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Restoring Civic Purpose in Schools

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Ask most social critics what ails America, and "low-performing public schools" will be high on the list. Pundits offer little supporting data (as if the pronouncement were self-evident), but when they do, they usually refer to test scores, not higher-level thinking skills, creativity, and resourcefulness—the tangible abilities that best serve a democratic society and market economy. K-12 schools, in effect, have become a scapegoat for a society incapable of or unwilling to face deeper problems associated with our education system.

This count-the-widget evaluation of the public schools has undermined the American education system. America's greatness is reflected in our ability to innovate, analyze complex problems, ask cogent questions, assemble and evaluate critical data, and seek creative solutions, not recall factual information. These are the skills of a democratic citizen, and failure to teach them imperils the future of the republic.

This decline of our education system began in earnest with the 1980s when corporate crusaders and other critics, supported by willing federal and state leaders, targeted public schools—an institution that plays a significant role in creating informed citizens, expanding the middle class, and thus expanding the economy. Schools do this by serving all students, regardless of cultural background and academic ability.

Instead of advocating for their students, educators have bowed to the pressure of mandated testing in narrow areas of study and centered the curriculum on workforce preparation. This has led to an over-allocation of resources to reading and mathematics at the expense of social studies, science, literature, music, and the arts, particularly in the elementary grades. The result, unintended or not, has been to erode the civic education, cultural knowledge, and critical thinking so necessary for a democratic republic to survive. As retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor explained, "It is absolutely essential that we make sure that civics is not squeezed out of our classrooms. ... It is about who we are as citizens."

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The impact on our attitudes from this curriculum neglect is predictable. When asked in a recent Gallup-Lumina Foundation for Education **survey**, as reported in *The Wall Street Journal*, what is the main purpose for schooling beyond high school, more than half (53 percent) of the adult respondents (age 18 and older) said "to earn more money," and another third (33 percent) answered "to get a good job." Other reasons, such as "to learn more about the world" (3 percent) and "to learn to think critically" (1 percent), hardly registered. Needless to say, the two dominant responses are interrelated, suggesting that the primary function of schools is to improve students' economic fortunes and the nation's economic productivity. It also signals that America is not so much a culture as it is an economy.

"We the People" of this republic, however, are more than simple workers spending our earnings in some crass commercial society. We are citizens who must be prepared to act as such. Our republic is based on the foundation of liberally educated citizens. Without this, individualistic goals of employment and consumption ring hollow, and the democratic fabric of society unravels. As a nation, we have begun to sever education from its civic and primary purpose.

What's missing? For starters, to be a citizen of the United States, among other things, requires developing a democratic mind—the intellectual ability to entertain contradictory or opposing ideas, hold tentative

judgments, and make decisions based on facts supported by evidence. None of us is born with this capability. It must be learned, if not from the family, then in school.

—Steve Braden

This disposition, also referred to as "abstract thinking," is critical to the study of many subjects, but particularly important when studying history, civics, and economics. Central to a reinvigorated social studies curriculum is the ability to conduct intelligent arguments and productive, sustained debate.

If America is an idea sustained through argument and based on thoughtful debate, then what is the debate about? To dispel the negative, it is not to establish absolute rights and wrongs, winners and losers. Rather, it is a dialogue on understanding the conflict between important American values. Democracy requires people paying attention to issues and responding in a discriminating, critical way.

Since the time of the American Revolution, citizens have been engaged in arguments about shared values: How do we obtain the most individual *freedom* and how is freedom limited by our quest for *equality*? We believe in the right to pursue *private wealth* and at the same time understand we must invest in the public infrastructure, or *common wealth*, of our community, our state, and the nation. We are a people with an abiding reverence for the *law* and at the same time we realize that law is effective only when it reflects our best *ethics*. Many American heroes have broken laws. Courts have overturned existing statutes, appealing to ethics to advance the cause of liberty and justice.

Our ethnic, cultural, religious, and economic *diversity* is cause for celebration, but it must be balanced by the *unity* that allows us to work effectively in our families, schools, communities, and nation. Although consensus has been a persistent struggle, one of this nation's finest achievements has been a stable political culture made up of different languages, religious traditions, and races. All public issues entail conflict and compromise that can be resolved effectively when seen through the lens of these tensions.

Democratic civic dialogue, in the social studies and elsewhere, is dependent upon "knowing" that is based on the "conviction that truth, objectivity, science, fact, and reason are fundamentally different from opinion, subjectivity, prejudice, feeling, and irrationality," as **explained by** political theorist Benjamin R. Barber. Many arguments today, in classrooms, in coffee shops, on talk radio, or in the halls of Congress weave between opinions and facts, feeling and reason, subjectivity and objectivity. Civility often declines into acrimony, and people stick obstinately to a position without bothering to empirically and logically defend it. With this, democracy suffers.

There is a better way, and productive debate is central to breathing vibrancy into civic life. Our nation's very history, from the founding documents up to today, provides ample testimony to the centrality of these shared ideals. It matters little if a person is Republican or Democrat; liberal or conservative; capitalist or socialist; religious or nonbeliever; white, black, brown, or yellow. Yes, we struggle—sometimes bitterly—about how to strike the right balance between these ideals. Yet, the path to compromise on policy issues is achieved by reconciling value tensions through civil dialogue. Our students should be primed to engage in these discussions.

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