CIVICS, Not Government
Redirecting Social Studies in the Nation's Schools
About the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Participation

Founded in 2000, the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Participation is an organized research unit of the University of Texas at Austin with a mission to create more voters and better citizens through applied research and outreach programs.

The Strauss Institute conducts research using focus group methodology, mail, phone and Internet surveys, interviews and content analysis. The Institute has examined political language, political attitudes of college and non-college youth, voter turnout and civic education.

As a result of its research, the Strauss Institute has created educational curriculum supplements, active learning projects, and standards-based lesson plans to help teachers engage students in civic education.

The Institute is named for the Honorable Annette Greenfield Strauss, a woman who dedicated her life to public service and never gave up fighting for what was right and fair as she pursued the best for her community. We are honored to continue her legacy.

For more information, visit the Institute's website at www.annettestrauss.org.
CIVICS, Not Government

“They (young people) just didn’t have a clue that a lot of the rights and privileges that they have today other people had to fight and die for...just things like being able to speak freely and not going to prison for it...It was baffling to them that these were things that had happened in my lifetime that they had not really been aware of.” —COLLEGE PROFESSOR FROM AUSTIN, TEXAS
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civic education has changed significantly in the United States since the 1950s. At that time, students took courses in “civic problems” and learned practical civic skills (such as how to vote) in their high school classrooms. As the nation became disenchanted with political life during the 1960s and 1970s, such grounded and practical instruction disappeared.

Instead, civic education became more scientized, sanitized, and nationalized.

- **SCIENTIZED**—Influenced by a spirit of government as a social science, by a sense of modernist detachment, and by a commitment to objectivity
- **SANITIZED**—Influenced by the mass adoption of textbooks, by the complications of a civil rights movement, and by an aversion to political conflict
- **NATIONALIZED**—Emphasizing the federal government, national institutions, and governmental processes
THE KNOWLEDGE TRAP

In recent decades, changes to civics instruction have created an emphasis on political knowledge. Scholars and textbook authors know that citizens with higher levels of political information are more likely to vote, to volunteer, to exercise their voices, and to make their communities better places. National testing standards in high schools now focus on long lists of things students should know. More social studies testing standards are being created in order to keep pace with standards in other areas such as English, mathematics, and science.

For these reasons, it has been tempting for policymakers to increase the scope of standards, for social studies departments to expand the amount of material taught, and for the education system to test mostly factual information. All of this has happened at the expense of the practical education of the 1950s—attending to civic problems, questioning democratic and non-democratic systems, and learning civic skills.

Ironically enough, this concentration on information has failed to create a more knowledgeable youth cohort. Despite an increased emphasis on information in public schools, and despite an increasingly educated citizenry (more Americans have college degrees than ever before in our nation's history), young Americans know less about their government than did their parents or grandparents at their ages. Additionally, young Americans are now less likely to be engaged in their communities, to participate in electoral politics, to read local or national newspapers, to voice faith in their system, or to express healthy levels of political efficacy.

Replacing the practical education of the 1950s with a focus on scientized, sanitized and nationalized information has been a gradual but fundamental shift in instruction.

Consider the purposes of civic education and government instruction.

- CIVIC EDUCATION trains students for an informed and responsible life in their communities.
- GOVERNMENT courses train students in democratic principles, leadership structures, and the federal system.

Thus, whereas we used to use the nation’s schools to create guardians of democracy, we are now in real danger of producing more spectators.

At present, government is taught as a one-semester course during a student’s senior year in high school. Meanwhile, civic education is largely relegated to government courses. Given contemporary practices of increasing the scope of what is taught in the spirit of improving education, today’s state educational standards insist that students should master a multitude of topics over the course of one semester.

It is difficult to cover the many required topics in one semester; it is nearly impossible to cover those topics and train students to be good citizens in such a short time.
Current practices, then, have placed social studies in a **knowledge trap**: a system which requires teachers to teach too much political information and too few practical lessons that could train students to be engaged citizens in their communities.

The question thus becomes:

**What must high school students learn to be ready to act as citizens?**

The Annette Strauss Institute set out to study this question, and we want to be clear that we are not the first to recognize or appreciate it. But for the most part, the policymakers, scholars and education groups who have studied these problems have tended to be info-centric themselves and thus caught in the knowledge trap as well.

We have taken a different approach here.

First, we conducted a thorough review of what educators, scholars, and existing school standards recommend high school graduates need to know in order to be prepared for a life of citizenship.

Then, we placed our research in front of four sets of stakeholder groups (workplace managers, college professors, city and municipal employees, and recent high-school graduates) in three states (Indiana, Massachusetts, and Texas) to gather their impressions. During the focus groups, participants were asked (1) to respond to the current practices advocated by educators, scholars, and standards; and (2) to identify any gaps in these practices.

Why invite a new set of stakeholders to a conversation about civic education?

We see at least two reasons:

- These new stakeholders interact with recent high school graduates on a regular basis and thus have a working understanding of what young people must know to be active citizens, and
- most true school reforms have begun outside the existing educational system because new sets of eyes tend to look at old problems in fresh ways.

**WHAT STAKEHOLDERS TOLD US**

The stakeholders we talked to see current practices as extraordinarily problematic. They spoke emphatically about the need to curtail the memorization and regurgitation presently operating in the knowledge trap. The status quo, in their minds, asks too much of teachers and offers too little to students.

Specifically, the stakeholders see current practices as creating young people who are:

- **UNREFLECTIVE**—lacking personal ethics, political tolerance, and conflict negotiation skills
* INDIVIDUALISTIC—concerned primarily about themselves and not identifying or connecting with their communities
* DETACHED—distanced not only from their communities but also from the larger political and democratic processes
* UNPREPARED—missing the basic prerequisites to be good citizens in the workplace, the college classroom, and their communities

The stakeholders believe that forcing students to memorize remote details cannot remedy these problems. In fact, they wonder whether too much breadth (information) and too little depth (meaning) created these problems in the first place. In other words, they doubt that more knowledge will free students from the knowledge trap.

**BANKING ON YOUNG PEOPLE**

The stakeholders were also asked to reflect on how civic education could be improved. They want to motivate and empower students. They want to help students see citizenship and democracy as relevant to their own lives today and into the future. They want to connect students with influential mentors and community groups to make citizenship meaningful. They want to help students gain practical skills so that they can become guardians, and not spectators, of the American system.

The stakeholders believe that social studies in our country must be redirected. Based on their comments, we offer five recommendations to create a more invested citizenry.

1. Civic education should emphasize meaning over memorization.
2. Civic education should emphasize inspiration over efficiency.
3. Civic education should emphasize ownership over detachment.
4. Civic education should be integrated, not specialized.
5. Civic education should start early, not late.

**CULTURAL DIVIDENDS**

Redirecting social studies will pay off handsomely for students, schools, employers and society. It will give students lifelong learning and problem-solving skills. It will give schools a more engaged and efficacious student body and stronger connections to their communities. It will give employers young workers who can think analytically, communicate well, be tolerant of others, and respect leadership. It will give society enlightened citizens who are self-directed and responsible, people who tend to their communities as they tend to themselves.

By making these changes to how civic education is taught, we set in place future guardians of the American system. We encourage students to think about their communities and their collective futures. We teach students what it means to be part of a democracy and why their participation is important for the future of our nation. And we show them why all of this is important right now.
INTRODUCTION

Americans are passionate about the democratic system. They are fiercely proud of the idea, history, and traditions of their democracy. They value the freedoms, rights, and opportunities extended to them in the nation’s founding documents. They respect their forebears who fought for the American way of life and acknowledge that they, too, have a role to play in preserving their rights.²

And yet at the dawn of the 21st century, there is reason to worry about American democracy. By almost every civic measure, today’s youth pale in comparison to the knowledge, engagement, and participation of their forebears when they were their age. While older folks have always been concerned about younger people, there are unprecedented reasons to be anxious about the civic disengagement of America’s youth.

Specifically, young people today are less trusting, less interested in politics, less knowledgeable about political life, less likely to follow the news, less likely to participate in electoral politics, less likely to join community groups geared toward solving public problems, and less likely to see connections between volunteering and collective forms of engagement than were their parents and grandparents at the same age.³

“America is great because we can think and we can function as individual people but come together under one same concept. We want freedom. Freedom of religion. Freedom of speech.”

—Manager from Austin, Texas
There are clear reasons for these disturbing patterns. Today’s youth have been:

- Raised during a time of unprecedented economic growth and so—collectively—may not appreciate the hardships of their grandparents and great-grandparents;
- Raised in a culture of mediated communication and political cynicism and so lack a direct, emotional connection to the nation’s democratic values and practices;
- Raised at a time removed from the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s and so may feel that questions of discrimination, fairness, and access to resources have largely been settled; and
- Raised in a post-Cold War world and so they experience a different type of patriotism, one influenced by abstract notions of terrorism and globalism rather than the clear, obvious enemies known to their ancestors.4

As a result of all this, today we are confronted with young people who know less, care less, and do less than their forebears. And yet they are the nation’s future. The system that has meant so much for so many years to so many Americans will soon be placed in their hands for caretaking. How can we prepare them to inherit and maintain this legacy? How can we give them a richer sense of civic possibilities?

Public schools have long been charged with training our nation’s youth for citizenship. Indeed, the American public school system was born out of a simple belief—that an educated citizenry is essential to the health of a democracy. The nation’s founders realized that political institutions alone were not strong enough to maintain a constitutional democracy. They knew that ultimately a free society must depend on the knowledge, skills, and virtues of its citizens. And they believed that the schools had a profound civic mission.

Americans continue to believe that schools should provide instruction in citizenship. Consider these data: In a recent survey, Americans ranked “preparing people to become responsible citizens” as the primary function of the public schools. They also ranked it above “helping people become economically self-sufficient,” and 86 percent of the respondents went so far as to state that “being a good citizen” is an “essential” or “very important” outcome of schooling. Additionally, Americans want a society in which human rights are respected and an individual’s dignity is acknowledged, in which the rule of law is observed, and in which citizens are competent, responsible, informed, and participatory.

So are our schools producing “competent and responsible” citizens? Are they helping young people discover the values and ideals needed in a democracy?

Perhaps not.
CAUGHT IN THE KNOWLEDGE TRAP
An “assessment culture” has emerged in the nation’s schools. Districts, administrators, teachers, and students are now being subjected to constant evaluation. These pressures, and the realities that not all students are making desired progress, have spawned a near panic about standards, accountability, and testing. These same pressures have placed increased importance on certain core subject areas (namely, English, mathematics, and science).

PRESSURES FACING THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS
Pressed by legislation such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (known publicly as No Child Left Behind [NCLB]), schools are working to ensure that every child becomes proficient in the core subjects. NCLB has been praised by many, but it has also been questioned for what it fails to do. Although NCLB acknowledges the importance of history, geography, government, and economics, it does not include social studies as an area to be tested.

What results from that omission? Schools are allocating less time to civic education. For instance:
- 30% of elementary school principals surveyed said that their schools have reduced the amount of time spent on social studies instruction, and
- 50% of principals in schools with large minority student populations reported decreased time for social studies instruction.

Moreover, research on the effects of a growing assessment culture show that (1) most elementary teachers spend only one to three hours a week teaching social studies and (2) teachers admit that they have to minimize, and in some cases eliminate, social studies to make room for intensive programs on reading and mathematics.

The assessment culture, in other words, has led to an “omission culture.”
CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULA

Not only is less time being spent on social studies instruction, but specific characteristics of social studies curricula complicate the civic education of youth.

Civic education has changed significantly in the United States since the 1950s. A key way in which this has happened has been the practice of removing courses on “civic problems” from the curriculum and restricting civic education to government classes. At first glance this seems reasonable: both topics address the connection between citizens and the state.

Yet deeper reflection finds important distinctions:

- **CIVIC EDUCATION** trains students for an informed and responsible life in their communities.
- **GOVERNMENT EDUCATION** courses train students in democratic principles, leadership structures, and the federal system.

Thus, whereas we used to use the nation’s schools to create guardians of democracy, we are now in real danger of producing more spectators.

In addition, in an assessment culture, government courses are charged with addressing an increasing amount of material. Political knowledge has long been a powerful predictor of many civic blessings, including political tolerance, trust, engagement, and participation. Educators, scholars, and policymakers are no strangers to the trends of civic disengagement of our youth. However, as the first step of this project shows, these groups may be trying to counter disengagement with political knowledge—hoping that more information might bring students back to public life.

We worry that this instinct is misguided. Forcing teachers to dish out more information and forcing students to memorize more things hardly quickens the civic pulse. **Instead, the focus on information appears to catching teachers and students in a knowledge trap** where contemplation rather than action rules the day.

Consider current practices in Texas. In that state (as in many others), government is taught as a one-semester course during a student’s senior year in high school. During that time, the State’s educational standards insist that students master more than 81 topics clustered under 23 categories.

Imagine trying to cover that many topics in one semester in a meaningful way. In addition, imagine trying to cover all that material and train students for citizenship in an engaging and relevant way. Accomplishing both tasks simultaneously is nearly impossible.

The Annette Strauss Institute is not alone in its concern. Prominent academics like William Galston, Richard Niemi, Jane Junn, Judith Torney-Purta, and others have studied this topic extensively. Research teams, including the American Political Science Association Task Force on Civic Education in the 21st Century, have been formed to underscore scholars’ commitment to solving this problem. Additionally, educational and non-profit organizations have advanced important
statements about how civic education can be reformed and wide-scale audits have pointed to the civic deficits of the nation's youth.

And yet despite these valuable researches, we continue to be threatened by something of a civic crisis.

To take action, the Annette Strauss Institute was commissioned to answer a fundamental question:

**What must high school students learn to be ready to act as citizens?**

We have adopted a unique way of answering that question.

Rather than look solely to the traditional voices in the area of civic education—educators, scholars, and policymakers—we asked a new set of stakeholders to join the conversation: citizens themselves. We believe that talking to the very individuals who make democracy work will offer new insight into this important arena. We believe that our best hope of breaking out of the knowledge trap is to think more broadly, and more practically, about what high school graduates need to learn to be prepared for real world citizenship.

We were inspired to do so by the American Diploma Project (ADP) conducted by Achieve, Inc., the Education Trust, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. The ADP sought to involve real world stakeholders in educational reform and to identify knowledge and skills that matter. ADP worked closely with K-12, postsecondary, and business leaders in five partner states (Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Texas) to identify the English and mathematics skills needed for success in both college and work. They then took their list of essential skills to managers and college professors, asking them to prioritize the items and to identify gaps in the list.

Inspired by the ADP project, we created a two-step study.

**STEP ONE** involved conducting a thorough review of what educators, scholars, and existing school standards have said that high school graduates must know to be prepared for a life of citizenship. Specifically, this step led to the creation of the Attitude, Skill, and Knowledge (ASK) Inventory which distilled thousands of recommendations into a manageable list of what young people should feel, do, and know about civic life before earning their high school diplomas.

**STEP TWO** involved a public opinion component in which we placed the ASK Inventory in front of four sets of stakeholder groups in three states to gather their impressions. The stakeholder groups included:

- Workplace managers who supervise 18–24 year-olds (chosen because they understand what young people need to know to exercise good citizenship on the job);
• Professors at two- and four-year universities who teach 18 year-olds (chosen because they understand what recent high school graduates should know to be good campus citizens in college);
• City and municipal employees (chosen because they understand what young people must know to have successful interactions with local government and law enforcement); and
• Recent high school graduates (chosen because they had just taken a high school government course and were familiar with current curricular practices in our three target states).

The focus group discussions were held in Indianapolis, Indiana; Boston, Massachusetts; and Austin, Texas. These three states were chosen for both regional balance and for insight into differing state standards for instruction. During the group interviews, participants were asked to respond to a condensed version of the ASK Inventory by (1) individually rating the importance of the inventory items for creating good citizens and (2) identifying notable gaps in the inventory.
THE STAKEHOLDERS SPEAK

Listening to the voices of the managers, college professors, municipal employees, and recent high school graduates offers a number of fresh insights. For example, our respondents did not believe that teaching more information would alone produce engaged young people. Rather, they believed that an emphasis on breadth over depth and the practice of forcing civics into government classes compromises democratic citizenship in four specific ways.

PROBLEM 1: CURRENT PRACTICES ARE CREATING UNREFLECTIVE CITIZENS.

Focus group participants constantly questioned why citizenship education is taught in government classes alone and tethered exclusively to institutional processes and perspectives. Their primary observation was practical: to train students for civic life, we must encourage them to be more reflective about themselves, about their relationships with others, about the necessity of democratic tolerance, and about the inevitability of conflict (and the desirability of managing conflict wisely). They believed that young people must be able to navigate these realities as individuals before they can move on to grander democratic practices. To be specific:

- They refused to see citizenship as an exclusively political matter, seeing it instead as a broader, social issue that transcends the topics emphasized in the ASK Inventory.
- They believed that young Americans need help in developing a personal sense of ethics, in becoming tolerant of others, and in engaging in constructive conflict.
- They argued that families, houses of worship, and communities have important roles to play in the development of citizenship skills.
- They felt that because students spend more time in school than with their families, the nation’s schools must redouble their efforts at citizen-making.

"The students I teach right now are struggling with concepts like character, character development. Taking personal responsibility. Taking initiative. These are concepts that they are asking me to define.... They're struggling with these things that I think I would have known in high school." —COLLEGE PROFESSOR FROM BOSTON

"I think you've got to find a way to bring back accountability and responsibility.... How do you give back? And why should you? I think it's hard, especially in public schools today, for them to hold kids accountable and tell them that they're responsible and that they have to become accountable." —MANAGER FROM INDIANAPOLIS
“[If] you’re going to be a good citizen, then you know that other people have individual rights. You can’t just go and knock them on the head. You need to know that people have (the right to) speak freely about their opinions. So, if you don’t know these values that are inherent in your government, and in your society, then how can you be a good citizen?”

—RECENT HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE FROM AUSTIN

“Part of being a good citizen is getting along with others.”

—COLLEGE PROFESSOR FROM INDIANAPOLIS

PROBLEM 2: CURRENT PRACTICES ARE CREATING OVERLY INDIVIDUALISTIC CITIZENS.

When talking about good citizens, focus group participants worried that mass media routines (television and the Internet), broken families (divorce, separation from extended relatives), and pressures to succeed (increasing expectations for college admissions) have led young people to become isolated from one another.

Their second observation is community-based: in order to train students for civic life, we must help them build connections to their neighborhoods and communities.

Our discussants believed that:

- An overweening sense of individualism prevents young people from understanding their communities.
- Current school materials, curricula, and practices detach students from one another.
- College classrooms and workplace responsibilities require teamwork skills.
- Getting young people involved locally is more sensible than stressing remote (historical) or distant (national) concerns exclusively.

“I think that the whole focus of our society (is) going me, me, me, me, me....I think that I would just try to emphasize that you are, regardless of what you think, or what your experience has been, connected to the people around you...I would just basically try to impart to them that they are their brother’s keeper.”

—MANAGER FROM AUSTIN

“Students need to see themselves as part of a community, as something outside of themselves. Most of them really don’t understand what their place is in their community. They are all about ‘when I grow up I want to have...a lot of money.’ And I try to talk to them and say, ‘But your job is your contribution to society and you are going to contribute.’ But they don’t care about that.”

—COLLEGE PROFESSOR FROM AUSTIN
"I work at a youth center. Part of (what) we do is try to is to tap into what the kids are not getting in school...and try to educate them more. So in everything we do, whether it's the teens or the preteens, there is a community service component. Whether that's going to a pantry and helping them stock the goods, or if they go down to the recycle center and do something there, or help out at a day care or a clinic, clean someone's backyard. And in that way they get a sense of giving, of being part of a community and giving back to a community."

—MUNICIPAL EMPLOYEE FROM BOSTON

**PROBLEM 3: CURRENT PRACTICES ARE CREATING DETACHED CITIZENS.**

In talking about good citizens, the focus groups noted how their own life experiences had given them a more stable and meaningful connection to the United States. They recalled taking courses where practical skills and real-life civic problems predominated. They also shared how having experienced conflicts like the Great Depression, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement had helped them appreciate the price of freedom and the importance of the political system surrounding them. They agreed that taking applied courses and making sacrifices for one's country had a definite effect on their understandings of citizenship.

Their third observation relates to engagement: we need to help young people see how the political process is relevant to them, how democratic ideals are critical to the sustenance of the system, and how patterns of disengagement threaten what they take for granted.

- They worry that young people are disconnected from community and national politics.
- They fear that the media age has distracted young people from democratic ideals.
- They acknowledge the importance of diversity but worry that young people have a declining sense of communal identity as a result.
- They believe that only after young people appreciate the values and importance of democracy will they begin to care about it.

"I think in the United States this is a real serious problem. It's a breakdown of American culture. And, whether we like it or not, we're a certain type of country and that's what we are and it's important to reinforce our values...If we get away from these values, then I think our children are just going to suffer. I think it is really important to be strong as a culture and be who we are."

—MANAGER FROM AUSTIN

"I think ultimately if you're talking about involvement in government, involvement in the political process, when it comes to kids, it comes from a desire to change something, be involved in the world, and knowledge of the world. I think that developing that awareness and that sensitivity...first, and then teaching them the facts, is ultimately going to motivate them to get involved."

—MUNICIPAL EMPLOYEE FROM BOSTON
**PROBLEM 4: CURRENT PRACTICES ARE CREATING UNPREPARED CITIZENS.**

The focus groups observed that citizenship involves monitoring the environment—reading the newspaper, making connections between issues—and navigating the political system—paying taxes, registering to vote, avoiding a parking ticket—rather than merely memorizing documents like the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence or having an encyclopedic knowledge of world leaders.

Their fourth observation relates to preparation: we need to offer students practical instruction (like that offered in the 1950s) to help them function in college, in the workplace and in their communities.

- They questioned the relevance of expanded standards that encourage memorization instead of direct civic involvement.
- They worried that young people are getting bored with information-based schooling and they sympathized with teachers who must teach a distanced curriculum.
- They noted that their own experiences with classes had focused on life-skills and believed that they provided a better preparation for adulthood than do current curricula.
- They observed that experiential learning could give students the teamwork skills needed in college, work, and community life.

"It is the difference between having food or giving the fish hook and the line to go fishing. To equip a person with critical thinking skills or critical judgment skills and everything else will follow."

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"I think it is extremely important that kids understand how government in this country and in their local town works. That they go on field trips, that they go to city hall, that they get a chance to talk to the mayor or chief council person or whoever that happens to be. I think they have to understand why the laws are built so that you don’t speed through a red light and why that is a consensus definition as opposed to something that someone made some arbitrary law."

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"I think a lot of the problem with the schools is it is about learning a bunch of stuff instead of about doing...Let them do things, because that is how you really learn. Apprenticeships were at one time a big part of education. That might have been the only education that somebody had. And they learned a lot by doing. They learned a lot about the world by doing."

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*Listening to our stakeholders, the problem is clear:*  
**Schools are not motivating students to become citizens.**
REDIRECTING SOCIAL STUDIES

After chronicling their concerns with contemporary practices, the stakeholders were asked how civic education might be improved. Their recommendations were based on their frustrations with the current system, recollections of their own high school experiences, and observations of the young people they know personally.

Across the board, they were sympathetic to today's high school students and aware of the complexities that modern life is sending their way. But unlike those on whom the ASK Inventory was based—educators, scholars, and state standards' experts—our stakeholders spoke of the need to motivate and empower youth, to help them see civics as relevant to their lives, to connect them with influential mentors and community groups, and to help them gain practical skills for dealing with day-to-day problems.

As evidenced in the recommendations below, they emphasized practicality over theory, group work over rugged individualism. The stakeholders also believe that social studies must be radically redirected to prepare high school graduates for enlightened citizenship.

RECOMMENDATION 1: MEANING, NOT MEMORIZATION

The stakeholders desire more depth and less breadth in civics education. They are aware that the contemporary testing culture has increased how much teachers teach and how much students memorize. Our stakeholders also shared:

- Their frustration with pure book-learning in their own school years
- Their awareness that studying for the sake of a test does not lead to lifelong learning
- Their belief that a proliferation of standards leads to shallow understandings
- Their conviction that democracy is precious but fragile (if not vigorously maintained)
"It seems more like a memorization exercise when they should really be learning why government works, what the leader's role is in that country as opposed to just memorizing a name."

—MUNICIPAL EMPLOYEE FROM AUSTIN

"You can hear something and not really understand it. You can learn it for a test and not understand it in perspective."

—COLLEGE PROFESSOR FROM AUSTIN

"One of the things that I am constantly frustrated with as a professor is the level of analytical thought or the lack of critical thinking skills. It just feels like they haven't used those muscles a whole lot. (In the high school testing environment) there is a lot of content there and maybe they can spew forth a lot of information, but then to ask them to challenge that idea or analyze that...what are going to be the causes and benefits of that...that's just not there."

—COLLEGE PROFESSOR FROM INDIANAPOLIS

RECOMMENDATION 2: INSPIRATION, NOT EFFICIENCY

The stakeholders were sensitive to some of the realities facing teachers (e.g., larger class sizes, a charged political climate) and students (wanting to fit in with other kids, peer pressure, etc.). They acknowledged that neutered curricula may lead to less conflict in the classroom and contribute to a smoother experience for teachers and students. Nevertheless, they felt that sanitized book-learning fails to engage young people. They championed inspiration over regurgitation and believed that:

- Role models can inspire students to reach for higher goals
- Teachers, community figures, and civic volunteers can make civic-mindedness real
- Such individuals can also break through the clutter of an over-communicated society
- Real people and real activities make civic learning more proximate and relevant

"Everybody has something that they can share with other people that will empower people...and say, 'I did this, and I overcame this, and this is why I want to do this.' Everybody has a story that can in some way motivate high school kids."

—MANAGER FROM BOSTON

"What is more powerful than a testimonial? You know? Somebody to come in and to bring somebody into the classroom and say, 'I went to the board of...I went to the building inspector and if I can do it...And this is how you facilitate change, and this is how you use your rights, and this is how you get things done.' And I think what you
need to do is you need to spark them, you need to motivate them, to make them feel like they're powerful." —MANAGER FROM BOSTON

"Role models. They need role models. They need either teachers or individuals that will come into their schools and show them what it's like to be a good citizen. It's a little thing. I'm a firefighter and we have a program known as FARM, Firefighters as Role Models. And we go into the elementary schools. We spend time with kids. It can be anything. It doesn't have a specific program. The teacher you work with can use it for whatever. She would incorporate us into her classroom, into their learning. Just that interaction with a role model from outside of the classroom."

—MUNICIPAL EMPLOYEE FROM INDIANAPOLIS

RECOMMENDATION 3: OWNERSHIP, NOT DETACHMENT

The stakeholders expressed fond memories of project-based learning in their own education as well as in their adult lives. They believe that that sort of learning should be factored into the curriculum for the following reasons:

- Projects and experiences empower youth by tapping into their native skills
- Project-based learning makes students more responsible for their work and more interested in the process of completing it
- Field trips and other applied lessons help students connect schoolwork with non-schoolwork
- Such lessons also help students link today's problems to tomorrow's solutions

"I think a lot of civics stuff is work. It's not fun, it's work. So, the extent that you take ownership of it, you know, get the creative juices flowing, get your heart into it, it will probably be more rewarding and productive." —MANAGER FROM BOSTON

"I think if you give children a passion for something, and I can only speak from having worked with them so long and loving them, if you give them a passion for something, if I can give them a passion for understanding local, national government, understanding debate, understanding how to keep up with current events, understanding how to compare different political systems, if I give them a passion for that somehow, some way they will find a way to work through the process. And in the past when I have tried to teach them the process first, I don't pique their interest and I don't pique their passion and they get lost in the process and I lose a lot of them. For me, let me
give you the passion, let me drive you, and then kids are remarkable. If you pique their passion, they will somehow, some way they will figure out the voting procedures.”

—MANAGER FROM INDIANAPOLIS

“The Constitution (becomes important to you when you actually have to write one). So we can say (to students) ‘You have to write a Constitution for this class and therefore you have to understand the process.’ I mean, can we again go back to the immediacy of it? Get the students to engage in governmental process or a political thing like writing a Constitution or participating in government in a classroom setting. Get them to do something more immediate where they have to learn it because they are participating in it.”

—COLLEGE PROFESSOR FROM INDIANAPOLIS

RECOMMENDATION 4: INTEGRATION, NOT SPECIALIZATION

The stakeholders vigorously questioned the ability of government classes alone to handle the business of making citizens. Instead, they focused on the many opportunities across the curriculum to help with that work. They told us that:

- Government classes focus too much on federal institutions and not enough on the values and skills that make democracy work.
- Opportunities for teaching civic lessons abound in science, math, and English courses and even during homeroom hours.
- Citizenship training will be seen as more meaningful by students if it is taught in both curricular and non-curricular settings.
- Civic training should become the duty of all teachers at all levels and in all disciplines.

“If we want kids to be good citizens, then they need to be practicing all of the skills all throughout the curriculum. And we have to get away from this idea that citizenship and the teaching of citizenship is the purview of government and history classes. It can be embedded into lots of other classes with service learning projects.”

—COLLEGE PROFESSOR FROM AUSTIN

“To me I think this [the worksheet] is too government focused... I would want to see something broader, like voluntarism and philanthropy. I mean, kids don’t know what philanthropy is or what really voluntarism can be. This is very focused on the teaching of government versus what is being a good citizen. So voluntarism and being an activist or being... giving money as a practice to help charitable causes, kids don’t really get that anywhere.”

—MUNICIPAL WORKER FROM AUSTIN
"I think I would like to see more life planning type of class. I mean, you know they teach you when you get educated and you go to college, you get a job, and then you're just out there. I mean, I just feel like there needs to be more about planning, planning for a family, planning for retirement, how much you are going to need to retire. Just more life skills."

—MUNICIPAL WORKER FROM AUSTIN

RECOMMENDATION 5: EARLY, NOT LATE

The stakeholders agreed that, particularly in an assessment culture, more attention must go to social studies (broadly) and civics (particularly). They told vivid stories of how civic instruction could be introduced across grade levels with age-appropriate instructions. Some of these accounts included kindergartners creating joke books for hospitalized children, middle school students researching news stories for their school newspapers, and high school students participating in unconventional field trips to highlight existing community problems. The stakeholders believed:

- That citizenship-training must start in elementary school and continue through 12th grade.
- That entrepreneurial efforts be made to teach civics across the curriculum, even in elementary and middle schools.
- That citizenship-training should begin well in advance of a student's senior year government course.
- That after-school programs and extra-curricular activities should be used to complement civics instruction.

"By the time you get to high school, the clay has already hardened."

—MANAGER FROM BOSTON

"Got to do it earlier than senior year. They are on their way out."

—COLLEGE PROFESSOR FROM AUSTIN

"If you start at the high school, you’ve lost them."

—MUNICIPAL EMPLOYEE FROM AUSTIN
THE PAYOFF

Americans are passionate about the idea, the history, and the possibilities of democracy. But a series of troubling trends has challenged the health and legitimacy of even a storied democracy like that of the United States.

The stakeholders we spoke to in this project want to break out of the knowledge trap facing current government instruction. They want to create citizens who are fully involved in the American political system. They want to build an “investment culture” in the nation’s schools.

The recommendations made by our stakeholders are a good fit for the real world. They are also important to students, schools, and society itself. Without doubt, the payoff for redirecting social studies is greatest if we act now.

PAYOFF FOR STUDENTS

Replacing the practical education of the 1950s with a focus on scientized, sanitized and nationalized information has been a gradual but fundamental shift in instruction. Our educational system should return to applied training in civics which can lead to a stronger communal consciousness, lifelong learning, and critical problem-solving skills.

Redirecting social studies empowers students to become guardians, not spectators. It leads to interpersonal relationships with role models and broader community networks. It aligns civic education with college and workplace expectations. It allows students to be more involved in the groups around them—at work, in college, in their neighborhoods. When civic education becomes “real” it can produce real results.

PAYOFF FOR SCHOOLS

The American public school system was born out of a simple belief: that an educated citizenry is essential to the health of a democracy. Democracies offers people choices but they don’t guarantee them good choices. Only enlightened citizens can do that.

Students who take ownership of their work and teachers who teach creatively rather than according to a list of antiseptic standards can surely create magic together. Redesigning civic education will not only lead to more engaged students but to more invested teachers as well.
Students who understand their community will find a place in that community if someone shows them how. Redesigning civic education can turn schools into communities and communities into schools.

PAYOFF FOR SOCIETY
Circa 2007, too many young Americans are disconnected from the civic structures around them. Redirecting social studies can rescue them from citizenlessness and help counteract political inequities both seen and unseen.

On a practical level, employers crave workers with critical thinking skills who communicate ideas effectively. They want workers who can collaborate and work as part of a team. Increasingly, they want workers who practice tolerance in the workplace. They also want employees who can learn from their mistakes and who demonstrate accountability. Criticism. Communication. Collaboration. Tolerance. Accountability. These are primitively civic virtues. Civics education can and must teach them.

Most importantly, good civic education creates guardians for the American system—its polity, its economy, and its very soul.

RISK OF NOT ACTING NOW
Students are currently not learning all that they need to know to be prepared for citizenship. A cynical mass media constantly bombards them with messages of disengagement and apartness. They lack available community role models to get them to aspire to something more enduring. They are taught facts and figures about government, but they are not schooled in civility. A carefully redesigned civic education will put disengagement, cynicism, and selfishness in their place.

Redirecting Social Studies will teach BOTH civics and government.

We need a new approach to civic education in the United States. We need an approach that emphasizes meaning, inspiration, and ownership and does so early and often in a child’s life. We need a culture where students see a place for themselves in their community and a place for their community inside of themselves. We need government, yes, but we need civics far more. The former is a curricular subject, the latter a life’s project. We need books and tests and homework, but we are in greater need of involvement and participation. We need young people to know about the nation’s founders, but we especially need close-at-hand people to inspire them. We need a mountain of information about our laws, but we need to teach the values under-girding them far more.

We need CIVICS, not government, and we need more of it each day.
Appendix I: Summary of Methodology

This project, conducted by the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Participation, joins the conversation about school reform in the United States in a unique way: by conducting research that focuses on practical ways of improving the nation's schools. As well-intentioned as the current reform conversation may be, few groups have had the resources or opportunity to ask fundamental questions about the fit between today's high school diploma and the demands of the 21st century. In thinking about such reform, we were interested in three specific questions, all tied to the original mission of the nation's high schools:

* Will high school graduates be ready for work?
* Will high school graduates be ready for college?
* Will high school graduates be ready for citizenship?

By finding answers to such basic questions, we believe we can honor the traditions of public schooling but also meet the needs of contemporary public life, particularly as those needs are refracted in the governing structures surrounding us.

Part of our inspiration for this project came from an earlier study conducted by Achieve, Inc., the Education Trust, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation entitled the American Diploma Project (ADP). The ADP sought to identify knowledge and skills that mattered in day-to-day life and to involve real-world stakeholders in education reform. ADP worked closely with K-12, postsecondary, and business leaders in five partner states (Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Texas) to identify the English and mathematics knowledge and skills needed for success in both college and work. They then took their list of essential knowledge and skills to managers and college faculty members and asked them to prioritize the list in terms of importance and to identify any gaps in the list as well.

Our two-step study builds on this work rather explicitly.

Step One: Research Component

Although the state of the nation's schools affects all citizens at some level, three groups are especially concerned about the requisite attitudes, skills, and knowledge needed for enlightened citizenship: educators, scholars, and policymakers. For this reason, these three groups were consulted about what young people should be learning in high school. Strauss researchers began the study by conducting a thorough review of the recommendations of educators, scholars, and existing school standards connected to civic education in the United States. Hundreds of documents were examined for this review. As far as educators are concerned, we examined research articles, opinion essays, and speeches created by school personnel. To assess the priorities of scholars, we studied peer-reviewed academic studies, project evaluations, and scholarly books. To trace the priorities of the standards-setting community, we analyzed the recommendations put forth by national bodies (e.g., National Assessment of Educational Progress) and nonprofit groups (e.g., Center for Civic Education) and the actual state standards implemented in three states (Indiana, Massachusetts, and Texas).

These researches eventually produced a summary of the civic attitude, skills, and knowledge said to create functional citizens. We dubbed this instrument the ASK Inventory.

Step Two: Public-Opinion Component

Researchers have yet to discover which types of civic knowledge and skills are most needed in adult life. To learn more, focus groups were conducted with four stakeholder groups from three previously studied states.

The four stakeholder groups consisted of:

1. Workplace Managers—supervisors at promising worksites where recent high school graduates are employed
2. College Professors—faculty at two-and four-year universities
3. City and Municipal Employees—employees of local governmental agencies
4. Recent High School Graduates—graduated between 2005-2006 and are at least 18 years of age

The focus group discussions were conducted in the following cities: Indianapolis, Indiana; Boston, Massachusetts; and Austin, Texas. The groups took place between July and October 2006 and were conducted at professional focus group facilities in each of the cities. A total of 110 people participated, 37 in Indiana, 39 in Massachusetts, and 34 in Texas.

Screeners or questionnaires were developed for each group to aid in recruitment of participants and to ensure that participants met the qualifications of the study. Professional focus group companies in each of the respective cities were contracted to aid in the recruitment and facilitation of the focus groups. The focus group co-moderators, however, were members of the Strauss staff. These same two individuals moderated all focus groups. Participants were recruited through random telephone sampling, e-mail notifications, and newspaper advertisements. Participants were financially compensated for their participation and asked to complete a short demographic survey. During the discussions, the participants were asked to rate the importance of the items on the ASK Inventory that purportedly describe "good citizens" and to identify gaps in the inventory as well. A more detailed description of the methods used in this study are available from the Annette Strauss Institute upon request.
Endnotes


2 Results of a 2004 telephone survey conducted on behalf of National Public Radio, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government available through Roper Center at University of Connecticut, Public Opinion Online, October 6, 2004.

Results of a 1998 telephone survey conducted by the Public Agenda Foundation available through Roper Center at University of Connecticut, Public Opinion Online, December 1998.

Results of a 2006 telephone survey conducted by ABC News/Washington Post available through Roper Center at University of Connecticut, Public Opinion Online, May 12, 2006.

Results of a 2006 telephone survey conducted by TNS Opinion and Social Institutes available through Roper Center at University of Connecticut, Public Opinion Online, September 6, 2006.


9 The Center for Civic Education, the National Commission on Civic Renewal, and the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) have all formed to call attention to the need for civic renewal. These audits include the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA).


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