

Reconnecting Education To Democracy: Democratic Dialogues

Mr. Westheimer and Mr. Kahne, guest editors of this special section, note the lack of consensus regarding the means and goals of civic education in the U.S. While there is an increasing tendency to view democratic citizenship in terms of service and patriotism, the authors in this section argue that there are many more dimensions of civic engagement for which schools should be preparing students.

BY JOEL WESTHEIMER AND JOSEPH KAHNE

FOR MORE THAN two centuries, democracy in the United States has been predicated on citizens' informed engagement in civic and political life. For much of that time, public schools have been seen as essential to support the development of such citizens. "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves," Thomas Jefferson wrote in his famous 1820 letter to William Jarvis, "and if we think [the people] not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education."¹ Belief in the fundamental importance of civic education for democracy has been long-standing. But if educators can agree that schools have a role to play in educating democratic citizens, they can't seem to agree on what that means.

Indeed, what has most strongly characterized recent discussions of democ-

JOEL WESTHEIMER is an associate professor of the social foundations of education and directs Democratic Dialogue: Inquiry into Democracy, Education, and Society at the University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ont. (joelw@uottawa.ca). JOSEPH KAHNE is the Kathryn P. Hannam Professor of American Studies, a professor of education, and co-director of the Institute for Civic Leadership, Mills College, Oakland, Calif. (jkahne@mills.edu).

racism and education — in particular those that followed the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon — has been a striking lack of consensus about what democracy requires of citizens and of schools. The very same efforts that are applauded by some are viewed as “the problem” by others.

“We are living in a teachable moment,” former Secretary of Education William Bennett wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* one year after September 11th.² He believes that “an appropriate response to September 11th begins with . . . moral clarity, the clarity that calls evil by its true name” and that we should point students to “what is good and right and true.” Other educators believe this is a teachable moment, too. But, unlike Bennett, they see an opportunity to explore difficult and unresolved issues in politics, religion, and international relations. Hoping to address the ignorance of many students when it comes to international affairs, they prefer a curriculum that broadens Americans’ traditional mindset. For example, Janet Myers, a Missouri English teacher, believes that “we have to understand what is going on in the minds of terrorists, and what seems real and rational to them.”³

Or consider the recently released high-profile Carnegie report, *The Civic Mission of Schools*, which details concerns about democracy and civic disengagement and suggests how schools might improve the situation. Many, such as David Broder of the *Washington Post*, praised the report for focusing educators’ attention on the need to stem the erosion of political participation by young people.⁴ Others, such as Fordham Foundation president and former Assistant Secretary of Education Chester Finn, gave the report a C- and faulted it on the same grounds — its emphasis on helping students develop the capacities and commitments needed to engage in political activity and influence public policy.⁵ Finn argued that the report should have emphasized *nonpolitical* activity, such as being a good neighbor or community volunteer.

Students are no more in agreement on what good citizenship means than are teachers, policy makers, and politicians. When asked what it means to be a good citizen, one student from a focus group we conducted in an urban California school replied, “Someone who’s active and stands up for what they believe in. If they know that some-

thing’s going on that is wrong, they go out and change it.” But a student from a different urban California school told us that to be a good citizen, you need to “follow the rules, I guess, as hard as you can, even though you want to break them sometimes. Like cattle.” This lack of consensus around the civic goals of schooling underscores the challenge and complexity of deciding what we want schools to accomplish and how to make this happen.

In our own past decade of research and writing about democratic communities in education, we have often been struck by this lack of consensus. We have not been surprised because smart and capable educators, policy makers, parents, and students disagree on important matters, but because of the ways different goals for civic education are conflated: kindness is confused with charity, charity

is equated with structural responses to the root causes of injustice, and teaching about historical injustice is confused with teaching how to *act* in order to address existing inequalities.

Post-9/11, the means and goals of civic education in a democratic society have become particularly difficult to pin down. In new school policies and practices, patriotic and compassionate activities are frequently put forward as lessons in democracy. Citizens who are proud of their country and who volunteer in the community have become synonymous with citizens who practice and strengthen democratic ideals, but the link between patriotism and service on the one hand and democratic ideals on the other is a tenuous one. Indeed, most nations — not only democracies — would welcome programs that promote patriotism and voluntary service. These programs may be useful, but, as we discuss in our article in this special section, they are as good for Indonesia or China as they are for the United States or Canada.

In contrast, the authors of the articles in this special section focus on visions of civic education that emphasize uniquely democratic forms of participation, debate, and action. They outline theories and programs that could only be practiced in a democratic society — a society that values active engagement with democratic institutions, dialogues among citizens with divergent perspectives, and ongoing public analysis and reappraisal of laws and social norms. Before we describe their contributions, let us

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look at some recent policies and programs and show how they depart from the visions of education for democracy expressed by the authors in this section.

EMPHASIS ON PATRIOTISM AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

Increasingly, politicians, policy makers, and educators are forging connections between civic education for democracy and symbolic school practices that seek to instill a love of country and an ethic of service. These programs and policies equate patriotism with democratic commitment and community service with democratic citizenship.

In November 2001, for example, just two months after September 11th, President Bush launched a new school program that he noted would rekindle our democratic spirit. Through “Lessons of Liberty,” war veterans visit elementary and secondary classrooms to teach “the ideals of liberty, democracy, and freedom that America’s veterans have defended for over two centuries.”⁶ Then, in January 2002, the President made a related case for patriotism and service when signing the executive order that established the USA Freedom Corps. “One of the best ways to counter evil,” as witnessed in the September 11th terrorist attacks, he stated, “is through the gathering momentum of millions of acts of service and decency and kindness. . . . Volunteerism and community service are central to . . . our Nation.”⁷

Individual states have also been emphasizing patriotism by requiring students to celebrate notable events in American history, learn patriotic songs, and pledge allegiance to the flag. For example, Nebraska’s state legislature introduced Bill 982, which aimed to require each school board to appoint a committee on “Americanism” to see that the school “arrange[s] its curriculum in such a way that the love of . . . America will be instilled in the hearts and minds of the youth of the state.” That bill did not pass, but Nebraska’s State Board of Education did jump on its own version of American Bandstand, specifying that the high school social studies curriculum should “include instruction in . . . the benefits and advantages of our government, the dangers of . . . communism and similar ideologies, the duties of citizenship, and appropriate patriotic

exercises,” that middle-grade instruction should “instill a love of country,” and that the social studies curriculum of elementary schools should include “exploits and deeds of American heroes, singing patriotic songs, memorizing the Star Spangled Banner and America, and reverence for the flag.”⁸

And support for community service extends well beyond the President’s Freedom Corps and his call for all Americans to provide 4,000 hours of voluntary community service over the course of their lifetimes. Public service is being touted by both Republicans and Democrats as a means of developing democratic citizens. Democratic Presidential candidate John Kerry, for example, has proposed a \$3.2-billion community service initiative that would make such work a high school requirement and enable young people to earn four years of in-state college tuition.⁹ Kerry hopes that citizens will “sustain” and “strengthen” democracy by enlisting in “a new army of patriots who will serve on all the frontlines of our future — guarding our nation from danger abroad, strengthening our homeland security, reducing illiteracy, preserving our environment, providing after-school care, helping our seniors live in dignity . . . building a nation [in which] one million Americans a year [will engage] in national service.”¹⁰

DEMOCRACY REQUIRES MORE

To say that many have promoted patriotism and service as educational goals tied to democratic ideals is not to say that this view has been universally accepted. The vision of patriotism and service put forward in recent pronouncements has been criticized for its disconnection from democratic values and institutions. Patriots in a democracy, for example, should be encouraged to challenge as well as support the government. Critics have charged that current calls for “patriotism” have instead been used to justify antidemocratic action. They highlight such policies as those put forward by Attorney General John Ashcroft that resulted in hundreds of individuals (many never even suspected of terrorism) being held for months in unnecessarily harsh confinement without being charged with any crime and without access to families or legal counsel.¹¹

Indeed, while the sale of American flags increased dramatically after September 11th, they were by no means the only symbols purchased. One popular poster and bumper sticker shows the flag used as a gag to prevent someone from speaking and reads, “Patriotism Means No Questions — A Message from the Ministry of Homeland Defense.”

Efforts to equate charitable service with democracy have also been subject to critique. Democracy requires more than community service; it requires citizen participation in affairs of the state. “Charity is a matter of personal attributes,” wrote the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, “justice a matter of public policy.” Moreover, many people see service as an alternative to politics and government programming, thus limiting further the links between a service-related curriculum and preparation for democratic citizenship.

Like these social critics, the authors of the articles in this special section argue that democratic societies are strengthened, not weakened, by providing space for debate between critics and supporters of various policies. Indeed, it is the basic conflicts of values in society that make democracy essential, and it is the ability to discuss these differences in an informed and productive manner that must be a priority for civic educators. Therefore, forms of patriotism that squelch debate and “patriotic” curricula that ob-

scure the need for debate are, in important ways, antidemocratic. Similarly, the authors highlight the centrality of government action and politics in a democratic society and hence shy away from some current efforts that equate the provision of service with democratic action. In short, these articles emphasize the importance of debate, dialogue, critique, and social analysis more than they do community service or conventional appeals to patriotism.

Our article, “Teaching Democracy: What Schools Can Do,” draws on our study of 10 educational efforts that have successfully promoted democratic values and capacities. This research highlights the importance of developing students’ civic commitments, capacities, and connections — an emphasis currently lacking in mainstream education reform efforts — as well as ways to foster these

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outcomes. If students are to be prepared to work thoughtfully and effectively to improve society, we argue that schools will need to integrate academic work with its civic and social meaning. This task is made particularly difficult by the current high-stakes exams, a focus on service disconnected from disciplined analysis, and exhortations to be patriotic. We show the use of several curricular strategies that are both doable and effective, such as helping students identify aspects of society that need improving, fostering a supportive community of peers, and developing the skills needed to work effectively for change. Thus the key question is not whether schools *can* support the development of democratic citizens, but whether they choose to make this goal more than a rhetorical priority.

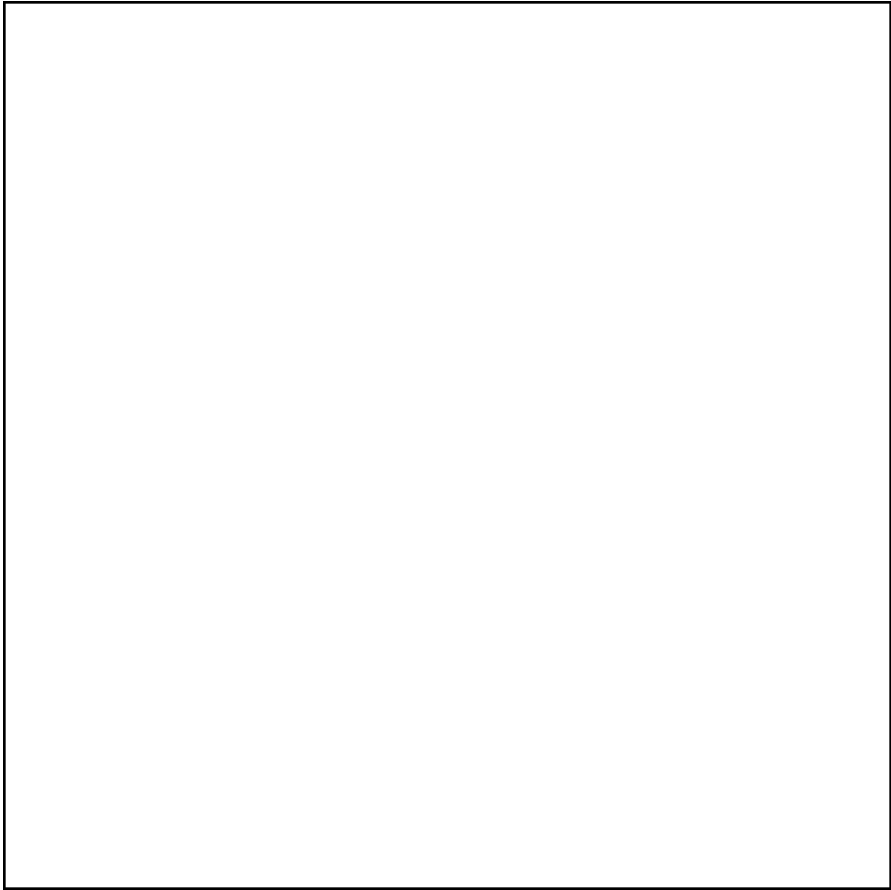
In her article, “So What Does It Take to Build a School for Democracy?” Deborah Meier details the kind of school culture that is essential for promoting democratic habits of heart and mind. Meier makes clear the countless ways in which a school’s culture — the ways educators interact with one another, with students, and with parents — can send fundamentally important messages to students about life in a democracy. She argues that, rather than accept the top-down imposition of academic goals inherent in the standards movement and in the No Child Left Behind legislation, schools must develop their own mission internally through dialogue involving teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders; that they must make time for democracy to be enacted and lived; that they must be gov-

erned thoughtfully, conscientiously, and transparently; and that assessments must clearly reflect these values. The value of opportunities to participate in democratic dialogues and to experience democracy as a way of life cannot be overstated.

Historian Charles Payne, in “More Than a Symbol of Freedom: Education for Liberation and Democracy,” discusses how fundamentally important an understanding of one’s past can be. Unlike those who emphasize traditional study of our nation’s heroes, however, Payne argues that African American young people need to know the full story of those who resisted injustice in the United States and the strategies they used to successfully fight for change. Indeed, the civil rights activists and others who demonstrate the potential of democratic action are not primarily characterized as patriots — at least not in the sense put forward in the recent efforts to promote patriotism. Rather, they are critics who had the courage, vision, strength, and talent to counter injustice, even when the cause of injustice was embedded in the laws, practices, and traditions of a democratic society in need of repair. This kind of knowledge is a fundamentally important alternative to what young African Americans may otherwise understand as a “history of collective humiliation.” Such liberatory studies can help counter negative images of black people that permeate the media and the broader culture.

Payne also describes several current programs that provide young people with the skills, insight, and motivation to work effectively for change in their communities. Underlying his analysis is the suggestion that teachers need to think about how the social contexts and histories of particular groups can shape their civic thinking and attitudes.

Professor William Galston reminds us that attending to diversity and culture, developing civic skills, and creating a vision for what democratic action can accomplish must be combined with attention to academic knowledge in order for students to become effective democratic citizens. Knowing how to read, write, and do arithmetic are essential for any citizenry. And democracy requires citizens who know how government works and have both the ability and commitment to locate and analyze information.



For these reasons, Galston argues, “informed engagement” should be the goal of civic education.

As former deputy assistant to President Clinton for domestic policy, Galston brings a unique combination of perspectives to his analysis. The problem, he writes, is that young people today “understand why it matters to feed a hungry person” but not “why it matters where government sets eligibility levels for food stamps or payment levels for Earned Income Tax Credits.” As he details in his article, research has identified important links between civic knowledge and commitments to democratic values, to political participation, and to a host of other civic outcomes. Galston’s article concludes by discussing strategies for effective civic education that have been identified through research.

Also for this special section, we asked seven thoughtful educators from a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives to write short responses to the question “What should teachers and schools do to educate good citizens?” In what can be seen as a “Roundtable,” the contributors share their thinking about active participation and engagement with civic culture while offering distinct perspectives on the goals of civic education in a democracy. U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige emphasizes civic literacy. He believes that core academic knowledge and education in

civics and American history are “vital to the health of our republic.” Social studies teacher Terri Camajani and professor Ingrid Seyer-Ochi, on the other hand, see good citizens as able to actively organize with others “to achieve real social change.” Professor of education Roger Soder finds the good citizen to be wisely averse to “either/or solutions,” tolerant of ambiguity, skeptical of demagoguery, and attentive to the tensions between individual and group and between liberty and order.

Like the other authors in this issue, the contributors to the Roundtable demonstrate the need for democratic dialogue among different constituencies. They grapple with different visions for citizenship in a democratic society and different approaches to the kind of schooling needed to strengthen those visions. Soder, Camajani, historian Tim Stanley, and educator Kim Westheimer argue that, if students are to be prepared to function in a democratic society, they must learn to listen and understand those with varying viewpoints and experiences. They argue that democratic dialogues and collective efforts that span and honor a diverse range of experiences, perspectives, and priorities are fundamentally important. Moreover, public histories must honor the voices of those historically excluded so that all may partake in the continuous remaking of shared commitments and practices.

At the same time that culture and context matter, however, as Shahara Ahmad-Llewellyn writes in the Roundtable, we must simultaneously care about our similarities and recognize our common humanity. Thus respect for and recognition of ethnic, racial, gender, sexual, class, and religious diversity must occur without constraining individuality and identification with particular groups on the one hand and without undermining broader shared identities as citizens on the other.

Although all of the articles that follow recognize the value of both civic knowledge and academic outcomes more generally as a key support for an engaged citizenry, several authors raise concerns about the impact of high-stakes tests on both what is taught and how such teaching occurs. They warn that lost in the growing pressure to respond to standardized tests and curriculum frameworks are opportunities for educators to champion the development of the skills, commitments, and capacities needed to participate fully in a democratic society. Civic education is getting inadequate attention and, as several authors in this special section note, is actually being cut back in some states as pressure to raise scores in math, reading, and science mounts. Thus those committed to teaching democracy must work to create space for developing civic skills and commitments both through the school culture and

through its curriculum.

Taken as a group, these authors offer an alternative to many of the popular “post-9/11” programs and policies we described earlier. The articles in this *Kappan* special section make clear that the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required for effective civic engagement in a democracy should neither be taken for granted nor be viewed as unattainable. No single program or policy will accomplish the work that education for democracy and civic engagement demands. It will require attention to many aspects of curricular content and pedagogy as well as to school culture, values, and governance. And while the work of preparing citizens for a democracy must include more than the schools, the schools are the public institution best positioned to affect the vast majority of young people.

The quality of our democracy and therefore of our ability to participate in and be responsible for the world in which we live is at stake. Democracy is not self-winding. As political theorist Sheldon Wolin observed, citizens in a democracy — both young and old — need to be taught to “know and value what it means to participate in and be responsible for the care and improvement of our common and collective life.”¹² It is up to educators, then, to reconnect the heart of the educational process to the democratic mission of schooling — to reconnect education to democracy.

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File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0309wes.pdf

Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, "Reconnecting Education To Democracy: Democratic Dialogues," Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 85, No. 1, September 2003, pp. 9-14.

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