

## **Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools**

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Benjamin Franklin, when prompted by a passerby upon exiting the Constitutional Convention of 1787, issued a challenge to citizens then and now when asked what the 55 assembled delegates had created: he replied, “a republic, if you can keep it.” Republican democracy in America has persevered throughout the intervening 224 years, as suffrage and civil rights have been extended to previously excluded groups, and democratic participation has spanned demographic divides. The expansion of rights carries reciprocal responsibilities and, unfortunately, Americans have lagged on this front, especially in recent years. Effective democratic participation demands a knowledgeable citizenry, but also one with the requisite skills and dispositions to fulfill Franklin’s challenge.

America’s first public schools were founded for the purpose of preparing young people for their role as citizens in this democratic republic. Unfortunately, today’s schools have largely abandoned this mission, casting aside civic learning in the wake of a national standardized testing obsession and unprecedented fiscal constraints. While taking seriously their charge to ready high school graduates for college and career, schools have forgotten the one role we will all be asked to perform, that of citizen. Fortunately, the [Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools](#) has led the charge to rekindle schools’ central purpose, and last month released a provocative new report, [Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools](#) (Annenberg Foundation, 2011), to further this critical cause.

The report begins with a bi-partisan case statement written by four long-time participants in the political arena, Michael Gerson, Mike McCurry, Les Francis, and John Bridgeland. Collectively, they frame our current political challenges alongside a relatively disengaged citizenry, arguing that schools should play a central role in educating young people for their pivotal position as citizens in our American democracy.

Civic learning in schools, the report argues, carries benefits beyond enhanced civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. It helps promote civic equality, narrowing the “democratic divide” that characterizes contemporary political participation, where white, male, college-educated, and higher-income individuals are more likely to perform democratic duties than their less privileged peers. Civic learning also helps build 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills like knowledge of economic and political processes, media literacy, and the ability to work cooperatively with others. Ancillary benefits of schoolwide commitments to civic learning include improved school climate and lower drop-out rates.

The original [Civic Mission in Schools report](#) (Carnegie Foundation, 2003) detailed six “promising approaches” to civic learning. Reflective of the interceding eight years of intensive

research, *Guardian of Democracy* describes these methodologies more definitely as “proven practices” and provides empirical evidence of their effectiveness. The practices include:

- Providing direct instruction of government, history, law, and democracy
- Facilitating discussions of current events and controversial issues
- Tying community service to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction
- Making extracurricular opportunities available for youth to engage with their schools and communities
- Encouraging student participation in school governance
- And integrating simulations of democratic procedures and practices into both classroom practice and extracurricular opportunities.

Tied to these proven practices, the report also addresses the positives and negatives of assessing civic learning, including performance tests and portfolios, along with the centrality of content-focused, ongoing teacher professional development that actively engages educators in the translation of content and principles into classroom practice and is linked to curriculum and standards.

*Guardian of Democracy* concludes with civic learning policy recommendations for various constituencies, including schools and administrators, state and federal policymakers, postsecondary institutions and scholars, parents, the media, and all citizens. Perhaps those directed at the latter group are most in line with Franklin’s aforementioned parting shot. The report recommends that “All citizens...demand that the schools they help support...provide effective civic learning for all students,” and “...volunteer time and resources” to forward this end.

“We the People” are the guardians of democracy, and schools are where democratic knowledge, skills, and dispositions should be incubated.