

Are We Still Teaching Civics?

WHY NOT – WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT – JUNE 2023

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Agenda

- ▶ Let's measure how well we're teaching civics
- ▶ Why are we not teaching civics effectively
- ▶ What can we do about it
- ▶ Call to action

Students' understanding of history and civics is worsening

- ▶ Recent results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, often called “the nation’s report card”:
- ▶ Fewer than one in four students are proficient in US history and civics
 - ▶ Just 13 percent of the nation’s eighth graders were proficient in U.S. history last year
 - ▶ 22 percent were proficient in civics
- ▶ This is significantly worse than 2018
 - ▶ 15 percent of students who reached or exceeded proficiency in U.S. history, compared to last year’s 13 percent.
 - ▶ In civics, it was 24 percent in 2018, falling to 22 percent last year.

Yes, but, sorry to say, it's worse than that.

- ▶ This isn't just about students' loss of knowledge. It's also about their loss of connection to this country.
- ▶ Peggy G. Carr, commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics:
 - ▶ "too many of our students are struggling ... to understand and explain the importance of civic participation, how American government works and the historical significance of events."
- ▶ Patrick Kelly, a 12th-grade government teacher in South Carolina and member of the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for NAEP:
 - ▶ "These are two critically important subject areas, not just for the success of students individually in the future, but for our success collectively as a society."

Is the recent drop just due to the pandemic?

- ▶ U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona:
 - ▶ While linking poor performance to the “profound impact” of the pandemic, he objects to efforts by politicians to cut education funding or limit learning.”
 - ▶ Banning history books and censoring educators from teaching these important subjects does our students a disservice and will move America in the wrong direction.”
- ▶ Martin West, an education professor at Harvard University who sits on NAEP’s governing board:
 - ▶ the data does not point to reasons for the decline.
 - ▶ “That said, I think it’s fair to speculate that ongoing debates over how to teach history may well be getting in the way of actually doing it.”

Degradation of civics education shows up across generations

- ▶ Here are the findings of a January survey by Morning Consult that revealed generation-by-generation declines in a sense of pride in America.
 - ▶ About three-quarters of baby boomers say they're proud to live in the United States,
 - ▶ but only 54 percent of Gen Xers,
 - ▶ 36 percent of millennials, and
 - ▶ 16 percent of Gen Z members do.
- ▶ you can't have a democracy unless people want one. And right now, the kids don't particularly want a democracy.

Further evidence that it's not just the pandemic

- ▶ In U.S. history, scores began falling after 2014 and were down four points by 2018.
- ▶ A majority of students had taken a course in eighth grade mainly about U.S. history but that percentage ticked down from 72 percent to 68 percent.
- ▶ Chester E. Finn Jr., president emeritus of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative think tank, ticks off what he sees as contributing factors to low scores:
 - ▶ poor state standards
 - ▶ poorly trained teachers
 - ▶ limited instructional time
 - ▶ spotty and uneven curriculums
 - ▶ lack of an accountability system.

The takeaway from these measurements

- ▶ Chester E. Finn Jr., president emeritus of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute:
 - ▶ “This is one of these Sputnik moments that says we’ve got to say the schools aren’t doing their part to prepare American citizens”
 - ▶ “This should be an alarm bell, a call to do something different.”

Why is this happening

- ▶ For the past three decades, NAEP results have shown a need to turn things around for civic education.
 - ▶ The results come out, and cries go up for more investment in civic learning.
 - ▶ But nothing has changed.
 - ▶ And now the slope of learning is headed down.
- ▶ But our problem isn't just underinvestment.
 - ▶ It's that, for three decades, adults have been fighting bitterly about what to teach by way of civic education...
 - ▶ **...and the result is that the kids don't get taught much at all.**

What are we fighting about?

Some examples:

- ▶ **a democracy or a republic.**

- ▶ Those advocating “democracy” cared about universal inclusion, participation and popular sovereignty.
- ▶ Those advocating “republic” cared about order, structure, constitutionalism and rule of law.

- ▶ **patriotism vs. solidarity.**

- ▶ For folks on the right, patriotism is a necessary term for describing our bonds to one another and to the country.
- ▶ On the left, solidarity tends better to capture the social connection necessary to sustain the common good.

- ▶ **The past or the future**

- ▶ Some claim that our founders design is perfect and should not change
- ▶ Others point to problems we can only resolve with changes

How can we find common ground?

▶ **Educating for American Democracy Roadmap**

- ▶ Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the U.S. Education Department
- ▶ the road map is designed to achieve excellence in history and civics learning for all K-12 learners
- ▶ it bears the distinction of having been funded by both the Trump and Biden administrations.
- ▶ Six former education secretaries, three from each party, spoke up on its behalf when it was released in 2021.
- ▶ Implementation is underway in nine states, including both conservative Oklahoma and liberal Massachusetts
- ▶ they are currently advertising a grant program for pilot implementations in kindergarten through fifth grade.

How was this roadmap created?

- ▶ Democracy renovation starts from moral revolution.
 - ▶ The determination that we will work hard to compromise, instead of fight each other.
- ▶ They worked hard to find common ground. For example:
 - ▶ **a democracy or a republic?** They compromised by recognizing that they are educating for a constitutional democracy where order, structure, rule of law, popular sovereignty and universal inclusion all matter.
 - ▶ **patriotism and solidarity?** They compromised by agreeing that an excellent civic education will cultivate reflective patriotism — a conviction that honesty will sustain, nourish and lift up a commitment to the common good and to one another.

What does the roadmap recommend?

- ▶ Democracy demands reflection. That's a core element of self-government.
 - ▶ And a civics education built on questions strengthens that fundamental democratic capacity.
- ▶ They structured the entire road map around questions, putting inquiry at the center of learning.
 - ▶ The goal was to build a vehicle that would support open-ended, inquiry-based pedagogy, where the answers are not obvious in advance.

Questions such as:

- ▶ In what ways and to what degree were liberty and equality present in 1619, 1620, 1776, 1789? Where were they absent? How did the relation between them change over time?
- ▶ How do you evaluate when changes are significant enough to count as a refounding?
- ▶ How do laws and social structures change?
- ▶ How can the Constitution be changed formally and informally? (And how can your state constitution or other charter be changed?)
- ▶ What political and economic ideas have contributed to these changes?

The roadmap covers seven themes

1. Civic Participation
2. Our Changing Landscapes
3. We the People
4. A New Government and Constitution
5. Institutional and Social Transformation—A Series of Refoundings?
6. A People in the World
7. A People with Contemporary Debates and Possibilities

Teaching all this is challenging

- ▶ The roadmap uses five different methods to teach such material
 - ▶ Motivating agency, sustaining the republic
 - ▶ America's plural yet shared story
 - ▶ Simultaneously celebrating and critiquing compromise
 - ▶ Civic honesty, reflective patriotism
 - ▶ Balancing the concrete and the abstract

Motivating agency, sustaining the republic

- ▶ How can we help students understand the full context for their roles as civic participants without creating paralysis or a sense of the insignificance of their own agency in relation to the magnitude of our society, the globe, and shared challenges?
- ▶ How can we help students become engaged citizens who also sustain civil disagreement, civic friendship, and thus American constitutional democracy?
- ▶ How can we help students pursue civic action that is authentic, responsible, and informed?

America's plural yet shared story

- ▶ How can we integrate the perspectives of Americans from all different backgrounds when narrating a history of the U.S. and explicating the content of the philosophical foundations of American constitutional democracy?
- ▶ How can we do so consistently across all historical periods and conceptual content?
- ▶ How can this more plural and more complete story of our history and foundations also be a common story, the shared inheritance of all Americans?

Simultaneously celebrating and critiquing compromise

- ▶ How do we simultaneously teach the value and the danger of compromise for a free, diverse, and self-governing people?
- ▶ How do we help students make sense of the paradox that Americans continuously disagree about the ideal shape of self-government but also agree to preserve shared institutions?

Civic honesty, reflective patriotism

- ▶ How can we offer an account of U.S. constitutional democracy that is simultaneously honest about the wrongs of the past without falling into cynicism, and appreciative of the founding of the United States without tipping into adulation?

Balancing the concrete and the abstract

- ▶ How can we support instructors in helping students move between concrete, narrative, and chronological learning and thematic and abstract or conceptual learning?

Different techniques are used for different themes

	Motivating agency	plural yet shared story	celebrating and critiquing compromise	Civic honesty, reflective patriotism	Balancing the concrete and the abstract
Civic Participation	X				
Changing Landscapes		X			
We the People		X			
New Government and Constitution			X		
Institutional and Social Transformation				X	
A People in the World					X
Contemporary Debates and Possibilities					X

Driving and Guiding Questions

- ▶ Within each of the seven themes, content is broken down into history and civics driving questions that break down the content to deepen students' understanding of each theme as they get older.
 - ▶ Then, within each set of history and civics driving questions, content is further broken down into sample guiding questions that provide a glimpse into the types of inquiries that teachers can plan when using the Roadmap.
- ▶ For example, within Theme 2, "Our Changing Landscapes," a K–2 history driving question is "How do communities name and talk about places?"
 - ▶ This driving question is then broken down into sample guiding questions that help students explore their own story of place, as well as their communities and belonging.
- ▶ By 6–8th grade, a history driving question in the same theme is "How do borders change over time, and why?" This driving question is more complex
 - ▶ and the sample guiding questions within it are more content-heavy, including questions that allow students to explore how the U.S. came to have its current borders, the history of territorial expansion, and the effects of that territorial expansion on various populations.

This roadmap is not a curriculum

- ▶ The Roadmap is an advisory document, intended to support a diversity of curricula, materials, lessons, and assessments and to work across a variety of state social studies standards.
- ▶ It breaks new ground by presenting an integrated framework for what, why, and how to teach history and civics.
- ▶ As such, it is meant to inspire and inform the authors of state standards, curricula, textbooks, and other materials as well as teachers themselves to rethink and reprioritize civics and American history education.

Can the roadmap be used within our state educational standards?

- ▶ Absolutely! The Roadmap was designed as an advisory document that identifies high priority content areas for all K–12 students.
- ▶ Its seven major themes are centered around design challenges and thematic questions, which were intentionally created to be used within and amplify the efficacy of many different state standards.
- ▶ The research team conducted an extensive review of every state's social studies standards and found a strong alignment between the Roadmap themes and state standards
 - ▶ though states are diverse in terms of which themes are emphasized and when.
- ▶ What makes the Roadmap different from most state standards is its focus on inquiry, presenting content in the form of questions that should be explored over the course of a K–12 education.

How can we bring this to our community?

- ▶ Principals, district leaders, and other officials responsible for education report that adults hardly ever ask them about civics and history.
- ▶ Educational leaders rarely receive pressure or support to emphasize those disciplines.
 - ▶ In contrast, educators receive constant pressure to raise test scores and graduation rates, and to prepare students for jobs.
- ▶ Insofar as schools hear about civics, they mostly receive complaints about materials, assignments, or discussions that are perceived as controversial.
 - ▶ They rarely receive encouragement to educate students to participate in controversial issue discussions.

We need to hold our schools accountable – the right way

- ▶ When schools are held accountable for civic and history education (which happens only in some states), the main question is whether students know specific facts that are measured on standardized tests.
- ▶ Educators are rarely encouraged to teach skills for civic participation.
- ▶ For these reasons, we badly need clear, positive, constructive, and sustained voices for history and civics in all communities.
- ▶ Local leaders are well-positioned to be the leading voices.

How do we convey our concern?

- ▶ When talking to fellow members of your community, and especially those with influence over education, you may consider making these points:
 - ▶ Strengthening history and civic education is a strategy for preserving and improving America's constitutional democracy and for addressing specific deficits in our public life, such as hyper-partisanship and false information.
 - ▶ History and civic education have been neglected.
 - ▶ Despite deep disagreements in our society, the EAD Roadmap demonstrates that a consensus exists about the core topics and issues to study in history and civics.
 - ▶ That consensus includes an agreement about the deep and worthy disagreements that young Americans should understand and learn to navigate.
 - ▶ All young people deserve an excellent education in history and civics and a curriculum that connects to their own backgrounds and experiences.

What questions should we be asking?

- ▶ These are questions to consider asking school leaders in your community:
 - ▶ Have you reviewed the quality, equity, and impact of history and civic education in our schools?
 - ▶ Do you have a plan for strengthening civics and history education?
 - ▶ Do curricula align with the themes of the Roadmap?
 - ▶ Are teachers following the recommended pedagogical practices for civics and history?
 - ▶ Are teachers prepared and supported to teach these disciplines?
 - ▶ What do our youth think about history and civic education in their schools?
 - ▶ How can we—adults from outside the school—help?

Call to Action

- ▶ Start by discussing these matters with your local principal and appropriate staff
 - ▶ Do this before going to the school board
 - ▶ So the staff are not blindsided
 - ▶ Get them on your side
- ▶ Bring these matters to your local school board
 - ▶ You may know them better after recent concerns over banning books etc.
- ▶ Educate others on this matter, so they can join in calling for change.
- ▶ I'll help.
 - ▶ I can give this presentation again
 - ▶ I can join you in school board meetings and staff discussions
 - ▶ You have my slides and reference material to help you

Another, broader Call to Action

- ▶ It's difficult to reboot civic learning if we adults can't shake our addiction to hate, rage and division.
- ▶ Our addiction is one reason why the kids are tuning us out. If we want them to learn, we've got to quit fighting so much.
- ▶ We've got to create some common ground.
- ▶ It's hard to win if we try, via civics education, to connect the kids to a broken thing.
- ▶ We must fix our democracy — and ourselves — so that we're inviting them into something worth their time, energy and affection.

Equal Representation

- ▶ Enlarge the House of Representatives
- ▶ Ranked-Choice Voting
- ▶ Multi-Member House Districts
- ▶ Independent Redistricting Commissions
- ▶ Pass an Amendment to Address Money in Politics
- ▶ Campaign Finance Disclosure and Transparency
- ▶ Clean Election Laws
- ▶ 18-Year Terms for Supreme Court Justices

Empowered Voters

- ▶ More and Easier Ways to Vote
- ▶ Move Election Day to Veterans Day
- ▶ Same-Day and Universal Voting Registration
- ▶ Voting Preregistration for 16- and 17-Year-Olds
- ▶ Universal Voting
- ▶ Paid Voter Orientation
- ▶ Restore Voting Rights to Citizens with Felony Convictions

Social Media as Civic Media

- ▶ Assess Social Media's Civic Value
- ▶ Social Media as Public Media
- ▶ Public-Interest Mandate for Social Media
- ▶ Make Digital Platform Data Accessible
- ▶ Improve Data on Democratic Engagement

Culture of Shared Commitment



- ▶ Create a Universal Expectation of National Service
- ▶ Telling Our Nation's Story
- ▶ Develop Civic Faith
- ▶ Building Democratic Citizens in Higher Education
- ▶ Promote Our Common Purpose

Other areas

- ▶ Responsive Government
 - ▶ Make Public Meetings More Accessible
 - ▶ Make Congress More Responsive
 - ▶ Create Citizens' Assemblies
 - ▶ Increase Participatory Governance
- ▶ Connected Communities
 - ▶ Create a Trust for Civic Infrastructure
 - ▶ Support Civic Leaders

That's a lot to do !!

- ▶ Choose one item in one of the above areas.
- ▶ Pursue it.
- ▶ Again, I'll help.
- ▶ Ed.Spire@gmail.com

Reference material

- ▶ The roadmap, in detail - <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/>
- ▶ The National Report Card: CIVICS - <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/civics/>
- ▶ Tufts University: What the NAEP Civics Assessment Measures and How Students Perform - https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2020-01/what_naep_assessment_measures_2013.pdf
- ▶ Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century - <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose>
- ▶ WaPo articles (pay-walled):
 - ▶ Students' understanding of history and civics is worsening <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/05/03/civics-history-education-naep-democracy/>
 - ▶ We hit rock bottom on civics education. Can we turn it around? <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/05/23/civics-education-democracy-danielle-allen/>