

The National Standards for Civics & Government

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I. The Idea of Civics & the American Creed

In his Letters From an American Farmer in 1782, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur posed the question that has driven the investigation of civics and civic character ever since. He asked, "What is this American, this new man?" He went on to write that Americans, unlike most of their European counterparts at the time, could not be defined by common ethnicity, religion, language, national origin, or even geography. What, then, were the important characteristics which defined Americans as a separate and unique identity? He answered, holding that Americans are not defined by who they are, but by what they believe. A common political philosophy, a shared set of deeply held values, a core set of beliefs define and separate Americans from others throughout the world. Ever since this observation was made, philosophers, political scientists and educators have struggled to identify exactly what these shared beliefs are. What are the elements that comprise the American Creed?

Intuitively, we all know what some of these values are. They include the ideals of liberty, equality, justice, and participation among others. But the special challenge for educators is to try to express these abstract concepts in ways which ensure that the ideas are passed down to successive generations. One of the prime historic functions of public schools in the United States has been the idea of "education for citizenship". It is impossible to effectively educate for citizenship, however, if there is not first a working definition of what "good citizenship" is, the rights that citizenship bestows, and the obligations that it requires.

Throughout the 1980's and continuing in the 1990's, there have been a slew of reports decrying what Americans in general, and young people in particular, don't know about history, govern-

ment, politics, and the Constitution. Study after study point to an appalling lack of knowledge about the fundamental principles and institutions of our government. Equally alarming are articles revealing declining voter turnout and political participation, especially among young people and an increase in apathy and cynicism among citizens. Combined, the statistics paint a bleak picture of the state of American citizenship.

The ideas of defining good citizenship, of continuing the search for the American Creed, and of addressing the concerns about American student ignorance are all part of the creation of these national standards for civics and government. In addition, the standards draw attention to the decline in instruction in civics in schools throughout the nation. Teaching civics and government has become an incidental part of education, rather than the essential role it ought to play. One objective of the standards, then, is to encourage a greater emphasis on civics in schools and to urge explicit and systematic instruction in grades K-12.

The other prime objectives of the civics standards are obvious. The standards are written with the intent to help students understand the philosophical underpinnings of government, the mechanics of how it works in practice, its strengths and weaknesses, and the ways citizens can participate by exercising their rights and fulfilling their duties. Overall, the standards are designed to encourage dialogue, deliberation, and reflection on the essential ideas and enduring issues that shape what it means to be an American.

II. The National Standards for Civics & Government

The content standards were developed by the Center for Civic Education in cooperation and consultation with more than 1000 educators nation-wide. They specify what students need to know and be able to do in the field of civics and government by the end of the 4th, 8th and 12th grades if they are to understand and become rationally committed to the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy. The standards identify five major areas of civic study. These basic elements are posed in the form of questions to encourage discussion and emphasize the importance of active learning. Specifically, they are:

- What are civic life, politics, and government?
- What are the basic values and principles of American democracy?

- How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy?
- What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs?
- What are the roles of the citizen in American democracy?

At each grade level (K-4, 5-8, 9-12), students are expected to demonstrate proficiency by identifying, describing, explaining, evaluating, advocating, and defending various key elements. For example, at the elementary level, youngsters should be able to define what government is; understand the distinction between local, state, and national governmental institutions; identify members of government; and list some of the ways in which citizens participate in government. By 8th grade, students should understand the concept of a constitution; be able to describe the role of law in American society; identify international organizations; and evaluate the difference between personal, political, and economic rights. In high school, teens should be able to evaluate the different forms of government; describe the disparities that exist between the ideal and reality in American political and social life; explain the historical context of American foreign policy; and advocate dispositions that facilitate thoughtful and effective participation in public affairs. Figure 1 provides a closer look at a sample standard at each of the three levels.

As demonstrated by the examples above (and in Figure 1), the model standards focus not only on the institutions of government but also on the shared values of the nation. Along with traditional instruction in the three branches of government, for example, students might be challenged to understand how the notions of justice, equality, diversity and the public good help to promote and sustain our system of constitutional democracy. The document attempts to fold together emphases on the content and structure of government, the skills necessary to take an active part in civic society, and the dispositions fundamental to good citizenship. The standards go beyond the basic laundry list of names, places, and dates to encourage students and teachers to explore the fundamental questions of government and citizenship in our society.

III. Implications for Teachers

The standards were not written to be used as a course outline

or a textbook, but they do lend a direction to the teaching of civics and government at all grade levels.

As content standards, the recommendations provide clear statements for the general categories of knowledge that need to be addressed in the classroom. The five organizing questions frame the key knowledge components. Students should have a basic understanding of the philosophy and values behind government, the governmental institutions themselves, the role of the U.S. in the global community, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Many of these elements are already covered in high school government classes. Where the standards differ from current practices in terms of knowledge objectives is in the placement of content at all grade levels (elementary, middle, and secondary) and in the comprehensive nature of civics instruction. The standards take a spiral approach to government and civics instruction. By 4th grade a student should already have been exposed to the idea of government and have at least a passing familiarity with the institutions of American government. By 8th grade, this knowledge should be broadened to include a more abstract understanding of the function of these institutions. By 12th grade, students should be engaged in analysis and evaluation as to whether our government, in its current form, is fulfilling the promise of the founders. Obviously, in a one semester or even in a one year course, it would be impossible to accomplish all of the content objectives. However, with a continuing emphasis at all grade levels, the task becomes more achievable.

The standards point to a variety of opportunities across the curriculum for teaching about citizenship and the fundamental values and beliefs that shape our society. Indeed, teaching "good citizenship" should not be left solely to the social studies department. Obviously, the bulk of the content seems most appropriate for government, history, economics, and current issues classes, but, especially with regard to the exploration of public policy issues and the examination of core democratic ideals, there are many opportunities in literature, art, music, science, and other subject areas to create and encourage a school-wide investigation of civics. Literature, art, and music classes, for example, might focus on works which seek to interpret the idea of "American" or which explore alternative visions of America's future. Science classes, similarly, offer a perfect opportunity for examination of governmental policy concerns regarding environmental regulations or the space pro-

gram. A math class might explore budgetary matters, a foreign language class might investigate how other cultures view the United States, even a physical education class can allow students an opportunity to learn about American culture through its sports and games. If, indeed, educating for citizenship remains a prime directive of our schools, then the responsibility to provide this education must be spread and reinforced throughout the curriculum.

As educators, we all know that there is a lot more involved in teaching than merely relaying information to students. Certainly, the conveyance of important content is a major requirement. However, without opportunities for students to develop crucial skills and the possibility of implementing knowledge and skills in a safe environment, much of the content will be lost immediately after the next exam. Therefore, it is up to administrators, curriculum designers, and teachers to find creative and innovative approaches to allow students to "get their hands dirty" doing the work of citizenship. If ultimately we want students to leave school feeling empowered - that they are a part of government, that their viewpoints count, and that they can make a difference - it is essential that students practice skills and apply knowledge while engaged in relevant, meaningful, positive experiences. Many of these opportunities already exist. Through seminars and class discussions, students can try out new ideas and work through basic dilemmas. Through research projects and presentations, students may explore various policy alternatives. Through service learning experiences, students become a valued part of the community and are given a chance in the classroom to reflect on exactly what their involvement means. In sum, in order for students to be good citizens, schools must allow them to experience good citizenship.

While the main instructional responsibility may fall to the social studies department, the most effective civic education takes place within the overall civic community of the school. Working together to implement standards, educators can make a school a laboratory for positive and effective citizenship. Students must be prepared to meet the challenges of citizenship and to step into roles of leadership in society at large. The National Standards for Civics and Government are not a panacea, but they do provide a good, broad outline of what needs to be accomplished. Now, it's time to get to work.

I. What is Government and What Should it Do?

- D. What are some of the most important things governments do?

1. Functions of government. *Students should be able to explain some of the major things governments do in their school, community, state, and nation.*

To achieve this standard, students should be able to

- describe some major things governments do
- make laws that establish schools, provide health services, and require licenses for drivers
- carry out laws that provide for crossing guards at schools, build and maintain highways, conduct immunization programs
- enforce laws that require people to obey traffic, health, child labor, and sanitation laws
- manage conflicts so that disputes between people can be settled peacefully
- provide for the defense of the nation
- explain how government makes it possible for people working together to accomplish goals they could not achieve alone.

II. What are the Foundations of the American Political System?

- D. What values and principles are basic to American constitutional democracy?

2. Conflicts among values and principles in American political and social life.

Students should be able to evaluate, take, and defend positions on issues in which fundamental values and principles are in conflict. To achieve this standard, students should be able to

- describe conflicts among fundamental values and principles and give historical and contemporary examples of these conflicts, such as
- conflicts between liberty and equality, e.g., liberty to exclude others from private clubs and the right of individuals to be treated equally
- conflicts between individual rights and the common good, e.g., liberty to smoke in public places and protection of the health of other persons
- explain why people may agree on values and principles in the abstract but disagree when they are applied to specific issues
- agreement on the value of freedom of expression, but disagreement about the extent to which expression of unpopular and offensive views should be tolerated, e.g., neo-Nazi demonstrations, racial slurs, profanity, lyrics that advocate violence
- agreement on the value of equality but disagreement about affirmative action programs

III. How Does the Government Established by the Constitution Embody the Purposes, Values, and Principles of American Democracy?

- E. How does the American political system provide for choice and opportunities for participation?

3. Political communication: television, radio, the press, and political persuasion.

Students should be able to evaluate, take, and defend positions on the influence of the media on American political life.

To achieve this standard, students should be able to

- explain the meaning and importance of freedom of the press
- evaluate the role of television, radio, the press, newsletters, and the emerging means of communication in American politics
- compare and contrast various forms of political persuasion and discuss the extent to which traditional forms have been replaced by electronic media
- explain how Congress, the president, and state and local public officials use the media to communicate with the citizenry
- evaluate historical and contemporary communication using such criteria as logical validity, factual accuracy, emotional appeal, distorted evidence, appeals to bias or prejudice, e.g.,
 - speeches such as Lincoln's "House Divided," Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?," Chief Joseph's "I Shall Fight No More Forever," Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms," Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream"
- government wartime information programs, campaign advertisements
- political cartoons