

EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY

California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools

PRESS RELEASE

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CONCERNED CALIFORNIANS AND KEY EDUCATION OFFICIALS CONVENE A STATEWIDE SUMMIT TO SUPPORT CIVIC EDUCATION

While schools across the State celebrate Constitution Day, a recent survey shows alarming trends in student civic knowledge

Sacramento, CA--Today, more than 200 civic and education leaders gathered in a day-long summit to discuss the importance of civic education in the State of California. The event represents the official launch of *Educating for Democracy: California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools*, a statewide initiative of Constitutional Rights Foundation (CRF) in collaboration with the Center for Civic Education and the Alliance for Representative Democracy. Convened by CRF and funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Annenberg Foundation and the W.R. Hearst Foundation, this project is promoted by a broad coalition of business leaders, educators, judges, lawyers and legislators.

Specifically, *Educating for Democracy* will:

- Conduct research to determine the effect of current educational practices in CA on the development of student knowledge, skills and attitudes and their capacity for effective civic engagement.
- Work with the schools to assess their current civic education practices and improve them by developing and implementing promising practices and providing teacher preparation and resources.
- Build upon public support to make effective civic education a greater priority in CA public schools and adopt policies to implement more effective practices.

The initiative received a huge boost in July when the California State Legislature approved, and the Governor signed, a Resolution recognizing the need to make civics a bigger priority in education. The Resolution urges the State Board of Education and all local school governing bodies to examine current practice and develop plans to increase and broaden emphasis on principles and practices of democracy in the schools of this state.

“The future of democracy in California depends on knowledgeable and engaged citizens. It is the goal of this project and the Summit to draw attention to this need and make sure that every student in our state receives a quality civic education so that they understand their constitutional heritage and the rights and responsibilities of effective citizenship,” states Todd Clark, Executive Director of CRF.

This theme was repeated throughout the day as a rich and diverse selection of speakers pledged their commitment to the goals of the initiative. The summit was hosted by a trio of state education leaders: **David W. Gordon**, Superintendent, Sacramento County Office of Education, **Darline P. Robles, Ph.D**, Superintendent, LA County Office of Education and **Gary K. Hart**, Institute for Education Reform, CSU Sacramento. During introductory remarks, each of them pledged their continued commitment toward the implementation of the *Educating for Democracy* initiative.

In his keynote address California Secretary of State Bruce McPherson stated, “An extension of our community involvement is really in our public service and that’s what we need to instill in our young people.” The summit also served as an opportunity to preview a new survey and research report being released in November that reflects the current status of civic education in California. A brief presentation by Todd Clark and Joe Kahne, Mills College Department of Education provided some interesting information:

- Students are not well prepared for effective citizenship.
- Although a high percentage of students reported that they intended to vote, they were less likely to say they were informed enough to vote.
- Student confidence declined further when asked about specific issues: Iraq, the economy, taxes, education, health care, and the like.
- One half of students surveyed could not correctly identify the function of the Supreme Court.
- 33 percent could not correctly identify even one of California’s two senators from among a list of options.
- There is much schools can do to significantly improve students’ civic capacities.
- Access to school-based opportunities to develop civic commitments and capacities are uneven. Those intending to go to four-year colleges have significantly more access to these opportunities than others.
- Young people have a strong desire to help their communities as evidenced by their involvement as volunteers and their commitment to charity work.

A variety of panel discussions throughout the day included topics such as “Creating a Legislative Agenda” and “Developing Community Support for High Quality Civic Education,” with speakers from the legislative, academic, legal and non-profit sectors. To demonstrate current best practices in the field of civic education, teachers and students from Fremont, Los Angeles and Mendocino presented and showcased successful programs. Fremont’s California State Winners of the 2005 “We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution” competition appeared with their teacher to demonstrate the teacher’s perspective on civic education. A team from Mendocino County presented a brief Mock Trial demonstration and students and teachers from Los Angeles’ John Marshall High School spoke about their particular civic education programs.

A highlight of the day was an appearance (via live video) by The Honorable Lee H. Hamilton, Director, Center on Congress at Indiana University. In his remarks to Summit guests, he stated that “We must teach our students that being an American provides the opportunity to do something great.” He further commented that “Civic education depends upon civil discourse and a decent respect for the opinions of mankind.”

California Secretary of Education Alan Bersin addressed the need to strengthen civic education in public schools as did State Board of Education member Jonathan Williams. Both state education leaders pledged their commitment to making civics a larger priority.

California State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell started the afternoon session with remarks that suggested California students...”need to have skills and tools to become effective citizens in our democracy.” The State Superintendent also presented Awards to student and teacher representatives of ten California high schools serving as Civic Mission Pilot Schools. These schools will develop and implement programs, curriculum and activities that will promote quality civic education on their sites. The schools are **Sheldon** High in Elk Grove District, Eureka High in Eureka District, Foothill High in Kern County District, John Marshall High in LAUSD, Bell Gardens High in Montebello District, Foothill High and Amador Valley High in Pleasanton District, John F. Kennedy High in Sacramento District, Aragon High in San Mateo District, Foothill High in Shasta District, and Pinola Valley High in West Contra Costa District.

The day ended with audience members breaking into small group discussions to brainstorm on a variety of topics meant to improve civic education, such as staff development, a review of the current History-Social Science framework, educational policies and methods in which non-education groups can assist in promoting the civic mission of schools. Audience members re-convened to present their recommendations on each topic.

In closing remarks, Charles Quigley, Executive Director, Center for Civic Education commented “It is amazing to me that emerging democracies know the need for civic education.” “Here in one of the most advanced democracies in the world, our students are ignorant of how our government works.”

For more information about *Educating for Democracy: California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools*, please visit our website at www.cms-ca.org