

Getting Started: The Importance of Civic Learning

In the Civic Mission of Schools (CMS)¹, the consensus goal of civic education was identified as helping students gain and apply citizenship skills, knowledge and attitudes. This is also the goal of public education in Pennsylvania as outlined in the Public School Act of 1949 and the goal of the PennCORD initiative, in which the PBA is proud to be a leading partner. CMS recognized the need to provide resources and encouragement to ensure that all students can 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.



CMS offered six promising approaches for civic education. The approaches of the report, which are outlined below, provide a strong framework for law-related education and civic learning in Pennsylvania:

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, which is unlikely to benefit students and may actually alienate them from

politics. History is full of great stories, both "his" and "her" stories, and there is significant commercial material available to fulfill this most basic aspect of civic education. There are wonderful ways that schools and communities have enriched this education such as the efforts by the Chester County Bar Association and local judges who produced a scripted mock trial of a real life 1821 case involving a former slave who killed two of the men who tried to kidnap him back into slavery.

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 own lives.** When young people have opportunity 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. Both students and teachers need support in broaching controversial issues in classrooms since they may risk criticism or sanctions if they do so.
3. **Design and implement programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is 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. Some school service programs involve the creation of mediation programs for the school or for the larger community such as those created through Project PEACE, which is a joint program of the Office of Pennsylvania’s Attorney General and the Pennsylvania Bar Association. Other programs involve cross-age teaching of conflict resolution skills.

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 school groups, and such participation should be valued². Group participation means interaction with peers and others as part of that participation, thus providing real-life experience in grassroots democratic practices.
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 be engaged civically. The conflicts associated with school governance often mirror the conflicts found in political life in the larger society, and the need for skill development is vital if the experience is to be positive for students. Although a developmentally appropriate approach is needed, there is room at every level for students to participate in school governance – with the level of participation growing as the students mature.
6. **Encourage students’ 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. The Pennsylvania Statewide Mock Trial Competition, sponsored by the Pennsylvania Bar Association in high schools throughout the state, provides a wonderful example of this kind of simulated process.

Footnotes:

1. CMS 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 and was accepted by the Bush Administration as an important document that demands careful review.
2. In other words, students in such service activities should be graded, paid for their work or rewarded in some significant fashion.