

Education for Citizenship

A CIVIC LITERACY

What does America's constitutional democratic republic
require of its public schools?

Summary: Literacy and numeracy are each fundamental for participation in our community, but so is the knowledge and capacity of citizens to make sense of their democratic society. Since the democratic way of life is built upon opportunities to learn what it is about and practice how it might be led, civic literacy is the capacity of students to experience democracy inside and outside of their public school. Civic literacy embodies the knowledge, skills, and decision-making activities students need to participate and initiate progress in their classroom, community, and the greater world. It is the foundation by which a democratic society functions: citizen self-determination as a means to create avenues for peaceful change. This is what our democracy requires of its schools.

We must remove the contradictions in our culture that embrace democratic ends for its schools, but resists the actual practice in schools of the democratic means from which the ends cannot be separated.

~The Institute for Democracy in Education

True democracy doesn't use education to move the worker-citizen from unskilled to skilled. Instead, it relies on education to position every citizen to govern. This project of democratic education can be carried out only by educators with the critical commitment to act on behalf of freedom and social justice that serve as a model for their students to discover their own personal power, social transformative potential, and most of all their spirit of hope.

~ from the ideas of Antonia Darnier (1997)

“Is America possible?”

-- Vincent Harding, *Hope and History: Why we must share the meaning of the movement* (1990, p. 178)

Democratic classrooms and schools offer the best hope for public support of public schools.

-- Institute for Democracy in Education

If we all agreed about everything, we wouldn't need democracy.

-- Deborah Meier, educator

The philosophy in the classroom of this generation is the philosophy of government in the next.

-- Abraham Lincoln

A democratic school is one that above all, tries to enable people to create their own world collectively rather than to fit into one that is created for them.

-- Michael Engel

What does a democratic process look like in a large urban school?

-- Mark Koester, Jefferson Open School, Lakewood, CO

Democracy is like a life raft—it bounces around a lot, your feet are always wet, you're not sure where you are going. But, you never sink.

-- General Colin Powell

Giving children a sense of ownership in the classroom can lead to a kind of open and cooperative learning environment that most teachers just dream about.

-- Michelle G Zachlod, 1st grade teacher, California City, CA

To save the democracy we thought we had, we must take democracy to where it's never been.

-- Francis Moore Lappé

Adults, why do you fear children's participation?

-- The Concerned for Working Children, Annual Report 2003

Listen, create an environment where students feel their voice is taken seriously and acted upon, and then involve them in school decision-making. The positive action and school improvement follows as sure as night follows day.

-- Derry Hannam, School Inspector, United Kingdom

If public schools exist to promote democratic values it would appear that they need to remove hierarchy. Education for democracy thus becomes education freed from authoritarian relationships.

-- C. Winch & J. Gingell, *Key Concepts in the Philosophy of Education*

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-- The Institute for Democracy in Education

We need to treat students like citizens now, not citizens in the future.

-- Sheldon Berman, Superintendent of Hudson Public Schools

Although we teach about democracy we rarely practice it in most public schools.

-- H. Jerome Freidberg, Professor of Education, University of Houston

Implementing democratic governance and small democratic groups in a large public school is not only doable; it brings schools closer to their historic mission.

-- Sheldon Berman, Superintendent of Hudson Public Schools

Freedom and justice, however important, can never be enough; learning about democratic citizenship must be more than an academic exercise.

-- *First Amendment Schools*, p. 21

It is up to educators, then, to reconnect the heart of the educational process to the democratic mission of schooling — to reconnect education to democracy.

-- Westheimer & Kahne

I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the young people themselves, and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion in schools that are each democracies.

-- paraphrased from Thomas Jefferson

The public schools of the United States of America, the globe's best example of a democratic society, must each be a democracy.

-- John Harris Loflin

Once the extent to which childhood drives history has truly dawned on us, we cannot avoid making children's emotional well-being our top social priority.

-- Robin Grille, *Parenting for a peaceful world*

What happens in the (public school) classroom (not in Iraq or Cuba) will, in the final analysis, reveal how deep are the roots of (America's) democratic commitment.

-- paraphrased from H. G. Hullfish

What does America's constitutional democratic republic require of its public schools?

Popularized by global coverage of the failed pro-democracy movement in China and countered by the rise of a strong democratic government in the South Africa, global citizens are discussing the potential of self-determination. Scrutinizing the fate of "young" democracies in the former Soviet Union, East Asia and South America, or the drafting of constitutions in Afghanistan and Iraq, those concerned with public education wonder what part schools will play in these democracies. In fact, what does a democracy require of its schools?

This role of democracy in American public schools began in the early 1800s as citizens realized the importance of an educated populace to a healthy civic society and nation. Until the 1850s, most formal education took place in private schools. Pushed by a need to educate all children, especially recent immigrants, the public "common school" was formed to instill the common set of political and social values needed for nationhood and a shared American society.

Both Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) and John Dewey (1859-1952) influenced the development of American democratic education. Jefferson believed the survival of America's budding democracy required the education of all citizens, with control by local communities, not the federal government. By teaching the correct political principles to the young, public schools for all could nurture virtuous citizenship. Literate citizens who knew the basics of democracy could better understand public issues, elect dutiful leaders, and sustain the delicate balance between liberty and order.

John Dewey emphasized political socialization and wise collective choices. Like Jefferson, he recognized most Americans lacked knowledge of democracy-- thinking it a political system in which governments elected by majority vote make decisions. To Dewey, it was public association defined by a certain kind of character: (1) a mutual regard for others; and, (2) an ambition, through communication and deliberation, to make society both a greater unity and one that reflects the full diversity of people's individual talents and aptitudes. Here, public education is the fundamental method of social progress through which democratic character (social intelligence--individual activity-based community consciousness) is taught and experienced.

Contradictions: What schools are for and what schools actually do

Despite the rhetoric of democracy in American society and the common sense idea that the democratic way of life is learned through experience, public schools have been remarkably undemocratic. Democracy entrepreneurs Apple and Bean note:

*If people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have the opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be led. Although common sense alone tells us this is a true statement, **there is perhaps no more problematic concept in education than that of democratic schools** (emphasis mine), a concept that some consider almost an oxymoron. How can this be so? Simply put, many people believe that democracy is nothing more than a form of federal government and thus does not apply to schools and other social institutions. Many also believe that*

democracy is a right of adults, not of young people. And some believe that democracy simply cannot work in schools.

Others are committed to the idea that the democratic way of life is built upon opportunities to learn what it is about and how to lead it. They believe that the schools, as a common experience of virtually all young people, have a moral obligation to introduce them to the democratic way of life. They know, as well, that such a life is learned by experience. It is not a status to be attained only after other things are learned. Moreover, they believe that democracy extends to all people, including the young. Finally, they believe that democracy is neither cumbersome nor dangerous, that it can work in societies and it can work in schools (1995, p. 17).

The 21st century: The century of American democracy or hypocrisy?

“To make the world safe for democracy” was the rationale President Woodrow Wilson used as the United States entered WW I in 1917. With just over 125 years of democratic development, Wilson believed the time had come for America to play a larger role on the world stage. America, Wilson reasoned, was the greatest force for democracy and good in the world. Nothing much has changed if we look at the past 60 years during which the U.S. has declared the “superiority of democracy” almost daily to the world community.

Oddly, although the voter turnout rate for the 2008 national election was above average, rates in local elections and involvement in local politics by ordinary Americans appear in sharp contrast to US public relations. For example, the current way the US is “selling” democracy to Iraq, the Iraqis must think 100% of Americans are registered and vote in every election. They might be persuaded to believe, by US enthusiasm for reproducing American democracy, American citizens are completely involved in each of their community’s decisions.

As well, average Iraqis must think American public schools are the fertile soil--no, in fact the hotbed of democracy where its young are introduced, trained, and given opportunities to practice this noble sense of community in preparation for the great democratic way of life US citizen soldiers so wish Iraqis could experience.

It is strange that the schooling system which was created to ensure democracy is the most undemocratic institution in America—except for the prisons which you can avoid by behaving or the military which is avoided by not enlisting.

-- Dr. Donald Glines, author of *Educational Alternatives for Everyone All the Time*

However, the American public schools are not democratic. Each American knows this intuitively. No statistics are needed. Now, many may not know of or understand this particular and presently obscure duty of public schools, nor otherwise care; but, they would be hard pressed to deny it makes good American horse sense if American society is to be truly democratic, its young must be provided ways--especially in their classrooms and schools--to understand and practice what that way of life means and how it might be led.

The problem is the topic has not been brought to the world’s attention the way it is now that the US is supporting and in some cases fighting to enable democratic self-government in various nations. What is relevant is this begs many questions for public education in American schools: Why does not America provide its youth the same democratic opportunity it desires for each

world citizen? Why are the public schools of our globe's strongest proponent of democracy not, in all aspects, democratic?

The disconnect between American ideals and reality

These were the questions during conversations at the 15th International Democratic Education Conference (www.idec2007.org) sponsored by Politeia (www.politeia.org.br), the Brazilian democratic education organization, which challenged and inspired an investigation into the gap between what America says about democracy and what happens in its public schools. What resulted is an attempt to connect and legitimize the role of US public schools in expanding America's democratic way of life. *A History of Democratic Education in American Public Schools* was written to review and understand this disconnect. Because of the growing achievement gap and low graduation rates in urban school districts, the paper was oriented to and subtitled as, "Discussions and recommendations concerning issues of democratic education in urban schools and civic engagement by urban students."

The American public must realize if its style of democracy is to be taken seriously as an example, America cannot be non-democratic in its own public schools and Public Square with its own young. The public must consequently renew this "obscure" spirit of public education. Public schools, as the common experience of most young people, provide the best chance to fulfill America's moral obligation to prepare students, its future citizens, for the democratic way of life.

Requirements of public education in an American democracy

The business of public education in America is, and should be, to teach young people to take charge of their own learning and to become responsible, informed, and engaged citizens.
-- American Youth Policy Forum

Nourish right social character: Public education's moral duty (Smith, 2001)

A democracy requires public schools to provide an education oriented toward the individual because it recognizes the formation of a certain social character ("sociability") as the only genuine basis of right living. Yet this "right character" is not just about individuals, rather it concerns the influence of a certain form of institutional or community life upon the individual and that this person, through the school, may acquire ethical character. *The community's duty to education is therefore its paramount moral duty.*

Thus, students learn democracy and about a democratic society by being members of a group or community that acts democratically. Through communication and participating in the process of deliberation, in classroom shared decision-making and school governance, students learn to view themselves as social beings with individual interests and a concern for the common good.

Yes, reading and math are important. But what also matters most is what kinds of human beings are reading the books and doing the math.

-- Charles Haynes, First Amendment Center

Through its public schools, a democratic society makes provisions for the present and future participation in the common good of all its members on equal terms. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder.

Provide firsthand chances to experience and learn the democratic life

While the work of preparing citizens for a democracy must include more than the schools, the schools are the public institution best positioned to affect the vast majority of young people by providing chances to learn--with its particular body of knowledge, skills, and habits of mind--how to “do” democracy

All children, regardless of family economic status or future occupation, must acquire the skills, knowledge, and civic values needed to perpetuate American democracy. To meet these requirements, students should receive a type of education that actively engages them as citizens in their own schools and communities (ASCD, 2002).

Students can be highly involved in classroom decisions concerning class rules, curriculum, or assessment rubrics. Morning meetings, weekly class or school meetings, a classroom constitution, and a bill of rights and responsibilities are examples. Student voice includes helping determine school climate, school rules, scheduling, curriculum, budgeting, and hiring decisions. Student can also help school staff with professional development activities and school reform initiatives.

Sleeter (2008) describes several key characteristics of teaching for democracy:

- students consider social issues in relationship to public good,
- students use democratic decision-making processes in the classroom,
- teachers embed content in critical thinking about real issues,
- teachers engage students in multiple perspectives and multiple sources of knowledge,
- schools afford all students access to high quality education, and
- students’ cultural and linguistic identities are supported and viewed as legitimate aspects of citizenship.

America’s K-8 public schools can be a “laboratory for democracy” (Beatty, 2003) and high schools can act as “democracy’s finishing school, the last shared experience for citizens in our republic and the place where we can inculcate the virtues of civic life” (Wood, 2005).

Enable ownership of learning: Education and self-determination

The singular public requirement of US public schools is to prepare students (America’s future citizens) for self-governing. Public schools can promote democratic self-determination through ownership of learning. *Educational Leadership* (Scherer, 2008) looks at the many ways to instill student ownership of learning in the daily life of school. Educational self-determination means differentiation: The opposite of democracy is the one-size-fits-all paradigm. Discovering and validating the uniqueness of each student enables a democratic culture. Enabling students to make responsible decisions about their learning is done by preparing students to determine tasks, learning projects, pace of learning, work locations, and learning partners. To foster self-directed learners, schools must transfer responsibility for learning to students gradually (Fisher

& Fry, 2008) over their schooling experience, offering support at every step and modeling behavior while moving students from competent novice to independent, self-directed learner, and eventual democratic self-determined citizen.

Practice democracy at the individual level: Student self-assessment

Perhaps there is nothing more democratic than self-assessment. Democracies self-govern, self-direct, self-determine and in doing so, must self-evaluate and self-regulate. Student self-assessment--monitoring and regulating their own thought processes, and judging and improving the quality of their work based on their ability to evaluate their “place” with respect to self-determined and/or group standards--must be acquired in schools. Also, the evidence is compelling that self-efficacy, self-determination and self-assessment are intertwined, and increase academic performance. Seen as democracy practiced at the individual level, student self-assessment is imperative to a democratic society.

Provide firsthand experiences in civic participation: The democratic aims of service learning

A democratic society has schools supporting and encouraging a student’s interest and future engagement in civic life by providing opportunities learn and act outside of school. The goal of these experiences should be to gain the ability to critically examine and respond to social issues—students try and understand an issue or a community institution’s current situation and then envision an improvement to which they can actively and collectively contribute. Thus, students learn what self-governing citizens do. This prepares students to be engaged citizens (David, 2009). By integrating social analysis throughout civic activities, schools are promoting democratic values—that we are all responsible for improving our community.

Barriers to what American democracy requires of public education

There are several barriers to these requirements of public schools in an American democracy.

Barrier one: The struggle for control of public education: Market oriented policies vs. democratic values

According to Michael Engel (2000), the ideology of the marketplace promotes educational policies and practices that are narrowly tied to broad economic goals, and not individual self-actualization and community self-government. Advocates of a corporate reform model of education have succeeded in imposing their definition of school reform via federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and state policy makers. The debate about choice, vouchers, privatization, and corporate control *is an ideological war between democratic and market values*. America has moved away from democratic citizenship revealed in action. It has substituted instead economic competitiveness which undermines democratic values as a bulwark against the “corrosive elements of market ideology.”

Engel points out 3 limitations of market-oriented education: (1) school choice policies ruin the concept of public education as a community enterprise, forcing families and schools to compete in a winners and losers educational world; (2) market-based aspects of educational technology unduly focus on increasing human capital in service of corporate interests; and, (3) market-ideology fails America’s youth by constructing an educational system where students

become objects--commodities to be controlled and manipulated toward the ends dictated by the market economy's definition of their value in terms of a return on investment.

Market ideology gained prominence in the 1950s when the progressive education movement collapsed and the politics of education began a conservative course. The progressives could not survive the conservative/Cold War/anti-communist post-WW II climate where the language of free market reigned: individual achievement, competition (with the Russians), choice, economic growth, and national security. As well, Engel points out the 1960s alternative education movement, underscored by an individualistic and Libertarian orientation, indirectly reinforced market ideology. This school choice orientation deprives students, parents, and teachers of their right to work as a community to control their schools.

Engel believes America must have a convincing ideological framework for democratic schools that provides a rationale for maintaining a community owned, controlled, and financed school system. Following Jefferson's concept of public schools as places that produce a citizenry capable of defending its right to govern and using that right constructively, Engel's ideas of a democratic school enables citizens to take an active and positive role in shaping their society, owning such educational institutions for their own benefit. This is Engel's democratic "values-based" challenge to market ideology. But, what values?

The basic issue is values: What do Americans think of their young people? What does American society believe about students' capacities and potentials and what they would like them to be? Market models make sense if society sees students as antisocial persons who must be formed into productive members of a consumer society. Here the purpose of school is providing training/skills and molding behavior appropriate for a system over which they have no control, and one they cannot change because they will not know how. But, if we believe that young people need to see themselves as part of something constructive and positive that requires their full participation, then the purpose of schooling becomes how to learn to share in making decisions for themselves and for society.

A democratic school is one, that above all, tries to enable people to create their own world collectively rather than to fit into one created for them. A democratic school operates on the principle that people can live together democratically--that they have the ability and capacity to be free and govern themselves. Thus, for Engel, older Americans must care about the future generation enough to give them the ability to shape their future, collectively and democratically, whether they approve of their direction or not. This is the essence of a democratic value system in education. Engel concludes: *If the market prevails as a way of organizing U.S. education, possibilities for creating a democratic society and developing a democratic citizenry are ended.*

NCLB: Democracy or corporatocracy

In the mind of educator Christine Sleeter (2008), the present U.S. standards movement (NCLB) limits the already limited practice of democracy in the classroom/school. In fact she used the term "corporatocracy" (American government under control of global capitalism) to show how the needs of business have created the standards movement, thus a classroom

climate that has little time and use for democratic education and is moving public schools to an education market system or education industry.

Improvising the dynamics created by Carr & Hartnett (1996), it is possible to contrast a school system with public vs. private purposes and show how different values lead to contrasting educational practices.

-- View of democracy --

Democracy: Grounded in a way of life in which all can develop their qualities and capacities. It envisages a intrinsically educative society in which political socialization is a distinctively educative process. Democracy is a moral ideal requiring expanding opportunities for direct participation.

Corporatocracy: Results from, and reflects, the political requirements of a modern market economy. Democracy is a way of choosing political leaders involving, for example, regular elections, representative government and an independent judiciary.

-- The primary aim of education --

Democracy: To initiate individuals into the values, attitudes, and modes of behavior appropriate to active participation in democratic institutions.

Corporatocracy: To offer a few an education appropriate to future political leaders; the majority an education fitted to their primary social role as producers, workers, and consumers.

-- Curriculum content --

Democracy: Focuses on liberal education--a curriculum which fosters forms of critical and explanatory knowledge allowing people to interrogate social norms and reflect critically on dominant institutions and practices.

Corporatocracy: Mass education will focus on the world of work and upon those attitudes and skills. Knowledge must have some market value.

-- Typical educational processes --

Democracy: Participatory practices that cultivate the skills and attitudes that democratic deliberation require.

Corporatocracy: Pedagogical relationships will tend to be authoritarian and competition will play an essential role.

-- School organization --

Democracy: Schools are communities in which the problems of communal life are resolved through collective deliberation and a shared concern for the common good.

Corporatocracy: Schools are organized around a pyramidal structure

Barrier two: The “practice” gap in Civics class

Schools are not actually practicing what their civics classes are supposed to teach. According to the Center for Civic Education, civic education as a discreet curriculum began between 1900 and 1920 in efforts to Americanize the waves of immigrants. Civics addressed immediate concerns and social needs of individual students while stressing civic-oriented goals such as

citizenship and ethical character. By mid-century, it was more interested in that individual's place in society.

Current Civics courses cover the organization and operation of government on all levels and require no more than an academic understanding through memorization, essays, and projects. Although students are exposed to the major ideas, protections, privileges, and economic systems, the courses tend to be too patriotic, discouraging critique of the country and repressive when it fails to teach respect and appreciation for the positive contributions by minorities to America's common culture (Gutman, 1995). The curriculum is not structured to build upon the "civic" experiences, both positive and negative, urban students have in the community with the very governmental institutions (and their representatives--teachers, police/legal system, social/welfare workers) students are studying. Thus, the courses lack practice and real world engagement. As well, Gutman sees public schools as environments dominated by middle-class practices and values, ignoring working-class ways of being and rarely acknowledging this exclusion. In this climate, many urban educators choose to avoid controversial social and civic issues in their classrooms.

As a result, many students have a negative view of civic education and their public schools which they see as reproducing and exacerbating existing social inequities that disadvantage poor and minority youth. This reflects the distrust youth have of public institutions due to the legacy of government not responding to minority concerns. Current forms of urban youth identification with hip-hop culture are organic expressions of racial and social meaning that emerge out of a context of struggle within urban environments. Many urban minorities (and urban working-class whites) come to school politically conscious, and thus knowing where they stand in the American social hierarchy and why. These experiences provide an authentic understanding of inequality and compel a passion to achieve social justice.

Public schools have a tremendous opportunity, through the curriculum, to support students by challenging the social and economic problems faced daily in their community. Unfortunately, this nurturing approach has been replaced by the idea youth are becoming more violent and therefore need more discipline and tougher punishment. These negative perceptions have influenced school districts to create hostile zero tolerance policies to ensure school safety. However, these policies often have the opposite effect (Ginwright, 2006), alienating urban students from America's main civic institution for developing in its future citizens the values of democracy and social responsibility—its public schools.

Research supporting democratic education

Student participation

Meaningful student engagement in school-related decision-making *reduces*:

- stress caused by a lack of a sense of control over one's environment (Kohn, 1993)
- the sense of disenfranchisement—being involved in schooling decisions empowers students, preparing them for citizenship (Loflin, 2003)
- disengagement from the schooling process resulting from the African American schooling experience of mis-education, under-education, or no education (Akorn, 2003; Loflin, 2007)

- powerful risk factors that influence adolescents' well being--need for control, bonding, and sense of meaning (Barnard, 1995; Holdsworth, 2003)

Meaningful student engagement in school-related decision-making *promotes*:

- higher order thinking skills—evaluation, synthesis, applying, etc.
- self-determination—having ownership of learning and sharing in classroom and school decisions (Scherer, 2008) is democratic self-determination (Hecht, 2002)
- self-actualization—a democratic school culture emphasizes the individual, leading to the full development of each student's uniqueness (Hecht, 2002)
- self-efficacy--countering the relationship among impotency, apathy, and lack of recognition with aggression/violence (May, 1967)
- democracy habits of mind—knowledge, skills, and experiences of democratic peoples (Meier, 2009)
- reviving/evolving, supplementing, and complementing multicultural education—practicing democracy in classrooms and schools is the practice of multicultural education
- sustainability—a sustainable society needs sustainable schools; sustainable schools are democracy schools (Loflin, 2006)
- trust and affirmation from adults and peers, a psychological investment in schooling--increased cooperation and enjoyment of learning, and community involvement outside of school (Fletcher, 2003)
- school connectedness and retention rates; mental, social, and physical health; and, an increase in a community's social capital (Papageorge, 2008)
- the social nature of our brain, both in its modular organization and extended development in that a collaborative classroom management model provides the best school venue for enhancing the brain maturation of students. (Sylwester, 2003)

Ownership of Learning

Currently students are playing four major roles, moving students beyond mere engagement and into ownership of learning (Fletcher, 2008):

- *Students as Planners* Selecting textbooks, creating classroom behavior guidelines, and designing new buildings.
- *Students as Teachers* Helping school staff understand technology; helping communications between adults and youth.
- *Students as Professional Development Partners* Assisting in developing new approaches to differentiating learning, transforming expectations, researching projects, and collecting data
- *Students as Decision Makers* Involvement in curriculum, policy, school climate, on boards of education, grant making, and school assessment to turn around failing schools.

Taking into account students ideas and opinions

In England (Hannam 2001; Tafford, 2003), *secondary schools which took into account students' ideas and opinions when making decisions in ways that were transparent, regular, and accessible* compared to similar schools that did not, for a significant number of students their participation in school-related decisions:

- Enhanced learning across the curriculum and the full range of academic abilities
- Helped them gain organizational and time management skills

- Supported the learning of communication and collaboration skills
- Facilitated quality outcomes which led to enhanced self-esteem
- Fostered an allover sense of personal and social efficacy
- Brought a greater sense of ownership, and personal empowerment leading to greater motivation to engage in school
- Increased feelings of independence, trust, and responsibility
- Required initiative and decision-making
- Significantly lowered disruptive behaviors in classes and hallways
- Improved their attendance—and was significant for the less academic and potentially alienated students
- Suspensions and expulsion were significantly lowered
- Helped school climate became more positive
- Improved the attitudes of teachers and staff
- Significantly lowered school violence
- Brought real-life benefits which enhanced staff-student relationships

See <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/4385/1/crickreport1998.pdf>

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmeduski/147/147.pdf>

http://www.academia.edu/6298319/Democratic_education_and_learning

Recommendations for American public schools

Have very high expectations for students: Democratic education

Expecting high achievement is seen as a way to get students to live up to their potential. If this is a viable plan, let schools have very high expectations: students challenged to be self-directed learners, thinkers, evaluators, and actors involved in classroom and school decisions that affect them in a democratic school-wide ethos that values student participation, and expects students to help solve problems in their community.

Advance multicultural education to include democratic education

Many controversies about public schooling turn on the “clash” of two apparently competing educational aims: securing civic unity against respecting cultural differences. Thus, multicultural education must expand politically by teaching students the civic virtue of mutual respect and through practice its understanding. Simply teaching tolerance may not be enough to help students face individual differences. This can be done by involving students in classroom and school decisions--teaching students how to engage together in respectful discussions in which they strive to understand, appreciate, and, if possible, resolve disagreements, including those that may be partly rooted in cultural differences. Just as a citizenship education, unmodified by multiculturalism, represses cultural differences, multiculturalism, uninformed by civic values, can discriminate among citizens on the basis of their group identities. Schools can meet this challenge to public education by realizing school democracy is the actual practice of multicultural education.

Realize the future of urban school reform is democratic public schools and classrooms: Global youth culture meets school democracy

The inability of urban educators to connect with students is reflected in low graduation rates. Civil rights generation and middle-class African American educational staff and school boards

often cannot fully understand urban youth culture because they do not share the same worldview, political identities, and economic realities. This generational and cultural disconnect is an obstacle to reaching urban youth who are simply not motivated, interested, or inspired by reform efforts in which their urban identities are not represented. Armed with an understanding of inequality and a passion for social justice, youth around the country want a say in decisions that impact their lives (Ginwright, 2006). Public urban schools must help create a democratic climate that provides students this voice. In democratic schools, they can demand their schools be equal to the best, and receive help in solving the problems of poverty and urban life they face everyday. This holds great promise for effective educational reform strategies. In fact, democratic schools and hip-hop culture are made for each other. Democratic schools can provide the model toward creating a more equitable world. In that progressive hip-hop culture functions as the voice of resistance, along with democratic education, the culture can be utilized as a politicizing tool to inform youth about social problems and how to solve them (J. Evans, 2005) while democratic practices provide the structure or blueprint for the possibilities of social change. *This is the democratic potential of American public schools and why democratic public schools are authentic urban school reform.*

Advance community service to community change

Urban schools must emphasize *shaping* the community, not community service or service learning. Some students do not want to do community service because it is required. Even when framed as something students want to do, *service learning still puts students in the role of servant--it's as though it is not their community; that they are an outsider; they serve it as though they are doing for/providing a service for.* This type of “service” disconnects students from their community as opposed to being a part of their own community that they could shape. Urban educators need to consider helping students shape their community--give back, not provide a service.

Model America's Constitution for students: Make public schools First Amendment schools

Another way to foster school engagement, enable mutual trust, increase retention rates, and empower students as school “citizens” contributing to school life and solving community problems is the concept of First Amendment schools (www.firstamendmentschools.org). Students experience citizenship in a democracy as they practice the five freedoms of the First Amendment in their school: freedom of religion, speech, and press, and the right to assembly and petition for grievances. When students and staff exercise their constitutional rights with responsibility, they reclaim the civic purpose of public education.

Reinvent adolescence: Combine citizenship education with rites of passage

To the Greeks, puberty was not limited to the process of physical changes by which a child's body matures. *Puberty was the transition to public life*, bringing youth into and through “puberty”—that is, cultivating citizenship and concern for the *polis*. Public schools as a public space provide multiple perspectives and personal values are brought into face-to-face contract around matters that “are relevant to the problems of living together.” Thus, *public schools can, like no other place in society, nurture “puberty”* (Parker, 2003).

In “Walkabout” Maurice Gibbons (1974) explains how schools can provide the experiences needed in rites of passage from childhood to initial adulthood by a curriculum built on 5 challenge areas which also advance through 6 stages from teacher directed to self-directed learning. Beginning at grade 6, “Walkabout” would begin (Isenberg, 1997). Through grade 7-8, students learn and practice the democratic habits of mind and heart by partaking in school decision-making processes and civic engagement. Graduation signifies a student passed all courses, progressively became more independent in meeting the demands of their challenges areas, and successfully practiced democracy in and out of school. Finishing 8th grade would represent entering high school, adulthood, and civic life

This would advance this stage of life from a dysfunctional to a *democratic adolescence*--reinventing adolescence for the 21st century. Robert Epstein (2007) believes teenagers are highly capable and suggests society can “rediscover the adult in every teen” by conferring adult authority and responsibility as soon as they can demonstrate readiness. The Epstein-Dumas Test of Adulthood provides criteria in 14 domains. Providing multiple pathways to adulthood will provide options to a prolonged adolescence or dangerous rites of passage. Remember, *adolescence is not for everyone*.

Demand a space for democracy in the standards movement (Sleeter, 2008)

NCLB and the broader accountability movement reflect structures and processes of corporatocracy more than democracy--making use of many of its business-oriented tools and assumptions, moving toward privatization of schooling and other public services. This limits public schools’ ability to enact democracy and is particularly worrisome in urban schools which presently are the ones not meeting test score targets—and historically are communities with a sense of disenfranchisement. If U.S. public schools are to prepare students for a participatory democracy and a diverse public life, while sharpening their political analysis of the U.S., its institutions, and its place in the world, its public schools and classrooms, in all aspects, must exemplify an ethos of democracy. The “Student Voice Curriculum” from SoundOut.org is an excellent way districts can introduce meaningful student engagement and meet standards (Fletcher, 2007).

Is the 21st century democracy’s century?

Democracy reform has taken on a renewed urgent focus on the world stage and United States. As stated, with the current global politics and wars, both civil and national, around democratization, plus the struggles of the young democracies and national pro-democracy movements, the start of the 21st century is filled with conversations and debate at all levels of society about the practicality of open and free democratic governments. If this momentum continues, the world community will engage and judge, in a daily global experiment with democracy, to see if various democratic forms of government can live up to their possibilities--and in particular, will watch to see if a nation such as America lives up to its democratic promise.

The development of American democracy: The efforts of citizens to make it genuine

A review of American history since 1900 reveals a relationship between (a) America’s promise (“All men/women are created equal”) and its manifestation in equal rights and justice under law, and, (b) the experiences of soldiers and personnel. Every major U.S. war has brought or made possible social changes. American women’s right to vote came after WW I. The seeds of the Civil Rights movement were planted during WW II and the Korean War. Vietnam

influenced the lowering of the national voting age to 18 and pushed the Civil Rights Movement to fruition

Many members of so-called minority groups risked their lives and culture in war defending an America where they were treated unjustly. Yet, these experiences provided the rationale to challenge these limitations. Re-experiencing discrimination after returning home from defending America in war against totalitarian regimes made it a duty to expose the moral hypocrisies in American society. Also, a major part of America's push for social justice was indirectly due its foreign policies and the rhetoric of democracy that supported them. This put America in the global political spotlight which pressured American leaders to "practice what they preached."

Practicing what it preaches—democracy in Iraq and in American public schools: What changes will the war in Iraq bring to American society?

The same rationale used by past US servicepersons--that there is a gap between American rhetoric and reality--to justify lobbying for significant changes in society in order to make America more authentic will, in "democracy's century," be used to influence all Americans to be open to a better quality democracy. Although there is a strong debate over the reasons and purposes of the war in Iraq, due to the fact that many see the conflict as one of democratization raises certain questions such as, "How democratic is American society?" or "How can we improve American democracy?" and what is pertinent, "How can public schools help America be genuinely democratic?"

It will be hard for those who fought in the Middle East to accept a vote counting method that may be manipulated, a two party system where the parties are so similar nothing really changes or how some Americans are left out of the system due to democracy itself. (See, "Democracy as Paradigm for Colonization" in M. Evans, 2006.) In other words, veterans will not be able tolerate a constitutional democracy that is less than the system they were "selling" to the Iraqis.

What is potentially different about these veterans is many are citizens in the National Guard, not professional soldiers. The Iraq and Gulf War vets, returning to their jobs and families, whose children attend public schools, will be open to seriously considering democratic education if approached. They may not necessarily be for democratic schools, but will not be against a pro-democracy movement in public schools either. How could they be? To the extent American soldiers are trying to win the hearts and minds of Iraqis, and especially the Iraqi youth, concerning the spirit and empowering qualities of democratic self-determination, how could they deny the same and more to their children and their neighbor's children?

Thus, it will also be hard for U.S. soldiers to return to America and not hear the voices of public school students who are also beginning to want a say in classroom, school, learning, and community decisions that directly and indirectly affect them; and, who want to know how democracy works—all due to the their exposure to America's desire to spread this method of governance globally. The 2008 presidential election proves students at all grade levels want to be involved in community decision-making. Many who could not vote were enthusiastic and volunteered for their candidate. Young people do not want to be disengaged; they want responsibility.

For Americans to say they want democracy in China and not provide their children and youth the opportunity to practice this form of community in their own classrooms and schools is the worst form of hypocrisy--an image Americans cannot afford to present to the world.

Democracy in public schools: Keeping democracy genuine

Democracy is not a goal, it's a path. Democracy must constantly be reworked and improved. When American public schools provide a public space for children to experience democratic education progressively by age and grade this institution carries forward Jefferson's dream that public education be education for democracy. Making public schools a public enterprise again will provide the means for American democracy to be continually more genuine.

This essay is a compilation of ideas from, "A History of Democratic Education in American Public Schools" by John Harris Loflin.

<http://vorcreatex.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/A-history-of-democratic-education-in-American-public-schools.pdf>

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