

DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS: PREPARING STUDENTS FOR CIVIC PARTICIPATION

For the past five decades, courts have re-affirmed a truth declared by the nation's founders: to sustain individual freedoms and responsible self-government, society must ensure an educated citizenry. As the franchise and civic duties have expanded beyond the original white male landowners of the nation's early history and we embrace and implement a commitment to ensuring that every citizen can become a civic participant, adequate education for all is of paramount significance.

Public schools are the only institution with the core mission to meet the fundamental democratic imperative to educate all children and to provide them with the skills, knowledge, and civic values that they will need to be capable, active, and engaged citizens.

In the Spring 2003 issue of *ACCESS Quarterly*, we described one strategy for education reform—public engagement—that has also been used to rekindle civic participation in a time when traditional forms of community engagement have languished. In this issue, we briefly describe the historical background and discuss skills and civic values that public schools must impart in preparing children to become capable citizens.

In its 1954 decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the United States Supreme Court articulated in clear terms the critical role of public schools in the American democratic system, stating that

[E]ducation is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society...It is the very foundation of good citizenship.

In the years since this decision, many state courts have interpreted the education clauses in their state's constitutions as requiring that an adequate public school system must be sufficient to prepare students for civic participation and for competitive employment. The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, for example, held that the state's constitution requires a public education system that "prepare[s] [children] to participate as free citizens of a free State," with "sufficient understanding of governmental processes...[and] the issues that affect his or her community, state, and nation." Indeed, constitutions in some 40 states specifically mention the importance of civic literacy among citizens. Many constitutions—including those of California, New Hampshire, New Jersey, South Carolina, and Washington—declare preparation for democratic citizenship as a central purpose of public education.

Democratic Mission of Schools Rooted in History

The American colonists deemed education essential, and from the earliest days of the new republic, schools were expected to assist in building the new

nation by, as historian Lawrence Cremin has written, "the deliberate fashioning of a new republican character, rooted in the American soil...and committed to the promise of an American culture." In embarking on the radical experiment of creating a self-governing democracy, America's founders acknowledged the need for an educated citizenry. Thomas Jefferson observed, "[E]ducation is necessary to prepare citizens to participate effectively and intelligently in our open political system if we are to preserve freedom and independence." Benjamin Franklin urged that students "be required to read newspapers and journals of opinions on a regular basis, and that they be incited to debate...major controversies of the day." As contemporary political scientist Lorraine McDonnell explains, the "original rationale for public schooling in the United States was the preparation of citizens who could preserve individual freedom and engage in responsible self government."

The common school movement of the 19th-century resulted in major advances in achieving the democratic promise of education by promoting a uniform system of free public schools in which all children—whatever their class or ethnic background—would be educated together. As Horace Mann, the founder of the movement, described the underlying democratic ideals of a common public school system, "it seems clear that the minimum of this education [should be] sufficient to qualify each citizen for the civil and social duties he [sic] will be called to discharge" as an "inheritor of a portion of the sovereignty of this great republic."

The efforts of the common school reformers—who fought to ensure the

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permanence of their goals—resulted in the late 19th-century adoption of education provisions in the majority of state constitutions. A century later, the legal challenges to state education finance systems have largely been in the form of constitutional challenges based on these very education clauses.

The Social Science Perspective

Courts in many states in recent years have held that too many students are not receiving an education that is adequate to prepare them to function effectively as citizens in a modern democratic society. These courts join a growing consensus among political scientists, sociologists, and education policy analysts that the education level typically displayed by an adult with less than a high school education is far from sufficient for effective citizenship.

Much of the recent focus on revitalizing civic participation has been on local public schools, as they “are the only institutions with the capacity and mandate to reach...every young person in the country” and can offer students both high-level skills and opportunities to participate in other civic functions—like community service and experiential learning—that will encourage broader civic participation in their lives. There has long been widespread agreement among educators and social scientists that apart from the family and traditional religious and civic institutions, public schools are the best institutions for preparing students to tackle the many challenges of 21st-century democratic society. Student learning standards in nearly every state include specific civics-related requirements.

Analytic skills and knowledge. Students need to have the analytic skills to understand and make reasoned choices regarding the information they obtain in daily life. As voters and jurors, they must assess the significance and credibility of statements, synthesize information, and communicate effectively. Numerous studies, however, demonstrate that a large portion of American adults lack the basic critical thinking skills needed to make well-informed choices when they perform these civic roles.

Civic participation also requires substantive knowledge of how government operates at all levels. “Civics” may be learned in a variety of courses, including history, social studies, economics, and government. In a modern, technologically oriented society, experts also agree that knowledge in a variety of other areas, including science, mathematics, and computer technology, is also necessary for effective citizenship.

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NCLB Report Finds Support and Potential Problems

The Center on Education Policy (CEP) has released its preliminary findings from fifteen case studies “Implementing the No Child Left Behind Act: A First Look Inside 15 School Districts in 2002-03.” The CEP reports that although school district officials were generally supportive of the stated goals of NCLB, some believe the federal law proficiency goal of 100% by 2014 is unrealistic. School districts are also facing major complications implementing NCLB, the report says, such as: state budget cuts; concerns about the test requirements for English Language Learners and students with disabilities; poor guidance from the federal government; a desire for additional professional development; and additional resources required to provide transfers and tutoring. Researchers found that rural and urban districts face additional problems: attracting and retaining “highly-qualified” teachers; limited school choice; and more student subgroups required to meet annual yearly progress goals.

CEP plans to complete 30 case studies by the end of 2003 and issue a more comprehensive report in January 2004.

Costing-Out Studies Call For Increased Funding

Recent costing-out studies in Arkansas and Missouri have found that large funding increases are necessary to enable students in each state to meet the state’s performance standards. As reported by the Missouri School Boards Association, Carter Ward, Chair of the Missouri Education Coalition for Adequacy (MECA), explained that such studies change “discussions about school finance from how much money the state has and how to distribute it to the levels of achievement we are expecting from our children [and] the resources required to attain that level of achievement.” Both studies used the professional judgment methodology, along with the effective strategies method in Arkansas, and the successful schools method in Missouri.

The Joint Committee on Educational Adequacy, which released the Arkansas study in September, is responding to the state supreme court’s declaration last year that the state education finance system was unconstitutional. In Missouri, MECA hopes that a joint legislative committee on school finance will use its costing-out study in developing a new state education finance system.

States Cut Spending and Raise Taxes

After difficult legislative sessions that often stretched into the summer, states adopted budgets for their 2003-2004 fiscal year, which began July 1. A report from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) summarizes the spending cuts and tax increases enacted to address what for most states was the largest budget deficit in decades.

For the 42 states covered by the report, reaching resolution to budget impasses meant major spending cuts (31 states), including cuts to K-12 education (11 states), reductions in state workforces, and raising taxes (17 states). Eight states were missing from the report, including California, which subsequently adopted a budget cutting \$288 million from K-12 education.

The advocacy community is concerned about funding cuts in education, generally, and concerned that cuts from state sources may result in more severe inequities among school districts as local property taxes become a greater percentage of total school revenue.

ADVOCACY

Illinois: Advocacy Efforts Heating Up this Winter

Education advocates in Illinois are gearing up for a major campaign this year in hopes of reforming an education funding system that, according to Better Funding for Better Schools, ranks 48th of the 50 states in school funding adequacy, and 49th of the 50 states in funding equity. Groups of advocates are working together to form a coalition to ensure that needed reforms are put into place in the next legislative session, which begins in January. These efforts follow on the heels of successes this past year, which resulted in the passage of a \$250 per-pupil increase in the education funding foundation level, increasing investments in early childhood education, and providing for a more accurate way to count children from high poverty homes who are eligible for additional school aid.

Washington DC: Advocates Fight to Stop School Vouchers

Education advocates in our nation's capitol celebrated a temporary victory as the U.S. Senate delayed a vote on a controversial program of federally funded school vouchers in the District of Columbia.

The Coalition for Accountable Public Schools and other advocacy organizations fighting to defeat the D.C. voucher plan continue to argue that federally funded vouchers would support schools that are not held to the same levels of accountability as public schools, currently forced to adhere to the "No Child Left Behind" Act, and that

federal funds should instead be used to improve the D.C. public schools.

The \$13 million dollar plan, currently stalled in the U.S. Senate, offers \$7,500 a year for less than 3% of the District's students to attend private schools. Advocates argue that President Bush and Congress are using the District to showcase their support for vouchers on a national scale.

Advocates Strengthen Schools, Communities, and Democracy

Public school activists play a vital role in building strong and effective constituencies, according to "Vital Voices: Building Constituencies for Public School Reform," a report recently released by the Academy for Educational Development and the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. The authors conclude that such efforts help change "how decisions are made, whose voices are heard, and whose interests are considered" and that, "by strengthening the public's role in public education, constituency builders and constituents are strengthening schools, communities, and the practice of democracy."

The report combines the knowledge, experience, and effective strategies of seven constituency-building organizations: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, Interfaith Education Fund, National Coalition of Advocates for Students, Parents for Public Schools, Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, Public Education Network, and the 21st Century School Fund.

LITIGATION

South Carolina: Witnesses Decry School Conditions

For seven weeks, rural school district plaintiffs in the *Abbeville v. State* school funding adequacy case presented evidence in support of their allegations that the state's school funding system denies their mostly minority and low-income students an equal educational opportunity.

Witnesses from the school districts, officials from the state Department of Education, and state and national education experts have testified about extremely low student graduation rates in these districts and the consequences for children, who, according to Sandra Lindsay, the state's deputy superintendent in charge of curriculum and testing, "are not going to have the skills to enter the work force and be productive citizens."

Fact witnesses such as school district superintendents, curriculum directors, and principals described devastating teacher turnover due to low salaries and meager benefits, buildings in shoddy condition, lack of equipment, overcrowding, and growing numbers of ELL students.

The trial is in recess until January 5, 2004.

Kansas: Trial Ending in Adequacy Case

Testimony in *Montoy v. State*, the Kansas school funding adequacy case, concluded in October, and closing arguments are scheduled for late November. Among other evidence, plaintiffs presented a Kansas costing-out analysis and testimony on programs and strategies that can be effective in helping struggling students. Given the rigor of the Kansas educational standards and the 100% proficiency requirement of the new federal NCLB law, plaintiffs argued that the state must provide a commensurate opportunity and that low-income, minority and ELL students require more funding to support needed programs. Attorneys for plaintiffs and the state expect an appeal to the Kansas Supreme Court.

Florida and Connecticut: Cases Withdrawn

Plaintiffs in Connecticut and Florida who had filed promising school funding adequacy cases a few years ago recently withdrew their suits without prejudice. Despite strong evidence in their favor, plaintiffs found these cases complex and expensive to mount.

For more information about these and other important cases, see the *ACCESS* litigation summaries and news, by state, at: www.schoolfunding.info/statesmain.html

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Appreciation of core civic values. Most people agree that Americans share a certain set of core democratic values, described by an Education Commission of the States task force as vital “civic attitudes” including belief in “liberty, equality, civil and humanitarian rights, personal responsibility...and personal integrity,” as well as respect for diversity.

Researchers contend that public schools are in an excellent position at this time to build on the positive trends in youth civic engagement that have emerged recently. Despite despairingly low voting rates among the nation’s youngest adults, young people’s participation in a variety of other civic functions—especially community service—is quite high. Equally remarkable, according to a recent report from the Carnegie Corporation, young people today are significantly more tolerant than their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, and are much more likely to value diversity, socialize with people from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, and to support rights for minorities, gays and lesbians, and immigrants.

A vibrant democracy depends on capable, committed citizens, and American democracy has always been sustained by the willingness and ability of citizens to engage in political action, to make the government responsive to their needs and aspirations, and to participate in their communities. Our collective efforts to improve public education will have a long-lasting impact on the health of our free society.

The Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc. and The League of Women Voters of New York State have issued a policy report, Today’s Students, Tomorrow’s Citizens: Preparing Students for Civic Engagement, which describes in more detail the history and policy research on civic participation and public schools, available at

www.cfequity.org/civengreport.pdf.



ACCESS News

New! Costing-Out Website Section

A new Costing-Out section on the ACCESS website provides comprehensive information on studies undertaken in several states to determine the amount of money actually needed to provide children the opportunity to meet applicable state education standards. To view the ACCESS Costing-Out Primer, read fact sheets on a variety of studies undertaken, or check the status of a costing-out study in your state, please visit

www.schoolfunding.info/research/costout.htm.

To subscribe to the ACCESS listserv, send your name and e-mail address to

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