

EDUCATION WEEK

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Creating Informed Citizens Should Be Education's Goal

By Arnold Packer

In his final State of the Union speech earlier this year, President Barack Obama told the audience: "[F]ix our politics ... uphold your duties as a citizen ... vote ... speak out." Halt our "downward spiral," former Senate majority leaders Trent Lott and Tom Daschle **urge in a recent Washington Post op-ed**. "Democracy requires active engagement, mindfulness, and tolerance," they write. Active engagement surely includes voting, even in nonpresidential years and on local matters. It may include serving in public roles. It also includes staying abreast of local, national, and international issues and, perhaps, communicating with elected officials.

Many observers, here and abroad, warn that the United States cannot meet its domestic and international responsibilities unless more Americans are better informed on the issues and exercise their right to vote.

Preparing students for today's entry-level careers and freshman-level college courses is among the goals of the new Every Student Succeeds Act. The role education needs to play in making for a functioning democracy, one Thomas Jefferson saw as crucial, is not mentioned. The Common Core State Standards appear silent on the skills and knowledge needed to have informed views on issues such as economic policy, global warming, the clash of civilizations, globalization, immigration, technological change, and the risks of terrorism.

Some would argue that preparing for college—with years of language, math, and social studies—would equip students to understand these and other national concerns. In some high schools, they would be right. But because citizenship is not explicit in the standards for reading and math—the subjects covered by the common core—no one knows how many schools succeed in preparing students to fulfill the duties the president mentioned.

Standards are likely to evolve as ESSA is implemented and states assume more control. As that evolution happens, it would be well if those who make education policy at the federal, state, and local levels keep in mind what participatory democracy in the 21st century requires.

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For example, shouldn't all high school graduates understand how scientists find and challenge "truth"? One need not be a scientist to think clearly about climate change and energy policy. Voters should know enough, in the president's words, to "speak out" intelligently about nuclear weapons and genetic modification. This knowledge is not the same as the content of the typical chemistry test. The Next Generation Science Standards, for instance, provide an opportunity to enhance students' knowledge of current issues.

Math standards should also be modified to support citizenship. The 8th grade common-core standards include **the ever-useful**: "Use square root and cube

root symbols to represent solutions to equations of the form $x^2 = p$ and $x^3 = p$, where p is a positive rational number." Although the math standards include statistics, these concepts are rarely applied to important public facts or choices, such as understanding income inequality or alternative plans for tax reform. Today's standards fail to promote the financial literacy needed to make sense of student debt, let alone banking reform.

Adding the goal of informed citizens would also affect other curricula. Many high school—and college—graduates know little of the history or economics of the Great Depression or the Great Recession. Such knowledge would help them evaluate the 2016 presidential candidates' economic proposals in a way that details of the French and Indian War will not.

Employers and managers have been surveyed countless times in the last 25 years about what work requires of schools. They consistently respond that communication—oral and written—collaboration, critical thinking, planning, creativity, and other "soft" skills play a key role in workplace success.

These skills closely match those required for citizenship, and many schools are already using project-based learning to teach these soft skills. Students in High Tech High School here in San Diego, for example, have studied historical movements that resulted in social and political change. They had to answer the question: What would you fight for? In this and other well-designed projects, students use and engage with interesting visual representations of numerical data.

When projects are successful, students learn that productive collaboration takes more than just being assigned to a team. But students need to be explicitly taught to work well together. There are ample opportunities for students to explore how astronauts working on the International Space Station for months—or even years—at a time work together, or how legislators working on a bipartisan bill collaborate. Students who are invited to role-play in these or other contexts can learn how to solve complex problems, while studying the details of important events.

High school graduates should have a sense of how governments at all levels set budgets; they should be introduced to time-management techniques used for projects in the public or private



—André da Loba for Education Week

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sector. Knowing how to manage money and time is crucial to becoming an engaged citizen and a successful employee, and to handling other adult responsibilities. Behaviors such as tolerance and integrity are important in politics and employment. History courses, by illuminating what this has meant to real people in concrete situations, can address these qualities.

As states determine standards for high school graduation, they should pay attention to what those who have been working in public policy think is necessary to have an informed electorate. Sens. Lott and Daschle, as well as President Obama, have valuable insights. So do those in the media who target their writing to meet their average reader's knowledge base. A national commission that included previously elected public officials, media, and college faculty could provide useful input as governors and state superintendents ponder what their high school graduates should know and be able to do.

"[F]ocus on our future," President Obama admonished the country, "change the system." Youngsters who fulfill their duties as citizens are essential to that task.

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