# *Introduction:*

# *Why this study and why a civic core?*

Since our nation's birth, the prime reason for free public education in a common school has been to nurture politically perceptive, committed citizens. Thomas Jefferson argued that each of us should be equipped to make our own decisions on what would "secure or endanger" our freedom. A generation later, Alexis de Tocqueville thought the spread of democracy—with all its possibilities and challenges—was inevitable. The power of ideas, he argued—both good and bad—would henceforth govern every sphere of a democratic nation's life. Thus he declared political education to be democracy's first need and first duty.

## *Why this study?*

Like Jefferson and de Tocqueville, most citizens want to know that children are being prepared to assume the responsibilities of citizenship. For this, they need to know whether their state's official standards for social studies—history, civics, geography, and economics—serve to help, hinder, or do nothing in the education of young citizens. Well before the horror of September 11th, Americans were told that such education was in trouble. Tests and polls were saying what they have for fifty years: that secondary and college students, and indeed most of the rest of us, have only a feeble grasp of politics and a vague awareness of the history—especially the political history—of the United States and the world.

It was news, but not new, when a federal assessment of student achievement—the 2001 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—found that only 17 percent of eighth graders scored at proficient or advanced levels in U.S. history. Less than half knew the Supreme Court could decide a law's constitutionality. Worse, the percentage of high-schoolers scoring at the proficient or advanced level dropped to 11 percent. Only a third knew what the Progressive Era was and most were not sure whom we fought in World War II.

Other bad signs accumulate. The young vote less and less, and do not read of politics or become involved in electoral campaigns. Many loudly mimic adult cynicism about "politics." Higher education promises little help. Not long ago, 81 percent of seniors at 55 leading colleges and universities earned an F or D when quizzed on twenty high school American history questions. Asked about Reconstruction, 60 percent thought it referred to repairing physical damage from the Civil War. Editorials raged. The Senate and House jointly told university leaders to rethink their curricula, despite the fact that most had long ago dropped history and

government as a requirement for the "general education" of students.

Perhaps worse for democracy than low scores and the public distrust of politics, however, is the low view of the people's intelligence held by many leaders in politics, business and the media. That negative view forces candidates and office-holders to mask the truth, hiding difficulties they know are there in favor of popular, but facile answers. History shows how dangerous it is for democracy when leaders fear to say anything new, complex or difficult, lest demagogues unseat them with cheap, one-dimensional rhetoric.

Since before the nation's birth, we have been told that only an educated people can let public debate rise above sea level. Now as ever, at stake is democracy's gamble that enough of us have—and can show that we have—sufficient grasp of public issues to liberate those leaders who would speak the truth and deter others from feeding us pabulum. What, then, must we know? This study examines how forty-eight states (plus the District of Columbia and the Department of Defense schools) chose to answer this question through their standards for social studies content in the secondary grades.

That 50 state and district teams labored long and hard to set common content standards is much to their credit. It also shows how far we have come since the 1984 publication of A Nation at Risk and the 1989 national education summit, where the idea of common academic standards for all students was advocated as America's best hope to raise the quality and equality of its schools. For this study, we examined all published "standards" documents (some are referred to by other names) from forty-eight states (Iowa and Rhode Island do not have them statewide), D.C. and the DOD schools. They list the knowledge and skills students should have by the end of high school from their pre-college social studies subjects: history, civics, geography, and economics. Many also set an order of courses from kindergarten through high school to convey content across the grades and set grade levels for state tests.

This study deals only with what states say should be taught and learned. It does not evaluate teaching practices, or teacher preparation, school resources, or assessments of student achievement. Statewide standards are still new to the nation and their implementation has only begun. Thus, what follows tries to answer one question only: If implemented, would the standards be likely to improve students' political education, or not?

What we found varies widely. Much good work has been done in many states. Some standards could surely help to broaden and deepen student understanding. More would do so if modestly revised. Others, unless wholly rewritten, would make things worse by dragging teachers away from the good work they already do. The worst could also happen, of course, even with the best standards, if tests are not aligned with those standards (still the case in some states), or if districts fail to prepare teachers to teach the new content the standards call for, or if state and district authorities fail to provide the proper resources and working conditions for a standards-based system to succeed.

# *Why a common core in a diverse society?*

The work of setting standards—deciding what is most important and what is less-important or not important—is crucial. So is bringing what is most important into a common "core" of civic/political studies, ensuring equal opportunity to learn—a primary aim of standards-based reform. From proposed national standards drafted by experts in each subject down to those of the states, the most common failure is in not deciding on priorities. This arises from the contentious nature of

social studies, especially history's mountains of content, much of it controversial.

Rather than battle over what to put in and leave out, writers put in everything, either in the form of endless specifics or vast headings that could "cover" any and all unnamed essentials.

Still, the battles go on. And, since no school can teach everything in a limited amount of time, standards are often attacked and revised—wrenched in this direction or that, ignored or narrowly interpreted by local interests. Schools are left adrift, at the mercy of shifting views. All this also imposes impossible demands on the teachers and test-writers, who are charged with tailoring instruction and assessments to the standards.

The common civic core offers two remedies. The "civic" part allows educators to focus on history/social studies topics that best nourish citizens' political judgment. The "core," properly designed, frees generous portions of instructional time and allows districts, local schools, and teachers to select other topics for themselves. State tests can then give priority to predictable political topics, broadly defined, to meet what the social studies establishment has always called its prime responsibility: preparing a competent citizenry.

To fulfill its purpose, a civic core must be required of all students and be uniform in its main focus, though not in detail or methods. The same learning for everyone? The usual objections "Whose culture is it? Who is to say?" should not apply to civic education. Nobody would ask the same of the other two purposes of education: preparing us for work and for private, personal fulfillment. The answer is that citizens of whatever class, race, age, gender, religion or cultural taste need a common body of knowledge that gives them the power to talk to each other as equals on their society's priorities, each others' experiences in it, and the political choices it confronts. Together, they need to grasp what speakers and newspapers say, and what they do not say but could.

The past repeatedly proves that no sort of diversity is safe, or has a chance at equality, except among people with common democratic ideas of politics, who also know and have learned to worry about the dangers to democracy and what it has always cost to keep it alive. This is a matter of rights and survival. A democracy has a right to ask every student to master a civic core, and students have the right as citizens not to be allowed to avoid it, because democracy's survival depends upon our opening to each new generation the political vision of liberty and equality that unites us as Americans. The values that sustain democracy are not natural habits; we are not born with them. Devotion to human equality and freedom, to social and economic justice, to truth and rule of law, to acceptance of diversity and mutual aid, to personal self-restraint and self-respect—all these need teaching, learning, and practice. They are not just options the society can do without.

As noted above, a common core of learning is often challenged as unsuitable in a society as diverse as ours in race, ethnicity, religion and culture. An effective civic core will not emerge, and would not work if it did emerge, unless teachers, scholars, citizens/parents and policymakers can answer this challenge, directly and honestly, to the satisfaction of most Americans. The answer has several aspects.

First, modern democratic schools must work at three distinct kinds of education because in each of us are three different "persons": a worker, a citizen, and a private individual with, we hope, a meaningful inner life that fortifies both work and citizenship. The Declaration of Independence touches upon these three aims in citing Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. Work sustains life, citizenship safeguards liberty, and personal cultivation enables the pursuit of happiness, however defined.

Second, saying that America is so fragmented that it is oppressive to teach any particular history or tradition ignores the very different needs of education's three aims. True, what students need to prepare for work and for private life can, and very often should, vary widely.

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But education for citizenship is special. It is precisely our common political heritage that frees us to differ from one another, yet live together in relative peace and liberty. This heritage is also what impels us to respect and defend the rights of those we see as different from ourselves.

Third, without admitting it (often without knowing it), American school reformers are finally copying what Europeans did a generation ago in the name of civic equality: providing all students, regardless of likely employment or social status, with a common core of academic studies into the secondary grades. This was not only to prepare young Europeans for work in the new postwar economies, but to produce competent and committed citizens. In reaction to Nazi occupation and their own collaboration in resistance, many liberals and conservatives saw a self-evident necessity of democracy—that all citizens must be educated well beyond the narrow confines of their jobs, whether they be unskilled laborers or highly qualified professionals.

In his 1965 book, *The Genius of American Education*, Lawrence Cremin issued the same challenge to Americans:

> On the basis of prudence alone, no modern industrial nation can fail to afford every one of its citizens a maximum opportunity for intellectual and moral development. And beyond prudence, there is justice. No society that calls itself democratic can settle for an education that does not encourage universal acquaintance with the best that has been thought and said.... Any lesser goal,it seems to me, is narrow and unlovely, and ultimately destructive of democracy.†

Finally, a civic core as political education of citizens is not indoctrination, but a challenge to the very notion of conformity. Its main lines were set forth in the 1987 booklet Education *for Democracy: A Statement of Principles.* (See Appendix D for the full text.) The late Albert Shanker was the force behind this publication, which was co-sponsored by the American Federation of Teachers, Freedom House, and the Education Excellence Network. It was signed by 150 American leaders across the political, professional, and educational spectrum, including Presidents Ford and Carter, Senators Hatch and Kennedy, Lynne Cheney and Marian Wright Edelman, E. D. Hirsch, Jr. and Theodore Sizer, Norman Lear and Norman Podhoretz, Barbara Jordan, Bayard Rustin and Elie Wiesel. What was needed, it said, was not indoctrination, but "a fullness of knowledge, an objective and balanced picture of world realities, historical and contemporary."

> We do not ask for propaganda,or for crash courses in the right attitudes,nor for knee-jerk patriotic drill. We do not want to capsulize 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.

The first part of this report suggests the desirable subject matter content for a civic core of learning in the secondary grades, and offers five criteria by which state standards documents may be evaluated. Next appears a review of the general difficulties encountered by writers of standards and frameworks, with emphasis on the needed study of political ideas and institutions, of United States and world history, and of Western and non-Western studies.

Part One ends by comparing the state documents according to the five criteria. Part Two contains separate descriptions and evaluations of standards for each state. Appendix A offers one of many possible versions of what a civic core for the secondary grades could look like. Appendix B offers suggestions on how to use teaching time and still leave time for other history/social studies topics. Appendix C contains state responses to the evaluations of standards. In cases where the findings were changed, based on new information that the state provided, the relevant points are highlighted. Appendix D is a reprint of 1987's *Education for Democracy: A Statement of Principles.*

† Cremin, Lawrence A. (1965).The Genius of American Education. Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press.