

No Child Left Thinking Democracy **At-Risk** in American Schools

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Imagine you were visiting a school in a totalitarian nation governed by a one-ruling-party dictatorship. Would the educational experiences be markedly different from the ones experienced by your children in your local school? I do not ask this question facetiously. It seems plausible, for example, that a good curriculum used to teach multiplication, fractions, or a foreign language — perhaps with some adjustments for cultural relevance and suitability — would serve equally well in most parts of the world. But if you stepped into a school and asked to observe a lesson related to the country's political ideals about governance or civic or political participation, would you be able to tell whether you were in a totalitarian nation or a democratic one?

BY JOEL WESTHEIMER • ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT BAKAL



Most of us would like to believe that we could. While schools in North Korea, China, or Iran might be teaching students blind allegiance to their nation's leaders and deference to the social and political policies those leaders enact, we would expect that schools in the United States would teach students the skills and dispositions needed to evaluate for themselves the benefits and drawbacks of particular policies and government practices. We would not be surprised to learn, for example, that North Korean children are taught to abide by an "official history" handed down by President Kim Jong-il and his single-party authoritarian regime. A school curriculum that teaches one unified, unquestioned version of "truth" is one of the hallmarks of totalitarian societies. Democratic citizens, on the other hand, are committed to the people, principles, and values that underlie democracy — such as political participation, free speech, civil liberties, and social equality. Schools might develop these commitments through lessons in the skills of analysis and exploration, free political expression, and independent thought. And U.S. schools often support democratic dispositions in just such ways.

But teaching and learning — in both public and independent schools — do not always conform to democratic goals and ideals. Tensions abound, and, in recent years, some of the very foundations of democratic engagement, such as independent thinking and critical analysis, have come under attack. If being a good democratic citizen requires thinking critically about important social assumptions, then that foundation of citizenship is at odds with recent trends in education policy.

In the past five years, hundreds of schools, districts, states,

In many states, virtually every subject area is under scrutiny for any deviation from one single narrative, based on knowable, testable, and purportedly uncontested facts.

and even the federal government have enacted policies that seek to restrict critical analysis of historical and contemporary events in the school curriculum. In June 2006, the Florida Education Omnibus Bill included language specifying that, "The history of the United States shall be taught as genuine history.... American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable."

Other provisions in the bill mandate "flag education, including proper flag display" and "flag salute" and require educators to stress the importance of free enterprise to the U.S. economy. But what some find most alarming is the stated goal of the bill's designers: "to raise historical literacy" with a particular emphasis on the "teaching of facts." For example, the bill requires that only facts be taught when it comes to discussing the "period

of discovery" and the early colonies. Florida is perhaps the first state to ban historical interpretation in public schools, thereby effectively outlawing critical thinking.

Of course, historians almost universally regard history as exactly a matter of interpretation; indeed, the competing interpretations are what make history so interesting. Historians and educators alike have widely derided the mandated adherence to an "official story" embodied in the Florida legislation, but the impact of such mandates should not be underestimated — especially because Florida is not alone.

The drive to engage schools in reinforcing a unilateral understanding of U.S. history and policy shows no sign of abating. More and more, teachers and students are seeing their schools or entire districts and states limiting their ability to explore multiple perspectives to controversial issues. Students and a drama teacher in a Connecticut high school spent months researching, writing, and rehearsing a play they wrote about the Iraq war titled "Voices in Conflict." Before the scheduled performance, the school administration banned the play on the basis that it was "inappropriate." (The students went on to perform the play in the spring of 2007 on an off-Broadway stage in New York to impressive critical review). In Colorado, a student was suspended for posting flyers advertising a student protest. In Bay City, Michigan, wearing a T-shirt with an anti-war quotation by Albert Einstein was grounds for suspension.

The federal role in discouraging critical analysis of historical events has been significant as well. In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education announced a new set of history and civic education

initiatives that the President said was designed to teach our children that "America is a force for good in the world, bringing hope and freedom to other people." Similarly, in 2004, Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander (former U.S. secretary of education) warned that students should not be exposed to competing ideologies in historical texts but, rather, be instructed that our nation represents one true ideology. Alexander sponsored his American History and Civics Education Act to put civics back in its "rightful place in our schools, so our children can grow up learning what it means to be an American."³ Presumably, for Alexander, what it means to be an American is more answer than question.

I focus on history teaching here, but the trend is not limited to social studies. In many states, virtually every subject area is under scrutiny for any deviation from one single narrative, based on knowable, testable, and purportedly uncontested facts. An English teacher, in a recent study undertaken by colleagues and myself, told us that even novel reading was now prescriptive in her state's rubric: meanings predetermined, vocabulary words preselected, and essay topics predigested. A science teacher put it this way: "The only part of the science curriculum now being critically analyzed is evolution."

As many people have observed, the high stakes testing mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has further pushed to the margins education efforts that challenge students to grapple with tough questions about society and the world. In a recent study by the Center on Education Policy, 71 percent of districts reported cutting back time for other subjects — social studies in particular — to make more space for reading and math instruction.⁴ Last June, historian David

McCullough told a U.S. Senate committee that, because of NCLB, "history is being put on the back burner or taken off the stove altogether in many or most schools." An increasing number of students are getting little to no education about how government works, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the evolution of social movements, and U.S. and world history. As Peter Campbell, Missouri State Coordinator for FairTest, noted, "The sociopolitical implications of poor black and

Hispanic children not learning about the Civil Rights movement, not learning about women's suffrage, not learning about the U.S. Civil War, and not learning about any historical or contemporary instance of civil disobedience is more than just chilling. It smacks of an Orwellian attempt not merely to rewrite history, but to get rid of it."⁵

The implications Campbell describes are not limited to poor black and Hispanic students. Any student being denied knowledge

The relentless focus on testing and "achievement" means that time for in-depth critical analysis of ideas is diminished.



about historical events and social movements misses out on important opportunities to link his or her education to the quintessentially democratic struggles for a better society for all.

You might be thinking at this point that conditions might be bad for students unlucky enough to be in the public schools, but that, on the whole, many independent schools prepare students for a democratic society by offering a broad liberal education that asks students to grapple with difficult and contested policy issues. Evidence indicates otherwise. As the goals for K–12 public education have shifted away from preparing active and engaged public citizens and towards more narrow goals of career preparation and individual economic gain, independent schools have, in many ways, led the pack. Pressures from

Table 1. Kinds of Citizens

	Personally Responsible Citizen	Participatory Citizen	Social-Justice Oriented Citizen
DESCRIPTION	<p>Acts responsibly in their community</p> <p>Works and pays taxes</p> <p>Picks up litter, recycles, and gives blood</p> <p>Helps those in need, lends a hand during times of crisis</p> <p>Obeys laws</p>	<p>Active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts</p> <p>Organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promote economic development, or clean up environment</p> <p>Knows how government agencies work</p> <p>Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks</p>	<p>Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures</p> <p>Explores strategies for change that address root causes of problems</p> <p>Knows about social movements and how to effect systemic change</p> <p>Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice</p>
SAMPLE ACTION	<p>Contributes food to a food drive</p>	<p>Helps to organize a food drive</p>	<p>Explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes</p>
CORE ASSUMPTIONS	<p>To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community</p>	<p>To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures</p>	<p>To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must question and change established systems and structures when they reproduce patterns of injustice over time</p>

From: Westheimer, J. & Kahne, J. (2004). What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*. 41(2), 237-269.

parents, board members, and a broad cultural shift in educational priorities have resulted in schools across the country being seen primarily as conduits for individual success, and lessons aimed at exploring democratic responsibilities have increasingly been crowded out. A steadily growing body of research in the United States now echoes what Tony Hubbard, former director of the United Kingdom's Independent Schools Inspectorate, stated most plainly after reviewing data from an extensive study of British independent schools: because of the immense pressure to achieve high academic results on exams and

elevate prestigious college entrance rates, independent schools are "over-directed" so that students do not have "sufficient opportunity or incentive to think for themselves." Increasingly following formulas that "spoon-feed" students to succeed on narrow academic tests, independent schools, Hubbard warned, "teach students not to think."

Too many schools have become increasingly oriented toward pedagogical models of efficiency that discourage deeper consideration of important ideas. The relentless focus on testing and "achievement"

means that time for in-depth critical analysis of ideas is diminished. Social studies scholar Stephen Thornton notes that, by "critical thinking," school officials too often mean that students should passively absorb as "truth" the critical thinking already completed by someone else.⁶ Current school reform policies and many classroom practices too often reduce teaching and learning to exactly the kind of mindless rule-following that makes students unable to make principled stands that have long been associated with American democracy. The hidden curriculum of post-NCLB classrooms is how to

please authority and pass the tests, not how to develop convictions and stand up for them.

WHAT KIND OF CITIZEN?

All is not bleak when it comes to educating for democratic understanding and participation. Many teachers across the country conduct excellent educational activities concerned with helping students become active and effective citizens (see sidebar on page XX).

But even when educators are expressly committed to teaching “good citizenship,” there is cause for caution. My colleague Joseph Kahne and I spent the better part of a decade studying programs that aimed to develop good citizenship skills among youth and young adults. In study after study, we come to similar conclusions: the kinds of goals and practices commonly represented in curricula that hope to foster democratic citizenship usually have more to do with voluntarism, charity, and obedience than with democracy. In other words, “good citizenship” to many educators means listening to authority figures, dressing neatly, being nice to neighbors, and helping out at a soup kitchen — not grappling with the kinds of social policy decisions that every citizen in a democratic society needs to learn how to do.

In our studies of dozens of programs, we identified three visions of “good” citizens that help capture the lay of the land when it comes to citizenship education in the United States: the *Personally Responsible Citizen*; the *Participatory Citizen*; and the *Social-Justice Oriented Citizen*.⁷ It’s worth summarizing the differences here so you might better be able to situate your own programs among these kinds of goals. They can serve as a helpful guide to uncovering the variety of assumptions that fall under the idea of citizenship education.

Personally Responsible Citizens contribute to food or clothing drives when asked and volunteer to help those less fortunate whether in a soup kitchen or a senior-citizen center. They might contribute time, money, or both to charitable causes. Both those in the character education movement and those who advocate community service would emphasize this vision of good citizenship. They seek to build character and personal responsibility by emphasizing honesty, integrity, self-discipline, and hard work. Or they nurture compassion by engaging students in volunteer community service.

Other educators lean toward a vision of the *Participatory Citizen*. Participatory citizens

personally responsible citizen would contribute cans of food for the homeless, the participatory citizen might organize the food drive.

A third image of a good citizen, and perhaps the perspective that is least commonly pursued, is of individuals who know how to critically assess multiple perspectives. They are able to examine social, political, and economic structures and explore strategies for change that address root causes of problems. We called this kind of citizen the *Social-Justice Oriented Citizen* because the programs fostering such citizenship emphasize the need for citizens to be able to think about issues of fairness, equality of opportunity, and democratic engagement. They

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actively participate in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state/provincial, and national levels. Educational programs designed to support the development of participatory citizens focus on teaching students about how government and other institutions (e.g., community-based organizations, churches) work and about the importance of planning and participating in organized efforts to care for those in need, for example, or in efforts to guide school policies. While the

share with the vision of the *Participatory Citizen* an emphasis on collective work related to the life and issues of the community. But the nature of these programs gives priority to students thinking independently, looking for ways to improve society, and being thoughtfully informed about a variety of complex social issues. These programs are less likely to emphasize the need for charity and volunteerism as ends in themselves, and more likely to teach about ways to effect systemic change. If *Participatory*

Citizens organize the food drive and *Personally Responsible Citizens* donate food, the *Social-Justice Oriented Citizens* — our critical thinkers — ask why people are hungry, then act on what they discover.

Currently, the vast majority of school programs that take the time to teach citizenship are the kind that emphasize either good character (including the importance of volunteering and helping those in need), or technical knowledge of legislatures and how government works. Far less common are schools that teach students to think about root causes of injustice or challenge existing social, economic, and political norms as a means for strengthening democracy.

Recall my earlier question: How would you know the difference between educational experiences in two schools — one in a totalitarian nation and one in a democratic one? Both the totalitarian nation and the democratic one might engage students in volunteer activities in the community — picking up litter from a nearby park perhaps, or helping out at a busy intersection near a school or a senior-citizen center. Government leaders in a totalitarian regime would be as delighted as leaders in a democracy if their young citizens learned the lessons put forward by many of the proponents of personally responsible citizenship: don't do drugs; show up to work on time; give blood; help others during a flood; recycle; etc. These are all desirable traits for people living in a community. But they are not about democratic citizenship. Efforts to pursue some conceptions of personal responsibility might even undermine efforts to prepare participatory and justice oriented citizens. Obedience and loyalty (common goals of character education), for example, may work against the kind of independent thinking that effective democracy requires.

Belief in the fundamental importance of education for democracy has been long-standing. And yet these beliefs are at risk in schools today.



RETURNING TO DEMOCRATIC EDUCATIONAL GOALS

For more than two centuries, democracy in the United States has been predicated on citizens' informed engagement in civic and political life and schools have been seen as essential to support the development of such citizens. "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves," Thomas Jefferson famously wrote, adding that if the people are "not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education." Belief in the fundamental importance of education for democracy has been long-standing. And yet these beliefs are at risk in schools today. Relentless pressures from the business community to link the goals of education to the needs of corporations, for example, jeopardize the democratic foundations of education. Educators concerned with the narrowing goals of schooling should continue to pose publicly the kinds of question former president of the American Educational Research Association Larry Cuban asks: Do schools geared to preparing workers also build literate, active, and morally sensitive citizens who carry out their democratic civic duties?8

For democracy to remain vibrant, educators must convey to students that critical thinking and action are both important components of democratic civic life. Moreover, students must learn that they have important contributions to make. Democracy is not a spectator sport.

The exit of the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, dedicated to a critical history of war, bears the following inscription:

History is yours to make. It is not owned or written by someone else for you to learn... History is

Resources for Teachers

The Council for the Social Studies website contains an archive of articles and lesson plans to help teachers engage students in the study of such current issues as the war in Iraq and terrorism
www.socialstudies.org/resources/moments

The Choices for the 21st Century Education Program at Brown University publishes a wide range of curriculum units on historical and current international issues. Sample topics include *Confronting Genocide: Never Again? Indian Independence and the Question of Pakistan*; and *A Forgotten History: The Slave Trade and Slavery in New England*. The website's Teaching with the News section provides online lessons at no charge on such topics as *Violence in Darfur*; *North Korea and Nuclear Weapons*; and *U.S. Immigration Policy*. www.choices.edu/resources/index.php

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility sponsors this website which "aims to encourage critical thinking on issues of the day." The site offers readings, study questions, and links to useful sources that teachers can use to present lessons on many different topics. Recent examples include *The U.S. and Iran*; *BLACKWATER USA: Is the U.S. Privatizing War?*; *Energy and the Environment: What Can We Do?*; *Presidential Power: Executive Privilege*; and *The Death Penalty*. www.teachablemoment.org

Facing History and Ourselves engages students of diverse backgrounds in examining racism, prejudice, and anti-Semitism to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry. The organization's website contains many lesson plans and units with such titles as *The Armenian Genocide: Examining Historical Evidence*; *Eyes on the Prize: Tactics of Nonviolence*; and *Guilt, Responsibility, and the Nuremberg Trial*. www.facinghistory.org

The University of Ottawa's Democratic Dialogue Initiative has information about research projects, publications, and events to assist educators in "the pursuit of creative approaches to projects that engage themes of democracy, education, and society."
www.DemocraticDialogue.com

Teachingforchange.org provides publications and K–12 resources focusing on diversity, global citizenship, and the environment.
www.teachingforchange.org

TeachingTolerance.org, a Web project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, offers subscriptions to Teaching Tolerance magazine and many lesson plans and videos at no charge for K–12 educators. Teachers will find instructional kits on such topics as the U.S. Civil Rights movement, the Holocaust, and the United States' struggle to ensure liberty and justice for all.
www.tolerance.org/teach/index.jsp

not just the story you read. It is the one you write. It is the one you remember or denounce or relate to others. It is not predetermined. Every action, every decision, however small, is relevant to its course. History is filled with horror and replete with hope. You shape the balance.

I suspect many readers could imagine a lesson in democracy by beginning a discussion with just such a quotation.



Joel Westheimer is university research chair in democracy and education at the University of Ottawa. His most recent book is *Pledging Allegiance: The Politics of Patriotism in America's Schools* (ed.) (Teachers College Press, 2007). Portions of this article are adapted from "Teaching Students to Think About Patriotism" (*Educational Leadership*, v.65, no. 5).

Notes

- 1 See www.flsenate.gov/data/session/2006/Senate/bills/billtext/pdf/s0028.pdf.
- 2 Westheimer, J. (2007). Politics and patriotism in education. In Westheimer (ed.) *Pledging allegiance: The politics of patriotism in America's schools*. New York: Teachers College Press
- 3 Alexander, L. (2003). Remarks of Senator Lamar Alexander on the introduction of his bill: The American History and Civics Education Act, March 4, 2003. www.congresslink.org/print_expert_amhist.htm.
- 4 Rentner, D. S., Scott, C., Kober, N., Chudowsky, N., Chudowsky, V., Jofus, S., & Zabala, D. (2006). *From the capital to the classroom: Year 4 of the No Child Left Behind Act*. Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy.
- 5 Campbell, P. (2006, October 18). Ballot initiatives, democracy, and NCLB. Transform *Education blog*. transformeducation.blogspot.com/2006_10_01_archive.html
- 6 Thornton, S. (2005). Ch. 5 in N. Noddings (ed.) *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- 7 Westheimer, J. & Kahne, J. (2004). What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*. Summer. 41(2), 237–269.
- 8 Cuban, L. (2004). Making public schools business-like... again. *PS: Political Science and Politics*. (37)2. April.

Democratic Dialogue reaches across disciplinary, institutional, and national boundaries through innovative research and methods of dissemination, community dialogues and events, and creative projects that engage themes of democracy, education, and society. We involve educators, political scientists, sociologists, philosophers, teachers, policymakers, and cultural workers (e.g., artists, curators, and critics) as well as members of the broader public community. Democratic Dialogue was founded in 2002 with a generous grant from the University of Ottawa and is now also funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, and the Canadian International Development Agency. It is based in the University of Ottawa's Faculty of Education.