

# HIGH SCHOOLS, CIVICS, AND CITIZENSHIP

---

What Social Studies Teachers Think and Do

Steve Farkas and Ann M. Duffett  
of FDR Group

Foreword by Frederick M. Hess, Gary J. Schmitt,  
Cheryl Miller, and Jenna M. Schuette

AEI PROGRAM ON  
**American Citizenship**

September 2010

## Foreword

Notwithstanding all the studies and data on schooling today, one has to go back more than a decade—to the 1998 Public Agenda study *A Lot to Be Thankful For*—for a serious attempt to examine what parents think public schools should teach children about citizenship. The annual Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup poll on schooling has not asked questions about citizenship since 2000. When these questions were last addressed, respondents chose “prepar[ing] people to become responsible citizens” as the least important purpose of schooling—behind such goals as “enhanc[ing] people’s happiness and enrich[ing] their lives” and “dispel[ling] inequities in education among certain schools and certain groups.”

Given this paucity of research, the AEI Program on American Citizenship sought to investigate what our schools are teaching today about citizenship. To aid us in this effort, we turned to the teachers most directly charged with educating and shaping America’s young citizens—high school history and social studies teachers. And when it comes to finding out what teachers think, there may be no better research team in America than the pollsters/analysts Steve Farkas and Ann Duffett.

This report is based on the views, thoughts, and frontline observations of our nation’s high school history and social studies teachers. Farkas and Duffett surveyed more than one thousand public and private school teachers, and they conducted three focus groups with teachers in various communities across the country. What they found proved to be both surprising and predictable, somewhat reassuring but also unsettling.

In general, the report points to the fact that while teachers’ priorities and values largely reflect those of the general public, their efforts to convey that knowledge to students are falling short of their own

expectations. This lack of confidence would certainly appear justified, if the poor results of the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress are any guide. In marked contrast to their private counterparts, public school teachers believe that social studies is losing ground to other subject areas and that civics in particular is being neglected by their schools. And, finally, teachers appear uncertain about what the precise content of a proper civic education should be—emphasizing notions of tolerance and rights, while giving less attention to history, facts, and key constitutional concepts such as the separation of powers.

\* \* \*

First, the good news: the survey results are fairly promising in terms of public values and how teachers view America. They seem to reflect what most Americans would regard as a vision of responsible citizenship—with 83 percent of the teachers surveyed seeing the United States as a unique country that stands for something special in the world. At the same time, 82 percent of survey respondents say students should be taught to “respect and appreciate their country but know its shortcomings.” Despite all of the concerns about anti-American sentiment in schools of education, just 1 percent of teachers want students to learn “that the U.S. is a fundamentally flawed country.” This sounds, to our ears, like a near pitch-perfect rendition of what parents, voters, and taxpayers would hope for—schools where students learn that America is exceptional even as they learn about its failures.

Teachers working with immigrants and English Language Learners (ELL) voice a particular need to teach their students to appreciate America and its culture. Fully 82 percent of teachers believe it is

especially important to teach foreign-born students to value the United States and the meaning of citizenship, and 89 percent of teachers working with ELL students say the same.

Second, when asked what content, skills, or knowledge are most important, teachers rank the guarantees of the Bill of Rights at the top, whereas concepts like federalism and the separation of powers and key periods like the American Founding fare less well. Students appear to be receiving instruction on those things that embody a certain spirit of America, but not on how that spirit is translated into actual governance. Similarly, only 50 percent of teachers think it essential for students to know “economic principles like supply and demand,” and just 36 percent think it essential that they know facts and dates (like the location of the fifty states or the date of the attack on Pearl Harbor). This strikes us as a case of teachers setting a remarkably low bar for what they expect their students to learn.

Third, teachers’ observations of what students are and are not learning are disconcerting indeed. When asked whether they are “very confident” that students have mastered important content and skills, only 24 percent of teachers indicate that their students can identify the protections in the Bill of Rights when they graduate high school, 15 percent think that their students understand concepts such as federalism and the separation of powers, and 11 percent believe their students understand the basics of the free market.

Fourth, private schools may be better at fostering citizenship and civic virtues. Despite all the popular assertions that private schooling cannot serve public purposes, the data suggest that public and private educators have similar values and goals. At the same time, the nature of the private school environment appears to be more conducive to achieving these civic ends. Take this striking finding: 43 percent of private school teachers say that most students in their high school graduate having learned “to be tolerant of people and groups who are different from themselves,” compared with just 19 percent of their public school counterparts. Indeed, private school

teachers appear to be much more confident that their graduates are learning the things that both groups of teachers say they want students to learn.

Finally, social studies teachers feel marginalized in the testing era. Seventy percent of them say their subject is a lower priority because of pressure to show progress in math and language arts. More than four in ten blame No Child Left Behind (NCLB) for deemphasizing their subject. Of course, the reality is that NCLB has had far more of an impact on elementary and middle schools than on high schools, so teachers may merely see the law as a visible, convenient villain. Nonetheless, 93 percent of teachers want social studies to be part of their state’s testing system.

\* \* \*

In some respects, the survey’s key findings are not altogether unexpected. Over the last decade, and especially since the passage of NCLB, Americans have increasingly come to speak of education as “the new civil right.” This has usefully focused educators, advocates, and policymakers on student achievement and school records in preparing their charges for careers or entrance to college. However, this healthy emphasis on academic skills and training has come with the unfortunate consequence of devaluing civic education.

From the dawn of the Western tradition, as seen in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, education has been regarded as essential to the formation of good citizens and the cultivation of a proper attachment to the state. For American Founders Benjamin Rush, Noah Webster, and Thomas Jefferson, one of the main functions of schools was producing democratic citizens. In Rush’s telling phrase, schools should mold “republican machines” who will support and defend their nation.

In recent decades, however, as education has come to be seen as the path to personal and professional advancement, the private purposes of schooling have been assigned higher priority. We see this crystallized in President Barack Obama’s oft-repeated goal to ensure that all students are

“college- or career-ready” by 2020. As the tangible economic benefits of schooling have become central to policy thinking, the teaching of citizenship has become increasingly peripheral.

When citizenship is spoken of today, it is often in a “transactional” sense—with citizenship understood as the basket of skills and attitudes (how to shake hands, speak properly, and be punctual) that will help students attend prestigious colleges and obtain desirable jobs. There was a temporary exception to this tendency following the attacks of 9/11, when politicians, teachers, and parents were briefly awakened to the importance of teaching students their privileges and responsibilities as American citizens. But the enthusiasm for this project soon waned and was quickly swept aside by the increased focus on proficiency and graduation rates.

Americans have entered the twenty-first century, an epoch punctuated by debates over immigration, religious tolerance, and the role of government, with their schools devoting remarkably little attention to the formation of sound democratic citizens. A focus on academic performance, along with concerns about provoking controversy, have in many places demoted talk of citizenship to assemblies, ceremonies, or the occasional social studies lesson.

We believe this report captures, from the perspective of teachers, these problematic trends.

This report is, however, only a beginning. Our hope is that this study will lead to a larger effort to rethink and reinvigorate the civic mission of schools. As history teaches us only too well, democracy is not self-perpetuating. If we believe good citizenship matters—if it is not just a means to help students graduate and get good jobs—then we need to value it. It should not be justified only in terms of student achievement, but because it is what holds this country together.

\* \* \*

Many people played important roles in developing this report. First and foremost, we thank our advisory board, including David Campbell, James W. Ceaser, Lily Eskelsen, Chester E. Finn Jr., Meira Levinson, Tom Loveless, Andrew Rotherham, and Jon Zimmerman, for their thoughtful guidance and feedback on the survey and its results. We are also grateful to the AEI publications staff and Sam Whitehead for their assistance in the production of this report. Finally, we thank the S. D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation and Gordon and Adele Binder for the financial resources that made this study possible.