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Accounting for Citizenship: Are our expectations for civic education too modest?

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Accounting for Citizenship: Are our expectations for civic education too modest?

Abstract

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There is no more central purpose to schools in a democracy than the preparation of citizens, yet you would hardly know it from how we hold these key public institutions accountable. Questions about the health of our civic life underlie many of today's central campaign issues, from taxes to foreign policy. What sort of democracy are we, and what do we expect every citizen to be able to do?

Comments

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Accounting for Citizenship

Are our expectations for civic education too modest?

By Michael Johaneck and John Puckett

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There is no more central purpose to schools in a democracy than the preparation of citizens, yet you would hardly know it from how we hold these key public institutions accountable. Questions about the health of our civic life underlie many of today's central campaign issues, from taxes to foreign policy. What sort of democracy are we, and what do we expect every citizen to be able to do?

If we look at schools today, we find very modest expectations for civic education outcomes: produce law-abiding, helpful neighbors who may volunteer from time to time, are basically informed of government structures, and, we hope, vote. We certainly don't expect more active participation, or any effort to work across the community to solve underlying issues. There is no such required senior project, no exit assessment tied to community-problem-solving competency. Only a handful of states even break out civics into a separate set of standards, and most of these are "not teachable" according to the historian Paul Gagnon. Most teachers pay them scant attention anyway.

What do we do now in the schools to prepare citizens—in courses, co-curricular programs, and extracurricular activities? Social studies educator Carole Hahn sketches an overview: Primary schools teach patriotic songs, national holidays, the daily salute to the flag, the role of "community helpers" like the police, and the need for rules and law. U.S. history, including the Constitution and Bill of Rights, gets introduced in the late primary grades, and at the secondary level, students take a yearlong U.S. history course and a semester in government (until the 1960s, students commonly took three semesters in civics, democracy, and government). Courses in state history, economics, law, and civics also play a role. Civic education content is weighted heavily toward the structures and functions of the U.S. government, primarily the Constitution, the three branches, and "how a bill becomes law." Textbooks and traditional didactic instruction dominate in social studies classrooms.

Suggesting its increased marginalization, schools apparently have shifted civics education partially from coursework to co-curricular programs, such as those from the National Issues Forum, Project 540, Kids Voting USA, Student Voices, Public Achievement, and Active Citizenship Today. A careful study of policies and practices in 14 school districts in seven states, reported by Kenneth Tolo, suggests that supplemental (co-curricular) programs are becoming increasingly popular. The Center for Civic Education, the most influential of co-curricular programs, has served over 26 million students since 1987, with materials distributed through a network of coordinators in 435 congressional districts and 50 states. In addition to the more "packaged" supplemental programs, approximately one-third of the nation's public schools, and one-half of public high schools, offer service-learning opportunities. Involving roughly 13 million students, service learning includes systematic reflection on the community-service experience in the form of class discussions, journals, research papers, or essays. Yet the implementation and quality of service-learning programs and classes, especially at the high school level, are highly variable.

So what does all this add up to? What sort of citizenship skills do students have when they walk out of our schools?

First, what do they *know*? Not a great deal beyond the basics. Indirect evidence provided by recent national surveys shows low levels of attentiveness to politics and public affairs among youths and young adults. Direct evidence gleaned by political scientists Richard Niemi and Michael Sanders from a variety of assessments discloses that, in the words of the two researchers, "young people lack geography skills," "most students lack basic history knowledge," "the level of financial literacy has declined," and "civics eludes U.S. students." According to Mr. Niemi and his colleague Jane Junn, while high school seniors appear "well versed" regarding individual rights, the division of powers, and some comparative knowledge of U.S. and other national governments, they seem less familiar with political parties and lobbying, and have "considerable difficulty working with civics material." On the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress civics assessment, roughly one-third of students in grades 4, 8, and 12 performed below the basic level, which measured political knowledge, intellectual and participatory skills, and civic dispositions. Thirty-five percent of 12th graders scored below basic, and only 26 percent scored at or above proficient.

Does civic knowledge matter? Quite a bit, according to political scientists Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter. Their empirical analysis shows that "informed citizens are demonstrably better citizens ... more likely to participate in politics, more likely to have meaningful, stable attitudes on issues, better able to link their interests with their attitudes, more likely to choose candidates who are consistent with their attitudes, and more likely to support democratic norms, such as extending basic civil liberties to members of unpopular groups. Differences between the best- and least-informed citizens on all of these dimensions are dramatic."

There is good news, of a sort: Young people are volunteering in their local communities at an unprecedented rate, compared with any previous generation.

Second, what do students leaving our schools *do*? Not much, and less each year. Between 1972 and 2000, according to the Center for Information on Civic Learning and Engagement, or CIRCLE, voter turnout among 18-to 25-year-olds declined by about one-third. A 1999 report of the National Association of Secretaries of State shows that only about one-third of this age group voted in the 1996 election, and less than one-fifth voted in 1998. Furthermore, as CIRCLE, recently reported, only 60 percent of those born after 1978 are even registered to vote. These young adults tend to avoid political activity of any kind, and they are highly unlikely to join any club or organization that has an explicit political agenda. They are half as likely as baby boomers and their elders to contact public officials.

There is good news, of a sort: Young people are volunteering in their local communities at an unprecedented rate, compared with any previous generation. They tutor, work in shelters and soup kitchens, and build homes for Habitat for Humanity. And according to CIRCLE, they appear roughly as involved in consumer activism as other age cohorts. Yet most of this volunteer activity is self-consciously nonpolitical, motivated by a desire to help others outside "politics."

Finally, what do young people *believe* about citizenship? Not surprisingly, American youths report that they care little about politics. Data from the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, show a clear trend of decline over a 30-year period in youth habits and dispositions deemed essential for effective democratic participation. In the fall of 2000, only 28.1 percent of entering college freshmen designated keeping up with politics as a "very important" or "essential" life goal—a record low, surpassing the previous year's all-time nadir of 28.6 percent—and only 16.4 percent reported discussing politics frequently. Cynicism toward politicians is part of this antipathy toward politics. According to the National Association of Secretaries of State, 64 percent of young people agree with the statement that "government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves," and 58 percent say, "You can't trust politicians because most are dishonest."

Most American young people seem to believe that being a "good citizen" is akin to being a "good person," helping those in need, voting, obeying the law, and acting patriotically; anything more is deemed to be uncommonly virtuous behavior or above the line of duty. (This finding is especially supported by the political socialization research of Pamela Conover and Donald Searing.)

In sum, schools are educating young people to be personally responsible, helpful neighbors, not active participants working to solve public issues.

We should not be surprised; do we expect much more of adults? Do we generally model a more active citizenship ourselves?

We should not be surprised; do we expect much more of adults? Do we generally model a more active citizenship ourselves? We seem to be getting from the schools what we're asking for and the frail civic life it would logically support.

But what if we did want to create a more vibrant civic life and train a more engaged, active citizen in the schools? What might that look like? As a start, of course, we could improve what we do now; more interactive pedagogy would apparently bump up student civic knowledge and even dispositions. Yet if we want significant change—if we're not satisfied with a "be nice and vote" citizenship—what might schools need to do?

They would need to "*do* citizenship." Our schools would need to model such active, engaged citizenship, modeling *institutionally* what problem-solving citizenship looks like. Our past, with no claim to foregone golden eras, can perhaps enhance our undernourished present imagination.

Our historical research highlights one such institution, Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem, New York City, during the 1930s and early '40s. A "community-centered school" for boys, Benjamin Franklin High suggested what a multiethnic public school might look like if it modeled what Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari call "public work" citizenship. For Franklin High, the role of public schooling served as the very foundation of a democratic republic. It would train youths to be local civic leaders through concrete community strategies, girding them with skills of social research, organizing, and political action, and in the process fostering locally based democracy and cultivating a richer citizen participation in resolving intercultural conflict.

Leonard Covello, the high school's indefatigable, visionary founding principal, and his professional allies in Italian Harlem (among them, Vito Marcantonio, a powerful political leader, and New York's mayor, Fiorello La Guardia) built a community school that included community advisory committees; federally supported adult education and recreational services; street units for social clubs, community-research bureaus, and a community library; and a school-based community newspaper. Large-scale community-organizing efforts, such as housing and health campaigns, and partnerships with umbrella activist groups were undertaken to mobilize the community's educational resources in the service of the high school, to provide a training ground for active, engaged citizenship (for young people and adults alike), and to unify East Harlem's competing ethnic groups on the common ground of a shared democratic vision.

These community activities were linked to the high school curriculum through a multicultural education program, a community social-research agenda, and various classroom projects. Every facet of Franklin High's community program focused on civic education and reinforced the high school's instructional program and community work.

Community advisory committees and social clubs, for instance, educated East Harlem parents about interethnic tolerance and cooperation at the same time that their sons were learning these lessons in the school's intercultural education program.

Franklin High modeled the interconnectivity of the three domains of civic preparation and performance. Through its social-research program, the high school was constantly improving its *knowledge*, which led it to adjust its *behaviors* to address its evolving role in engaging and reconciling civic and political issues. And through its behaviors—for example, the East Harlem housing campaign—it modeled the *dispositions* of engaged public-work citizenship.

Preparing more active citizens requires a public institutional vehicle, one to hold accountable for the development of the knowledge, behaviors, and dispositions of the future public-work citizenry. We have some history to help our imaginations, as in Benjamin Franklin High School, though with all the blemishes of the real past. Someone in some institution has to train such citizens; active citizens, like strong math students, aren't simply born that way.

"The first and primary reason for civic education," we are told in *CIVITAS: A Framework for Civic Education* (1991), "is that the health of the body politic requires the widest possible civic participation of its citizens consistent with the public good and the protection of individual rights.

"The aim of civic education is therefore not just any kind of participation by any kind of citizen," that document goes on to say, "it is the participation of *informed* and *responsible* citizens, skilled in the arts of deliberation and effective action."

That should be our goal.

Michael Johanek is the executive director of K-12 professional development at the College Board in New York City, where he teaches occasionally at New York University. John Puckett is an associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania's graduate school of education, in Philadelphia. This essay is adapted from their chapter in The Public Schools, edited by Marvin Lazerson and Susan Fuhrman (Oxford University Press, 2004).

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