

A LETTER FROM THE AUTHORS OF THE CIVIC MISSION OF SCHOOLS REPORT

On behalf of Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, we collaborated in 2002 and 2003 to organize *The Civic Mission of Schools* (CMS) report. Written by 60 authors, the report is probably best known for presenting evidence in favor of “six promising practices” for civic education in schools (see the cover article to this issue for recent evidence about those practices).

By 2003, there had been many evaluations of specific programs and types of programs, often with favorable results. Citing that body of research, *The Civic Mission of Schools* concluded that schools play an important role in helping young people gain the civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need to participate fully in our democracy. That conclusion mattered for public policy because preparing the next generation for active and responsible citizenship is a crucial, and often forgotten, purpose of public education.

A deeper commitment, however, underlay our interest in programs and program evaluations. We believe that providing young people with school-based civic learning courses or activities, while important, is a means to a greater end: a democracy in which Americans of all ages and backgrounds have opportunities to contribute their ideas, energies, values, and passions—working alone and in groups to define and address common problems.

To generate that kind of participation, civic education is a necessary but not sufficient component of what must be a more comprehensive approach to “civic learning.” Under this rubric, government classes, service-learning experiences, and other individual programs/models can and should be the vehicles for young people to have more meaningful and substantive opportunities to participate as active and engaged citizens, often in collaboration with adults, in their schools, communities, religious institutions, and other arenas.

But even comprehensive civic learning is not enough to ensure that young people grow into adults who are engaged and active in political and civic life. Today, millions of young people, as well as adults, are turning away from traditional institutions, including government, that they see as deeply flawed, driven by money or special interests, and/or uninterested in working with citizens to address issues that affect all of us. In short, young people, like

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of young Americans. Although CIRCLE conducts and funds research, not practice, the projects that we support have practical implications for those who work to increase young people’s engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 and is funded predominantly by Carnegie Corporation of New York and The Pew Charitable Trusts. It is based in the University of Maryland’s School of Public Policy.

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many adults, want to participate but are frustrated by political processes and institutions that were founded on a notion of democratic participation but seem closed to ordinary citizens.

Turning away, however, is not the answer. More participation is. Civic learning means not only learning about systems, but understanding how to change them for the better. We must prepare young citizens for politics but also improve politics for citizens. Those who care about civic learning, therefore, must focus on both the supply (young people) and the demand (the system) as equally important factors in achieving a goal of a more involved and informed citizenry. (Please see "Youth Civic Engagement: An Institutional Turn" in the March 2006 issue of this newsletter).

It is with this comprehensive message and framework that the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools—a national coalition of more than forty educational, policy, and professional organizations committed to better school-based civic learning—was created. Since then, the coalition has worked diligently to advance and promote the policy recommendations contained in the CMS report. With a board led by former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and former Governor Roy Romer, the coalition has commissioned a national poll that showed parents willing and eager to see civic education reinstated in schools; created a national database of best practices, programs, and curricula that were vetted by teams of educators and experts; and helped to pass legislation that encourages more frequent testing of civic knowledge.

The report has also generated a wave of new and rigorous research studies on civic education, particularly at the high school level, thanks to funding from Carnegie Corporation of New York. Since 2003, CIRCLE has distributed more than one million dollars to 30 of the nation's leading scholars who are conducting studies on such topics as the state of civics textbooks, the impact of youth media in classrooms, and student deliberations about issues.

But much needs to be done—under difficult conditions. Resources are scarce for experiential education. The No Child Left Behind Act, enacted just before the release of the Report, has driven attention toward subjects other than civics and democracy. It also reduces opportunities for communities to deliberate about and influence the priorities of their own schools. That means that communities cannot choose to emphasize civic learning—and also that students cannot experience full community engagement in the governance of their schools. Finally, in an era of high-stakes, standardized tests, the teaching of values, deliberation, and collaborative skills are easy to overlook.

Despite these challenges, excellent programs continue to flourish and grow, and comprehensive policies have been enacted in several school districts and states. From Hudson, Massachusetts to the State of Washington, increasing numbers of jurisdictions are incorporating richer curricula and better assessments of civic learning.

The best assessments do more than determine whether young people know "how a bill becomes a law" or how many senators there are. Testing should also include assessments of young people's civic skills—their ability to understand and discuss current issues, vote, and get involved in community affairs—but these outcomes are hard to measure. For that reason and others, research must continue to be a priority in all efforts to promote comprehensive school-based civic learning at all levels—curricula, standards, testing, and policy.

We have made considerable progress. But there is much more to be done and much of this work begins with rigorous research that informs the development of richer civic learning curricula; tests that include a broader set of civic-related factors; standards that embrace civic skills, attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge; and policies that advance all of these. These are the elements of a more comprehensive approach to civic learning for all young people in the nation's K-12 schools, and, thanks to the hard work of all those who participated in the CMS report, we are well on the way to achieving those goals. ■



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