

What binds America is values in our Constitution

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Diversity in America is as old as the nation itself. As the home to citizens of more ethnic backgrounds and religious faiths than any other nation on earth, America is not sustained by the same type of cultural unity as most European or Asian nations. So what holds us together? For well over two centuries, the values of our Declaration of Independence and Constitution have served to unify Americans of every background: *e pluribus unum*. In signing the Constitution on this day in 1787, our founders built America on the values that have sustained us to this day, the ideals of self-government, liberty, and equality - all in pursuit of a more perfect union.

Yet these ideals are not automatically renewed in each generation. In the words of education reformed John Dewey, "democracy must be reborn in every generation, and education is its midwife."

Dewey was not alone in understanding schools as the primary means of ensuring that Americans have the civic knowledge and virtue necessary for responsible citizenship. Nearly forty state constitutions cite the civic mission of schools as the reason for the establishment of their public school systems.

Despite this original mission, over the past generation the number of civics classes offered to youth has been in steady decline. Until the 1960s it was common for students to take three civics courses focused on citizen responsibility in a democracy, but today most schools only offer a single, often optional course for seniors about to graduate high school.

This decline undermines the health of a democracy premised on citizen participation. On the last national civics assessment, released in 2006, two-thirds of students scored below proficient and less than a fifth of high school seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy.

This decline comes at a time when we most need citizens to understand their role in our democracy. The great challenges America faces - from energy dependence to a growing deficit to the war in Iraq - demand shared sacrifice on the part of an engaged citizenry. A nation that is becoming more culturally, ethnically, racially, and economically diverse faces grave threat if young people are not prepared for active citizenship and feel a sense of civic obligation toward each other and their nation.

Moreover, a growing civic achievement gap threatens our most core ideals of equal citizenship. On the last national civics assessment, African-American and Hispanic students are twice as likely as their White counterparts to score below proficient on national civics assessments, and a similar gap exists based on a student's economic class.

This knowledge gap correlates with a gap in attitudes. Minority and low-income students are less likely to trust each other and our national institutions, resulting in vast differences in political participation based on race and class. In a democracy premised on citizen participation and citizen equality, the civic participation gap threatens the cornerstone of our national legitimacy. How can our government fulfill Lincoln's goal of being "of the people, by the people, for the people" if only some people have the tools to participate?

Each generation in our history has been more diverse than the one that came before it. We must ensure that every citizen - from the descendant of the Pilgrims to the newest American - shares the knowledge and the tools necessary to affect change in their communities. Only through civic education can we preserve the Constitution's ideal of a society in which "We the People" control our own futures.

Join the campaign

The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools advocates for policies that make it easier for schools and school districts to pursue their civic mission. From flexibility to funding to institutional support, there are a range of ways that policymakers can help schools educate the next generation of informed and active citizens.

For more information: Go to www.civicmissionofschools.org

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