

# EDUCATION ★ ★ ★ F ★ O ★ R ★ ★ ★ DEMOCRACY

*A Statement Of Principles*

GUIDELINES FOR STRENGTHENING THE  
TEACHING OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES

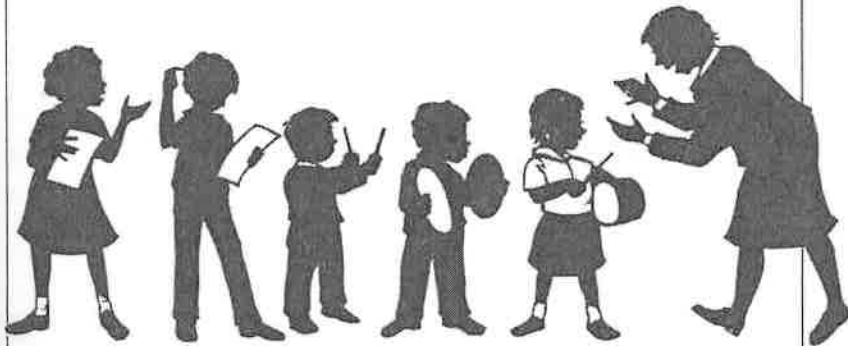


*Will democracy survive through the ages if we do not purposefully transmit to successive generations the values that underlie it?*

*We believe the answer is no. We believe that our children must learn—and we must teach them—the knowledge, values, and habits that will best protect and extend our precious inheritance.*

*To help schools and teachers strengthen their teaching of democratic values, the American Federation of Teachers, the Educational Excellence Network and Freedom House have jointly launched The Education for Democracy Project and prepared this Statement of Principles.*

*We hope that the perspective outlined here will be a useful guide to educators. We hope that the public support for these ideas—reflected in the diversity of the Statement's signatories—will strengthen schools' resolve to consciously impart to students the ideals and values on which our free society rests.*



**EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY** is a joint project of the American Federation of Teachers, the Educational Excellence Network and Freedom House.

**The American Federation of Teachers** is a union with a membership of 640,000—most of whom are classroom teachers, higher education faculty, and other school employees. The AFT is committed to helping its members bring excellence to America's classrooms and full professional status to their work.

**The Educational Excellence Network**—headquartered at Teachers College, Columbia University—is a coalition of several hundred educators and scholars devoted to the improvement of American education.

**Freedom House** is a national organization that monitors political rights and civil liberties around the world and that has spent 40 years educating the public about the nature and needs of democracy and the threats to it.

Quantities of *EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY: Statement of Principles* may be ordered by writing the Education for Democracy Project™ at the American Federation of Teachers, 555 New Jersey Avenue, Washington D.C. 20001. For pricing information and an order form, see page 23 of this booklet.

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# SIGNATORIES TO THE STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES\*

List in formation.

**Henry J. Abraham**  
James Hart Professor of Government  
& Foreign Affairs,  
University of Virginia

**Morris B. Abram**  
Chairman, Conference of Presidents of  
Major American Jewish Organizations

**Brock Adams**  
U.S. Senator, Washington

**Gordon M. Ambach**  
State Commissioner of Education,  
New York

**Arthur Ashe**  
Tennis Champion

**Morton Bahr**  
President, Communications  
Workers of America, AFL-CIO

**Terrel Bell**  
Former U.S. Secretary of Education

**William Bennett**  
U.S. Secretary of Education

**Walter Berns**  
John M. Olin University Professor,  
Georgetown University

**Owen Bieber**  
President, International Union, UAW

**James H. Billington**  
Writer

**Eve M. Bither**  
State Commissioner of Education,  
Maine

**Harold Blackburn**  
State Commissioner of Education,  
Kansas

**Phyllis L. Blaustein**  
Executive Director, National  
Assn. of State Boards of Education

**Richard A. Boyd**  
State Superintendent of Schools,  
Mississippi

**Bill Bradley**  
U.S. Senator, New Jersey

**John H. Bunzel**  
Senior Research Fellow,  
Hoover Institution

**James MacGregor Burns**  
Williams College

**Owen B. Butler**  
Retired Chairman of the Board,  
Procter & Gamble Co.

**R. Freeman Butts**  
Senior Fellow, Kettering Foundation

**Joseph A. Califano, Jr.**  
Senior Partner, Dewey, Ballantine,  
Bushby, Palmer & Wood

**Hortense G. Canady**  
National President, Delta Sigma Theta  
Sorority, Inc.

**Barbara L. Carter**  
Acting President, Spelman College

**Jimmy Carter**  
Former U.S. President

**Gordon Cawelti**  
Executive Director, Association for  
Supervision & Curriculum Development

**John W. Chandler**  
President, Assn. of American Colleges

**Lynne Cheney**  
Chairman, National Endowment  
for the Humanities

**Alice Childress**  
Writer

**Henry Cisneros**  
Mayor, San Antonio, Texas

**Todd Clark**  
Education Director, Constitutional  
Rights Foundation

**Joan Ganz Cooney**  
President, Children's Television  
Workshop

**Saul Cooperman**  
Commissioner of Education,  
New Jersey

**John E. Corbally**  
President, John D. & Catherine T.  
MacArthur Foundation

**John J. Creedon**  
President & CEO, Metropolitan Life  
Insurance Company

**Alonzo A. Crim**  
Superintendent of Schools, Atlanta

**Elizabeth Crow**  
Editor, Parents Magazine

**S. John Davis**  
Superintendent of Public Instruction,  
Virginia

**Lucy S. Dawidowicz**  
Writer

**A. Graham Down**  
Executive Director, Council for  
Basic Education

**Denis Doyle**  
Senior Research Fellow,  
The Hudson Institute

**Frank Drozak**  
President, Seafarers' International  
Union of North America

**Marian Wright Edelman**  
President, Children's Defense Fund

**Christopher Edley**  
President, United Negro College Fund

**Diane U. Eisenberg**  
Executive Director, Council for the  
Advancement of Citizenship

**H. Dean Evans**  
State Superintendent of Public  
Instruction, Indiana

**Frank J. Fahrenkopf, Jr.**  
Chairman, Republican  
National Committee

**Dante B. Fascell**  
U.S. Representative, Florida

**Millicent Fenwick**  
Former Congresswoman & Ambassador

**Chester E. Finn, Jr.**  
Assistant Secretary,  
U.S. Department of Education

**Gerald R. Ford**  
Former U.S. President

**William D. Ford**  
U.S. Representative, Michigan

**Calvin M. Frazier**  
State Commissioner of Education,  
Colorado

**Mary Hatwood Futrell**  
President, National Education Assn.

**Ellen V. Futter**  
President, Barnard College

**David P. Gardner**  
President, University of California

**Robert A. Georgine**  
President, Building & Construction  
Trades Department, AFL-CIO

**Carl Gershman**  
President, National Endowment  
for Democracy

**Bernard R. Gifford**  
Dean, Graduate School of Education,  
University of California/Berkeley

**Rabbi Joseph B. Glaser**  
Executive Vice President,  
Central Conference of American Rabbis

**Nathan Glazer**  
Professor of Education and Sociology,  
Harvard University

**Robert A. Goldwin**  
Resident Scholar, American  
Enterprise Institute

**John Goodlad**  
Professor of Education,  
University of Washington

**William F. Goodling**  
U.S. Representative, Pennsylvania

**Tipper Gore**  
Author

**Tony D. Hall**  
U.S. Representative, Ohio

**Joe Frank Harris**  
Governor, Georgia

**Lou Harris**  
President, Louis Harris &  
Associates, Inc.

**Peter D. Hart**  
Chairman, Peter D. Hart  
Research Associates, Inc.

**Orrin G. Hatch**  
U.S. Senator, Utah

**Augustus F. Hawkins**  
U.S. Representative, California

**Dorothy Height**  
President, National  
Council of Negro Women

**Hazel W. Hertzberg**  
Professor of History & Education,  
Teachers College, Columbia University

**Theodore M. Hesburgh**  
Former U.S. President

**Frances Hesselbein**  
National Executive Director,  
Girl Scouts of the USA

**Ruth C. Mueller-Hill**  
Retired Educator and Administrator

**E.D. Hirsch, Jr.**  
Kenan Professor of English,  
University of Virginia

**Bill Honig**  
California Superintendent of  
Public Instruction

**Sidney Hook**  
Professor of Philosophy, Hoover  
Institution/New York University

**Benjamin Hooks**  
President, NAACP

**David Hornbeck**  
State Superintendent of Schools,  
Maryland

**Shirley M. Hufstедler**  
Former U.S. Secretary of Education

**Jim Hunt**  
Former Governor, North Carolina

**David G. Imig**  
Executive Director, American Assn. of  
Colleges for Teacher Education

**Steve Janger**  
President, Close-Up Foundation

**James M. Jeffords**  
U.S. Representative, Vermont

**Barbara Jordan**  
Professor, University of Texas

**John T. Joyce**  
President, Int'l Union of Bricklayers  
& Allied Craftsmen, AFL-CIO

**Stephen S. Kaagan**  
Commissioner of Education, Vermont

**Ann Kahn**  
President, The National PTA

**David T. Kearns**  
Chairman & CEO, Xerox Corp.

**Rabbi Wolfe Kelman**  
The Rabbinical Assembly

**Mary Ann Kirk**  
President, Kirk Communications

**Paul G. Kirk, Jr.**  
Chairman, Democratic National  
Committee

**Lane Kirkland**  
President, AFL-CIO

**Jeane J. Kirkpatrick**  
Professor, Georgetown University

**Father Leonid Kishkovsky**  
Secretary, Orthodox Church  
in America

**Leszek Kolakowski**  
Professor, Committee on Social  
Thought, University of Chicago

**Ann Landers**  
Columnist

**Judith E. Lanier**  
Dean, College of Education,  
Michigan State University

**Norman Lear**  
Writer/Producer,  
Act III Communications

**Ernest W. Lefever**  
President, Ethics and Public  
Policy Center

**Leslie Lenkowsky**  
President, Institute for  
Educational Affairs

**Herbert London**  
Dean, Gallatin Division,  
New York University

**Ben H. Love**  
Chief Scout Executive,  
Boy Scouts of America

**Robert W. Lundeen**  
Retired Chairman,  
Dow Chemical Corp.

**Joe E. Lutyeharms**  
State Commissioner of Education,  
Nebraska

**Richard W. Lyman**  
President, Rockefeller Foundation

**John T. MacDonald**  
State Commissioner of Education,  
New Hampshire

**Charles Marshall**  
Vice Chairman, AT&T

**Jewell Jackson McCabe**  
President, National Coalition  
of 100 Black Women

**Tom McNeel**  
State Superintendent of Schools,  
West Virginia

**William H. McNeill**  
Professor of History Emeritus,  
University of Chicago

**Billy A. Melvin**  
Executive Director, National  
Association of Evangelicals

**Lenore Miller**  
President, Retail-Wholesale  
Department Store Union, AFL-CIO

**Richard D. Miller**  
Executive Director, American  
Assn. of School Administrators

**William G. Milliken**  
Former Governor, Michigan

**Walter F. Mondale**  
Attorney

**Edmund S. Muskie**  
Former U.S. Senator, former U.S.  
Secretary of State

**Martina Navratilova**  
Tennis Champion

**Richard John Neuhaus**  
Director, The Rockford Institute,  
Center on Religion & Society

**John Cardinal O'Connor**  
Archbishop of New York

**Joseph A. O'Hare, S.J.**  
President, Fordham University

**Frederick O'Neal**  
President, Assn. of Actors and  
Artistes of America, AFL-CIO

**Jack F. Otero**  
National President, Labor Council for  
Latin American Advancement

**Benjamin F. Payton**  
President, Tuskegee University

**Claiborne Pell**  
U.S. Senator, Rhode Island

**Charles Peters**  
Editor, The Washington Monthly

**Robert Pickus**  
President, World Without War Council

**Anthony T. Podesta**  
Founding President, People for the  
American Way

**Norman Podhoretz**  
Editor, Commentary Magazine

**Alvin F. Poussaint**  
Senior Associate in Psychiatry,  
Judge Baker Children's Center

**Charles N. Quigley**  
Executive Director,  
Center for Civic Education

**Ruth E. Randall**  
State Commissioner of Education,  
Minnesota

**Austin Ranney**  
Professor of Political Science,  
University of California/Berkeley

**Diane Ravitch**  
Chairman, Educational Excellence  
Network

**Harold Reynolds, Jr.**  
State Commissioner of Education,  
Massachusetts

**A. James Reichley**  
Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution

**Werner Rogers**  
State Superintendent of Schools,  
Georgia

**Bayard Rustin**  
President, A. Philip Randolph  
Educational Fund

**Ted Sanders**  
Superintendent, Illinois State  
Board of Education

**Samuel G. Sava**  
Executive Director, National Assn. of  
Elementary School Principals

**William Schneider**  
Columnist and Author,  
American Enterprise Institute

**Gene L. Schwilck**  
President, The Danforth Foundation

**Donna E. Shalala**  
President, Hunter College

**Albert Shanker**  
President, American  
Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

**Paul Simon**  
U.S. Senator, Illinois

**Theodore R.Sizer**  
Professor of Education,  
Brown University

**John B. Slaughter**  
Chancellor, University of Maryland,  
College Park

**Andrew F. Smith**  
President, Global Perspectives  
in Education

**Marshall S. Smith**  
Dean, School of Education,  
Stanford University

**Donald Stewart**  
President, The College Board

**Leonard Sussman**  
Executive Director, Freedom House

**John J. Sweeney**  
President, Service Employees  
International Union, AFL-CIO

**Gardner Taylor, D.D.**  
Senior Pastor, Concord Baptist Church

**Stephan Thernstrom**  
Winthrop Professor of History,  
Harvard University

**James R. Thompson**  
Governor, Illinois

**Scott D. Thomson**  
Executive Director, National Assn. of  
Secondary School Principals

**Michael Timpone**  
President, Teachers College  
Columbia University

**Gerald N. Tirozzi**  
State Commissioner of Education,  
Connecticut

**Liv Ullmann**  
Actress

**Gene Upshaw**  
President, National Football League  
Players Association, AFL-CIO

**Patrick Welsh**  
Teacher, Author *Tales Out of School*

**Elie Wiesel**  
Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the  
Humanities, Boston University

**George F. Will**  
Columnist

**Lynn R. Williams**  
International President, United  
Steel Workers of America, AFL-CIO

**William S. Woodside**  
Chairman, Executive Committee,  
Primerica Corp.

**William Wynn**  
President, United Food & Commercial  
Workers Int'l Union, AFL-CIO



\*Organizational affiliation is listed  
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# EDUCATION ★ ★ ★ F ★ O ★ R ★ ★ ★ DEMOCRACY

As the bicentennial for our Constitution approaches, we call for a special effort to raise the level of education for democratic citizenship. Given the complexities of our own society, of the rest of the world, and of the choices we confront, the need is self-evident and improvement is long past due.

As the years pass, we become an increasingly diverse people, drawn from many racial, national, linguistic, and religious origins. Our cultural heritage as Americans is as diverse as we are, with multiple sources of vitality and pride. But our political heritage is one—the vision of a common life in liberty, justice, and equality as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution two centuries ago.

To protect that vision, Thomas Jefferson prescribed a general education not just for the few but for all citizens, “to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom.” A generation later, Alexis de Tocqueville reminded us that our first duty was to “educate democracy.” He believed that all politics were but the playing out of the “notions and sentiments dominant in people.” These, he said, are the “real causes of all the rest.” Ideas—good and bad—have their consequences in every sphere of a nation’s life.

We cite de Tocqueville’s appeal with a sense of urgency, for we fear that many young Americans are growing up without the education needed to develop a solid commitment to those “notions and sentiments” essential to a democratic form of government. Although all the institutions that shape our private and public lives—family, church, school, government, media—share the responsibility for encouraging democratic values in our children, our focus here is on the nation’s schools and their teaching of the social studies and humanities.

In singling out the schools, we do not suggest that there was ever a golden age of education for citizenship, somehow lost in



**[We believe] that democracy is the worthiest form of human governance ever conceived.**

Our call for schools to purposely impart to their students the learning necessary for an informed, reasoned allegiance to the ideals of a free society rests on three convictions:

First, that democracy is the worthiest form of human governance ever conceived.

Second, that we cannot take its survival or its spread—or its perfection in practice—for granted. Indeed, we believe that the great central drama of modern history has been and continues to be the struggle to establish, preserve, and extend democracy—at home and abroad. We know that very much still needs doing to achieve justice and civility in our own society. Abroad, we note that, according to the Freedom House survey of political rights and civil liberties, only one-third of the world's people live under conditions that can be described as free.

Third, we are convinced that democracy's survival depends upon our transmitting to each new generation the political vision of liberty and equality that unites us as Americans—and a deep loyalty to the political institutions our founders put together to fulfill

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that vision. As Jack Beatty reminded us in a *New Republic* article one Fourth of July, ours is a patriotism “not of blood and soil but of values, and those values are liberal and humane.”<sup>1</sup>

Such values are neither revealed truths nor natural habits. There is no evidence that we are born with them. Devotion to human dignity and freedom, to equal rights, to social and economic justice, to the rule of law, to civility and truth, to tolerance of diversity, to mutual assistance, to personal and civic responsibility, to self-restraint and self-respect—all these must be taught and learned and practiced. They cannot be taken for granted or regarded as merely one set of options against which any other may be accepted as equally worthy.

recent years. It is reported that in 1943—that patriotic era—fewer than half of surveyed college freshmen could name four points in the Bill of Rights. Our purpose here is not to argue over the past, but only to ask that everyone with a role in schooling now join to work for decisive improvement.

## WHY WE ARE CONCERNED

Are the ideas and institutions—and above all the worth—of democracy adequately conveyed in American schools? Do our graduates come out of school possessing the mature political judgment Jefferson hoped for, an ability to decide for themselves “what will secure or endanger” their freedom? Do they know of democracy's short and troubled tenure in human history? Do they comprehend its vulnerabilities? Do they recognize and accept their responsibility for preserving and extending their political inheritance?

No systematic study exists to answer these questions. We lack adequate information on students' knowledge, beliefs, and enthusiasms. There has been little examination of school textbooks and supplementary materials, of state and district requirements in history and social sciences, or of what takes place in everyday school practice. A study of how high school history and government textbooks convey the principles of democracy is underway, and we hope that several other studies will be launched soon.

Meanwhile, the evidence we do have—although fragmentary and often anecdotal—is not encouraging. We know, for instance, of the significant decline over several decades in the amount of time devoted to historical studies in American schools, even in the college preparatory track; today, fewer than twenty states require students to take more than a year of history in order to graduate. We know that, as a result, many students are unaware of prominent people and seminal ideas and events that have shaped our past and created our present. A recent study shows that a majority of high school seniors do not know what the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was about.<sup>2</sup> Nor could majorities identify Winston Churchill or Joseph Stalin. Without knowledge of our own struggle for civil rights, how much can students understand of democracy's needs at home—what it has taken and will still take to extend it. And what can they know of democracy's capacity to respond to problems and to reform? In ignorance of the Second World War and its aftermath, how much can they grasp of the cost and necessity of defending democracy in the world? Having never

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debated and discussed how the world came to be as it is, the democratic citizen will not know what is worth defending, what should be changed, and which imposed orthodoxies must be resisted.

We are concerned also that among some educators (as among some in the country at large), there appears a certain lack of confidence in our own liberal, democratic values, an unwillingness to draw normative distinctions between them and the ideas of non-democratic regimes. Any number of popular curriculum materials deprecate the open preference for liberal democratic values as "ethnocentric." One widely distributed teaching guide on human rights accords equal significance to freedom of speech, the right to vote, and the guarantee of due process on the one hand, with the "right" to take vacations on the other.<sup>3</sup>

In the rush to present all cultures in a positive light, the unpleasant realities of some regimes are ignored, as when this guide talks of the high value accorded the right to strike by governments in Eastern Europe (a notion that would surely be disputed by the supporters of Solidarnosc). Or as when another guide—financed by the U.S. Department of Education—lauds the Cuban government's commitment to women's rights, noting with approval that men who refuse to share equally in household responsibilities can be penalized with "re-education or assignment to farm work."<sup>4</sup>

This insistence upon maintaining neutrality among competing values, this tendency to present political systems as not better or worse but only different, is illustrated by this test question designed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress and



administered in the 1981-82 school year to students aged nine, thirteen, and seventeen:

Maria and Ming are friends. Ming's parents were born in China and have lived in the United States for twenty years. "People have no freedom in China," Maria insists. "There is only one party in the election and the newspapers are run by the government."

"People in China do have freedom," Ming insists. "No one goes hungry. Everyone has an opportunity to work and medical care is free. Can there be greater freedom than that?"

What is the best conclusion to draw from this debate?

- A. Ming does not understand the meaning of freedom.
- B. Maria and Ming differ in their opinions of the meaning of freedom.
- C. There is freedom in the U.S. but not in China.
- D. People have greater freedom in China than in the U.S.

According to NAEP, choice B—"Maria and Ming differ in their opinions of the meaning of freedom"—is correct. The test's framers explained in a 1983 report summarizing the survey's findings that students choosing answer B "correctly indicated that the concept of freedom can mean different things to different people in different circumstances." And, of course, in the most narrow, literal sense, B is correct.

Around the world, people and governments do apply different meanings to the word "freedom." Some states that deny freedom of religion, speech, and conscience nonetheless define themselves as free. But we need not accept their Orwellian self-definitions as if words had no meaning. Were we to use Ming's definition of freedom—a job, medical care, and ample food—many of history's slaves and today's prisoners would have to be called "free"! To offer such a definition, and to leave it at that, without elaboration—as NAEP has done—is grossly to mislead students about history, about politics, and above all, about human rights. In fact, the "rights" to food and work and medical care, when separated from the rights to free speech, a free press, and free elections, are not rights at all. They are rewards from the government that are easily bestowed and just as easily betrayed.

We are rightly accustomed to honest scrutiny of our own faults, and so it is all the more inexplic-

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able when educational materials sidestep or whitewash violations of human rights and pervasive injustice in other lands. Students need an honest, rigorous education that allows them to penetrate Orwellian rhetoric and accurately compare the claims and realities of our own society and those of others. Such a goal is compromised when the drawing of normative distinctions and values is frowned upon as a failure of objectivity, on the premise that all values are arbitrary, arising from personal taste or conditioning, without cognitive or rational bases. They are not to be ranked or ordered, the argument runs, only "clarified"; so the teacher must strive to be "value-free." But such a formulation confuses objectivity with neutrality. It is hardly necessary to be neutral in regard to freedom over bondage, or the rule of law over the rule of the mob, or fair wages over exploitation, in order to describe objectively the differences among them, or among their human consequences.

What of Nazi values and their consequences? To grasp the human condition in the twentieth century objectively, we need to understand the problems of German society that pushed so many to join the Nazis and to acquiesce in their crimes. But to "understand" is not to forgive, or to trivialize, those crimes. Or to teach, in Richard Hunt's phrase, "no-fault, guilt-free history" where nobody is to blame for anything and fixing responsibility is disallowed.

Finally, no discussion of the discomfort that some feel in teaching children to cherish democracy can fail to mention that

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some may be indifferent, or even alienated from American democracy, out of disillusion over its failings in practice. The postwar confidence in the American way of life was undermined by the political upheavals of the 1960s and early 1970s. First, America had its long-overdue reckoning with the historic national shame of racial discrimination. Then the country found itself mired in the Vietnam War, and was further shocked and disheartened by assassinations and the events of Watergate. As we strug-

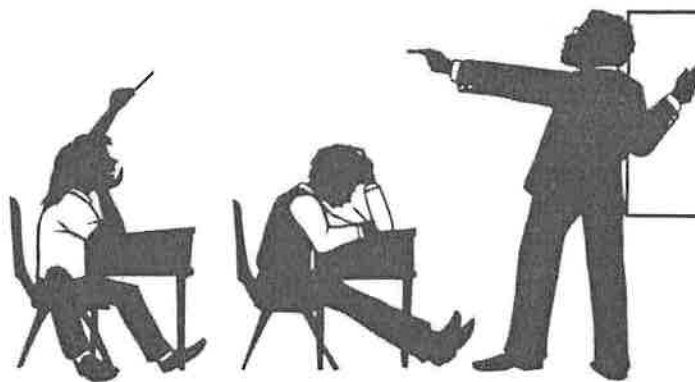
gled to confront our failings and correct our flaws, legitimate self-criticism turned at times into an industry of blame. The United States and its democratic allies were often presented as though we alone had failed, and as though our faults invalidated the very

ideals that taught us how to recognize failure when we met it.

While the realities of our own society are daily evident, many students remain ignorant of other, quite different, worlds. How can they be expected to value or defend freedom unless they have a clear grasp of the alternatives against which to measure it? The systematic presentation of reality abroad must be an integral part of the curriculum. What are the political systems in competition with our own, and what is life like for the people who live under them? If students know only half the world, they will not know nearly enough. We cannot afford what one young writer recalled as a "gaping hole" in his prestigious, private high school's curriculum.<sup>5</sup> He and his classmates, he says, were "wonderfully instructed in America's problems . . ."

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but we were at the same time being educated in splendid isolation from the notion that democratic societies had committed enemies; we learned next to nothing of the sorts of alternatives to bourgeois liberalism that the twentieth century had to offer . . . [We] learned nothing of what it meant to be a small farmer in Stalin's Russia or Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam. That it had been part of Communist policy to "liquidate as a class" the "kulaks" was something we had never heard spoken of. It was perfectly possible to graduate from the Academy with high honors and be altogether incapable of writing three factual paragraphs on the history of any Communist regime (or for that matter of any totalitarian regime whether of the Right or Left)."



## WHAT THE CITIZEN NEEDS TO KNOW

What was, and is, lacking is a fullness of knowledge, an objective and balanced picture of world realities, historical and contemporary. We do not ask for propaganda, for crash courses in the right attitudes, or for knee-jerk patriotic drill. We do not want to capsule democracy's argument into slogans, or pious texts, or bright debaters' points. The history and nature and needs of

democracy are much too serious and subtle for that.

**We do not ask for propaganda, for crash courses in the right attitudes, nor for knee-jerk patriotic drill. . . . We do not propose to exclude the honest study of the doctrines and systems of others. Or to censor history, our own or others', as closed societies do . . .**

Education for democracy is not indoctrination, which is the deliberate exclusion or distortion of studies in order to induce belief by irrational means. We do not propose to exclude the honest study of the doctrines and systems of others. Or to censor history—our own or others'—as closed societies do, or to hide our flaws or explain them away. We do not need a bodyguard of lies. We can afford to present ourselves in the totality of our acts. And we can afford to tell the truth about others, even when it favors them, and compli-

cates that which indoctrination would keep simple and comforting.

And then we leave it to our students to apply their knowledge, values, and experiences to the world they must create. We do not propose a "right" position on, say, American involvement in the Vietnam War; or on the type of nuclear weapons, if any, we should have; or on what our policy in Central America should be; or on whether the E.R.A. should be passed or hiring quotas supported. Good democrats can and do differ on these matters. On these and a host of other policy issues, there is no one "truth." Our task is more limited, and yet in its way much greater: to teach our children to cherish freedom and to accept responsibility for preserving and extending it, confident that they will find their own best ways of doing so, on the basis of free, uncoerced thoughts.

The kind of critical thinking we wish to encourage must rest on a solid base of factual knowledge. In this regard, we reject educational theory that considers any kind of curricular content to be as good as any other, claiming that all students need to know is "how to learn," that no particular body of knowledge is more

worth noting than any other, that in an age of rapid change, all knowledge necessarily becomes "obsolete." We insist, on the contrary, that the central ideas, events, people, and works that have shaped our world, for good and ill, are not at all obsolete. Instead, the quicker the pace of change, the more critical it will be for us to remember them and understand them well. We insist that absent this knowledge, citizens remain helpless to make the wise judgments hoped for by Jefferson.

First, citizens must know the fundamental ideas central to the political vision of the eighteenth-century founders—the vision that holds us together as one people of many diverse origins and cultures. Not only the words—but the sources, the meanings, and the implications of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Federalist Papers, the Bill of Rights.

To go deeper than the words, and truly to understand the ideas, students must know where and how they arose, in whose minds, stirred by what other ideas. What historical circumstances were hospitable, and encouraged people to think such things? What circumstances were hostile? What were the prevailing assumptions about human nature? About the relationship between God and themselves? About the origins of human society and the meaning and direction of human history? To understand our ideas requires a knowledge of the whole sweep of Western civilization, from the ancient Jews and Christians—whose ethical beliefs gave rise to democratic thought—to the Greeks and Romans, through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Reformation, the English Revolution—so important to America—the eighteenth century Enlightenment, and the French Revolution, a violent cousin to our own. Such a curriculum is indispensable. Without it, our principles of government—and the debates over them ever since—are not fully comprehensible. They are mere words, floating in air without source, life, drama, or meaning.

Second, citizens must know how democratic ideas have been turned into institutions and practices—the history of the origins and growth and adventures of democratic societies on earth, past and present. How have these societies fared? Who has defended them and why? Who has sought their undoing and why? What conditions—economic, social, cultural, religious, military—have helped to shape democratic practice? What conditions have made it dif-

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difficult—sometimes even impossible—for such societies to take root? Again, it is indispensable to know the facts of modern history, dating back at least to the English Revolution, and forward to our own century's total wars; to the failure of the nascent liberal regimes of Russia, Italy, Germany, Spain, and Japan; to the totalitarianism, oppressions, and mass exterminations of our time. How has it all happened?

Third, citizens in our society need to understand the current condition of the world and how it got that way, and to be prepared to act upon the challenges to democracy in our own day. What are the roots of our present dangers and of the choices before us? For intelligent citizenship, we need a thorough grasp of the daily workings of our own society, as well as the societies of our friends, of our adversaries, and of the Third World, where so many live amid poverty and violence, with little freedom and little hope.

**How can we avoid making all of this into nothing more than just another . . . parade of facts?**

This is no small order. It requires systematic study of American government and society; of comparative ideologies and political, economic, and social systems; of the religious beliefs that have shaped our values and our cultures and those that have shaped others; and of physical and human geography. How can we avoid making all of this into nothing more than just another, and perhaps longer, parade of facts, smothering the desire to learn? Apart from needed changes in materials and methods, in the structure of curricula and of the school day itself, we believe that one answer is to focus upon the fateful drama of the historical struggle for democracy. The fate of real men and women, here and abroad, who have worked to bring to life the ideas we began with deserves our whole attention and that of our students. It is a suspenseful, often tragic, drama that continues today, often amid poverty and social turmoil; advocates of democracy remain, as before, prey to extremists of Left and Right well-armed with force and simple answers. The ongoing, worldwide struggle for a free center of "broad, sunlit uplands," in Churchill's phrase, is the best hope of the earth, and we would make it the heart of a reordered curriculum for history and social studies.



## HISTORY AND THE HUMANITIES AS THE CORE OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

We regard the study of history as the chief subject in education for democracy, much as Jefferson and other founders of the United States did two centuries ago. In revamping the social studies curriculum, we should start with the obvious: History is not the enemy of the social sciences, but is instead their indispensable source of nourishment, order, and perspective. We aim at nothing less than helping the student to comprehend what is important, not merely to memorize fact and formula. But it is clearly impossible to reach genuine comprehension of economic, political, social, and cultural questions without examining them in their historic context. To pull "case studies" and "concepts" out of historical narrative, as so many social studies programs do, not only confuses students but is likely to distort the truth of the human condition.

Of all the subjects in the curriculum, history alone affords the perspective that students need to compare themselves realistically with others—in the past and

elsewhere on earth—and to think critically, to look behind assertions and appearances, to ask for the "whole story," to judge meaning and value for themselves. History is also the integrative subject, upon which the coherence and usefulness of other subjects depend, especially the social sciences but also much of literature and the arts. Taught in historical context, the formulations and insights of the social sciences take on life, blood, drama, and significance.

And, in turn, their organizing concepts and questions can help rescue history from the dry recital of dates and acts so many students have rightly complained about.

We are pleased that several major reform proposals agree on the centrality of history.<sup>6</sup> TheodoreSizer, in *Horace's Compromise*, makes the joint study of history and ideas one of the four required areas of learning throughout the secondary years. *The Paideia Proposal* puts narrative history and geography at the center of the social studies curriculum, during every grade beyond the elementary. Ernest Boyer's Carnegie Report, *High School*, asks for a year

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of the history of Western Civilization, a year of American history, another of American government, and a term's study of non-Western society. The Council for Basic Education sets an "irreducible minimum" of two years of American history, one year of European, and the study of at least one non-Western society in depth. The state of California now calls for at least two years of high school history.

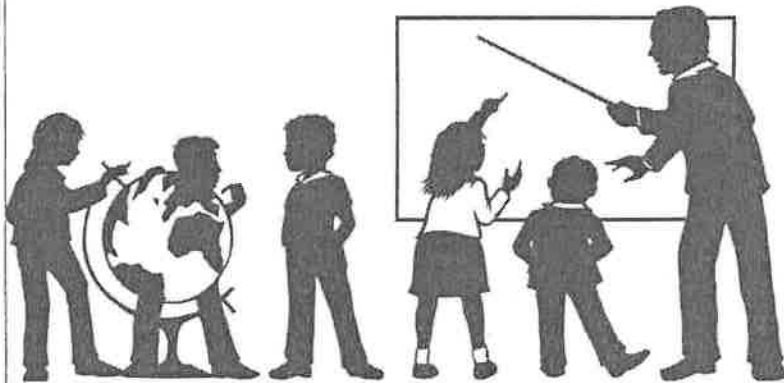
We also ask for wider reading and study in the humanities. For we are concerned, again, with values, with every citizen's capacity for judging the moral worth of things. In this, courses in "values

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clarification" do not get us very far. They either feign neutrality or descend to preachiness. Values and moral integrity are better discovered by students in their reading of history, of literature, of philosophy, and of biography. Values are not "taught," they are encountered, in school and life.

The humanities in our schools must not be limited, as they so often are now, to a few brief

samples of Good Things, but should embrace as much as possible of the whole range of the best that has been thought and said and created, from the ancient to the most recent. Otherwise, students have little chance to confront the many varied attempts to answer the great questions of life—or even to be aware that such questions exist. The quest for worth and meaning is indispensable to the democratic citizen. The essence of democracy, its reason for being,

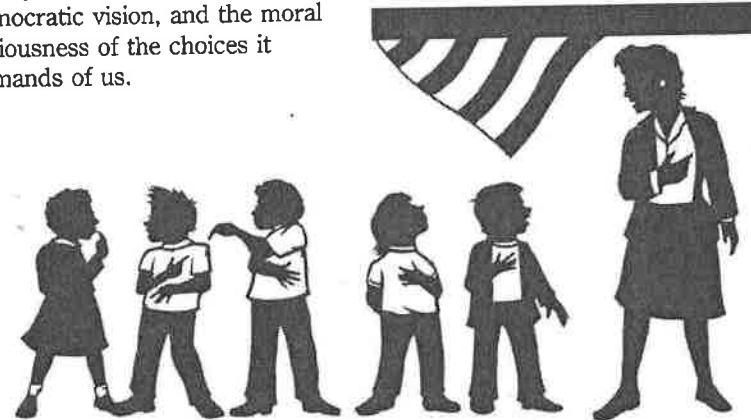


is constant choice. We choose what the good life is, and how our society—including its schools—may order its priorities so that the good life is possible, according to what we ourselves value most. That is what de Tocqueville meant by the "notions and sentiments" of a people.

Education for democracy, then, must extend to education in moral issues, which our eighteenth century founders took very seriously indeed. This is hardly surprising. The basic ideas of liberty, equality, and justice, of civil, political, and economic rights and obligations are all assertions of right and wrong, of moral values.

Such principles impel the citizen to make moral choices, repeatedly to decide between right and wrong or, just as often, between one right and another. The authors of the American testament had no trouble distinguishing moral education from religious instruction, and neither should we. The democratic state can take no part in deciding which, if any, church forms its citizens' consciences. But it is absurd to argue that the state, or its schools, cannot be concerned with citizens' ability to tell right from wrong, and to prefer one over the other in all matters that bear upon the common public life. This would be utterly to misunderstand the democratic vision, and the moral seriousness of the choices it demands of us.

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## CONCLUSIONS

In calling for a decisive improvement of education for democracy, we are well aware that this will require a sea-change in the typical curriculum. Specifically, we call for the following:

1. A more substantial, engaging, and demanding social studies curriculum for all of our children—one that helps students to comprehend what is important, not merely to memorize names, dates, and places. The required curriculum should include the history of the United States and of democratic civilization, the study of American government and world geography, and of at least one non-Western society in depth.
2. A reordering of the curriculum around a core of history and geography—with history providing the perspective for considered judgment and geography confronting students with the hard realities that shape so many political, economic, and social decisions. Around this core of history and geography, students should be introduced to the added perspectives offered by economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and political science.
3. More history, chronologically taught and taught in ways that capture the imagination of students. Historical biography, colorful historical narrative, and debate over the central ideas that have brought us here are all appealing to students. And we recommend that a central theme in the study of history be the dramatic struggles of people around the globe and across the centuries to win, preserve, and extend their freedom.
4. More attention to world studies, especially to the realistic and unsentimental study of other nations—both democratic and non-democratic. Comparative study of politics, ideology, economics, and culture, and especially the efforts of citizens to improve their lot through protest and reform, offers students a healthy perspective on our own problems and a needed window on problems elsewhere.
5. A broader, deeper learning in the humanities, particularly in literature, ideas, and biography, so that students may encounter and comprehend the values upon which democracy depends. Through such study, moral education—not religious education and not neutral values clarification—can be restored to high standing in our schools.

We understand that such a major reform of the curriculum will require more effective textbooks and auxiliary materials, aimed less at "coverage" than at comprehension of what is most worth learning. It will require continuing collaboration between faculty members from the schools and universities, where both work together as equals to clarify what is most worth teaching in their

subjects and to devise ways to convey the material to diverse clienteles. And it requires new approaches to teacher education, both pre-service and in-service, to help teachers present the revamped and strengthened curriculum.

Our proposal asks for great intensity of teaching effort. Students will not reach genuine understanding of ideas, events, and institutions through rote learning from texts, classroom lecture, and recitation followed by short-answer quizzes. We ask for active learning on the part of students—ample time for class discussions, for coaching, for frequent seminars to explore ideas, and for regular writing assignments.

We know that teachers would like nothing better than to work in this way. We also know that they cannot be expected to do so when they are responsible for 150 or more students, coming at them in a kaleidoscopic, five-times-fifty minute daily lockstep, frequently requiring three or four different preparations. We thus ally

ourselves with recent calls to dramatically restructure education. Over time, we must sharply alter the management, the schedules, and the staffing patterns of our schools to afford teachers more authority, a wider latitude of methods and materials, more time to devote to the intellectual lives of fewer students, and more time to devote to their own intellectual growth.

We understand that the dramatic changes we call for—in curriculum and structure—will not come easily. We know also that these changes can be made, and must be.

As citizens of a democratic republic, we are part of the noblest political effort in history. Our children must learn, and we must teach them, the knowledge, values, and habits that will best protect and extend this precious inheritance. Today we ask our schools to make a greater contribution to that effort and we ask all Americans to help them do it.

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