

As students, parents, and grandparents, many Americans have thought about quality public schools in personal terms—and rightly so. The realities of modern society and an uncertain economy dictate that we urge our youngsters to pursue learning as their best avenue to the American dream, self-fulfillment, and economic prosperity.

And yet, we cannot afford to forget that Americans' educational interests are not just an important private benefit, but about a vital public good—the reason that we, as citizens, are called upon to help provide a quality education to the children of strangers, not just our own. As Paul Gagnon reminds us in these pages and Thomas Jefferson argued so persuasively, free access to education and the health of our democracy are inextricably linked. It is a link we break only at our peril.

The youngsters our schools educate today are not just “other people’s children” and someone else’s concern. They are also the fellow citizens who will help shape the future and the nation that our own children will inherit. We must do all we can to provide them with the knowledge, the foresight, the vocabulary, and the analytic skills that responsible citizenship demand.

That is what this study is about. Over the past fifteen years, our nation started down the long and difficult road of creating a standards-based education system—our best hope of making progress toward the dual (and often dueling) goals of equity and excellence. The fact that Dr. Gagnon was able to find and evaluate 48 state (standards in the social studies including civics, history, geography, and economics) is itself a testament to how far we have come.

Now that these standards have been written, and states have begun to make steps toward implementation, Dr. Gagnon was asked to evaluate their strength with regard to preparing an informed citizenry. As the first such effort ever undertaken, a finding of mixed results is only to be expected. Interestingly, most states expressed gratitude to receive their state reviews, with many indicating that this analysis would be used to inform future revisions.

We should also be clear: This study says nothing about how many teachers, schools, and school systems around the country are already doing an excellent job of educating citizens for our democracy—or how many are struggling and would like some extra help.

What it does is tell us whether the standards documents that states have created are a useful tool for teachers and schools as they endeavor to fulfill this vital mission.

The events of September 11, 2001 and the intervening months are a painful reminder that we cannot afford to take the survival of democracy and democratic values for granted. And as the inhumanity of terrorism demonstrates, these values do not come naturally. As it has been said, devotion to human dignity and freedom, to social and economic justice, to self-restraint and the rule of law, to civility and truth, to diversity and civic responsibility—all these must be taught and learned and practiced.

Our educators deserve every assistance in the teaching of democracy and the values that sustain it.

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