

Restoring the City on a Hill

U.S. History and Civics in
America's Schools

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INTRODUCTION

Why Study History?

The Case of Winston Churchill

By Paul Reid

In 1953 Winston Churchill told an American student: “Young man, study history, study history. In history lie all the secrets of statecraft.”

The young man in question, James Humes, took Churchill’s advice to heart, and went on to become a presidential speechwriter and historian. Of course, when an outsized historical figure such as Winston Churchill suggests a course of action, it likely pays to listen.

And yet, what exactly did Churchill mean by that advice? As usual with Churchill, there is more here than first meets the eye. Did Churchill mean that in history lie all the secrets of practicing statecraft? Was this a case of an old politician advising a young man with political ambitions to study history in order to perfect his craft? I think not.

A perusal of Churchill’s written and spoken words — and his actions — over seven decades on the subject of history reveals that he believed every citizen in a democracy, in order to evaluate practitioners of statecraft, must study history.

Otherwise, the citizen can be sold a bill of goods by a clever or unscrupulous politician or, what is far worse, be enslaved by a tyrant who distorts and falsifies history with wicked intent. Think of Hitler. Churchill certainly did.

Churchill's advice was a warning: Ignorance of history on the part of the citizenry breeds consequences, and likely bad consequences, for civil liberties, even for personal safety. Churchill's advice was not a variation on George Santayana's maxim that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it. Churchill certainly agreed with Santayana, but he was saying something else to young Humes: Those who study history are less likely to become victims of history, are less likely to be gulled by those who seek—for good or ill—political power.

That sentiment is cited in one way or another by history teachers on the first day of a high school history or civics class: We're here to become better and better-informed citizens. To do so requires far more than memorizing a catalogue of names, dates, and events. It requires the ability to critically analyze and interpret those names, dates, and events. That is the essence of Churchill's advice.

To ponder and discuss Churchill's advice to Humes requires at least a modest background in . . . history. To evaluate Churchill's advice requires at least a cursory understanding of Churchill and the role he played on the world stage for seven decades. That is, to even begin to discuss the first paragraph in this essay requires a sense of history. To complete the circuit—Churchill's advice, discussion of it, analysis, refutation, or affirmation—requires the ability to apply reason and opinion informed by history.

Churchill made his living as an author. What did he write? History. Multivolume histories of World War I, World War II, a biography of his luminous ancestor, John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough, and a history of the English-speaking peoples.

He was curious about everything—new technologies, political and economic trends, geography, language (well, the English language anyway), ancient history, modern history. He predicted genetic engineering of crops, and even humans, in the 1930s.

He was the father of the battle tank and was ridiculed by experts when he proposed it. Naysayers called the tank "Winston's folly," until it helped win World War I. He predicted throughout the 1930s that Adolf Hitler was intent on conquering Europe, from Moscow to the North Sea. For that, too, he was ridiculed.

He based that prediction on a careful reading of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, wherein Hitler told the world exactly what he intended to do, and how. Hitler's book was his blueprint, right there for all to see. Few saw.

Churchill was self-taught. He never graduated from college. His appetite for the written word was astounding— all of Shakespeare, the historians Macaulay and Gibbon, Dr. Johnson, Karl Marx, Kipling, Mark Twain, Nietzsche, Abraham Lincoln's speeches, General Grant's memoirs, the Hornblower adventure novels, Dickens, and much more, along with at least six newspapers each day. He did so because he loved doing so.

Churchill also enjoyed Marx Brothers movies and Donald Duck cartoons. These were his stimulants; they got his intellectual juices flowing; they offered sensation and propelled him to action. History, for Churchill, was not dead, but alive with possibilities.

He told friends and family that the cornerstone of his interest in history was his infatuation with the human condition. He believed that history is far more than a repository of dusty documents, dates, and artifacts. History is the unfolding of mankind's story, the sum of our actions.

Churchill's advice to young Humes can be seen as a variation of "Know thyself." He believed that if we, as citizens, do not know our collective story, if we do not or cannot reference our collective memory, we cannot know ourselves as a nation, as a people. Our character traits, and the ability to decipher them, are revealed not through mathematics or pure science or engineering, but through history.

Yet Churchill once told an audience: "History, with its flickering lamp stumbles along the trail of the past, trying to reconstruct its scenes, to revive its echoes, and kindle with pale gleams the passion of former days." That is a cautionary phrase, perhaps one that should not be told to young history students on their first day of class.

Churchill meant that historical truths do not reveal themselves with the absolute clarity of mathematical or scientific truth. History is shadowy, rife with hard-to-fathom motives

and passions. It challenges us. That is why Churchill loved it. He loved a challenge above all else.

History demands critical thinking. To teach it by rote — by listing dates, winners and losers of battles, famous documents — is to not teach it at all. To teach history effectively the teacher must employ the novelist's tools of plot, narrative pace, character, tension, suspense. Churchill hated his history classes as a young boy at Harrow because, he later realized, his teachers reduced heroic people and events to mere names and dates. The heart of the story was lost. As was any wisdom or guidance the story might contain.

Churchill once told an American audience, "As history unfolds itself, by strange and unpredictable paths, we have little control over the future and no control at all over the past."

Does this imply a certain pessimism, a certain resignation, on Churchill's part? No. Churchill stressed to friends, family, and countrymen, over long dinners and in speeches in the House of Commons, that while we have no control over the past, the past can inform our decisions in the present. Those decisions and their consequences will beget the future.

Along with historical context and consequences, Churchill saw the beauty of—and the enigmatic irony of—contingency in history. No other academic discipline is so rife with what-if scenarios.

But what-if questions can have real, practical, even mortal significance. In Britain, in 1940, it was no parlor game to ask: What if Hitler throws his armies across the English Channel to Britain? Many in Britain believed Hitler would do so.

But Churchill knew that the Royal Navy, vastly larger than the German navy, would destroy any armada; Germany was—historically—a land power, never a sea power. Sustained by his historical knowledge, Churchill believed no German invasion would take place, and accordingly sent men and tanks to Egypt.

Many in Britain were appalled, but Churchill was proven correct. No German invasion ever took place. Churchill believed that Britain, behind its North Sea moat, would survive and prevail. In the end, he led the West to victory against the criminal

wickedness of Nazi Germany.

Churchill wrote millions of words and earned millions of dollars doing so. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Had he never spent a single day in Parliament or led Britain in World War II he would be known today as one of the premier historians of the twentieth century. Had he never written a single book, he would be known as an intrepid war correspondent. Had he never been a journalist he would be known as a talented painter. He was, indeed, a Renaissance man.

A cynic, with a modest knowledge of Churchill and twentieth-century history, might ask, why is Churchill's opinion on the value of studying history worth anything? We live in an age when everyone is entitled to his or her opinion. But not all opinions have value; some opinions are both baseless and dangerous. Absent sound knowledge and critical thinking, such ideas can take root in the public consciousness.

More hazardous to our collective intellectual health than a cynic who begrudges Churchill the validity of his opinion, is the person who reads this essay and asks, who is Winston Churchill? Who is Martin Luther King? Who is Susan B. Anthony? What is the Supreme Court? Where is the Pacific Ocean? Or one who asks a most unsettling question: Why bother to vote?

In 1929, Churchill told an audience: "How strange it is that the past is so little understood and so quickly forgotten. We live in the most thoughtless of ages. Every day, headlines and short views. I have tried to drag history up a little nearer to our own times in case it should be helpful as a guide in present difficulties."

Almost a century later Churchill's words ring true for our times. Our print newspapers are dying. The internet resembles the gunfight at the OK Corral on a vast scale — everybody shooting, few taking aim. Yet the news of the day still demands critical thinking. Possible consequences and contingencies need to be put into historical context by engaged citizens. Are we doing so? Time — and history — will tell.

Churchill often spoke of history in metaphorical terms, using Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* as one of his sources. In his memoir Twain writes a marvelous chapter about learning to

become a riverboat pilot under the tutelage of a curmudgeonly old pilot, who told him that you learn the river by feeling it. The spring thaw in Wisconsin could result in dangerous water at Memphis; an ice dam on the Ohio River could mean low water on the Mississippi. To know the river, a pilot had to know its history.

That, Churchill liked to tell friends over brandy and cigars, was how human history worked. History swirls around us, carries us forward on its currents, steers us toward shoals that we best learn how to pass safely by. History is not mileposts that point the way; history is in flux, always, like the river. Diligent citizens — and their political leaders — must understand that.

Lifelong, Churchill did his bit for the cause of history. He made history; he wrote history; he loved to parse history. Today, our leaders must do their bit to ensure that history is taught in all public schools, that students are tested and that today's young citizens are prepared for the challenges of tomorrow's world. The lamp of history, even with its pale gleams, can help them light their way. The alternative is to carry no lamp at all.



*Paul Reid is coauthor with William Manchester of *The Last Lion: Defender of the Realm, Winston Spencer Churchill — 1940–1965*.*

CHAPTER 1

Shortchanging the Future

The Crisis of History and Civics in American Schools

By Robert Pondiscio, Gilbert T. Sewall,
and Dr. Sandra Stotsky

“History by apprising [citizens] of the past will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views.”

– THOMAS JEFFERSON, *NOTES ON THE STATE OF VIRGINIA*,
QUERY 14, 1781

Executive Summary

The collective grasp of basic United States history and civics among American students is alarmingly weak. Beyond dispiriting test results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and other measures, poor performance in history and civics portends a decay of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for a lifetime of active, engaged citizenship.

The reasons for this decline are many. The amount of time devoted to U.S. history in K–12 education has demonstrably shrunk over time. Further, demands to make curriculum more inclusive have led schools and teachers to dwell on social history, race, and

gender in ways that distort the nation's historical narrative.

These changes are in turn reflected in textbooks and teaching materials used in social studies classrooms. Problems with teacher training and qualification compound the problem, leaving teachers poorly equipped to arrest the decline in history and civics.

Past efforts to arrest or reverse the decline, however well intentioned, have had little impact. Attempts to create national history standards have failed, and great caution must be exercised before further efforts are made to write or impose such standards.

Instead, states should consider adopting highly rated sets of standards in history and social science such as those that—at least until recent years—have been used in South Carolina, California, and Massachusetts.

In addition, states should consider using the U.S. Citizenship Test as a requirement for students to graduate from a public high school, be admitted to a public college, or be eligible for a Pell Grant or other public funds.

Is the Study of United States History on the Wrong Side of History?

When Americans speak of the crisis in education, we typically cite the poor performance of children in reading, mathematics, and science. Compared to our students' grasp of foundational ideas in history and civics, however, reading, mathematics, and science are pillars of strength.

While history teachers with low academic expectations have contributed to the unsatisfactory level of historical knowledge among high school graduates, a much greater factor is the steady decay of the content of the history curriculum, the decline of its standing within K–12 education, and the methods teachers use to convey hollowed-out content.

History lessons and civics education too often celebrate diversity and bolster student self-esteem rather than ensure a deep understanding of the past and the responsibilities citizens have in a representative form of self-government.

In 1983, the landmark education report *A Nation at Risk*

memorably stated that “if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”

Our earliest commentators on the public purpose of education might have viewed our present neglect of civics and history as an act of treason.

As E.D. Hirsch, Jr. observed in *The Making of Americans*, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century contributors to the nation’s political structure saw schools as the main hope for the preservation of democratic ideals and the republic. As James Madison said, “The advancement and diffusion of knowledge is the only guardian of true liberty.”¹

Today, we view the goals of education largely through an economic lens and are too often narrowly concerned with “college and career readiness” and economic competitiveness.

Yet, the neglect of a commonly understood heritage and the failure to cultivate civic values breed cynicism, distrust, and the decidedly un-American idea that ordinary citizens lack agency to manage their own affairs.

History has come to be seen as secondary in importance to literacy and mathematics. Textbooks are declining in importance and quality. Dubious strategies and activities, cloaked with benign or positive attributes, make it difficult for parents to understand the damage done to the history and social studies curriculum.

Further, today’s teachers were educated in an era of diminished emphasis on history and civics.

There have been many well-conceived attempts at reform and several examples of first-rate curricular and pedagogical approaches. However, none has had any discernible impact on trends in K–12 history and civics curriculum or overall student achievement.

In this opening chapter, we review changes in the curriculum in the past half-century and suggest how alterations in content occurred. An explanation of the role of state guidelines, regulations, and statutes leads to a discussion of the placement of U.S.

history in the curriculum, the problems and limitations of teacher qualifications, and deficiencies in current instructional materials.

Finally, we discuss how national and state standards have contributed to the problems of history and civics education today.

What National Tests in History and Civics Tell Us

Historical illiteracy among the nation's high school students is not new. It has been discussed and lamented by eminent intellectuals and historians from George Santayana to Richard Hofstadter. It has also been documented by the NAEP history tests given to students in grades 4, 8, and 12 from 1986 to the present.

NAEP history tests

On the 1986 grade 12 test, for example, 60 percent of students did not know that the purpose of *The Federalist Papers* was to promote ratification of the U.S. Constitution in New York State; 60 percent failed to recognize the purpose of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation; 40 percent were not familiar with the concept of checks and balances; and a third could not identify the Declaration of Independence.

"Many [students]," one study commented at the time, "lack a clear understanding of the fundamental document that defines the organization and powers of the federal government, as well as the rights and liberties of citizens."²

Scores through the 1990s made clear that a lack of historical knowledge extended into elementary and middle schools. In 1995, over 80 percent of students in grades 4, 8, and 12 failed to achieve the Proficient level that, according to NAEP, demonstrates "solid academic performance."³

"More than half of America's high school seniors," the *New York Times* wrote in 1995, "do not know basic facts about American history..."⁴

On the 2006 NAEP history test, only 13 percent of seniors scored Proficient, while over half failed to score at the Basic level. Scores in 2010 were unchanged: Fourth graders could not explain why Lincoln was important. Perhaps most alarming, 98 percent

CHAPTER 8

Learning for Self-Government

A K–12 Civics Report Card

By Dr. David Randall

The ideological battle over school curricula began decades ago, and champions of a traditional understanding of our republic have been fighting back for a generation or more with textbooks, teacher training programs, and lesson plans.

In this chapter, intended for civics reformers seeking to defend and improve traditional American civics education, we review both traditional and progressive approaches to civics. We also assess the academic level of numerous K–12 resources. Many claiming to be for high schools are at best at a grade 9 or middle school level. The exception is Hillsdale College’s *1776 Curriculum*, which is aimed at intelligent grade 12 students. None of the other curricula discussed here approach Hillsdale’s level.

For quick reference, we offer summary grades for these resources, suggesting how helpful each might be in restoring a rigorous K–12 civics curriculum in American schools. Those offered by more ideological organizations receive Ds and Fs — not because they are incompetently written, but because they are all too likely to damage traditional civics instruction.

Introduction

In 2021, the American people awoke to a crisis in K–12 civics education. This crisis was not one of declining test scores and abysmal knowledge of our republic’s structure and history, but the realization that partisans have imposed their political and social views. Critical race theory is one flashpoint, but subjects of dispute include action civics (training in community organizing) and other ideological distortions of the curriculum.

American schools traditionally have offered nonpartisan instruction to convey a broad account of American history and government. They sought to instill a love of country, build knowledge of government, promote understanding of each generation’s contributions, and create self-reliant citizens.

The new progressive pedagogy instead advocates partisan education through revolutionary and illiberal departures from that tradition, including:

- Placing group identity ahead of individual membership in our republic
- Replacing the equality of individual opportunity with equity that aims for equal outcomes for every identity group
- Touting quasi-Marxist economics that discredit capitalism and free markets
- Advocating revolutionary liberation from an allegedly oppressive status quo
- Redefining intellectual inquiry from the collective pursuit of truth to the imposition of power

Ideological activists are committed to replacing traditional classroom instruction in American history and government with exercises in left-leaning political activism. The coalition Educating for American Democracy has catalogued many terms from these curricula, including *action civics*, *civic-focused schools*, *constructivist teaching*, *democratic competency-based*, *project-based learning*, *service learning*, and *social emotional learning*.²⁵²

The language may be impenetrable jargon, but the negative effects on traditional classroom instruction are clear.

Action civics, defined as “vocational training in community organizing,” means students receive credit for work with non-governmental community organizations—reducing already precious classroom time. And action civics lets teachers impose personal views on students by influencing which community partners students choose to work with.

Generation Citizen, one of the more politicized organizations, states: “The road to a more equitable democracy begins with our schools... Through student-driven projects, youth learn how to effect policy change by engaging with local government and leaders to solve community problems.”²⁵³

This progressive curriculum uses federal grants, national frameworks, state laws, school district policies, and classroom initiatives to prepare children for a more administrative regime that would divide them into identity groups rather than emphasize their common heritage as self-governing citizens in the American nation.²⁵⁴

The erosion of traditional civics began in universities and has migrated to schools of education, state bureaucracies, education trade groups, and foundations that govern American education.

The Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University illustrates how this politicized approach is shaping civics education. Offerings include a civics studies major and minors titled “Entrepreneurship for Social Impact” and “Peace and Justice Studies.” The Tufts Civic Semester is “a transformational first-semester program that combines academic and experiential learning with a focus on community engagement and social and environmental justice.”²⁵⁵

Tisch Scholars for Civic Life helps students “... develop skills to take action for positive social change in community settings.” Recent scholars’ interests include “menstrual equity through service, education, and advocacy,” “allyingship [*sic*] and participation in social movements such as Black Lives Matter, March For Our Lives, the Women’s Movement, and recently, Stop Asian Hate,” and “community organizing centered around gender equity, racial justice, gun control, and climate action.”

For Tisch, training students for political activism comes before traditional civics study. But while would-be civics reformers must create rivals to such organizations, they should include studying the techniques Tisch uses to spread their ideologically driven agenda.

Educating for American Democracy

Educating for American Democracy (EAD) is the main force reshaping civics education toward action civics. Ostensibly for merely informing state and local standards, EAD's framework in practice seeks to force textbooks and lesson plans to conform to their vision of action civics.

A small amount of traditional civics content is included to satisfy more traditional members; the emphasis is on hollow educational skills, video games civics, and more progressive-leaning action civics.

EAD demonstrates the art of bureaucratic politics—the careful combination of putatively bipartisan compromise, impenetrable jargon, and euphemized but extensive radical commitments that will provide the framework to radicalize America's sprawling K–12 civics education. It further demonstrates that the radical activists' focus on political action does train them well in the arts of administration and obfuscation, if not to cherish and preserve a free republic. EAD encapsulates the America they would make—democracy and equity imposed and maintained by the Byzantine arts of career bureaucrats.

iCivics

Founded in 2009 by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, iCivics began as an organization focused on providing actual civics resources for K–12 education. But in 2017, Executive Director Louise Dubé declared O'Connor's vision could not be realized “unless the country made a fundamental change in how civic education was viewed and made it a priority to educate students for American democracy.”²⁵⁶

iCivics softly advances a progressive curriculum through

free educational video games that dovetail with the action civics pedagogy. These video games replace challenging academics, primary source texts, and expert instruction, with graphics, music, and student-led learning that contains soft biases.²⁵⁷

The game *Cast Your Vote*, for example, emphasizes civic engagement and green spaces. The game declares that equal access to public transportation is a priority, without focusing on maintenance, labor costs, taxes, municipal pension reform, or the burdens undocumented immigrants place on municipal services.

The other half consists of lesson plan modules geared to middle schools, with titles including *Limiting Government; Slavery: No Freedom, No Rights; Civic Action and Change*; and *Why Do We Have a House and Senate, Anyway?*²⁵⁸

While sufficient to constitute a comprehensive civics curriculum, iCivics offers no sequence by which these plans should be taught. The modular format encourages teachers to adopt individual modules into their curriculum plans rather than to adopt the iCivics curriculum wholesale.

iCivics also includes action civics lesson plans with primers on organizing protests and advocating for identity groups, including women, farm workers, people with disabilities, and American Indians. It never mentions right-leaning causes such as election integrity, the right to life, immigration control, or gun rights.²⁵⁹

Dubé helped craft the 2018 Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework, which replaced its excellent 2003 predecessor with a mixture of action civics and identity politics. iCivics and CivXNow work with Educating for American Democracy and assure readers that by 2026 all products will be “updated with an equity lens.”

Analysis: The iCivics project disseminates a soft-progressive bias designed to force schools to abandon political neutrality and politicize instruction. Yet it is difficult to measure their impact. In 2021, iCivics claimed that “iCivics games and lesson plans are used annually by more than 140,000 teachers and more than 9 million students.”²⁶⁰

Generation Citizen

Generation Citizen also funds and supports progressive action civics in selected states and school districts but spreads its influence by collaborations with larger organizations such as iCivics.²⁶¹ Generation Citizen embraces critical race theory, declaring that “systemic marginalization of communities of color and low-income communities has resulted in a lack of equitable representation and political power at all levels of government...”²⁶²

The organization would inculcate equity ideology and teach equity activism to “explicitly address the political and social marginalization from the formal democratic process that specific communities have faced.” Generation Citizen holds up a catalogue of progressive activist groups as models, including Black Lives Matter and advocates of the DREAM Act.

Generation Citizen’s curriculum framework asserts that BLM “elevates youth power and voice on issues that not only affect young lives but also our broader democracy, such as criminalization, racial equity, and mass incarceration.”²⁶³

Bluntly stated, Generation Citizen aims to integrate progressive youth organizing into schools through teacher workshops, lesson plans, and curriculum.²⁶⁴ The organization works to lower the voting age to 16 on the explicitly politicized grounds that younger voters are less white than older ones:

“By including 16- and 17-year-olds in the electorate, and experiencing the subsequent increase in turnout among voters in their 20s, the interests of diverse young people will be represented during a time of historic demographic change.”²⁶⁵

Generation Citizen’s list of action civics projects mirrors the progressive political agenda:

- Support for the Green New Deal
- Advocating school walkouts to protest gun violence
- Branding the Founding Fathers as merely wealthy white slave owners
- Pushing for school absences to let students participate in protests²⁶⁶

Analysis: Generation Citizen serves as a vanguard for action civics, showing how a broad coalition can offer templates for importing progressive youth organizing into schools.

The 1619 Project Curriculum

The 1619 Project Curriculum, produced by the Pulitzer Center, provides a distorted vision of American history based on the *1619 Project*.²⁶⁷ Its biases include:

- Slavery was uniquely American
- Americans fought the Revolution to preserve slavery
- Lincoln was a racist intent on keeping blacks and whites apart
- Blacks fought back alone to secure their rights
- American capitalism was founded on plantation slavery
- American history is fundamentally characterized by black struggle against white supremacy²⁶⁸

The curriculum is narrowly focused like Generation Citizen but provides classroom lessons with a format that more closely follows iCivics. The curriculum provides relatively few individual and modular lesson plans, which are crowd sourced rather than provided by the Pulitzer Center. This approach relies on organic support—which appears to have been relatively weak—at the cost of coherence and comprehensive structure.²⁶⁹

The curriculum library includes *The 1857 Project*, focusing on the history of racial injustice in St. Louis, Missouri and Illinois, a unit on why migrants make various choices, and one titled *Buffalo Public Schools & 1619 Curriculum*.²⁷⁰

Though few in number, these lessons all claim extensive alignment with the Common Core standards, now adopted in many states.

The 1619 Curriculum’s own lesson plans include a law school initiative, one on wealth, labor, and mobility, mass incarceration, and arts and culture. They are supported by the 1619 Project Education Network, which provides \$5,000 grants to 40 education professionals to explore “key questions of racial justice and other

pressing issues in a community that also includes award-winning journalists and the Pulitzer Center education team.”²⁷¹

Analysis: The 1619 Project Curriculum appears amateurish, the product of journalists, not academic professionals, and appears to do less damage because it is not crafted by experts. Its indirect effect is presumably more damaging, as education bureaucrats remodel standards to conform to its version of history.

Civics Education: Eleven Necessary Principles

A proper civics education should teach students about America’s foundational ideals, from the foundation of the nation through the growth, expansion, and preservation of the Union. The following 11 principles are essential.

Ideals of Liberty

Schools must teach how liberty is embedded in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Greek philosophy, and Roman republicanism and continues with English ideals of self-government, common law, parliamentary sovereignty, and Enlightenment philosophy. They should study how liberty is secured in natural law and how America’s forebears struggled to achieve ever greater liberty.

Constitutional Order

Our constitutional order was framed to secure Americans’ liberties within an enduring republic built upon separation of powers, federalism, and the Bill of Rights. Subsequent constitutional amendments and judicial decisions are best studied as a history of how each generation has worked within an extraordinary constitutional inheritance to reaffirm natural liberty.

Expansion of Liberty

A knowledge of the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln helps students understand America’s struggle for economic, social, and political liberties for all, and America’s rededication to founding principles.

Preservation of the Republic

Understanding the survival of the Union as a moral imperative is essential to understanding what animated Daniel Webster, Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, Stephen Douglas, the Compromises of 1820 and 1850, or why the Civil War was fought. Understanding how our republic works is useless without also teaching children to cherish its survival.

Expansion of the Republic

Our forefathers expanded the republic to make it more durable and better able to foster the well-being of citizens. Expansion to 50 states should be accorded fundamental importance in any course, as it provided Americans with the territorial resources for prosperity and greatness. Classes should teach students to be grateful to America's pioneers.

Commercial Expansion

Students should know that our nation fosters commerce and economic growth not as absolute goods in themselves, but only insofar as they serve the republic and its citizens' liberties. We support American businesses only insofar as they help sustain the republican order and do not decay into oligarchic malefactors of great wealth.

The National Interest

Territorial and commercial expansion are meant to serve our national interest, including the extension of diplomatic influence. Students should understand the threads that link the Monroe Doctrine, Roosevelt Corollary, our interventions in world wars, Cold War policies, and trade policies — and how they have served the liberty and prosperity of America's citizens.

National Unity

Students must understand the imperative of national unity and that the nation was founded by English settlers whose customs, religion, laws, attachment to liberty, and pride in the

republic continue to shape us. Immigrants must understand that being American supersedes other creeds and ideologies and that Americans are members of a common nation, no matter their private beliefs.

Moral Crusade

Civics should teach students to cherish both America's predisposition to moral crusades as well as a republic designed to disperse and balance powers. Successful crusades such as the abolition of slavery and the difficulty of amending our Constitution both illustrate that Americans undertake fundamental change only when enthusiasms are general and enduring.

Populist Revolt

Civics classes also should teach students to cherish America's national characteristic of populist revolt, a necessary phenomenon given that our constitutional machinery cannot prevent the corruption of elites. A radical suspicion of government is itself an aspect of America's civic disposition. Our republic can grow brittle without regular populist rebellion.

Moderation

Moderation in the pursuit of justice and the defense of liberty is an eminently civic virtue. We should teach children that moderation helps preserve the republic, and that they must both tolerate and partially accommodate their fellow Americans when deep convictions differ.

Civics Education: Curriculum Sketch

The foregoing catalogue of civic principles requires a complex syllabus, with a varied cast of American heroes and sustained coverage of Colonial America. Students should learn about the birth of the nation, Puritan theology, English common law, and the Mayflower Compact. They must understand town meetings and colonial assemblies, farmers' conquest of the frontier, and merchants' search for profits on the seas. They should

know about the self-made Ben Franklin, preacher Jonathan Edwards and the first Great Awakening, and pioneer Daniel Boone.

A civics curriculum should tell the stories of great figures — Paine, Washington, Jefferson, and Madison — as well as ordinary Americans who fought to achieve independence and adopt a Constitution.

By citing Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ronald Reagan, that curriculum should teach that crusades for liberty should be confident but never self-righteous. Students must learn the importance of national unity and cultural assimilation by studying figures such as Noah Webster, William McGuffey, Irving Berlin, and Jackie Robinson.

The virtues of populist revolt must be illustrated through the speeches of William Jennings Bryan and how Populists discomfited both Jim Crow Democrats and the Wall Street Republicans. The curriculum must also illustrate the limitations of populism through the careers of Huey Long, Ross Perot, and Donald Trump.

The power of moral crusade must find a place in this curriculum, drawing upon figures such as William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, Carrie Nation, Woodrow Wilson, Alice Paul, and Jerry Falwell. Students must learn to be both inspired by and wary of crusaders.

A true civics curriculum should uphold the virtues of moderation in the exercise of national interest, perhaps best exemplified by Dwight Eisenhower, who practiced moderation both as Supreme Allied Commander during World War II and as president at home — the great compromiser who made his peace with the New Deal but prevented its further expansion while presiding over the apogee of American prosperity.

Finally, this unified, sustained civics curriculum should be taught across history, civics, and literature classes, helping students gain an integrated understanding of the civic virtues that have shaped American history, government, and culture.

Nonpartisan Approaches to History and Civics

Several groups articulate civics instruction that is nonpartisan and marks a compromise between advocates of traditional education and the radical establishment.

“We the People”: Citizen and Constitution

We the People’s textbook, also named *We the People*, provides comprehensive civics coverage, with a lucid analysis of the intellectual background, history, and structure of U.S. government. It is particularly strong on Greco-Roman history, Anglo-America law, natural rights philosophers, founding source documents, and key U.S. Supreme Court cases.

Analysis: The 2019 edition of *We the People* is well crafted and coherent, offering a framework for effective civics instruction. But while reformers can use it as a model, future editions should be made more academically challenging while retaining the focus on foundational principles and resisting partisan political pressures.

Bill of Rights Institute

With intellectual grounding in Enlightenment principles, the Bill of Rights Institute (BRI) “develops educational resources on American history and government, provides professional development opportunities to teachers, and runs student programs and scholarship contests.” Dedication to the European intellectual tradition is evident in a lesson plan that compares Plato’s *Republic* to Madison’s writings in *The Federalist*. And BRI’s materials evince a mild preference for free markets.²⁷²

This classic liberal focus, however, does not prevent them offering an engagement initiative that embraces the action civics movement. BRI’s effort to embrace action civics for nonpolitical ends is laudable but unlikely to succeed. The civic engagement lesson, for example, cites the women’s movement and the International March for Science but not Phyllis Schlafly or the March for Life.

BRI’s *Yearlong Civics Course* provides seven study units, and the American history sequence — *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit*

of Happiness—has 16 structurally detailed chapters. BRI provides more curricular coherence than iCivics but less than *We the People*.²⁷³

Analysis: BRI has created a solidly crafted and moderately challenging curriculum, although marred by its inclusion of action civics. As with iCivics, its choice to focus on modular lesson plans allows for greater flexibility of adoption. Civics reformers should regard BRI as a good model, if not a stellar one.

Core Knowledge

Core Knowledge provides a range of curricular materials to support E. D. Hirsch’s “knowledge-based schooling.” Core Knowledge’s offerings include *CKHG: A History of the United States*, whose materials are intended to support *The Pathway to Citizenship* and are crafted for a middle-school audience. While the material is solid, it could easily be used to settle for a “crib notes” approach that simply lists facts.²⁷⁴

While Core Knowledge’s approach outshines the fact-free ignorance too common in American schools, civics reformers should ensure that civics education is always more than memorization of facts.

Core Knowledge’s most interesting innovation is to tie its framework to the answers on the test developed by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).²⁷⁵

Analysis: Core Knowledge provides a solid middle-school curriculum in history and civics, which can serve as an effective tool for teachers, provided they use it with care. Another strength is its links to the U.S. Citizenship Test, since half of states have already passed laws linking their K–12 curriculum to the test.

Reformers

Hillsdale College: The 1776 Curriculum

Hillsdale’s curriculum emphasizes natural law, the Founding, Abraham Lincoln, and the Progressive movement’s deleterious effects on America. Building upon 2020’s *The 1776 Report*, in 2021 Hillsdale published its *1776 Curriculum*, which immediately became the gold standard for high school civics.²⁷⁶

The *1776 Curriculum* eschews web-friendly devices of competing institutions, favoring comprehensive, lengthy text files that contain everything needed for in-depth lesson plans. This approach will attract teachers serious about teaching history and civics, although reissuing the *1776 Curriculum* in a more web-friendly format would be a service for other teachers and students as well.

The *1776 Curriculum* provides curricula for elementary, middle, and high school classes, repeating lessons for each level. While teachers and parents using it might do well to vary the lessons, the content itself is extraordinarily good and the only one among those we reviewed that will challenge intelligent grade 12 students.

Its selection of primary sources provides a thoughtful introduction to our civic past, including extracts from *The Federalist*, Lincoln's speeches, the Anti-Federalist "Brutus," and proponents of states' rights and popular sovereignty, including John Calhoun, Stephen Douglas, and Roger Taney.²⁷⁷

The curriculum's focus on the Founding Fathers and Lincoln—and abhorrence of the Progressives—leads to too little attention to other topics. Adding material on Andrew Jackson, William Jennings Bryan, and Dwight Eisenhower would provide a fuller canvas of American ideals and heroes.

Analysis: Hillsdale College's *1776 Curriculum* is by far the best K–12 civics curriculum reviewed, offering enormous amounts of essential material—the Founding, Lincoln, an assessment of some of the ill effects of the Progressive Era, and a fair assessment of Ronald Reagan. The high school sequence defies the almost universal degradation of academic standards in K–12 education.

Further improvements to the *1776 Curriculum* would be better adapting it for the web, making it more modular, and adding a textbook. Hillsdale can and should fix many of these flaws in time.

The Ashbrook Center: Teaching American History

The Ashbrook Center, an independent academic center at Ashland University, provides educational programs whose

centerpiece is the *Teaching American History* graduate program, offering courses in person, hybrid, and online.²⁷⁸

The material includes *The American Revolution*, *The American Founding*, *Civil War and Reconstruction*, *The Progressive Era*, *Great American Texts — Heller & Vonnegut*, *Gender and Equality in America*, and *Indian Assimilation, Resistance, and Removal*.

Ashbrook provides its own edited selections of core documents covering the major periods of American history and debates pertaining to each. Historical and thematic collections include *The American Revolution*, *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, *Westward Expansion*, and *Religion in American History and Politics: 25 Core Docs*.

Ashbrook also offers toolkits that encourage teachers to peruse the collections for their own purposes. And while homeschooling is not the center's focus, Ashbrook provides a selection of lesson plans and resources that can be used by homeschooling families.

Analysis: Ashbrook's approach is a useful reminder that half the stakes in civics education pertain to educating teachers. *Teaching American History* makes the point explicit by focusing on graduate-level courses in a master's degree program.

Jack Miller Center

The Jack Miller Center has worked to strengthen higher education for a generation, particularly by sponsoring programs within universities that provide a traditional education in Western Civilization and American history. Its Founding Civics Initiative (FCI) now concentrates on broad-based support for teacher training.²⁷⁹

The Center has funded a virtual seminar series for Florida teachers, covering historical antecedents to the Bill of Rights, freedom of religion, and the Second Amendment, as well as funding for the Summer Civics Institute at the University of Virginia, Civic Spirit in New York City, and summer graduate courses at the University of Wisconsin Madison, Tufts University, and the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia.

JMC's support for the Civics Program for Teachers (CPT),

hosted by Lake Forest College, deserves particular mention because CPT “consists of a series of graduate courses designed to help teachers respond to the new State of Illinois civics requirement for high-school students.”²⁸⁰ Unfortunately recent changes have degraded the Illinois’ civics standards.²⁸¹

Analysis: Teacher training programs ought to be intelligently crafted to meet state standards, and the Jack Miller Center and its funding beneficiaries have taken a thoughtful and productive approach to meeting that challenge.

Other Programs

The following programs are representative of the many others available to schools today:

1776 Unites

1776 Unites was founded by Robert Woodson, Jr. as a patriotic and optimistic antidote to the 1619 Project.²⁸² Its *1776 Unites Curriculum* includes downloadable modular lesson plans that provide an uplifting version of black American history, featuring figures such as Crispus Attucks, Benjamin Banneker, Paul Cuffe, Bidley Mason, Elijah McCoy, Bessie Coleman, Booker T. Washington, and Alice Coachman. Other lessons include *Tulsa: Terror & Triumph*; *Jesse Owens & The Berlin Olympics*; *Resilience and Learned Optimism*; and *The Woodson Principles*.

The FAIRstory Curriculum

The Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism’s (FAIR’s) curriculum works within ethnic studies courses. While there is some question as to whether ethnic studies teachers will accept these materials, FAIR should be commended for making this effort.²⁸³

Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History supports K–12 American history education with a cache of 70,000 primary source documents, along with curricula and lesson plans, although the materials are restricted to members rather than being

open access. Its efforts parallel those of Ashbrook's *Teaching American History*.²⁸⁴

Florida K–12 Civics and Government Standards

The state of Florida has approved draft civics standards to restore more traditional civics. For example, they explicitly acknowledge the Hebraic and Christian roots of our civic culture and require the study of Colonial history. The standards provide a framework for each grade through grade 8, and then a detailed sequence for grades 9–12.²⁸⁵

Through consultation with school administrators and teachers, Florida's standards have been made more softly bipartisan. Reformers should note that no amount of civics materials in schools can do any good unless they align with state standards.

Elements of Comprehensive Civics Education Reform

Education Framework

Civics reformers should offer a roadmap, not impose a curriculum. Such a roadmap, with broad support from nonprofits dedicated to civics education, can provide a model for states and school districts.

Leveraging Higher Education

The Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University and similar institutions illustrate the influence that activists currently wield in higher education. Reformers should carefully plan long-term campaigns to reclaim traditional civics instruction.

State Standards

Florida's standards offer a template for reform efforts nationwide. Reformers in others state should seek laws empowering state legislatures to review standards and ensure districts can choose rigorous textbooks and curricula. Where districts already enjoy autonomy, reformers should defend that autonomy.

Assessments

In a perfect world, civics reformers could link reformed American history and civics curricula to rigorous statewide assessments, providing permanent incentives for proper civics and history instruction. The 2003 Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework provided the best real-world example, yet bureaucratic resistance blocked implementation of a statewide assessment.

Many state standards are now hopelessly politicized. The College Board's AP exam in U.S. Government and Politics now includes an action civics requirement.

Civics reformers should seek assessments from competitors to the College Board, such as the Classic Learning Initiatives.²⁸⁶ To succeed, such an alternative should link to AP instruction at a significant number of American colleges and universities and provide scholarship support for students who do well on these assessments.

Homeschools

Civics reformers familiar with homeschooling should lead the effort to offer resources to this market, bearing in mind:

- Homeschoolers already have many existing curricular resources, including self-generated ones.
- More explicitly religious civics instruction will usually be better received than in public schools.
- Modular lesson plans are favored by parents who often dislike standardized instruction.

Teacher Training

Civics reformers must first educate teachers and can turn to the Ashbrook Center and the Jack Miller Center for models. Reformers should also seek to transform teaching licensure requirements. Reformers should work within states' existing legal frameworks to provide proper teacher training — based on rigorous textbooks, curricula and lessons plans — that meet state licensure requirements.

Professional Development Support

Civics reformers should imitate the techniques of iCivics and the 1619 Project Curriculum that provide teachers with professional development grants. They should establish an effective eligibility screen since some teachers will accept money from reformers.²⁸⁷

Textbooks

Civics reformers need a coherent textbook to complement a resource such as Wilfred McClay's *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story*, which provides a coherent U.S. history narrative. *We the People* and Core Knowledge provide useful models.

Curriculum

Hillsdale College, iCivics, the Bill of Rights Institute, and Core Knowledge all provide a unified civics curriculum, with Hillsdale's *1776 Curriculum* the most impressive for rigor and comprehensiveness. Reformers should develop a curriculum that emulates Hillsdale's in structure and is built around a textbook with a nuts-and-bolts explanation of how our Constitution works.

Thematic Curricular Units

Suites of thematic lesson plans are likely a more efficient use of resources than individual lesson plans. Philanthropists seeking to improve the effectiveness of reform materials should link support for teacher training courses to associated thematic curricular units. Commissioned textbooks should craft narratives that support natural jumping-off points contained within thematic curricular units.

Lesson Plans

iCivics, the Bill of Rights Institute, and the 1619 Project all provide individual, modular lesson plans; any civics reform campaign must do the same and can benefit by enlisting educators to provide crowdsourced materials. Yet it remains difficult to gauge the extent to which any existing resources are used.

In August 2021, iCivics claimed its plans are used by 140,000 teachers and nine million students annually but doesn't quantify how intensive or effective that use is. Civics reformers—and those financing their efforts—should create a textbook and lesson plans to support it, thus increasing the likelihood both will be used.

Primary Sources

The Ashbrook Center's Teaching American History and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History provide a wealth of American history primary source documents. The challenge for reformers is how to facilitate wide adoption of this material given low literacy expectations in K–12 education.

Far too few students and teachers can profitably read primary documents, and Common Core further inhibits genuine literacy in favor of remedial skills. Civics reformers must campaign for broader and deeper literacy and should demand that teachers take required classes in reading primary source materials, including training in how to get students to read such materials.

Professional Format

Civics resources should be designed with professional polish and crafted to be web friendly, varied, interesting, and age appropriate. Civics reformers should apply as high standards to the professional mechanics and marketing of their materials as they do to its textual content.

Common Core Requirements

The 1619 Project articulates how its lesson plans fulfill Common Core requirements. Reformers should not adjust their curricula and lesson plans to suit the academically mediocre Common Core but should create a template to easily demonstrate that their material meets Common Core requirements.

The Civics Test

Core Knowledge has tied its civics curriculum to questions on the U.S. Citizenship Test, which has been incorporated into public school civics curricula in half the states. Civics reformers should work to strengthen the USCIS test or at least defend it against being weakened or politicized. They may also usefully consider integrating the test's questions into their civics resources.

Multiple Strategies

Civics reformers will do well to align their efforts to make the most of scarce resources. But some independent reform efforts should remain so as to test new strategies per se. The civics reform impulse must not be allowed to stagnate through a process of seeking consensus and compromise.

CHAPTER 9

The Enduring Wisdom of the Founders

By Chris Sinacola and Jamie Gass

“Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day,” wrote Thomas Jefferson to the French economist and writer Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours in 1816.

Three years later, the 79-year-old Jefferson — author of the Declaration of Independence, and former governor of Virginia, minister to France, and two-term president — capped his illustrious career by founding the University of Virginia, which he considered among the most important achievements of his life.

Education was never far from the thoughts of Jefferson and his fellow Founders. The men and women who founded our nation understood that true liberty depends as much upon freedom of speech, thought, and religion as upon force of arms.

“*History by apprising [citizens] of the past will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views.*”

—THOMAS JEFFERSON, *NOTES ON THE STATE OF VIRGINIA*, 1781

Indeed, Americans have long valued education — and Massachusetts has been on the leading edge of educational excellence since long before there was a United States.

Massachusetts' role in American education

Harvard, the first university in what would later become the United States, was founded in 1636, nearly a century before any of the Founders were born.

Massachusetts played a central role in the nation's birth through figures such as the rabble-rousing revolutionary Samuel Adams, lawyer and patriot Josiah Quincy II, and the printer and publisher Isaiah Thomas.

In 1828, lecturer Josiah Holbrook of Millbury launched the American Lyceum movement—forerunner of the Chautauqua meetings and countless adult and community education programs.

By the 1830s, Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville captured the growing reputation of New England for educational excellence.

“In New England every citizen receives the elementary notions of human knowledge,” he wrote in the first volume of *Democracy in America*. “He is taught, moreover, the doctrines and evidences of his religion, the history of his country, and the leading features of its Constitution. In the states of Connecticut and Massachusetts, it is extremely rare to find a man imperfectly acquainted with all these things, and a person wholly ignorant of them is a sort of phenomenon.”

It was upon such fertile ground that Horace Mann introduced the nation's first public schools in the early nineteenth century, helping give public education — and education of the young in particular — a more central role in Americans' understanding of themselves and their country.

And it was in Massachusetts in 1993 that lawmakers on Beacon Hill, in the heart of the “Cradle of Liberty,” added one more modest chapter to that illustrious history with passage of the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act.

That landmark legislation that set the stage for 30 years of unprecedented educational achievement by infusing the existing

system with new funding, standards and tests of academic quality, and the creation of public charter schools to provide greater educational choice and spur excellence.

Were he alive today, Jefferson could hardly find a more diverse and rigorous system of schools anywhere in America than exists in Massachusetts, even if it would not be quite what he had envisioned.

As historian Bernard Bailyn wrote in his 2003 study *To Begin the World Anew: The Genius and Ambiguities of the American Founders*: “Jefferson did not live long enough to see the dawn of a universal education for all Americans, nor could he conceive that a strange, unsystematic mélange of schools — public and private, parochial and secular — would one day create the universal education he so passionately desired.”

A distinctively American education

But what would have surprised Jefferson and his fellow Founders of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries seems to us today distinctively American.

After all, in the nearly two-and-a-half centuries since the Founding, Americans have sought to fulfill the words of the U.S. Constitution by creating a “more perfect union.” Through a devastating civil war, decades of Reconstruction, waves of immigration, and the civil rights movement, our nation has drawn ever closer to realizing the vision that gave us birth.

Americans of the twenty-first century understand that the genius of the Founders lay not in perfection — they were far from perfect — but in devising a system of government with the strength and flexibility to welcome the unknown riches of the future while retaining the profound wisdom of the ages.

No guarantee of future success

But however natural such a system may seem, its past successes were never inevitable, and its future course cannot be guaranteed.

As the preface of this book notes, “without education as a unifying force, the Founders feared that the new nation itself might dissolve.”

Few Americans in 2023 expect their nation to dissolve in any overtly political way. But internal dissension need not lead to a redrawing of political boundaries to undermine a nation. The path to national decline includes many other less obvious warning signs — the erosion of community, a coarsening of popular culture, the decline of patriotism, plummeting rates of voting and civic participation, and a loss of respect for religious institutions.

Each of the chapters in this book has touched upon one or more of the factors that have helped to forge educational excellence in Massachusetts and nationwide — as well as those that threaten to undermine the progress we have made.

But what are the implications of these trends? And what specific actions might communities, states, and the nation take to strengthen the quality of history and civics instruction and thus help ensure the long-term health of the American experiment in democracy?

Identifying the threat from within

In 1983, the landmark report *A Nation at Risk* memorably stated that “if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”

It turns out that no foreign invasion was necessary. Forty years after *A Nation at Risk* sounded the alarms, the primary threat to American education — and American democracy — is not from without but from within.

While Americans endlessly debate ever-finer points of group and personal identity, stagnant test scores chronicle the slow decline of achievement. Instructional time is eroded by bureaucratic process, professional development activities of questionable academic value, and seemingly endless rounds of testing that subordinate assessments meant to guide and fine-tune learning to the goal of achieving a particular percentage.

Meanwhile, the culture wars rage on. In print, on radio and TV, and across the vast regions of cyberspace, educators,

teachers, parents, and pundits alike endlessly debate the latest fads, score political points, and engage in public relations wars over the meaning and purpose of education.

None of that is any substitute for the rigorous instruction and meaningful discourse than once characterized American classrooms.

To be sure, most schools continue to teach something they label history, civics, or social studies. The content of those courses, however, is often only a faint echo of what students were once expected to know.

Reversing that decline will not be easy, but it can and must begin. And a better spot could hardly be found to do so than in Massachusetts, which offers a case study in how success can be achieved — and all too soon placed at risk.

Reclaiming the legacy of the Bay State

At many points in the preceding pages, we have spoken about the central role Massachusetts has played in building a strong educational legacy in the United States. The builders of the Bay State—figures that include John and Abigail Adams, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Mann, and scores of inventors, entrepreneurs, and political leaders—shared a commitment to education.

Whatever their private beliefs and preferences, all were united in contributing to an enterprise greater than themselves, one that would endure for generations to come.

“Education, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of conditions of men,” wrote Mann, whose pioneering work on behalf of public education in Massachusetts established a model for the nation.

In the more than 150 years since Mann served as the state’s education commissioner, Massachusetts has built upon and expanded his legacy. But since the early years of the current century, warning signs have appeared suggesting that Mann’s legacy is at risk. Educational performance has declined and that decline is accelerating.

Reclaiming a leadership role for Massachusetts will require new thinking among both voters and the politicians they choose to represent them. While a return to the spirit of the American Revolution would be ideal, Massachusetts can in the short term reaffirm its commitment to its own 1993 reform legacy in two ways:

- Follow the law and implement a U.S. history MCAS test as a requirement for high school graduation.
- Turn away from lackluster Common Core standards that have undermined the independence, rigor, and autonomy that states should exercise in education.

Rejecting the low expectations of Common Core

To quantify the deleterious impact of Common Core curriculum standards, one need only examine the ongoing decline in scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and other testing measures, as detailed at the end of chapter 5.

But to understand how far the quality of educational instruction has fallen over time, it is necessary to appreciate the extraordinary range of thought that shaped the Founders' generation. Adams, Jefferson, and others were immersed from an early age in the classics, from Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato, and Plutarch to Livy, Caesar, and Tacitus.

To the study of the classics, they added familiarity with Enlightenment thinkers, a knowledge of rhetoric, an appreciation for religious traditions, and training in writing clear and persuasive English. And the study and appreciation of history permeated their lives.

In contrast to the high expectations that prevailed even a generation or two ago in most American schools, today's Common Core is a lowest common denominator in education, an outline of the bare minimum students are expected to know. And as the dismal returns from standardized testing show, too many students are failing to meet even those minimums.

A better option — 50 laboratories of democracy

As important as it is to implement a history MCAS test and reject the low expectations of Common Core, more is needed. For civics to reclaim a central role in guiding the education of citizens — if it is to once more mold them into informed participants in a vigorous democracy — states must take seriously their role as laboratories for bold educational experimentation.

As detailed in chapter 4, many states have done so, achieving far stronger standards than anything contained in Common Core by exercising the autonomy granted to them by the U.S. Constitution and the federal structure of our republic.

Americans accustomed to the outsized role of the federal government in their lives may not realize that neither the Declaration of Independence nor the U.S. Constitution accords any role in education to the federal government.

Indeed, the words “education” or “school” appear nowhere in either document or in any of the 27 amendments to the Constitution. The Founders understood what too many Americans have forgotten: Some things are too important to be left to a centralized government.

Many in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere continue to believe that government is best which governs *most*. Driven by the vision of an all-powerful, centralized state run by technocrats and bureaucrats, they ceaselessly advocate for expanding Uncle Sam’s presence in more and more areas of American life.

Education remains the province of the states

But education remains largely the responsibility of local and state governments, just as the Founders intended. And early twenty-first century America offers abundant evidence for the wisdom of the Founders’ eighteenth-century vision.

Chapter 4 offers examples of curricular excellence that developed in very different regions of the nation, including Massachusetts, New York, California, Indiana, South Carolina, and Alabama.

While each of those states approached history and civics in different ways, they share key factors that informed a successful process, including:

- An inclusive and nonpartisan process for developing educational standards
- Attention to detail and clarity in sources and language
- A focus on academic content and accountability to measure progress
- Placing a high value on civics and the study of American history
- The encouragement of reading history, including original and primary sources
- An emphasis on having students write about history

These and other principles promote academic standards that have earned broad support and acceptance precisely because they take a bottom-up approach that involves parents, community leaders, and local organizations.

Simply put, the residents of a given community and state are in a better position to develop a rich and relevant curriculum — particularly for history and civics — than any national organization, never mind the largely political animals that inhabit the halls of Congress.

Consensus around the ‘sacred fire of liberty’

In today’s politicized and highly fractious America, even abundant evidence of success in one or more states may not be enough to persuade all of the enduring wisdom of the Founders. And even among those who are so persuaded, not all will endorse a decentralized approach that devolves power to the level of the state, the municipality, and the family.

Against that reality it is helpful to recall George Washington’s first inaugural address, a speech that contains the famous words “the sacred fire of liberty.”

In that address, Washington spoke of an “unparalleled

unanimity” that had helped create the nation. But unparalleled unanimity is not quite *complete* unanimity, something that our nation has never experienced.

In 1815, John Adams famously speculated that perhaps only a third of Americans had actively favored independence, while another third actively opposed it.

Historians have long debated the question of how many Americans favored independence. It is a point, like so many in our history, that can never be definitively settled. What we can say is that Americans of diverse backgrounds and opinions have always freely expressed their views, followed the dictates of their consciences, and founded schools in accordance with their beliefs — in the framework of a united and free nation.

Today, school choice and voucher programs continue to spread across the nation. Despite the heated rhetoric from the political fringes, true believers, and sensationalist media, most Americans simply want their children—and the children of their neighbors—to enjoy good schools that prepare them for productive careers and fulfilling lives.

That broad, sometimes quiet coalition of Americans transcends partisan delineations of left vs. right and Democrat vs. Republican. Its members understand that no one has a monopoly on educational excellence and that students can achieve great things in many kinds of schools.

They also understand, however, that too many publicly funded district schools—those that serve the majority of America’s schoolchildren—are dramatically underserving those students. Particularly in urban areas, too many remain trapped in systems that fall short not only of the lofty ideals of Jefferson and Washington, but short of basic reading and math skills, and an understanding of the nation’s history.

Reclaiming the American vision for all

Advocates for change must understand that excellence and rigor can never be achieved by rigid adherence to a single educational model. In a nation as diverse as ours, it can only be

achieved by strengthening all educational models, be they public, charter public, private, religious, vocational-technical, or home-based schools.

In light of the growing understanding of what civics and U.S. history could be, it is disappointing to witness the actions detailed in chapters 6 and 7.

Despite being the direct heirs of more than 300 years of educational excellence, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education has year after year weakened standards, including history frameworks, while ignoring the state law that requires creation of a U.S. History MCAS test.

Disappointments and signs of crisis can be found elsewhere, as well. As noted in chapter 7, a survey conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that more than one-third of respondents could not identify even *one branch* of the federal government. And few students or adults could engage in meaningful discussion of key U.S. Supreme Court decisions that have shaped our society.

Some blame too much testing, the media, or the distractions of the internet and popular culture for the decline of educational standards. Others appear to relish that decline, rejecting the received wisdom of the ages and following in the footsteps of a Howard Zinn as they catalogue the sins of the Founders, the legacy of slavery, and the alleged growth of inequality and injustice.

Today, many schools, from K–12 through college, pay more attention to alleged microaggressions in the classroom than to the obvious suppression of free thought and expression on their campuses. Books such as *The 1619 Project* purvey a history permeated by myth and resentment while the remarkable achievements of the likes of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King are relegated to footnotes or ignored altogether.

The hunt for implicit yet unconscious bias — concerning race, gender, sexual identity, cultural appropriation, or what have you — resembles nothing so much as the witch hunts that scarred seventeenth-century Salem and New England.

A coalition of, for, and by the people

Simply put, Americans cannot afford to continue along that path. And many are beginning to recognize that the disappointments, detours, and dead ends of the recent culture wars must not deter them from continuing to strengthen a coalition determined to reclaim our national greatness.

Members of that coalition can be found across the political spectrum and in every corner of the nation. Americans whose ancestors came over on the Mayflower stand side-by-side with new Americans from Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America.

They acknowledge America's imperfections without becoming paralyzed or jaded by a sense of historical guilt.

They recognize that filling school curricula with material that pays homage to every special interest and identity group may soothe feelings but cannot bring us any closer to understanding the causes of our national greatness.

They see that more than a million immigrants come to the U.S. each year—eagerly and legally—drawn here not by any light or transient cause, but by a deep yearning for the liberty they can find nowhere else.

They realize that the endless debates over education cannot obscure the fundamental truth that the American experiment in democracy continues to serve as a model to the world.

Above all, they understand that ensuring the future success of that experiment requires cherishing our past—and teaching our history to the rising generations.

It is only thus that we can realize the vision so eloquently expressed by Abraham Lincoln in the aftermath of the battle of Gettysburg, when he began to bind the wounds of a divided nation by declaring that “This nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

SUMMARY

Recommendations

For Any State Seeking Immediate Reforms to Its Existing History/Civics Curriculum

- **Adopt highly rated history standards** such as those previously used in Alabama, California, Indiana, Massachusetts, New York, South Carolina, and Washington, D.C.
- **Use the U.S. Citizenship Test as a requirement for graduation** from a public high school, admission to a public college, and eligibility for a Pell Grant or other public funds.
- **Administer the U.S. Citizenship Test to prospective teachers** so that teachers have — and students develop — the same history/civics knowledge demanded of new citizens.

For Any State Seeking to Develop Its Own History/Civics Curriculum

- **Design an open, inclusive process** through surveys, regional meetings, and review panels, including outreach to parents and teachers so classroom realities are addressed.
- **Adopt a nonpartisan stance** that includes all viewpoints on contested historical topics and avoids giving excessive input and weight to special interest groups or activists.
- **Make standards and related testing materials detailed and specific** so that teachers know what they must teach, and students know what they should learn in K–12.

- **Focus strongly on academic content** and avoid education trends and fads, including so-called “21st-century thinking” skills.
- **Incorporate civics content that prioritizes primary source documents**, so students study the Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution, *Federalist Papers*, *et al.*
- **Require the reading of history in each grade**, from biographies to histories, so students develop background knowledge, acquire vocabulary, and understand historical context.
- **Promote historical writing** to help students develop clear, thesis-driven papers with strong analysis and use of evidence; increase the complexity and length of papers each year.

For Massachusetts

- **The state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) should reinstate the high school U.S. history test** as a requirement for graduation.
- **The Legislature should require DESE to suggest specific reading texts** for grades 6–10 that prepare students for studying original sources as high school juniors and seniors.
- **To gain licensure, history teachers** should be required to major in history, with survey courses and advanced study in European and American history.
- **The state should fund professional development programs** centered on teaching rigorous academic content and grounded in the work of reputable scholars.

For Local School Boards and Parents

- **Establish remedial and enrichment reading classes**, taught by experienced teachers and volunteers, for secondary students who cannot yet handle high school-level texts.
- **Oppose the College Board's AP U.S. History curriculum** and push for U.S. history courses that unite students of all backgrounds, exemplified by Paul Gagnon's *Educating Democracy*.
- **Press local school administrators to explain history curricula** to ensure that they are academically rigorous and sufficient class time is dedicated to history and civics instruction.