

Californians for Civic Learning Commentary:
The Need to Teach About our Democratic Ideals and Structures
August 27, 2021

“A Republic, if you can keep it” — Benjamin Franklin

Anti-democratic forces are growing stronger in our country and threaten the stability of our fragile republic. California students need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and dispositions to be informed, tolerant and engaged citizens. They need to understand why and how to find common ground in our pluralistic society. We must instill a shared commitment to preserving and striving for our nation’s ideals.

This is the role of robust, grade-level aligned and matriculated civics education, taught by professionally developed instructors who are guided by high-quality curriculum and the recently updated and award-winning California History-Social Science Framework that references civics and the recently adopted California Ethnic Studies Model curriculum.

Policymakers, community stakeholders and representatives, administrators, teachers, and parents cannot marginalize this pivotal subject-matter out of fear of cultural controversies. Political extremists are calling for either whitewashing our nation’s historic failings or fixating on nothing but our country’s past and present shortcomings. Our schools may not be able to avoid this growing tumult, but they can and should offer instructors and students a clear, directional beacon to navigate these dangerous tides.

We believe schools should help students understand, cherish, and be willing to protect our democratic ideals, norms, and practices and pursue the continual struggle to make our nation “a more perfect union.”

We believe students should understand the organization and structure of American governance, the role of private institutions and community organizations, the issues that have tested our nation’s unity, and the opportunities to realize its ideals and practices moving forward.

We believe students should learn America’s ever-evolving story and the stories of the various groups and cultures which have contributed to the creation of a multi-racial, multi-ethnic diverse country comprised of citizens from all parts of the globe. We believe students should learn when we have failed to live up to our ideals, such as slavery and discrimination, and the ongoing progress we are making to correct these evils.

We believe schools can no longer avoid controversial and complex topics, with global information flow in the palm of every student’s hand. We therefore believe instruction should be neutral and unbiased, where students learn the skills and dispositions to argue from facts and evidence without personal attacks, while listening to and understanding alternative viewpoints.

These value statements have changed and expanded over time and there are continuing disagreements over their meaning. But a good curriculum incorporating these values as outlined in the California History-Social Studies Framework encourages citizenship grounded in these democratic ideals and habits. The framework also includes expositions of why these values are crucial to the health of our nation and what happens when they start to erode as has occurred in some failed democracies. As important, it recommends a history which includes our struggles to live up to those ideals which sometimes were successful and often fell short. Finally, the framework is a useful tool to combat extremist pressure groups.



We reject the ideas of those that advocate for:

- instilling collective guilt in today's children (while we support efforts to examine the horrors of our past and develop a passion for justice going forward);
- the idea that American democratic ideals and institutions are corrupted beyond repair;
- believing that any one identity is the only lens through which to view our history and that a person's identity limits legitimate comment on discrimination; and
- discounting the progress the nation has made in becoming a more perfect union (granting that we still have a long way to go).

We reject the ideas of those who seek to:

- present a whitewashed version of American history and civics;
- disregard the evils of slavery, genocide, and discrimination in our past;
- refuse to address continuing injustice and racism in the past and present; and
- pass dangerous laws and school policies prohibiting content that doesn't support their views.

It's time all California schools, at every grade level, devote significant instructional time to teaching students their civic responsibilities and rights before the noble promise of this fragile republic disintegrates into tribal strife and economic collapse.

We believe students should understand and commit to our democratic creed originating in the universal ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution including:

- the ideals of consent of the governed, majority rule with protections for the minority, the right to vote, periodic elections, the peaceful transfer of power, federalism and the separation of power, an independent judiciary, and protections against using government power to harass individuals or groups;
- individual rights and protections from the government
- individual responsibility for acting as a good citizen;
- liberty and autonomy to pursue individual or group goals;
- tolerance, equality, and respect for the humanity of fellow citizens inclusive of identity, culture, or opinion;
- the pursuit of justice;
- the rule of law, equal protection of the law, and the idea that no person is above the law;
- free speech, a free press, and freedom of religion;
- accountability and transparency of government and the idea that elected representatives must respect our institutions and be accountable for their actions, veracity, and lack of corruption;
- the importance of compromise based on discussion, deliberation, and truth grounded in evidence and facts; and
- the idea that the purpose of those in government is not simply to enrich themselves but to further "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" for the people and to protect the Constitution.

We hope this statement is useful to those advocating for a robust civic instruction and engagement program and therefore, call upon boards of trustees, superintendents, administrators, teachers, students, families, business and community organizations and individuals, private and public civic institutions, and policymakers to work collaboratively to prioritize civic learning by adopting policies and resolutions to:

- provide ample professional development for teachers and administrators;
- ensure that civics is taught appropriately with adequate instructional time at each grade level per the California History-Social Science Framework;
- encourage and provide avenues for all students to qualify to earn the State Seal of Civic Engagement;
- promote and support student leadership and civic engagement inside and outside the school day;



- dedicate adequate funding to support civic learning; and
- dedicate efforts for schools to receive a Civic Learning Award sponsored by the California Chief Justice and State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Californians for Civic Learning, including the following individuals:

- Dave Gordon, Sacramento County Superintendent of Schools
- Jeff Harris, Former Chief Executive Officer, Junior State of America
- Michelle M. Herczog, Past President, National Council for the Social Studies
- Bill Honig, Former State Superintendent of Public Instruction and Chair, California Instructional Quality Commission
- Michael Matsuda, Superintendent, Anaheim Union High School District
- John Minkler, Co-Founder and Chief Operations Officer, Civic Education Center
- Stephen Morris, Chief Executive Officer, Civic Education Center
- Robert Nelson, Superintendent, Fresno Unified School District
- Dan Schnur, Former Chairman, California Fair Political Practices Commission
- Amanda Susskind, President, Constitutional Rights Foundation