and the improvement of society.

Civic Knowledge—Civic knowledge refers to what citizens need to know to become informed participants in their system of government. In both the National Standards for Civics and Government and the Civics Framework for the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the knowledge to be taught and assessed is set forth under the following five overarching questions.

- What are civic life, politics, and government?
- What are the foundations of the American political system?
- How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy?
- What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs?
- What are the roles of citizens in American democracy?

Civic Skills: Intellectual and Participatory—The second essential component of civic education in a democratic society is civic skills. If citizens are to exercise their rights and discharge their responsibilities as members of self-governing communities, they not only need to acquire a body of knowledge, they also need to acquire relevant intellectual and participatory skills.

Intellectual skills are inseparable from content. To be able to think critically about a political issue, for example, one must have an understanding of the issue, its history, its contemporary relevance, as well as command of a set of intellectual tools or considerations useful in dealing with the issue.

The intellectual skills essential for informed, effective, and responsible citizenship are sometimes called critical thinking skills. The *National Standards for Civics and Government* and the *Civics Framework for the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress* categorize these skills as identifying and describing; explaining and analyzing; and evaluating, taking, and defending positions on public issues.

In addition to the acquisition of knowledge and intellectual skills, education for citizenship in a democratic society must focus on skills that are required for competent and responsible participation in the political process. These include the skills required to effectively monitor and influence the political process. *Monitoring* refers to the skills citizens need to track the handling of issues by the political process and by government. *Influencing* refers to the capacity to affect the outcomes of the political process.

Civic Dispositions: Essential Traits of Private and Public Character—The third essential component of civic education is the fostering of democratic civic dispositions; that is, the traits of private and public character essential to the maintenance and improvement of constitutional democracy. These include traits of private character, such as moral responsibility, self-discipline, and respect for the worth and human dignity of every individual. They also include traits of public character, such as public-spiritedness, civility, respect for the rule of law, critical mindedness, and willingness to listen, negotiate, and compromise.

Policy Option 1: Identifying and encouraging non-federal education authorities (NFEAS) to adopt best practices in civic education and service learning. Many institutions help to develop Americans' knowledge and skills and shape their civic character and commitments. The family, religious institutions, the media, and community groups exert important influences. Schools, however, bear a special and historic responsibility for the development of civic competence and civic responsibility. Schools must fulfill that responsibility through both formal and informal curricula beginning in the earliest grades and continuing through the entire educational process.

The development of the worker, the citizen, and the private individual may be fostered by a balanced curriculum in schools that must include, among other offerings, a vigorous education in civics and government. During the past several decades, educational policy and practice appear to have focused

more and more upon developing the “worker” at the expense of developing the “citizen” and the “private individual with a meaningful life.”

Civic Education Must Be Given Adequate Attention—The most basic requirement for civic education programs to be effective is for them to exist in the school curriculum. All too often, civic education is simply not taught at all or taught too little or too late. Civic education must not merely exist in our schools, it must occupy a prominent role. It must be given enough attention for its demonstrable, beneficial effects to occur. This requires, among other things, that education in civics and government should be

- seen as a central purpose of education,
- considered a core subject on a level with others, such as history, geography, mathematics, and science, and
- taught explicitly and systematically from kindergarten through twelfth grade either as separate units and courses or as a component of courses in other subjects.

Before we can improve civic education, we need to remedy some specific shortcomings—inadequate policy support, inadequate curricular requirements, and inadequate teacher preparation. And we also must address the problem caused by assessment in a few subjects diverting attention from other worthy subjects, including civics.

We need to establish a systemic approach to the implementation of sound civic education programs. Such an approach must include the establishment of standards, the development of curricular frameworks and curricular materials, teacher training, and an assessment program.

We agree strongly with the recommendation to introduce civic education in early grades. Although the National Education Goals, as well as the goals, curricular requirements, and policies of every state, express the need for and extol the value of civic education, this vital part of students’ overall education is seldom given sustained and systematic attention in the K–12 curriculum. Inattention to civic education stems in part from the false assumption that the knowledge and skills citizens need emerge as by-products of the study of other disciplines or as an outcome of the process of schooling itself.

We need policy establishing time requirements for civic education at the elementary level and specific course requirements at middle and secondary school levels. We also need policy suggesting how civic education can be furthered in related courses, such as history, language, science, and mathematics. We recommend that states and school districts give serious consideration to the allocation of sufficient time for civics and government. A proposed allocation is offered below for purposes of stimulating discussion.

<i>Requirements by Grade</i>		
Grade	Specific Treatment	Treatment in Other Subjects
K–2	30 hours per school year at each grade; e.g., focus on rules, authority, justice, responsibility	Primary and elementary—a minimum of 30 hours per school year; e.g., as part of instruction in reading, language arts, math, science, physical education, etc.
3–4	40 hours per school year at each grade; e.g., community and state studies focusing on local and state government	

5	40 hours per school year; e.g., integrated into a course in U.S. History/Civics and Government/Geography	Teams of middle-grade teachers develop integrated curriculum units infusing content standards for civics and government; e.g., a language arts/literature unit focusing on the theme of power and authority; a science unit on environmental pollution focusing on the public policy aspects of the issue
6–7	Four two-week units at each grade (approx. 30 hours per school year); e.g., focus on comparative government as part of a World Civilization/Area Studies program	
8	One-semester course (approx. 60 hours); e.g., U.S. Constitutional Government	
9–10	Six two-week units at each grade (approx. 40 hours per school year); e.g., focus on comparative political philosophies and political systems in a World History/Global Studies course	Teachers planning high school courses in other subjects could use the content standards for civics and government to develop thematic organizers; e.g., a technology education class exploring how safety procedures and workplace rules protect everyone.
11	60 hours per school year as an integral part of specific social science coursework; e.g., 20th Century U.S. History and Government	
12	Full-year course (120 hours); e.g., Applied Civics/Participation in Government	
<p><i>NOTE: For grades K–4, 30 minutes per day was used as an average instructional period. For grades 5–12, 40 minutes per day was used as an average instructional period.</i></p>		

The Importance of Professional Development—There is abundant evidence that knowledgeable, skilled, and dedicated teachers are one of the most important factors, if not the most important single factor, in providing a sound civic education for our students. Teachers need adequate preparation in both the substance and methodology of civic education, as well as the support of their administrations and their communities.

Unfortunately, teacher preparation is a problem in the social studies. The problem of out-of-field teaching, or teachers being assigned to teach subjects that do not match their training or education, is widespread. More than half of all secondary school history students in the country are being taught by teachers with neither a major nor a minor in history. No data currently are available on the subject-matter qualifications of teachers of civics and government, but one could assume that the number of teachers with majors or minors in political science or allied fields would be even less.

We need to provide more opportunities for teachers to take part in professional development programs that will enhance their knowledge of the subject matter for which they are responsible, as well as enhance their capacity to use interactive methods that have proven to be effective.

Teachers in public schools in general, and teachers of civics and government in particular, must be committed to education, not indoctrination. Teachers should help students develop the knowledge and skills required to come to their own thoughtful positions on matters about which reasonable people differ. To do otherwise—that is, for teachers to try to convert students to their own points of view on such matters—is to violate the student’s rights to freedom of belief, conscience, and choice, and is

incompatible with the proper role of public education in a free society. Teachers in public schools are responsible for avoiding partisan bias when teaching their students.

Knowledgeable, skilled, and dedicated teachers are arguably the most important factor in helping our young people develop the capacity and inclination to take part in the political life of our nation. The success of the James Madison Legacy Project, a nationwide professional development program, is discussed further in this paper. It provides a successful model for improving teachers' knowledge of the American political system and the use of effective pedagogy in their classrooms.

There is abundant evidence both from research and everyday observations that good civic education produces desirable results. When students receive a sustained and systematic education in civics and government they become

- more knowledgeable about their government,
- more interested in politics and government,
- more capable of identifying public policies that do or do not serve their interests and the common good,
- more critical of politics and government—developing a healthy skepticism that does not alienate them from participation, but instead motivates them to participate in improving the system,
- more likely to participate in the political life of their communities and nation,
- more committed to fundamental values and principles of the American political system, and
- more tolerant of those who differ in their opinions.

Civic Education Works—We know that good civic education programs work—they have the desired effects. Formal instruction in civics should provide students with a basic understanding of civic life, politics, government, and the fundamental values and principles underlying American democracy. It should help them understand the workings of their own and other political systems as well as the relationship of American politics and government to world affairs. Such instruction provides students a basis for understanding their rights and responsibilities and a framework for principled, competent, and responsible participation.

The formal curriculum should be augmented by related learning experiences in both school and the community that enable students to learn how to participate in their own governance. Ultimately, no matter how well designed instructional programs may be, their success relies upon knowledgeable, skilled, and dedicated teachers.

Since the 1960s there has been a growing movement to develop stimulating and effective approaches to civic education, resulting in a number of curricular programs of proven effectiveness available to interested teachers, schools, and school systems. These programs have been developed by educational nonprofits from throughout the nation and include programs by our Center, the Constitutional Rights Foundation, Close Up, Street Law, Inc., iCivics, and others. The Commission should highlight these programs in their report, especially those that research has confirmed as effective, and make them more widely known to school districts across the nation.

The Center's two flagship programs, [We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution](#), and [We the People: Project Citizen](#), are implemented in every state in the country.

1. We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution is a program developed in 1986 and adopted by the Commission on the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution chaired by Chief Justice Warren E. Burger as the principal education program of the federal Constitution’s bicentennial. The program consists of classroom lessons on the U.S. Constitution using textbooks at the upper elementary, middle, and high school levels. Portions of the *We the People* text have been used by the U.S. Army Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps for student instruction.

Following the course of study, students participate in a simulated congressional hearing during which they respond to questions related to our nation’s basic documents and their contemporary relevance. The format gives students an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of constitutional principles while providing teachers with authentic means of assessing student performance. Winning classes of We the People state competitions participate at the We the People National Finals competition in Washington, D.C., and have the opportunity to meet with their members of Congress. The Center was honored to have Commissioner Tom Kilgannon as a guest speaker at the We the People National Finals awards ceremony in 2019.

Research Studies Confirm Impact—Numerous studies of We the People alumni have demonstrated that they are better informed and more politically engaged than their peers.

- A “great instructional success” is how the Educational Testing Service (ETS) characterizes the We the People program. Independent studies by ETS have revealed that We the People students “significantly outperformed comparison students on every topic of the tests taken.”
- Students involved in the We the People program develop greater commitment to democratic principles and values, according to a study by Richard Brody of Stanford University. The study concludes that the program is effective in promoting political tolerance because participating students feel more politically effective and perceive fewer limits on their own political freedom.
- In a recent study, Dr. Diana Owen of Georgetown University found that We the People students and alumni know significantly more about American government than the general public, including those who have taken a basic civics course. We the People program alumni, some of whom have been out of high school for more than two decades, retain knowledge about government and exhibit higher levels of knowledge than the general public.

2. We the People: Project Citizen provides students with experience in grassroots democracy. It is an interdisciplinary experiential learning program for middle, secondary, and post-secondary students, youth organizations, and adult groups that promotes competent and responsible participation in local and state government. The program helps participants learn how to monitor and influence public policy. In the process, they develop support for democratic values and principles, tolerance, and feelings of political efficacy. It is one of the most extensive service-learning programs in the country.

Research Studies Confirm Impact—The most extensive evaluation of Project Citizen to date was conducted by the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. The evaluation revealed that 98% of teachers surveyed say Project Citizen is a good way to teach civic education because it

- deepens knowledge and understanding of government,
- is multidisciplinary,
- fosters teamwork and encourages cooperation,

- is a highly engaging program for students,
- develops useful intellectual and participatory skills,
- enhances political efficacy, and
- has results observable by students, parents, and civic leaders.

Policy Option 2: Leveraging federal funds to incentivize NFEAs to improve the quality and delivery of civic education and service learning. The Center strongly supports a federal grant program to support civic education initiatives as proposed in the Commission’s staff memorandum. We believe that such a program should be structured in a way that provides the maximum benefit to teachers and students on a nationwide basis. To do this we recommend the following:

1. A National Civic Education Program (\$15 million)—This could be a single award to a nonprofit organization or a consortium of nonprofits that have proven expertise in civic education and the administration of nationwide programs that provide resources to schools in every state and congressional district. Such a program was funded by Congress for more than two decades through the Education for Democracy Act (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Sections 2341-2346). This nationwide program had widespread congressional support and provided an evidence-based course of instruction on the U.S. Constitution (*We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution*), an experiential service-learning program (*Project Citizen*), and a program titled *Representative Democracy in America*, which was administered by our Center, the former Center on Congress at Indiana University directed by former Congressman Lee H. Hamilton, and the National Conference of State Legislatures. The funding also provided special initiatives to reduce school violence and to meet the civic education needs of students on Native American reservations.

A nationally structured program of civic education has the capacity to accomplish the following:

- Provide resources based on population on a proportionate and sustained basis, ensuring that each state and congressional district receives an equitable and fair share of high-quality curricula for classroom use, professional development, and technical assistance. The assurance of sustained support enables schools to plan ahead and fosters their commitment to the implementation of effective civic education programs.
- Reach the diversity of the nation by serving every state and congressional district. This means that all kinds of schools are served: high-need school districts in rural and urban settings, diverse suburban districts, and Native American reservations.
- Deliver educational resources directly to the classroom unhampered by lengthy application processes and administrative procedures. For example, under the Education for Democracy Act, the *We the People* Programs were implemented by an extensive national network consisting of highly skilled, experienced, and dedicated staff and volunteers. It would be highly inefficient, if not impossible, to attempt to achieve the goals of such a program through a number of relatively small and uncoordinated grants with two- to five-year timelines that would fail to serve many high-need and economically disadvantaged areas of the country.

2. A Federal Small Civic Education Grant Program (\$15 million)—The national program could be enhanced by awarding smaller grants (\$ 250,000 to \$500,000) to create an array of evidence-based high-quality civic education programs.

3. A State-based Civic Education Professional Development Program (\$20 million)—This fund would allow nonprofit organizations in each state to apply for professional development grants to conduct summer institutes to improve teacher knowledge and pedagogy in civics and government.

A Priority on High-need Students: The James Madison Legacy Project Model—The need to improve civic education in the nation’s middle and high schools is especially pressing for high-need students—students living in poverty, minority students, English language learners, and special needs students. Instructing high-need students, who have fewer civic education opportunities and access to resources than more advantaged students, presents unique challenges to educators. In 2015, the Center implemented the James Madison Legacy Project (JMLP), a three-year nationwide initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education that provided professional development to middle and high school teachers of high-need students nationwide, including those in Title I schools.

Since 2015, the program has been administered to four cohorts of teacher participants from 48 states and the District of Columbia. More than 2,000 teachers and 80,000 students nationwide have participated in the JMLP since its inception. The goals of the JMLP are to improve teachers’ civics, social studies, and American government content knowledge and to enhance their classroom pedagogy. Dr. Diana Owen of Georgetown University evaluated the JMLP and found that the civic knowledge and dispositions of students in participating teachers’ We the People classes increased markedly. For example, the evaluation revealed a 63% improvement in middle school students’ scores and a 78% improvement in high school students’ scores. A summary of those findings can be found at http://www.civiced.org/pdfs/research/JMLP_StudentKnowledgeAndDispositions_Jan2019.pdf.

The U.S. Department of Education program from which the JMLP was funded is the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) program. We highly recommend support for continued funding for the SEED program, which provides critical federal resources to support teacher professional development that are unavailable at the state level.

Other policy options

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment—The Center supports the policy option of disaggregating results by state and conducting the NAEP Civics Assessment every two years in the same manner as the NAEP Math and Reading Assessments. The Civics Consensus Framework for the 1998 and subsequent NAEP Civics Assessments was developed by Center staff and was based upon the Center’s *National Standards for Civics and Government*. We feel that the NAEP, sometimes referred to as the “Nation’s Report Card,” is an important vehicle for driving improvement in civic education practice and policy and should be administered on a more frequent schedule.

National Awards and Recognition—The Center agrees that instituting a national award and recognition programs to honor excellence in civic education would be a helpful contribution to the field. In 1988, the Center developed and administered the Disney Channel Salutes the American Teacher and the Walt Disney Company Presents the American Teacher awards, which gave national recognition to teachers in different disciplines. The program culminated in an Academy Awards–type televised special, during which prominent movie and television personalities presented awards to classroom teachers. The program also featured video vignettes capturing the unique talent of the teacher in the classroom that were broadcast on the Disney Channel.

In 2006, the Center for Civic Education, the former Center on Congress at Indiana University, and the National Education Association launched the American Civic Education Teacher Awards, designed to recognize educators who have demonstrated a special expertise in teaching about the U.S. Constitution,

the U.S. Congress, and public policy. We found these recognition programs to be outstanding ways to honor educators who are on the front lines helping to build the next generation of leaders and citizens.

The Center also helps to distribute information on the American Lawyers Alliance Teacher of the Year Awards program each year. The ALA is a charitable and educational nonprofit organization that works to foster understanding and respect for the American legal system by “keeping the spirit of democracy alive across the nation” and by preserving the “integrity of our legal heritage through citizenship education.”

Develop and Distribute Civic Education Resources and Materials—The Center feels this is an excellent idea. Both the Library of Congress and the National Archives have excellent primary source materials that can enrich civic education for teachers and students.

Create a Mobile Constitution Center—The Center supports such an idea and feels it would be a nice opportunity to draw attention to the importance of the public knowledge of America’s fundamental ideals and principles. We would be pleased to send notices about the mobile center’s schedule to our national civic education network.

What Do We Have to Gain by Investing in Civic Education?—I would like to conclude with excerpts from an e-mail correspondence between an outstanding teacher in New Hampshire who participates in the Center’s major civic education program, *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution*, and one of his students. He teaches a high school constitutional law class that is open to all juniors and seniors from all levels of academic ability and social and economic status. It speaks to the role of civic education in inspiring young people to a commitment to service.

Some years ago, the teacher enrolled a girl who was a fair student from a poor home environment and who worked at her uncle’s garage after school and on weekends. When she saw how rigorous the civics class was and learned that most of the students were far more advanced, she talked with her teacher about withdrawing from the class. He encouraged her to stay and give it her best and told her that this was all she could ask of herself. She chose to stay. In class, she jumped into conversations to try and fit in. Since her writing skills were poor, she felt by contributing verbally she could at least try to achieve in that way. After three months, she dropped out of school. Her teacher did not know what happened to her until he received this message:

Dear [teacher],

About a year ago I was in your constitutional law class. I really loved your class. I ended up dropping out of school and joined the United States Army. I held on to your books because they were my life. I continued studying after I got out of basic training, and thought about going to college for law, because I enjoyed your class so much.

One day a sergeant of mine borrowed my book and we went to the field. When I got back after a month he and my book were gone. He went to Germany and I tried finding him so I could get my book back, but I just kept hitting dead ends. The reason I am writing to you is because I was wondering if it would be possible to get another copy of the book. I will pay anything in the world to have it. The only problem I face right now is that I am deploying overseas to fight. I leave at the end of this month and it takes 7 days for packages to reach me from New Hampshire. I will have my dad deliver a check or something. If something could be worked out please write back to me and let me know what I would have to do, and if not I understand completely. I’m still

working on the essay of what the American flag means to me. I'm up to 8 pages and it needs more work.

Thank you for inspiring me!

Sincerely, PFC [student]

Her teacher wrote back, sent her the book, and invited her to visit his class when she returned from Iraq. She responded,

Dear [teacher],

I would be more than happy to visit the school and tell everyone how truly important your class is, even if they don't think so at the time. Your class will stay with them for the rest of their lives, as it will open up more doors than they would know. There was more than one time I stood out in the Army because of simple stuff I learned in your class. I was the only one in basic who could recite the Preamble, and then go into depth of what it actually meant. Later that day two drill sergeants told me that I had explained it in a way they had never looked at it. It has also helped me in promotion boards. My friends have also brought up simple things in daily conversations such as burning the American flag, and I showed them the handout you gave us. They are now also intrigued about the Constitution. I'm glad that I was able to show them some of what I have learned, and I thank you for giving me the opportunity for that. I don't know when I'll have the chance to take leave in the future, but I'll keep you informed.

Sincerely,

PFC [student]

I am pleased to report that this young woman arrived home safely from overseas.

Aristotle said that "if liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in a democracy, they will be attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost." I think this statement conveys an important thought, but I would like to take the "liberty" of adding something to it. What is missing from Aristotle's statement is the idea that participation alone is not enough. We need to develop enlightened participation, and the best way to do that is through civic education. Our task should be to develop the student's capacity to participate competently and responsibly. This includes fostering among our students a reasoned commitment to the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy. Thus prepared, they should have the capacity and the inclination to work together to preserve our democratic heritage and narrow the gap between our ideals and reality.