

Erin Omahen  
February 15, 2012

### Reform of Civic Education in the United States

**Audience Analysis:** In this essay I will be addressing educators of all levels to confirm the lack of emphasis on civic learning in the years leading up to post secondary education. This audience is familiar with the education system and where flaws or strengths exist respectively. This paper may be delivered at a teaching convention in order to reach out to the targeted academic audience.

In a study of 510 Americans ages eighteen to twenty-four, six out of ten were unable to locate Iraq on a map (Young Americans Shaky on Geography). Additionally, 75% incorrectly answered that English was the most widely spoken native language and alarmingly, “despite the wall-to-wall coverage of the damage from Hurricane Katrina, nearly one-third of young Americans recently polled couldn’t locate Louisiana on a map and nearly half were unable to identify Mississippi” (Young Americans Shaky on Geography). As clearly indicated by these statistics, many Americans are uneducated in the civic sphere. The civic sphere is defined as knowledge surrounding historical and global events both past and present. There is a lack of ample civic education in the classroom and greater emphasis must be placed on social engagement and awareness leading up to post secondary education. There are multiple suggested causes and resolutions to this problem; however, the best solution is implementing a nationwide standardized that students would be required to pass in order to graduate from high school. High standards for global knowledge must be set in order to ensure civic engagement. This paper will present each of the researched causes independently, to best understand the variety of explanations for this decline.

It is vital to establish successful civic education in the United States as scholastic competition from around the world is at an all time high. School districts in the United States are in a constant struggle to keep pace with other world powers. A conflict of interest develops as students from Asian and European countries stay in their native education systems leading up to post secondary education. These students then come to America to pursue college degrees. There is a clear gap between the reputations of American high schools compared to its colleges. Researchers such as Thomas Murray question, “How is it that we cannot prepare our young people at elementary and secondary levels to successfully compete in universities which are valued so highly by foreign students?” (Murray). Questions arise as to who is to blame for the decline in general education in the United States. Is the problem that the teachers out of date and out of touch, or does the curriculum needs to be reformed, or are both problems? Murray places blame on both the teachers and the education system as a whole. He argues that, “if the methods used in other countries are more effective than our methods, then we need to change, or at least improve, the ways we teach” (Murray). Teachers are not developing their skills enough and fail to stray from the classic teaching techniques they were taught many years ago. Schools ignore the necessity for professional development and as a result accept mediocre teaching performances. Additionally, teachers are not rewarded for students’ excellence in their classroom. The lack of motivation leads to subpar effort from teachers and results from students.

According to Murray, in order to resolve the crumbling system we must “decide how to change what is taught and how it is taught.” He calls for “real educational reform,” acknowledging that schools are failing to put students at a desirable level of academic performance compared to the rest of the world (Murray). As a nation, we must look deep into the education system and make difficult decisions on what to do to resolve the spiraling crisis of

declining civic engagement among our youth. A nationalized standardized test would set a benchmark for students to strive to achieve while also providing a goal for his “real educational reform” (Murray).

Furthermore, civic education is a larger issue than students’ and teachers’ success. Schools are responsible for molding young people to become vital participants in our democratic society. The youth must be properly engaged and educated in order to effectively participate as citizens of the world. A report on Early Childhood and Elementary Social Studies from the National Council for Social Studies, (NCSS) disclosed information surrounding “the world demands independent and cooperative problem solving to address complex social, economic, ethical, and personal concern” (Social Studies for Early Childhood and Elementary School Children). It also reported that, “social studies must be an essential part of the curriculum in the early childhood/elementary years” (Social Studies for Early Childhood and Elementary School Children). Our schools are solely responsible for developing students into citizens, and the focus must be on social studies education to properly prepare the youth. When parents enroll their children in school, they are trusting that the system is doing what is necessary to prepare the youth for the future, but unfortunately the system is no longer doing its job. The proposed standardized test provided parents with a measure of their children’s success in the classroom.

Pursuing this further, the NCSS tries to pinpoint the problems that are stunting success in American schools. The study points to a growing problem that once the student exists the classroom they stop learning. The report states that, “nearly all the children spend more hours each week watching television than they spend in any other activity besides sleeping.” Students sit “passively,” rather than engaging in activities outside of the classroom that would stimulate and extend learning (Social Studies for Early Childhood and Elementary School Children). If

the hours spent watching television or playing video games were dedicated to programs such as service learning or volunteering, the youth would be better prepared and engaged in and out of the classroom.

Furthermore, the NCSS finds problems in students' failure to appreciate diversity. The group feels, "classrooms mirror the larger society" and acknowledge that "mere contact with diversity, without understanding, can intensify conflict" (Social Studies for Early Childhood and Elementary School Children: Preparing for the 21st Century). This year's college freshman class graduated kindergarten in 1998 and high school in 2011. They have lived through wars, attacks on the homeland, natural disasters and changes in presidencies. Living through these current events, does not qualify them as "active citizens." The NCSS states that, "the ability for making personally and socially productive decisions do not just happen. They require that the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of social studies be introduced early and built upon throughout the school years" (Social Studies for Early Childhood and Elementary School Children). Students must be engaged and educated from a young age to ensure current events that transpire during their lifetime adequately prepare them for what to expect when they become global citizens. Current event questions would be included on the proposed standardized exam to encourage the youth to remain engaged.

As the NCSS points out, there is such a large focus placed on the importance of civic education in elementary school because children's attitudes and values towards society begin developing in their early years. They believe students "need to encounter and reencounter, in a variety of contexts, the knowledge, concepts, skills, and attitudes that form the foundation for participation in a democratic society" (Social Studies for Early Childhood and Elementary School Children). Programs must be developed to better allow students to participate in

activities that emulate their responsibilities as citizens. The institution of such programs will help to revamp the civic education system and reform general education for the better.

Moreover, James M. Giarelli, professor at Rutgers University, admits, “civic education in the United States is failing,” (155). He is confident that “progress is still possible if, we, as a nation, take the challenge seriously, develop leadership, allocate resources, and persist” (155). Giarelli recognizes effects of the failing civic education system on an even larger scale. He insists that now Americans are less likely to run for office or take up a role in politics at any level. Years ago, young men and women dreamed of becoming the President of the United States, but now, as Giarelli observes in his students, that motivation no longer exists. In Giarelli’s eyes, understanding democratic concepts is essential for the development of good citizens (80). There is a lack of democratic appreciation, but Giarelli acknowledges that the social studies community is aware of declining education. Unfortunately, the support for practices to promote advancement in civic education is also declining. A nationwide standardized test would increase the support for these practices once again as civic education would be woven back into the spotlight.

In the same way Giarelli challenges the system, more questions arise regarding what is taught and how it should be transcended in the classroom. Giarelli reports, “what is now being taught in high schools by way of civic education does not make the grade, not if a goal of civic education is to give students an appreciation of the functioning of representative democracy” (170). There is a lack of fundamental exposure to diversity in our nation. Wide varieties of tradition, interests, and values exist within the United States; however, the failures in civic education prevent cultural blending from occurring (171). New skills and techniques need to be taught to the teachers in order to engage students’ appreciation for civic education. Without

inspiration for the teachers, the students are negatively affected, causing them to struggle. These new skills could be presented and questioned in a standardized exam.

Who should take responsibility for the failing civic education in America? Giarelli emphasizes the importance of social studies teachers taking their jobs seriously. He declares, “the National Council on the Social Studies and state associations, are key to such endeavors” (173). He adds “there is a role for the Center for Civic Education and its networks of teachers in the states” (173). The teachers that are responsible for educating the youth should have multiple levels of educational training. More emphasis must be placed on employing the most passionate, engaged, and qualified teachers to fill that void.

While Giarelli places much of the blame on the teachers and schools, some suggest that the problem of the failing education system falls in the lack of appropriate funding. According to Herbert Rudman, professor at Michigan State University, “money makes a difference” (39). Appropriate funding is vital to ensure success of civic education. Without adequate funds it is impossible to hire inspiring teachers and develop programs to promote engagement in the classroom. Rudman also takes on another radical approach to civic education reform. He suggests, “it is desirable for a school system to contract with a university to operate a public school” (Rudman 58). He cites an example at New York University where the school donated money to reform a junior high school in the inner city. The goals of this experiment were to direct funds to the underprivileged students and hopefully through the programs instituted, encourage advanced civic engagement and learning. Based off the successes of this experiment, Rudman insists that, “university-school-system operation of a school stands a chance of accomplishing its goal” (59).

Additional blame develops because of the lack of appropriate funding is directly related

to the outdated and curriculum in schools. Daniel Bell, professor at Columbia University advocates for contemporary curriculum. He says the problem exists in uncovering “how to teach a subject for the general non-specialized student,” and insists upon the need to adopt a new device to “accommodate diverse needs” (202). Social studies topics are always changing. History is rewriting itself each day. They require constant adaption to keep students properly engaged with the surrounding world as it constantly evolves.

Furthermore, Bell also criticizes the lack of emphasis on social issues in the classroom. He calls for a course focusing on “contemporary social issues, drawing from the best of the recent work in the social sciences” (198). There is a growing need to infuse current events that surround students’ lives into the classrooms. Without this emphasis there is a clear disconnect between students and what is going on in the world around them. As a result, after high school, they are unengaged and unprepared for their democratic responsibility. To prepare students for their democratic responsibility, contemporary social issues must be included in the classroom. Curriculum must constantly be updated so it is reflective of current issues and the topics of study. He calls for radical change, asking schools to reorganize the curriculum every two years and to develop “interdisciplinary courses which give students a passing knowledge of presumably new approaches” (209). Bell recognizes the failures in civic engagement and addresses the root of the problem, suggesting swift action to reform the growing epidemic.

The evidence provided illustrates the inevitable truth that changes must be made to ensure the success and vitality of America’s children in the future. Although multiple resolution to this problem have been suggested, the best solution is to implement a nationwide standardized test, which students must pass in order to graduate from high school. Standardized tests are effective in predicting a student’s future success (Kemmerling). “Almost two-thirds of U.S

colleges take SAT scores into account for their applicants” (Kemmerling). If colleges use the SATs to measure academic knowledge, an additional standardized test for high schools to measure academic preparation would also be acceptable. While the SATs gauge students’ preparation for college, a standardized test covering civic education would measure a students’ preparation for the real world.

Developing a nationwide standardized test would provide the accountability that the education system lacks. Failures in the classroom have led to much speculation as to who is to blame. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 “aims to reform education by improving academic standards” (Kemmerling). The goals of the Act include “holding states more accountable for results, creating greater flexibility at the state and local levels, and emphasizing teacher quality and effective teaching methods, and confirming states' progress” (Kemmerling). Despite the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act, academic standards remain too low, and states are still not held accountable for student failures. The Act needs further support to help achieve outline goals, which can be provided by a nationwide mandated standardized test.

Not only will establishing a standardized test build support for the No Child Left Behind Act, but it will also answer the question of who is to blame for students’ civic disengagement. The exam would create a black and white representation of students’ knowledge and a teachers’ ability. If a student does poorly on the standardized exam, and the rest of a class excels, clearly the student is struggling, not the teacher. However, if a large percentage of a class is doing poorly on the standardized test, it is clear that the teacher’s skills need to be reassessed. Developing a standardized test simplifies what is currently a complicated conundrum. Now schools will know whom to blame and the new question will be who is to blame, but rather what can be done to make the situation better?



Accountability will help to encourage positive changes. Curricula will be adjusted, teachers will be continually reassessed, and resources will be allocated effectively to promote further advancement in education. The results of the suggested standardized test may encourage schools to “hire more qualified teachers and provide after-school tutoring sessions” (Kemmerling). Without standardized testing, parents have no way of measuring student performance. Because public education is funded through tax dollars, taxpayers deserve the right to see the results of their money through the performance of students in their schools.

Alternative arguments suggest that civic awareness in the United States is thriving through unique means of education including service learning, study abroad programs and internships. The arguments suggest that these learning activities have created global citizens who are able to view the world through a magnified lens and better understand the core components of life economically, politically, environmentally and socially (Rubin 134). Beth C. Rubin, Rutgers University Professor of Education advocates for programs that develop these unique and engaged citizens. She writes, “thinking and acting historically encourages global citizenship by drawing student attention to the multicultural nature of American society, which of course mirrors global society” (135). Rubin’s argument suggests that the American youth are not only engaged in school, but also excelling in the classroom beyond the expectation for scholastic performance.

Admittedly, statistics from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (NCPPE) support Rubin’s claim that alternative education is causing students to excel in the classroom. The center issues a State-By-State report card every two years that illustrates scholastic performance in different subjects. The report released in 2002 illustrates major strides in students’ performance in five key areas of higher education compared to the previous report

issued in 2000 (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education). In comparing the report released in 2004 to that released in 2002, additional improvements were made.

Although the results indicate forward strides in students' civic education, more can be done. We must continue to institute programs and standards to measure achievement in order to ensure continuing success in the future. The reports issued by the NCPPHE are valid and indicate academic strides, but this is still not enough to contend with the competitive world. Scores from a 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment showed that 15-year-old students in the United States were performing far behind the highest scoring countries that including South Korea, Finland, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, and Canada (Armario). United States students' academic growth is being met and surpassed by international students success. More must be done to not only surpass previous performance in the United States, but also to exceed current results from the competitive nations around the world.

To successfully engage and prepare the youth, social studies should be emphasized during the elementary years, because this is the time when young people become active citizens. When children fail to develop foundations of democratic knowledge and skills, it is unlikely that they will be prepared in later years of education and citizenship. Current adults are guardians of America's vitality. The youth today will one day be the adults represent American society as a whole. We want to be confident that the votes casted and opinions voiced by our young citizens will be well-educated.

Our country is declining into a downward spiral of academic failure. On top of social and geographic ignorance, there is a lack of political knowledge as well. The First Amendment in the United States Constitution guarantees five freedoms: speech, religion, press, assembly, and petition. Only 25% of Americans can name more than one of the five freedoms in which our

country was established (Shenkman). The problem lies in the inevitable truth that there is a lack of ample civic education in the classroom. More emphasis must be placed on social engagement and awareness leading up to post secondary education. The solution to the growing epidemic is a nationwide standardized test, which students must pass, in order to graduate from high school. Ensuring standards for social studies success and civic engagement guarantees the success of America's future in the competitively growing world.