



Statement for the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service

Civic Education, the Essential Substrata of Military and National Service

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Across the Midwest, and indeed much of America, you will find inscribed across the doorways of the brick and stone schoolhouses built in the early 20th century these words: “Enter to learn. Go forth to serve.” From the New York City Police Academy, which adopted the exhortation as its motto in 1925, to Los Angeles’ Fairfax High School in 1926, and countless humble schools in between, America’s institutions of learning proudly acknowledged the public ends of education and the duties or responsibilities toward their community that education confers on those educated. In proclaiming this mission, American schools were simply underlining with a flourish the role historically envisioned for them, dating to the very foundations of the American Republic: to create good citizens, of and for the Republic.

Creating good citizens who were prepared for self-government was the primary charge of democratic schooling. At the time of the American Revolution, Benjamin Rush, one of the most influential founders when it came to schooling, even suggested that public schools ought to be in the business of creating “Republican machines” out of the future generation. Such phrasing sounds exotic, if not toxic to our ears today, perhaps in part because our schools no longer understand themselves in such terms, much less communicate that to students and their larger communities.

A few years ago, former civics teacher and current education scholar Robert Pondiscio of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute conducted a study of the hundred largest school districts in America, which represent some 11 million students, reviewing their publicly available mission, vision, and values statements to see whether “they still view the preparation of students for participation in democratic life as an essential outcome.”¹ Within the 14,000 words making up those mission statements, US citizenship appears only once, “democracy” only twice. Sixty percent of the mission statements makes no mention of civics, citizenship, or democracy. And while there are nods toward “community,” the context is inevitably in terms of what the community can do for students—not what students are expected to do for the community. What *is* emphasized is private success—entrance into college and having a career. We might say that “Enter to learn. Go forth to serve” has become rather “Enter to learn; go forth to earn.”

This isn’t a blanket condemnation of self-improvement, monetary and otherwise. As Pondiscio pointed out, these school mission statements are crafted by a panoply of leaders and stakeholders in each district, who at least in theory come together to articulate a set of ideas, values, and goals that reflect the aspirations of their communities. And service toward that community, much less to the larger American community, seems nowhere to be championed and publicly valorized as an obligation or even goal of education, even by community leaders. Small wonder that civic education, the last, sorry beachhead of education’s public purpose, is barely acknowledged as a curricular necessity;² is given less than 10 percent of a student’s classroom time;³ cannot give its teachers time or funding for professional development;⁴ gives its professional development community less funding in the aggregate than one organization alone, Intel Foundation, gives in one year in grants to STEM programs.⁵ Everywhere, especially in light of the 2016 election outcome, politicians and pundits are giving lip service to the importance of civic education. Precious few have done anything tangible about it. However, this has been a perpetual problem for the past few decades. This has led me to call civic education “The bobblehead issue”: It’s a problem that seems to be acknowledged with a nod only in passing by those outside of the civic education community.

This commission creates an opening to change that.

What Civic Education Does

The National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service is enjoined by Congress “to consider methods to increase participation in military, national, and public service in order to address national security and other public service needs of the Nation.” Accordingly, it is developing recommendations for encouraging “every American to be inspired and eager to serve” and has asked how civic education and schools can create an expectation of service. I commend the commission for their interest in civic education and their desire to learn more, which will inevitably elevate civic education onto the national stage as a topic worthy of national discussion.

It is not often that civic education is considered alongside national security concerns. I believe that it should be. Current recruiting shortfalls among branches of the armed forces is one indication of why. So too is the trend among “influencers” (parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors) not to recommend military service as a viable career or life-choice option,⁶ or to outright denigrate it and shame those who show some support for the military—as did the California teacher last year who berated a student for wearing a US Marines sweatshirt, calling military members society’s permanent failures, “the freakin’ lowest of the low.”⁷ A further indication is the alarming propensity of today’s youth to say that democracy is a “bad” or “very bad” way to govern a country.⁸

Around the same time that World War II veterans were stepping into the middle class thanks to the GI Bill, America’s public education system drastically reduced the time it spent on teaching young Americans the history, principles, and institutions of its democratic way of life. Students today spend only 7.6 percent of their school time in social studies, only one part of which is civic education—the most crucial vehicle of transmitting an appreciation of the value of the American political order, and inspiring the individual to invest in the practice of democracy through political participation or through military or other public service. Public servants do much of the work to protect Americans in the exercise of their inalienable rights at home. American soldiers exist primarily to protect the American people and American democratic principles against external threats. Yet a nation cannot attract or support such soldiers or public servants in the most fundamental way needed, when it no longer much knows what it itself is.

Civic education traditionally understood is the vehicle through which a nation transmits who it is and what it does, and *why*, to succeeding generations. This is vital, because America in particular has constantly championed the belief that citizens are made, not born. At the American Enterprise Institute, I work with the Program on American Citizenship, which is focused on the fundamental principles and challenges of a free society. We believe, in the words of Walter Berns, one of our late, great scholars of the Constitution (and a veteran), that, among other things: “Citizenship is an awareness of sharing an identity with others . . . a sense of belonging to a community for which one bears some responsibility. In a word, citizenship implies public-spiritedness, which is akin to patriotism, and has to be cultivated.”⁹

How does civic education foster public-spiritedness? In a rights-based liberal democracy, a balance must always be struck between self-interest and public-spiritedness. Civic education reminds the citizen that her rights are accompanied by civic duties or obligations—something our current emphasis on the importance of asserting rights has been a bit blind to. The result is a kind of “transactional” sense of citizenship, where citizenship is the basket of skills and attitudes (how to shake hands, speak properly, and be punctual) that will help students attend prestigious colleges and obtain desirable jobs, rather than about belonging to a community. Civic education is needed to forge the bonds of trust and affection that enable individuals to interact with each other as equals in a community setting, and for the sake of a common or public good.

Thomas Jefferson explained it this way: Citizenship requires civic knowledge (the identification of rights, how to exercise “with order and justice” those rights the citizen retains, and how to choose “with discretion” the officials tasked with employing the citizen’s delegated rights), the inculcation of sound civic habits, and an informed attachment to the American regime and the principles of the Constitution. “To instruct the mass of our citizens in these, their rights, interest, and duties, as men and citizens, [is] the object of education,” Jefferson believed.¹⁰ Just as the democratic citizen by definition participates in the activities of governing and of being governed, so civic education must provide a complex array of knowledge to a wide variety of citizens. At a minimum, it includes knowledge for effective participation in public affairs, knowledge needed to elect officials who best demonstrate such an understanding, and an understanding of the rights and obligations we have as citizens. In its deepest sense, civic education thus reaches beyond simply helping individuals have a working familiarity with government structure and citizen rights. It also implies the need to habituate the young and new citizens to the habits of heart and mind on which vigorous democracies rely.

Thus, civic education, importantly, happens through various mediums outside of the formal classroom—in families and in the home most of all, but also through participation in sports clubs, faith-based organizations, and other local private associations. Sebastian Junger completely overlooked this foundational rung in the public-spirited ladder in his recent bestseller about veterans and society, homecoming and the belonging to community, *Tribes*. It is not disasters such as the Blitz, 9/11, and Hurricane Harvey, *per se*, that create public-spiritedness such that volunteerism goes up and crime goes down in their wake—it’s rather that it awakens as from a slumber induced by the soporific rhythm of daily life those impulses and traits individuals have already learned (however passively) through a visible example, in the frequented forum of the home or similar place. It’s about individual character. Invoking Lord Moran, Winston Churchill’s famous doctor, General Allen (Ret.) recently has wondered aloud what it is that makes a man or woman “go over the top [of a trench] solely on the orders of a subalternate Second Lieutenant into almost certain death,” to answer, also aloud, that at the end of the day it is the character these individuals bring with them into military service to begin with, more than any rote military training, that impels them so.

Character is the sum of principled action repeated again and again that propels individuals not just to run toward the gunfire to protect their comrades but also to live by the belief: “If not me, then who,” which belief ultimately feeds the core of willingness toward public and specifically military service.¹¹ Recognizing the foundational importance of early and repeated example on character development toward public-facing outcomes, even before the American Revolution

was won, America's leading statesmen and theorists insisted on women and girls having equal access to as robust an education as did boys. French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at this, expending considerable ink in his *Democracy in America* to explaining individual character formation and the viability of the American democratic experiment. Today, contemporary scholars such as Brookings Institute's William Galston reflect a similar understanding and argument about family, individual character formation, and liberal democracy.¹²

Individual character formation is a tall order, however, and one perhaps a bit beyond the immediate scope of this commission, whose present question is about civic education in America's schools and how schools can create the expectation of service. Still, I believe this connection of individual character and community cannot be ignored, if even because our contemporary schools are increasingly tasked with the responsibility of all aspects of character formation, whether this is realistic or not, and as seen in the rise of such things as social and emotional learning—or, to bring the discussion back to civic education explicitly, the push from some quarters for civics education to be defined narrowly in terms of character development and behavior only.

Setting aside for the moment that the content of a civics education can be as contentious as partisan politics (“How we think about the formation of democratic citizens depends on the specific conception of democracy we embrace, and this is a matter of considerable debate”),¹³ recognizing the centrality of civic education in creating civic and social awareness, and for perpetuating this America way of life, is the key argument for why its status within schools and curricula must be prioritized once more and its teachers given every support possible. This extends to the rigorous academic research about what works and what doesn't in the field, which is paltry compared to the wealth of literature and studies we have about newer or more recently valorized subjects such as STEM. Still, in a just-published review of the literature, “What Social Scientists Have Learned About Civic Education,” David Campbell provides an excellent lay of the land to show what more we need to study, to know.¹⁴

Examining the Policy Options

What we do know, according to Campbell's review, is this: At least four aspects of schooling affect civic learning and engagement, including classroom instruction, extracurricular activities, service learning, and a school's ethos. Furthermore, state-level civics exams can positively affect knowledge about politics and government. And, as our own AEI survey of civics teachers revealed in “High Schools, Civics, and Citizenship,” civics teachers highly support a civics assessment: 70 percent of civics teachers indicated that social studies classes are a low priority in schools because of pressure to show progress on statewide math and language arts tests. Little surprise that 93 percent said that social studies should be part of every state's set of standards and testing. In light of this, requiring all states to participate in the National Assessment of Education Progress Civics Assessments, and disaggregating its results by state, appears a sound policy prescription.

Assessments, for better or worse, attract the attention of principals, school districts, and state and federal officials, not the least on account of funding. For all intents and purposes, civics education is basically privately funded. But the entire funding for the community between 2011

and 2013 was between \$33 million and \$41 million, according to data provided by the Foundation Center. In contrast and as previously mentioned, among the hundred shining stars in the STEM-education funding constellation, Intel Foundation alone gives approximately \$45 million in annual grants to STEM programs. In 2015, President Obama's fiscal year budget proposal included over \$170 million to improve teaching and learning in STEM subjects. And, as this commission has noted, currently the federal government has allocated less than four million in available funds for direct civic education programs. Meanwhile, it has invested over \$1.7 billion in supporting STEM education. As goes the way of federal funding and priorities, so apparently goes private funding. And there's little incentive to invest time and attention where funding and assessments do not exist.

One consequence of having no funding weight to throw around is that school districts apparently see little benefit in investing in their civic education (social studies) teachers and programs. In comparison with teachers in STEM, we've found that social studies/civics teachers typically have to use vacation time to attend even half-day professional development programs. In addition, they often have to cover the cost of the program themselves because the school won't, and the offering organization is not able to cover the operating cost of such a program. By contrast, teachers in other fields are even rewarded for attending their respective professional development programs—or at least are not effectively punished for doing so.¹⁵ Incentivizing states, school districts, and principals to invest in the professional development needs of their civics and social studies teachers would automatically raise their status *vis a vis* their educator peers, as well as in the eyes of students and their parents. It signals that they and their subject are serious, worthy of respect and investment. Instituting national awards and recognition programs to honor excellence in civic education are less substantive on this score but bolster this image. Public recognition and honor are powerful shapers of public opinion, especially in a democracy.

In other words, consistent with what others have said throughout the commission's hearings about creating a culture of service, from the federal government's standpoint, much of what it can do best on a national level is essentially messaging. Holding up civics education and civics educators as at least as worthy of respect and investment as STEM can create a shift in public opinion about the status of civic education in our educational system, if not eventually a shift in what our educational system should, at the end of the day, have as its most complete goal—the creation of self-governing citizens capable of self-government. This more rhetorical approach has the benefit of fitting with America's system of education, where responsibility for education resides primarily with the states. The trickle-down effect is to signal to governors, research universities, school districts, principals, and other education officials within those states, that they must take civic education seriously, by creating the national environment that expects it.

In terms of encouraging which policies nonfederal education authorities should consider and adopt, the introduction of civic education in elementary school has long been a policy deeply desired by the civic education community. As previously noted, civic education is tasked with an almost-dizzying breadth of responsibilities in terms of what it needs to transmit to succeeding generations. This can't be relegated to only two formal courses between eight grade and high school and accomplish anything near what we expect of it. Civic education is a pyramid process, which builds off of civic literacy and progresses to the ability to probe and weigh the justice and goodness of one's regime in comparison with other regime types. Elementary school is the ideal

entry point to begin this journey of civic literacy, then building on it throughout middle school to ensure that students have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions expected of informed and engaged citizens by the end of high school.

Creating the Expectation of Service

In closing, I'd like to say a word about what "service learning" can and cannot teach us about what happens when individuals are required to perform public service rather than freely offer it and about how schools shape the public-facing attitudes of our youth. This latter point I want to touch on specifically in regards to how our public schools portray military veterans—through perpetuating Hollywood myths about the "broken veteran" and through discouraging or denying military recruiters access to career fairs, which only encourages the teachers themselves to hold on to their often mistaken or uninformed views about who and what a military is and does, and that they pass on to their students.

We currently have no study of service learning that has examined its long-term consequences with an individual-level longitudinal study. Perhaps this commission might want to study whether to recommend federal funding for a public-private partnership that would undertake such a study. The reason why is that despite the dynamic growth of schools adopting service learning requirements since the latter 1990s, current studies are actually quite mixed with the positive or negative effects of service learning for later civic involvement or public service. And yet service learning is often touted as the model or reason for pursuing some type of national service requirement. As David Campbell notes in his literature review, a study of "involuntary volunteering" among high schoolers in Maryland found that the mandatory community service requirement for high school graduation in that state has actually led to a decline in self-reported volunteerism. "Rather than giving them a taste for more service, it seemed to sate their appetite."¹⁶ Requiring or mandating service can often create a revulsion or cynicism about service.

The most extreme form of involuntary volunteering within America has traditionally been conscription or military service during times of necessity. Military service has traditionally been understood to be both the highest civic duty of a free citizen and his or her most serious civic obligation, which the nation has the right to command under certain circumstances. Even so, actual conscription has always been contentious in the United States, and there is no reason to believe that a form of "conscription" for mandatory national service, outside of military service, would ever not be even more contentious. The founders, Gen. George Washington prominent among them, hoped that American individuals would be spirited enough in their attachment to the principles of equality, liberty, and self-government that they would be self-impelled to serve in the defense of their nation. But human nature being what it is, and the demands of daily life being what they are, they knew that they could not simply rely on this hope. Outside of conscription under certain proscribed circumstances, their safest bet was a public education system that instilled a love for those principles and a concern for the public good in each individual.

At the core of the American experiment of self-government is the freedom to choose—and not to choose. Public education used to be informed by the understanding that it was supposed to

educate succeeding generations toward choosing civic service generally understood: “Enter to learn. Go forth to serve.” Perhaps the demonstrated loss of this core compulsion informs why so many public schools today are unwelcoming to military service and members of the military, outside of the specific cultural and political controversies informed by the long shadow of the Vietnam War. Thus, one step, perhaps a first step, toward creating an expectation of service within schools is to help schools accept the validity of military service. Help principals and teachers understand that those in our military are not “the lowest of the low” but are educated young men and women whose service helps prepare them for more successful, monetary and otherwise, careers than their civilian peers—through creating opportunities for educators to learn about the military, such as its separate branches and missions. Encourage schools to welcome recruiters and local veterans to tell their stories—even to create programs in which they can serve as coaches or teachers. And encourage the education community to recruit veterans to become teachers.

Military veterans are our permanent, if unacknowledged, ambassadors of public service. How we treat them, and how we publicly portray veterans, directly relates to how society conceptualizes military service, including what happens to an individual during that service. In an all-volunteer force, reputation is key to the attractiveness of joining a profession that can end in death or permanent disability. Those who choose to wear the nation’s uniform, and those who choose not to, are invariably influenced by how the public cares for veterans’ reputations as much as for their physical bodies. And it is that reputation that carries over into more general ideas of public service.

Thank you again for your interest and concern for this topic. Should the commission have any questions I would be honored to answer them.

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- ¹³ William Galston, “Political Knowledge, Political Engagement, and Civic Education,” *Annual Review of Political Science* (2001): 217–34.
- ¹⁴ David E. Campbell, “What Social Scientists Have Learned About Civic Education: A Review of the Literature,” *Peabody Journal of Education*, 94, no. 1 (2019): 32–47.
- ¹⁵ Burgess, “Civic Education Professional Development.”
- ¹⁶ Campbell, “What Social Scientists Have Learned,” 40.