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Civic Education in Massachusetts

Preparing Students for Citizenship

A recent Pioneer Institute White Paper examined the state of civic education in Massachusetts, comparing the performance of district, charter, and private—including parochial and secular private—schools in preparing students for responsible citizenship. To mark the study's release, Pioneer sponsored a Forum with the author, ***David Campbell****, a research fellow at Harvard University's Program on Education Policy and Governance. Commentary was provided by former Congressman* ***Mickey Edwards****, John Quincy Adams lecturer in legislative politics at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government;* ***Jay Greene****, senior fellow of the Manhattan Institute; and* ***Diane Palmer****, Massachusetts coordinator of "We the People" Center for Civic Education. The remarks of each are excerpted below.*

Civic Education: Why It Matters

David Campbell: Two issues in public discourse today are not often connected, though they are often discussed. The first is education policy—what we might loosely call the health of our schools. The second is the stunning decline in civic engagement in America. We might refer to this as the health of our democracy.

It is somewhat ironic how little we know about how schools shape citizens. When Horace Mann and others first created the publicly funded common school, the idea was to forge a common citizenry, to make Americans out of immigrants. The research community's lack of knowledge about what schools do and how they do it is perhaps understandable. It's very tricky to isolate the particular effects a school is having on an individual student. Whether you're looking at academic performance or civic education, a number of things can affect what a student is learning. Even harder is the specific study of civic education because there's little consensus on what kids should be taught.

A general definition of civic education is "preparation to be involved in collective action with a public end." We attempted in the paper to cover each element of civic education in some detail: community service and voluntarism; extracurricular activities; participation in or the opportunity to participate in student government; and actual classroom instruction. There are also practical things people need to know how to do, such as write a letter or run a meeting. A lot of Americans don't have the skills needed for active involvement in civic life.

Read the complete White Paper online at **www.pioneerinstitute.org/research/whitepapers/wp17cover.cfm.**

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David Campbell, author of the study.

Civic education also includes the school environment. Do students and teachers treat one another respectfully? It includes political efficacy—whether or not students believe they can make a difference—and political tolerance—whether students are willing to grant civil liberties to unpopular groups.

The study consisted of a questionnaire given to over 2,700 students in the state of Massachusetts. There were 23 different schools that participated—six charter schools, two private secular schools and three Catholic schools, and twelve traditional public schools categorized by MCAS scores. The high MCAS score category has three, the medium MCAS group has four, and there are five in the low MCAS group. The survey included some demographic questions, as well as questions targeted to each area of civic education.

There is a connection, or there seems to be, between the academic proficiency of the students within a school and almost every civic measure we used. There are some exceptions, and interestingly, the exceptions are most often found in the charter schools.

How Well Our Schools Are Doing

I'll report the more notable findings. Regarding whether or not students had been engaged in community service and volunteering, charter school students score pretty highly, especially relative to low MCAS students and Catholic school students. If you look only at the demographics and ignore the type of school students attend, you would expect charter school students to participate in community service less than students in high MCAS schools. Instead, they participate at slightly higher rates, although in many cases, charter schools are mandating service.

On participation in extracurricular activities, the charter school students score lower than every category of schools but the low MCAS, scoring in line with low MCAS school students. As charter schools are relatively new, it's perhaps a reasonable trade-off that they focus more on academics than on the extracurricular.

For the most part, in the traditional public schools, civic performance tracks academic performance. But academic performance is not destiny: charter schools are often an exception to that trend.
—David Campbell

On civic skills, charter school students score quite highly—ahead of every group but private secular students.

Two questions in the survey constitute what I call a school environment index; they ask whether students and teachers are respectful toward one another, and whether students listen to one another. The schools that do well on this score are typically relatively small. I have long thought that small size probably contributes to the civic atmosphere in a school. Both charter school students and high MCAS students have good school environments, as do secular private schools. Interestingly, charter schools and high MCAS schools are both swamped by the secular private schools.

The bottom line here is that charter schools excel in providing a positive and civic school environment, but they fall short when it comes to extracurricular activities. Private secular schools do very well across the board. For the most part, in the traditional public schools, civic performance tracks academic performance. But academic performance is not destiny: charter schools are often an exception to that trend.

Let me conclude by saying that we should do a better job of figuring out what our schools are doing to prepare students for an active civic life. We ought to come up with a benchmark and track schools; perhaps even deciding what we should do could become a civic exercise. It would provide a wonderful opportunity for social scientists to learn how it is that schools do what they do.

It's often said that states are the laboratories of democracy. As we see a proliferation of different types of schools, including charter schools, we might view our schools in the same way and learn from their efforts.

What Civic Education Should—and Shouldn't—Be

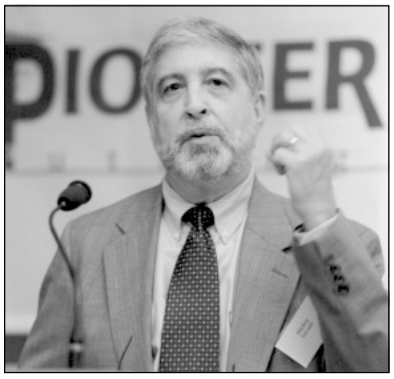
Mickey Edwards: We're all familiar with the decline in political participation in its most measurable form—people don't vote. I teach at the Kennedy School of Government, and our goal is to get students to come to our school who will then participate in public life. Increasingly, our students do not go into government or public life. There are other measures. It has become harder and harder to recruit people to run for public office from either political party. Large numbers of people in the civil service of the United States are nearing retirement age. They will not be easily replaced because there is no pool of new people competing for these jobs. I emphasize this to make the point that this paper is extremely important.

The challenge in teaching civic education in the public schools is to teach academically the roots of our democratic system, what its goals and structures are, why those structures are the way they are, and why participation in the system is good.
—Mickey Edwards

I want to focus on what qualifies as civic education and what should be the goal of civic education. I would suggest, first, that civic education and community participation are not necessarily the same thing. One of my colleagues at the Kennedy School, Robert Putnam, wrote a well-known book titled *Bowling Alone*. Being social animals, liking each other, and developing a sense of being part of the community is a beneficial thing. But I don't think it's the same as educating people to be participants in the management of a diverse democratic society.

Obviously, a spirit of voluntarism is beneficial to a society. But I think it's a stretch to suggest that performing a required activity is volunteering. Not in my dictionary! Recipient agencies may not have to pay for the service, but the person who is performing a public service because they won't graduate or in some way will be penalized is not volunteering. Nor does this teach people the benefit of volunteering—of sacrificing on your own because want to make things better. I think you need to disaggregate required service and volunteering.

Political tolerance is also important, especially after what happened on September 11th, when very important questions about privacy invasion and wiretapping are back on the table. But how much you tolerate opposing views is more a question of ethics than of civic education. At the Kennedy School, one of my campaigns has been to suggest that diversity is more than having people of different genders and different colors and different national backgrounds. Diversity includes the way different people think and what their ideas are. But I don't equate teaching people to be tolerant of diverse views with learning how to participate in a society. Let's say, in Germany 50 years ago, somebody wanted to teach that Jews like me are sub-human and should be eliminated. Does teaching tolerance imply that it is acceptable to advance a political agenda by murdering small children? Teaching tolerance is a very complicated, difficult ethical question that steps outside the boundaries of civic education.



Former Congressman Mickey Edwards

I believe there should be a greater understanding of the system in which we live. People get out of our public schools without understanding our tripartite system of government, the idea of checks and balances, the idea of separation of powers, why we have an electoral college. People get out of our public schools without understanding the purpose of politics, the purpose of a legislative body, or why our system is set up the way it is. The challenge in teaching civic education in the public schools is to teach academically the roots of our democratic system, what its goals and structures are, why those structures are the way they are, and why participation in the system is good. I believe civic education should focus much more specifically on participation in our system and how to make it work.

Is Public Governance of Schools Counter-productive to Civic Education?

Jay Greene, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

Jay Greene: A number of studies have looked at the differences in civic education at public and private schools. David's study is the first to look at charter schools and to compare charter, traditional public, and different kinds of private schools all in one study. The findings are basically consistent with what has been found otherwise; comparisons of civic education at public and private schools have found no particular advantages to the government operation of schools.

This is odd, because the creation of the government-operated school was motivated largely by concern about the civic ideas that would be conveyed to future generations. David's study finds that public operation of schools actually seems to be counter-productive. For some reason, non-government-operated schools do better. This same finding has been produced by some other studies. One study published in the *Georgetown Public Policy Review* compares the political tolerance, social capital, and civic participation of public and private school attendees who are now adults and Latinos. It looked at the Latino National Political Survey, which is a representative sample of all adult Latinos. It asked people where they went to school every year, every grade. It asked people a number of standard civic education questions, such as "Would you be willing to let members of your least liked group engage in certain political activities, like march in your town or hold a rally, run for office?"

What the evidence shows is that the more adult Latinos attended private—almost entirely Catholic—schools, the more likely they were to tolerate the political activities of their least liked group and the more likely they were to vote and join civic organizations. And this is true, holding constant for demographic differences between those adult Latinos who attended public and private schools when they were younger. Similar results have been published in the *Catholic Journal of Education* and in a book, *Learning from School Choice,* put out by Brookings in 1998.

Why is this? Why might public operation of schools be hurtful to civic education? I want to offer three entirely speculative answers.

One is that perhaps private schools and charter schools simply provide a better quality education. They may be better at teaching the academic content of civics, which in turn produces differences in civic beliefs. There is some evidence that suggests that this is true. There's a national test given in civics by the Department of Education. Private school students out-perform public school students on that test.

Comparisons of civic education at public and private schools have found no particular advantages to the government operation of schools.... For some reason, non-government-operated schools do better.
—Jay Greene

A second possibility is that many of the private schools are religiously affiliated, and that even those that are not religiously affiliated, or charter schools that are not religious, are quasi-religious in their orientation, or covertly religious in their conduct. Perhaps many religious views in the United States are somehow helpful to the idea of promoting tolerance. Perhaps teaching children that we are all equal in the eyes of God has a certain value in promoting tolerance and other civic values that we desire.

A third possibility is that non-government-operated schools benefit simply by the fact that they are not politically controlled. Because they are not politically controlled, they are not constrained in their ability to address difficult and controversial issues. They're able to talk honestly and openly and fully about difficult questions. Perhaps the disadvantage that publicly operated schools have is that they are unable to address civics fully because of how sensitive those questions are, given the political nature of their governance.

It's worth thinking about additional studies that might get at these causal questions so that we could structure schools to promote civic goals, and also so that we could unravel this puzzle that seems to suggest that public governance is counter-productive for civic education.

Diane Palmer of "We the People," a civic education organization.

Civic Education: Not Just a Question of Knowledge

Diane Palmer: I happened to have been in Panama on the 11th of September, leading a week-long seminar on "Justice, Responsibility, and Authority for school teachers and those who train school teachers. They asked if I wanted to stop the seminar. "Absolutely not," I said. "It makes what we're doing here all the more important." They couldn't get enough of learning about civic education and how to do it better.

This study is very important in that regard, because we don't necessarily "do" civic education very well. We do a lot of teaching about what government is all about and individual rights. I think the problem is not necessarily what is taught, but in how well we do it and what is learned. We need to have the knowledge, but we also need to have the skills and the right attitude. One of the things we should do is train teachers how to do it better. How many of us really know how to write a good letter to a congressman to get something done? Few teachers have the ability to teach those civic skills.

I'd like to bring up a few other things: one is the issue of community service. David commented that charter schools seem to have less altruism in their community service than others, perhaps because it's mandated. But it also turns out that making the community better was the second highest percentage for charter schools. So maybe they do it to make their own community better. I lived for 18 years in Maryland before coming here a couple of years ago. Maryland is the only state where community service is required for graduation, and now has four or five years' worth of students who have had to fulfill that requirement. It might make a fascinating study to look at the civic participation of those students to try to determine whether compulsory service is good or bad.

The statement has been made by several people that small is good. But I did notice in the results that the high MCAS schools scored as high as charter schools on the school environment questions. And the high MCAS schools may or may not be small schools. They may be among the largest. I'm not sure the connection between small and a good school environment necessarily holds. Again, it's something to look at further.

What we're trying to do is improve not just the knowledge, but, in fact, the civic participation of students at any grade.
—Diane Palmer

In his conclusion and comments here, David suggested it might be easy to add extracurricular activities at charter schools. It seems easy—let's just add a bunch of clubs. But speaking as a teacher, I think it may be very difficult to find the people to staff those clubs. In the study, David suggests that student government may be a way to combine the knowledge, skills, and attitudes. That might be a place to start in charter schools.

That gets back to my original point that civic education is not just a question of knowledge. My students could easily tell you about the division of government and checks and balances and the powers of the federal, state, and local governments. But I don't know how many of them actually went out and voted, or have voted over the years. What we're trying to do is improve not just the knowledge, but, in fact, the civic participation of students at any grade.