

Profile of Pennsylvania Coalition for Representative Democracy (PennCORD)

Description

The Pennsylvania Coalition for Representative Democracy (PennCORD) is a coalition of state organizations committed to implementing in every Pennsylvania school the six classroom and extracurricular approaches to civic learning recommended in the Carnegie Corporation's Civic Mission of Schools Report (2003).¹ The Pennsylvania Bar Association (PBA) is one of three lead partners in this project along with Third Circuit Court of Appeals Judge and Pennsylvania First Lady Marjorie O. Rendell and the National Constitution Center (NCC).

PennCORD held its first meeting at the Governor's Mansion on Oct. 25, 2004, and Judge Rendell lauded PBA President Mike Reed for his support of PennCORD and for the PBA's leadership in promoting civic learning. PBA Law-Related Education Committee Co-chairs Judge Linda Wallach Miller and Lou Teti were among the 55 statewide leaders in attendance. PBA Executive Director Barry Simpson and PBA Pro Bono Coordinator David Trevaskis also participated in the event.

Judge Rendell has made civic education the cornerstone of her mission as First Lady of Pennsylvania. The First Lady's office, together with the NCC and the PBA, have taken the lead in developing a partnership serving K-12 students that will:

- Conduct detailed student and teacher assessments of the current state of civics education in Pennsylvania to determine areas for improvement and to identify exemplary programs and key messages that make a case for improved civic education in schools and communities. The PBA has been a longtime leader in promoting civic learning through its Law-Related Education Committee and its public education programs.²
- Develop resource packets and hold advocacy-training sessions for students, parents, educators and community leaders to advance their communication with key policymakers about the importance of civics education in every school. The PBA, with members across the state, is a perfect partner in this outreach effort.
- Engage print and broadcast media partners to take up the Civic Mission of Schools cause and to provide venues for students and community members to express their views on improving civic education — to ultimately influence policymakers. The PBA provides tremendous potential resources having already demonstrated that it is committed to civic learning by being the first statewide organization to endorse the state standards in civics and government when they were initially proposed.

¹ A summary of CMS is included at the end of this report as Appendix A.

² See <http://www.pabar.org/specialprograms.shtml> to see the full range of the PBA public education effort.

- Track civic education policy implementation around the state; compile, post to a web portal, and market best practices and proven teaching models; and offer teacher training and support in civic education methodology. The PBA will assist by maintaining its statewide civic learning efforts through such programs as I Signed the Constitution, Mock Trial, Project PEACE, Law Day and Stepping Out.

PennCORD's founding partners, in addition to the three lead partners, include the Pennsylvania Association of Student Councils, the Pennsylvania Senate and House Education Committee chairs, the Pennsylvania Council for the Social Studies, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court and Law, Education and PEACE for Kids, the Pennsylvania center for law-related education. A number of other statewide and regional organizations have indicated their interest in the coalition, and the group is currently expanding. The PBA has played a significant role in bringing additional partners to the coalition and will continue to do so in the future.

Vision

The Pennsylvania Department of Education developed academic standards in civics and government, but despite the support and backing of groups like the PBA, they are not being implemented in many Pennsylvania schools. Too few teachers are familiar with the standards and many lack content knowledge to teach citizenship effectively. There is also evidence that Pennsylvania's teachers are not making civics a priority when faced with tough standards for student achievement in reading and math. The PBA Law-Related Committee has seen a reduction in school participation in certain projects for these reasons and, even where participation has increased, the increase has been less than it might have been before the advent of high-stakes testing.

There is outstanding K-12 civic education work taking place around the state. The PennCORD vision includes providing recognition and visibility for excellent civic education practice, such as that of the PBA LRE Committee, so that more schools and young people can take advantage of this work.

PennCORD's ultimate vision for a representative democracy in Pennsylvania is that children are taught, from an early age, about the value of citizenship and the important role they can play through civic action. Students who learn about civic responsibility as part of their general curriculum are better prepared to be politically active adults. The PBA, promoting both the rule of law and the vital role attorneys play in our representative democracy, has been working towards that vision for many years.

Current PennCORD Activities/Interests:

- Collecting excellent K-12 classroom resources/lesson plans, etc. for statewide distribution; showcasing excellence in civic education
- Developing teacher training programs
- Developing advocacy kits for high school students and community members
- Promoting student journalism advocating for improved civic education
- Promoting high quality programs already in place around the commonwealth that provide students with civic education experiences

Appendix A

In *The Civic Mission of Schools (CMS)*³, the consensus goal of civic education was identified as helping students gain and apply citizenship skills, knowledge and attitudes. The CMS recognized the need to provide resources and encouragement to ensure that all students may become the kind of competent and responsible citizens who are:

- Informed and thoughtful;
- Involved in their communities;
- Active politically; and
- Concerned for the rights and welfare of others.

The CMS offered six promising approaches for civic education. The approaches are outlined below.

- 1. Provide instruction in government, history, law and democracy.** Formal instruction in U.S. government, history and democracy increases civic knowledge. This is a valuable goal in itself and may also contribute to young people's tendency to engage in civic and political activities over the long term. However, schools should avoid teaching only rote facts about dry procedures that are unlikely to benefit students and may actually alienate them from politics. The materials created by the PBA for programs such as I Signed the Constitution and Law Day teach about government, history, law and democracy in engaging and interactive ways that reinforce both the skills, as well as the content, of our democracy.
- 2. Incorporate discussion of current local, national and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.** When young people have opportunities to discuss current issues in a classroom setting, they tend to have greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communications skills, more civic knowledge and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school. Conversations, however, should be carefully moderated so that students feel welcome to speak from a variety of perspectives. Teachers need support in broaching controversial issues in classrooms since they may risk criticism or sanctions if they do so. The visits of attorneys and judges to classrooms and the visits of students to courthouses and elsewhere, conducted under the auspices of the PBA and many local bars across the commonwealth, significantly support this type of learning.

³ ¹CMS was sponsored by CIRCLE (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) and the Carnegie Corporation of New York in cooperation with the Corporation for National and Community Service. See www.civicmissionofschools.org for the complete findings of CMS. The CMS report was the creation of a diverse and talented group of civic scholars and practitioners; it was accepted by the Bush Administration as an important document that demands careful review.

- 3. Design and implement programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that are linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.** Service programs are now common in K-12 schools. The ones that best develop engaged citizens are linked to the curriculum; consciously pursue civic outcomes rather than seek only to improve academic performance or to promote higher self-esteem; allow students to engage in meaningful work on serious public issues; give students a role in choosing and designing their projects; provide students with opportunities to reflect on the service work; allow students – especially older ones – to pursue political responses to problems consistent with laws that require public schools to be nonpartisan; and see service-learning as part of a broader philosophy toward education, not just a program that is adopted for a finite period in a particular course. PBA programs support service learning activities and the elementary peer mediation program, Project PEACE, conducted in cooperation with the Pennsylvania Attorney General, shows that students can make a difference in their schools and in their communities, even at very young ages.
- 4. Offer extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities.** Long term studies of Americans show that those who participate in extracurricular activities in high school remain more civically engaged than their contemporaries even decades later. Thus, everyone should have opportunities to join high school groups and such participation should be valued. Over 260 teams and nearly 3,000 high school students participate annually in the statewide mock trial competition run by the Young Lawyers Division of the PBA. Thousands of students take part in the PBA’s annual Law Day and I Signed the Constitution programs and other activities. New initiatives, such as the efforts in central and western Pennsylvania to mentor inner-city students with corporate counsel in the Diversity Pipeline Project, provide even greater opportunities for young people outside of school.
- 5. Encourage student participation in school governance.** A long tradition of research suggests that giving students more opportunities to participate in the management of their own classrooms and schools builds their civic skills and attitudes. Thus, giving students a voice in school governance is a promising way to encourage all young people to engage civically. Many PBA leaders emphasize this very point in their public presentations, and numerous lawyers across the state mentor student leaders.
- 6. Encourage student participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.** Recent evidence indicates that simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberation and diplomacy in schools can lead to heightened political knowledge and interest. The data is not conclusive, but these approaches show promise and should be considered when developing programs and curriculum. Mock trials, from the statewide high school competition to the elementary class that argued Jack and the Beanstalk before Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Eakin, We the People congressional simulations, mock mediations, law writing exercises and more have been conducted under PBA auspices and the experiences have been powerful ones for both the students and the attorneys involved.