

**Educating for Democracy Conference
Cantigny Park, Illinois February 9, 2009
By Ted McConnell**

Thank you McCormick Foundation and Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago for bringing us together today.

How wonderful it is to be here on the eve of the Bicentennial of the birth of that great son of Illinois, our 16th President. Here is what *he* had to say about our mutual civic responsibility.

“When the people neglect (abjure) their civic responsibilities, they have ceased to be their own rulers.”

In 1832 here is what Abraham Lincoln had to say about the need to learn about our institutions of governance: “Upon the subject of education, not presuming to dictate any plan or system respecting it, I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in. That every man may receive at least, a moderate education, and thereby be enabled to read the histories of his own and other countries, by which he may duly appreciate the value of our free institutions.” Mr. Lincoln is most assuredly talking about the vital importance of civic learning to the health of our democracy.

Educating All Students for Democracy -- and Life

A healthy democracy requires the informed and active participation of its citizens. For self-governance to work, citizens must understand and actively engage in the process. Gaining civic knowledge and skills doesn't just happen. As my Friend Justice Sandra Day O'Connor says “It's not passed along in the gene pool.” People must be taught – how their government and the political system work as well as their rights, role, and responsibilities. Since the earliest days of our republic, our schools have had the twin missions of educating students for the workplace and for active and informed citizenship; the latter mission is the civic mission of our schools.

Education for Democracy in Decline

School remains the one universal experience all citizens have to gain the knowledge and skills for informed and engaged citizenship. Unfortunately, far too few students today are receiving a well rounded civic learning experience, which includes opportunities to learn in the classroom and through service learning and experiential learning opportunities that makes civic learning more interesting and engaging.

The results of the most recent national measurement of how our schools are meeting their civic mission, the 2006 National Assessment of Educational Progress on Civics, were shocking. Less than 25% of students in the sample could demonstrate a proficient understanding of this area so vital for our nation's future! This lack of basic civic knowledge imperils our democracy by effectively disempowering its citizens. With the decline in civic education over the past decades, it is no surprise that citizens are becoming cynical and failing to vote, read newspapers, and engage in their communities.

Here are some more sad statistics from surveys about our fellow citizens' lack of civic knowledge. Only one-third of Americans can name the three branches of government. Two-thirds know at least one of the judges on *American Idol*. Less than one in one hundred can identify the Chief Justice of the United States. And the average American is more likely to know the five members of the Simpson cartoon family than the five freedoms of the First Amendment.

There are a variety of reasons for the decline in civic learning. The most notable are a lack of adequate standards and assessments in civic learning, a lack of adequate curricular requirements, a lack of professional development opportunities for teachers, a lack of implementation of proven teaching strategies that include service and experiential learning and discussion of current events, and a lack of inclusion in student testing which emphasize a few subjects over all others.

Arguably, the greatest challenge facing effective civic learning today is THAT NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND DOES NOT INCLUDE CIVIC LEARNING CIVIC LEARNING IS THE REASON OUR FOUNDING FATHERS SUPPORTED THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS. AN EDUCATED CITIZENRY IS ESSENTIAL TO DEMOCRACY—OUR DEMOCRACY. NCLB HAS REQUIRED THAT STATES BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR WHAT STUDENTS ARE LEARNING SO THAT STUDENTS ARE NOW TESTED FREQUENTLY AND ALWAYS IN READING AND MATH Only 22 states include the social studies in their assessment programs and the trite old adage “If it isn’t tested, it isn’t taught” looms as the reality in most schools today. HOWEVER JUST BECAUSE SOCIAL STUDIES IS TESTED IN THOSE STATES IT DOESN’T MEAN THAT AUTHENTIC CIVIC INSTRUCTION OR LEARNING HAS IMPROVED. WHEN OUR PRESIDENT WAS YOUR STATE LEGISLATOR, HE TOLD A STORY ABOUT A FARMER TO ILLUSTRATE HIS CONCERN OVER AN EMPHASIS ON ASSESSMENT. THE FARMER SUPPOSEDLY TOLD STATE SENATOR OBAMA THAT IF A FARMER WANTED TO RAISE A HEALTHY COW, HE DIDN’T JUST WEIGH HIM. SO HOW CAN ILLINOIS SEND A SIGNAL ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SUBJECT IN THIS ERA OF STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENT-BASED EDUCATION.?

Until the 1960s, the typical U.S. student was offered courses in government and civics. She or he learned about citizenship in a democracy and the rights and responsibilities that come with it. Today, formal civics has all but vanished from the curriculum. AND WHEN US GOVERNMENT AND US HISTORY ARE TAUGHT THEY ARE OFTEN MORE ABOUT TRANSMITTING a body of facts. Important stuff to know, but hardly enough to develop a life long commitment to informed, engaged citizenship.

This decline in civic learning in our schools has combined with events over the past four decades (Vietnam, Watergate, political scandals and the like) to cause a general feeling of distrust and alienation from our institutions of governance at all levels, particularly among our younger citizens. Just take a look at the current approval ratings of our institutions of governance for evidence of this fact. Too many of our fellow citizens don’t believe they can influence civic affairs, so why bother, why care.

Yet, we see increasing evidence that the millennial generation, those aged 15-30, have a tremendous desire to give back to their community. They volunteer at record rates for social and charitable causes they believe in. They are even finally beginning to vote in higher numbers. An estimated 23 million young Americans under the age of 30 voted in the 2008 presidential election, 3.4 million more voters as compared to the 2004 election. The estimated youth voter turnout rose to between 52 percent and 53 percent. Frankly, just a little over half of this age group voting is nothing to write home about and shows a continuing problem with youth civic engagement especially when you consider all of the attention the 2008 election received and the amount of resources thrown at the youth vote.

Voting and even volunteering at your local soup kitchen is not enough. It's a good start, but it's just the tip of being an informed and engaged citizen. The same members of the millennial generation have been victims of the decrease in effective civic learning in our schools and exhibit the highest rates of disillusionment and distrust of governing institutions. They volunteer at high rates while having the attitude that government, the law, politics, its all just corrupt, I don't want to work in that corrupt system to bring about positive change; besides a regular 'Joe' or 'Joanna' can't make a difference so why try?

There is another major problem with how we approach civic learning far too often today. It's a serious problem with how we use what little time is left in the school day to teach civic learning. Far too often the remaining civics and history curriculum is based on textbooks, worksheets and vocabulary which the 21st Century Students does not find is relevant to them. We are using teaching strategies developed in the early to mid 20th Century to impart 21st Century Citizenship skills. Put another way, far too often the way we teach history, civics, the law bores the stuffing out of students. It doesn't have to. There has been a revolution in new highly relevant teaching strategies and methods that are proven to help students develop the skills and the disposition for informed, engaged citizenship.

Folks, there is a reason the United States Military uses video gaming technology and simulations to teach our gallant, brave Service Members – its because it works. Just like the use of 21st Century teaching methods work for the military, so can these new 21st Century teaching methods, like those employed in the programs of the Constitutional Rights Foundation and other outstanding civic education programmers, work to successfully provide high quality civic learning for all students.

Restoring the Civic Mission of Schools – The Report

BE PREPARED TO JUST REFERENCE THIS IF IT HAS ALREADY BEEN MENTIONED SEVERAL TIMES

Recognizing the danger to our nation of a continued decline of civic learning in our schools, over forty national education, civic engagement, business, and professional organizations participated in a landmark study entitled *The Civic Mission of Schools Report*, published in 2003. This Report, published by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, calls on policymakers and educators to strengthen civic learning through an integrated approach that includes six elements used at every grade level PK-20:

- (1) classroom instruction in government, history, law and democracy;
- (2) guided discussion of current events;
- (3) community and service learning programs linked to the curriculum;
- (4) extracurricular activities in the school and community;
- (5) simulations of democratic processes and procedures, and
- (6) student participation in school governance.

The Report and its recommendations may be found at: www.civicmissionofschools.org.

The Civic Mission of Schools Campaign

To reverse the decline in civic learning the signatories to the *Civic Mission of Schools Report*, joined by prominent organizations and citizens from many walks of life, have launched a campaign to restore the civic mission of schools. The Campaign has a simple and straightforward goal – to strengthen every school’s capacity, commitment and performance in educating America’s young people as citizens of our democracy. The Campaign is focused on producing real change in education policies and, most importantly, in changing classroom practice and student civic dispositions by raising awareness about the importance of civic learning, promoting policies that strengthen civic learning at the federal, state and school district levels, distributing high quality civic materials, assessment tools and research and providing assistance to a network of campaigns in each state.

The Campaign is hosted by the National Council for the Social Studies. Retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, former Governor Roy Romer and former Congressman Lee Hamilton co-chair our National Advisory Committee of prominent citizens who guide the Campaign’s work and promote the importance of civic learning.

The Campaign has affiliate campaign organizations in all fifty states and the District of Columbia. Here in Illinois, Carolyn Pereria and the Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago do an incredible job leading the Illinois Campaign. These state campaigns have been very active in passing legislation, establishing official state commissions on civic education and working with policymakers to strengthen civic learning policies.

WE BORROWED STUFF FROM CALIFORNIA AND NORTH CAROLINA. HOW ABOUT JUST RATTLING OFF SOME THINGS THAT OTHER STATES HAVE DONE RECENTLY?

Campaign Resources

On the Campaign website, www.civicmissionofschools.org, you will find our Civic Learning Online database of innovative examples of curricular programs, practice examples and professional development opportunities that illustrate each of the *Civic Mission of Schools Report*’s six promising practices. You will also find school-wide and district programs, examples and strategies for using civic learning integrated into reading, math, science and other curricular areas as well as tools for civic learning assessment. The examples and programs contained in the

Civic Learning On-Line database are ready for school use and for policymakers who want to see what high quality civic learning looks like.

In addition to Civic Learning Online, www.civicmissionofschools.org also provides contact information for each affiliated state campaign, the latest research and news on civic learning, examples of effective civic learning policies, and toolkits for schools, policymakers and civic learning advocates.

The Campaign is taking the lead in advocating for strengthening civic learning policy at the Federal level, including the provisions of the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act scheduled for reauthorization over the next year and for more frequent and meaningful national assessments in the social studies.

Illinois

Now what about Illinois? During this Conference you have been exposed to many outstanding civic learning programs. You have heard from the top national experts and what the most recent research says. You have or will have an opportunity to see what high quality civic learning looks like in the classroom.

How to translate all of these great programs and concepts into the reality of every Illinois Schoolchild's civic learning experience?

You have tremendous resources right here to help you. The Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago, the Public Education Section of the American Bar Association and the McCormick Foundation just to name a few.

It's up to you here in Illinois to develop a blueprint for reversing the decline in civic learning in your schools and to ensure the latest and best teaching methodologies are used.

I suggest you must engage with policymakers, local school board members, local superintendents, the state School Board, the State Superintendent, the Legislature, the Governor and the Judiciary. You must remind all of these public officials of the central place civic learning plays in maintaining the health of our democracy. When reminded they usually get it. You must show them the deficiencies of the State's current approach in this essential part of education and persuade them to improve. You must show them what a high quality civic learning can look like for every Illinois School Child and work with them to make that possible. In short, we all must practice what we teach in being effectively engaged citizens. The Illinois Civic Blueprint you will create will help do just that.

I began my little chin wag with you by quoting a President who hailed from Illinois. I would like to close by quoting the words of the latest President hailing from Illinois. Here are words President Obama spoke on January 20th:

“Our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends — hard work and honesty, courage and fair play,

tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism — these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history. What is demanded then is a return to these truths. What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility — a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task.

This is the price and the promise of citizenship.”

Let us join together to ensure every Illinois Schoolchild receives the civic learning necessary to have the chance to be another Lincoln, another Obama, or most importantly a thoughtful, informed engaged citizen of this great State and Nation.