



Leading Students Toward Citizenship

BY TERRI CAMAJANI AND INGRID SEYER-OCHI

WE BELIEVE that a good citizen actively organizes with other people to address causes of injustice and suffering. A good citizen understands the complexities of social, political, and economic issues and sees how they are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. A good citizen questions accepted definitions of problems. Good citizens are activists who are empowered to focus on things that they care about in their own lives and who can either identify or build the potential avenues needed to truly change them.

Just as English education is not about grammar — except as a vehicle for clarity in writing and thought — democracy education is not solely about how a bill becomes a law; it is also about how students can understand that process and then put it into action to change the world around them. In the same way that far too many English classes focus on diagrams of sentences, too many government classes focus solely on diagrams showing the classic separation of powers, the branches of government, and how a bill becomes a law. Of course, it is important to understand how the mechanisms of our democracy work. When the analysis stops there, we become deeply concerned. Students will only be truly empowered by their understandings of democracy when they can move beyond the diagrams and apply their knowledge in the real world of political action and social change.

It is tempting to believe that teachers, working together with common purpose, can turn students into em-

powerd and active citizens. However, we know that it is not possible for teachers and students to learn, understand, focus, organize, and then right wrongs. When society tells teachers that it is our responsibility to pursue these lofty goals with our students, we are all missing the larger picture. Are there real opportunities for students to change what's wrong in the world? Can they do it if teachers join them? It is not likely.

Society must stop pinning its hopes and aspirations for social change primarily on schools. Schools alone have never been and will never be able to cure the broader ills of the social, political, and economic system. Society must acknowledge that real opportunities do not exist for all. Then we must decide collectively that all of us will work to build those opportunities. Until we see increased interest, accompanying public dialogue, massive reorientation of values and priorities, and a resultant groundswell of public action, we will not be particularly hopeful that changes in the distribution of opportunities at all levels will occur.

What, then, should teachers and students do to help educate good citizens? The answer may be simply to encourage and challenge society to start functioning as a true democracy. Schools — and our youths — will follow.

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Civics Education in America

BY ROD PAIGE

CIVICS AND American history education are vital to the health of our republic. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, "Educate and inform the whole mass of the people. . . . They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty."

Last January, we celebrated the one-year anniversary of the No Child Left Behind Act, which ushered in a new era of accountability for educating all of our nation's students. While the focus of this historic legislation is on the basic elements of reading, writing, math, and science, the connection to learning civics should be clear. Without those core learning abilities, American children cannot adequately learn about the great history of our nation. Indeed, the problems that No Child Left Behind is seeking to correct are probably to blame for the lack of history and civics performance to a significant degree.

The most recent data we have on the current status of civics knowledge in the United States is discouraging, to say the least. Some might even say that we have reached a crisis in this country with regard to civics education. I would agree. Consider the following:

- The results of the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics examination showed that one-third of fourth-graders could not explain the meaning of "I pledge allegiance to the flag" on a multiple-choice test. A majority of fourth-graders could not answer why "citizens elect people to make laws for them" in a democracy.
- The NAEP 2001 U.S. History Report Card also shows a similar lack of proficiency. Again fourth-, eighth-, and 12th-graders were tested, and the results showed that 89% of high school seniors, 84% of eighth-graders, and 82% of fourth-graders scored below "proficient" levels.

Let me tell you what the Bush Administration is do-

ing to address this crisis. The U.S. Department of Education's Teaching American History program will provide nearly \$100 million in fiscal-year 2003 to promote the teaching of American history as a separate academic subject in elementary and secondary schools. This program makes competitive awards to local school districts that establish partnerships with postsecondary institutions, nonprofit history or humanities organizations, libraries, or museums. These partnerships support professional development for teachers of American history.

The second major activity supported by the department is the Civic Education Program, which provides a \$16.9-million grant to the nonprofit Center for Civic Education. The Center operates the We the People Program, which consists of two projects: The Citizen and the Constitution and Project Citizen.

Last September, President Bush announced that the National Archives and Records Administration, in collaboration with National History Day, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and the USA Freedom Corps, will give students and teachers across the country access to national treasures of American history through the Our Documents initiative. At that same Rose Garden ceremony, President Bush called for a We the People White House Forum on American History, Civics, and Service, which was held last May at the Smithsonian Museum of American History.

At this exceptional time in our nation's history, we can and will do everything possible to ensure civic literacy for all of our schoolchildren. For I am reminded again of the words of our third President, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

ROD PAIGE is U.S. Secretary of Education.

Hope for a Better Future

BY KIM WESTHEIMER

DESPITE THE presence of 100 high school students, the large room was nearly silent. One young person had gained the students' attention and addressed the group. "I don't see much hope," he said. "I see people on the news saying gay marriage isn't appropriate, but [the reality TV show] 'Married by America' is. I used to think that being an adult would make things better, but I don't anymore." This transgender student was speaking to his peers at a conference for Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs), school-based extracurricular clubs. He described being taunted, pushed, and derided by classmates. He reflected on his strength to withstand these attacks, his vulnerability, his disappointment in the school's failure to protect him, and his lack of hope for a better future.

Hope for a better future was a recurring theme in six regional conferences for GSAs recently sponsored by the Massachusetts Departments of Education and Public Health and the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth. Over 500 students attended the conferences, which were broadly organized around the theme of civic engagement.

Civic engagement seems like such a lofty theme when seen through the eyes of students who do not see themselves as having power in their schools or in the larger community. Their lack of hope seems linked to strong misgivings about the people who have power. At the conferences, students were asked what comes to mind when they hear the word "politics." Most conjured up negative images: corruption, money, lies, and funky, straight, white men. With some prodding, a few offered such responses as "democracy" and "way to make change." In

their more immediate world, some students' mistrust of adults appeared to be reinforced by adults who callously ignore blatant school-based harassment. Several students saw their GSAs as welcome oases that provided support but did not alter the surrounding hostile school climate.

In light of the realities expressed by GSA members, what kind of education do they need to become good citizens? These students seem to be saying that they need to feel that adults care about their well-being regardless of their identities. They need to see a history that reflects who they are. They need to see that not all people in power (or in front of their classrooms) are straight or white. They need to see that there are straight and white people who are their allies.

In these conferences, students had a chance to speak with politicians who might not fit their stereotypes, including Liz Malia, a white lesbian state representative; Jarrett Barrios, a gay Cuban American state senator; and U.S. Rep. James McGovern (D-Mass.), a straight white man. In a dialogue with politicians, one student recognized that she had benefited from learning about slavery and the civil rights movement and asked, "Is there a way schools can be mandated to teach about gay and lesbian history?" Other young people expressed their desire to support openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT) teachers. Students of all sexual orientations had numerous questions about how Liz and Jarrett had responded to homophobic politicians and constituents. These questions were a reminder that students were looking for strategies to improve their schools as well as proven methods to counteract antigay bigotry.

In addition to speaking with politicians, the students spent considerable time getting to know one another and learning from one another. They heard from student groups that were proud of their accomplishments. They had conversations about things that mattered in their



lives, exchanged phone numbers, and created an art project that captured the energy of the day. Some even volunteered to sing a few songs for the group — ranging from a song by Christina Aguilera to a selection from the musical episode of “Buffy the Vampire Slayer.”

Did students leave these conferences feeling prepared to be more active citizens? Some said they would persuade their teachers to teach about GLBT issues, some were going to pressure their administrators to respond more appropriately to antigay harassment, and others planned to host social events to foster both learning and fun involving GSAs and other student groups.

Those of us who organized the conferences were reminded of the simple fact that, if students are going to be engaged in their schools and communities, they need to feel hope. That hope is nurtured when students learn about the contributions of people with whom they identify. Hope is nurtured when students have social and educational spaces where diversity is welcomed and celebrated. Hope is nurtured when students learn from and appreciate one another.

At the end of one conference, a GSA advisor noted that a gay, African American 12th-grader had been active in these regional conferences for four years. “Each time he leaves,” she said, “he stands about three inches taller.” That’s where hope lies.

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From Knowledge, to Service, To Citizenship

BY SHAHARA AHMAD-LLEWELLYN

THE PHRASE “E Pluribus Unum” — out of many, one — brilliantly distills what it means to be a good citizen. I learned at an early age that this Latin phrase, our nation’s original motto, referred to the welding of 13 colonies into one nation. But over the years, “E Pluribus Unum” has also served as a reminder to me that, even with our nation’s great diversity, there is still one aspect that we all share: the title “citizen,” a meaningful role that truly unites us as Americans.

Yet all too often, young people fail to understand the true meaning of citizenship. They grow up ambivalent, thinking they are entitled to certain rights, thinking that it’s all “about them.” They fail to grasp that they are, as individuals, part of a greater whole, part of a community. And as *citizens* of that community, they need to fulfill the great responsibilities that go along with the title.

So how does one create competent and responsible citizens in the face of widespread apathy? How do educators spark the flames of the spirit of citizenship that are smoldering in America’s youths?

It starts with instilling civic competence in a child’s early years. Just as lessons are taught in reading, writing, and arithmetic, so too should we teach our children the vital lessons of democracy, responsibility, and service — three concepts fundamental to understanding responsible citizenry. These vital lessons should be a part of every student’s curriculum.

Each and every day, starting in kindergarten, teachers should demonstrate, in words and in actions, the concepts of citizenship. Whether it is voting on which book the teacher will read at story time, developing a student Bill of Rights, or collecting cans of food for the poor, simple lessons in civics will foster attitudes that are necessary for children to participate as effective, responsible citizens.

As young people move on to middle and high school, teachers should increase students’ understanding of politics, government, and how our democracy works. Teachers must encourage students to express their opinions and

participate in decision-making activities. Stated simply, they must help their students become active citizens. Civic education should take shape in active class participation, in student government, in debate teams, and in service clubs.

Teachers also need to integrate service learning and civics education by reaching beyond their classrooms into the community. By combining community service and academic lessons, service learning enables students to apply their classroom knowledge to real-life problems. In addition, service learning gives students a sense of competency, enhances personal growth, and instills citizenship in a way that no other program can.

The ultimate responsibility of all citizens comes when one turns 18 years old. When I was young, voting was a rite of passage. Today, an entire generation of young citizens feels disconnected from government and has opted out of the political process. This is unacceptable.

It is imperative to the future of our democracy that, beginning at a very young age, students work on cultivating lifelong citizenship and voting habits. It is up to educators, all educators, from kindergarten through college, to teach young people that every vote counts. The decisions are too important to be left up to others. Students must know that exercising their right to vote is the way to change things in a democracy and is the greatest responsibility of a good citizen.

Today, more than ever, citizenship should play a vital part in every student’s education. The values and principles learned from such an education are essential to sustaining the future of our democracy. They unite us as Americans. And out of many, we become one.

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