

CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

Although it has been argued that the establishment of the proper institutions is sufficient to maintain a free society, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Adams, and others recognized that even the most well-designed institutions are not sufficient. Ultimately, a free society must rely on the knowledge, skills, and virtue of its citizens and those they elect to public office. Civic education, therefore, is essential to the preservation and improvement of American constitutional democracy.

The goal of education in civics and government is informed, responsible participation in political life by competent citizens committed to the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy. Their effective and responsible participation requires the acquisition of a body of knowledge and of intellectual and participatory skills. Effective and responsible participation also is furthered by development of certain dispositions or traits of character that enhance the individual's capacity to participate in the political process and contribute to the healthy functioning of the political system and improvement of society.

Many institutions help to develop Americans' knowledge and skills and shape their civic character and commitments. The family, religious institutions, the media, and community groups exert important influences. Schools, however, bear a special and historic responsibility for the development of civic competence and civic responsibility. Schools fulfill that responsibility through both formal and informal curricula beginning in the earliest grades and continuing through the entire educational process.

Formal instruction in civics and government should provide students with a basic understanding of civic life, politics, and government. It should help them understand the workings of their own and other political systems as well as the relationship of American politics and government to world affairs. Formal instruction provides a basis for understanding the rights and responsibilities of citizens in American constitutional democracy and a framework for competent and responsible participation. The formal curriculum should be augmented by related learning experiences, in both school and community, that enable students to learn how to participate in their own governance.

In addition to the formal curriculum, the importance of the informal curriculum should be recognized. The informal curriculum refers to the governance of the school community and relationships among those within it. These relationships should embody the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy. Classrooms and schools should be managed by adults who govern in accordance with constitutional values and principles and who display traits of character worth emulating. Students should be held accountable for behaving in accordance with fair and

reasonable standards and for respecting the rights and dignity of others, including their peers.

- A. **The need for increased attention to civic education.** Although the National Education Goals, as well as the goals, curricular requirements, and policies of every state, express the need for and extol the value of civic education, this vital part of the student's overall education is seldom given sustained and systematic attention in the K-12 curriculum. Inattention to civic education stems in part from the assumption that the knowledge and skills citizens need emerge as by-products of the study of other disciplines or as an outcome of the process of schooling itself.

While it is true that history, economics, literature, and other subjects do enhance students' understanding of government and politics, they cannot replace sustained, systematic attention to civic education. Civics should be seen as a central concern from kindergarten through twelfth grade, whether it is taught as a part of other curricula or in separate units or courses.

Civics and government should be seen as a discipline equal to others. Civics and government, like history and geography, is an interdisciplinary subject, whose substance is drawn from the disciplines of political science, political philosophy, history, economics, and jurisprudence.

In sum, civic education should not be considered incidental to the schooling of American youth. Civic education instead should be considered central to the purposes of American education and essential to the well-being of American democracy. It is particularly important for students in less privileged socio-economic circumstances. Research tells us that if these students are to have the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills essential for informed, effective citizenship, it must be provided at elementary and secondary levels of their education.

National Standards for Civic Education, *U.S. Department of Education. 1994*