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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the research on students' and adults' knowledge of government and queries: "Will the civics and government standards (or any others) make any difference?" Contending that the present teacher education environment does little to promote active learning in the government classroom and that present government teachers have not likely seen a copy of the civics and government standards because of pressing classroom duties, those who are reading the standards are policy makers, bureaucrats, educational specialists, and those who produce and market educational materials. Because textbook companies and testing producers are embracing the various standards, the policy makers, local school leaders, and teachers will be affected by the standards as well. The paper challenges teachers and students to become involved in the standards debate and demonstrate the democratic principles they are to profess. Contains 18 references. (EH)

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CIVICS and GOVERNMENT: Standards for Adequate Participation of Citizens in American Democracy?

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Civics and Government: Standards for Adequate Participation of Citizens in American Democracy?

The civic mission of education is universally embraced in a democratic society. It was recognized by Jefferson, Madison, and Adams and has been affirmed throughout our history. The late Ralph Tyler (1993, 74) summed it up when he said, "The public schools were established to enable young people to learn what is necessary for intelligent democratic citizenship." Civic education has ranked alongside the three R's as a central responsibility of American schools. The Committee of Ten in 1892 and the 1916 landmark report of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education affirmed citizenship as one of the cardinal principles of education. The 1945 Conant report asserted that the purpose of schools is to cultivate in the largest possible number of our future citizens an appreciation for both the responsibility and the benefits that come to them because they are Americans and free (Conant 1945; *The Social Studies in Secondary Education* 1945). These observations were reaffirmed in *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education [NCEE], 1983). In his classic recounting of life in American high schools, *Horace's Compromise*,Sizer (1984, 10) put citizenship at the very center of education, stating, "The essential claims in education are very elementary: literacy, numerically, and civic understanding."

In his review of the school reform movement of the 1980's, R. Freeman Butts (1989) concluded that those who were leaders in educational reform had little interest in including civic education in their agenda. There was a lack of interest by the media, parents, and students. Parents opined that academic goals superseded civic ones and students voted social studies at, or near, the bottom of their interest level. The effective schools movement all but ignored civic goals in their work.

It is no wonder, then, that when the National Goals were penned, civics and government were omitted from the list of "challenging subject matter" students were to know (National Education Goals Panel 1992). It took the lobbying efforts of civic education leaders from across the country to facilitate having civics and government added to Goal Three. The cause was championed by former Chief Justice Warren Burger.

To achieve the goals of "students leaving school competent in civics and government and prepared for responsible citizenship" and "all adults possessing the knowledge and skills necessary to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship," the Center for Civic Education (CCE), with financing from the U. S. Department of

Education and the Pew Charitable Trusts, developed the *National Standards for Civics and Government (Standards)* (1994).

Accolades have come from media, from members of Congress, from Democrats and Republicans, from public and private school leaders, from educators, and from international leaders.¹ The CCE marshaled the assistance of a network of educators, (over 3000) academicians of all sorts, people in the legal field, and politicians. Perhaps the principle reason for their approval is that the *Standards* are organized around five concise questions to which all Americans can agree are central to the sustaining of our Constitutional democracy.

- 1) What is government and what should it do?
- 2) What are the basic values and principles of American democracy?
- 3) How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy?
- 4) What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs?
- 5) What are the roles of the citizen in American democracy?

Although the civic mission of education is, perhaps, universally accepted, how to accomplish that goal is the subject of ongoing discussion. For starters, there is not, nor has there been, a consensus on what constitutes a “good citizen.” (*Citizenship Education and Peace Project 990; A Generation Adrift 1990*). *Civitas: A Framework for Civic Education* (CCE 1991) has done a Herculean job of moving us toward consensus on just what civic education ought to be about. Civic educators believe that crucial to a change in the status quo of citizenship education is the need to alter how we teach students to be citizens, to change what happens in the classrooms and schools (Callahan & Banaszak 1990).

For the first time in our history, we have standards to which educators, academicians, the legal community, and citizens have ascribed. Aside from guiding the practice of the teaching of civics and government and the education of civics and government teachers, they may also serve to fairly measure and assess the civic competence and political attitudes of children and young people.

Statistics that indicate young people are ill informed about government, civics, and politics, apathetic about civic participation, and cynical about the ability of citizens to change society via their government haunt and baffle the educational community. An annual survey of college freshmen conducted by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute, indicates an alarming rate of apathy among college freshmen. The report of the study, entitled *The American Freshman*, documents the responses of some 240,000

students at more than 400 colleges and universities. Just over a third of the freshmen felt that individuals can do little to change society.²

It is difficult to point a finger at students, for adults are equally cynical and ill-informed. In a poll reported in *The Washington Post*, in early 1996, 40% of those adults questioned could not name the vice president of the United States. Almost half (48%) could not correctly name the current Speaker of the House. Only 6% could name the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.³

The crucial question posed in this forum is simply, "Will the civics and government standards (or any others) make a difference?" Based on what we know, we are not doing an effective job of educating and preparing our students to be citizens. While there are certainly some outstanding civic education programs available, (e.g., those of the Close-Up Foundation, the CCE, as well as a myriad of law-related education projects across the country), the average student is not flourishing in innovative civic education classrooms and programs. In addition, in the latest budget battles in Congress, the federal financial underpinning for most of the civic education programs has been eliminated.

School curriculums are largely structured by adopted textbooks and teachers resort to lecture, discussion, and multiple guess assessments as standards for the daily routines of their instructional programs (Davis 1995). Of additional concern is the fact that civics is being taught less and less. Civics is a required course in only six states. It is a popular elective in some ten states, but in 34 states there is no requirement (Council of State Social Studies Specialists 1995). Teachers in grades K-4 report spending less than 2.5 hours per week on social studies and/or history (U. S. Department of Education 1993).

Moreover, as those teachers teach, so were they taught. The substantive courses that prospective teachers take in colleges, or universities, do not, nor have they ever, as a rule, provided models of active learning. The stereotypical college classroom is one in which a professor lectures while students quietly take notes. While there are obviously many professors who use creative and appropriate seminars, peer evaluation, and cooperative learning, it is estimated that teachers in most institutions spend 80% of their time lecturing to students who, in turn, are attentive some 50% of the time (Pollio 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini 1991).

It is unreasonable to think that the average social studies teacher has read, digested, and embraced the civic and government standards. If they know about them, or have seen a copy, chances are they read with interest and then quickly returned to the pressing duties of their day-to-day responsibilities, where their energies are drained and

their intellect challenged by meeting the needs of their students and the demands of their school districts. They worry about covering the content set out in the curriculum guide of the school district and preparing students to take and pass the almighty test that society has deemed the measure of success and accountability.

Those who are reading the civics and government standards, as well as other standards, are the policy makers, the bureaucrats, the educational specialists, and those who produce and market educational materials. As states have developed new frameworks, state committees have reviewed the various sets of standards. Since 1990, the annual programs for the Council of State Social Studies Specialists (CSSS) and the Social Studies Specialists Association (SSSA) have been dominated by presentations and discussions of the standards. Sitting in on many of those meetings and hearings were the representatives of various textbook companies.

It is quite logical, then, to predict that the standards will become a marketing tool -- a "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval." Every textbook company will be proud to say that their text conforms in some way to the standards, that is, if they perceive that the standards are being well-received, as the *National Standards for Civics and Government* have been. The math standards provide another good example. The content of the standards will be scrutinized by those preparing all kinds of curriculum materials and, as a result, ultimately, the standards may well affect what happens in classrooms and in teacher preparation programs across the country.

More importantly, those who develop, write, and market the standardized tests that every child in the United States takes are examining standards and using them as criteria for tests now under development and production. At the educational summit held by the nation's governors and business leaders, in March of 1996, President Clinton, along with leaders of the governors' association and the businessmen, called not only for tougher school standards, but exit tests to measure student achievement. President Clinton also said

While I believe (standards) should be set by the state and the testing mechanism should be approved by the states, we shouldn't kid ourselves: Being promoted ought to mean more or less the same thing in Pasadena, California, as it does in Palisades, New York." ⁴

With these groups agreeing, it goes without saying, then, that tests are going to become more powerful than ever.

Two examples serve to prove this point. The National Assessment of Educational Progress' regular evaluation of students' knowledge of civics and government, to be conducted in 1998, will be based on the *National Standards for Civics and Government*. ⁵ The state of Alabama, as well as others, has adopted the Stanford 9 test, which is produced

by Harcourt Brace Educational Measurement. All students must take and pass it at certain times in their school career. In companion materials distributed by the company, where resources are listed, it is clearly stated that the tests are closely aligned with all of the national standards, including those produced by the National Council for the Social Studies and the *National Standards for Civics and Government*, (Harcourt Educational Measurement 1996, 16). As a result the other materials produced by the CCE are suddenly very popular in the state of Alabama, and consultants from CCE are in great demand as speakers and presenters on educational programs in Alabama.

Because both textbook companies and those in the assessment world are embracing the various standards, it is abundantly clear that policy makers, local school leaders, and teachers will be affected by the standards. As local guides are developed and curriculum written, teachers will have to contemplate the content and suggestions of the standards in all areas. The sheer volume of those in the social studies arena remains a significant drawback. The average faculty may see them as insurmountable and simply rebel in frustration and continue with business as usual. In that case, the opportunity and hope of the standards as a reform, or renewal, tool, is lost.

It is reasonable to postulate that as the standards affect textbooks and the national testing in grades K-12, they will also inform those who develop the tests taken by those seeking teaching credentials, such as PRAXIS, or various statewide tests, like the EXCET in Texas. If teacher educators have not already become informed about the standards, they will most assuredly do so when their students fail to pass the state-mandated assessment necessary for teacher licensure. Since most of those test content, though, the focus turns to professors of political science and other social sciences, for it is there students gain their cognitive awareness in the subject area. Thus we arrive at the question of what will higher education do with the standards. Will the standards guide and/or influence research?

The opportunities for research among teacher educators are immense. The *National Standards for Civics and Government*, as well as others, provide contemporary barometers by which we might assess the effectiveness of curriculum, the content of texts, and the academic success of students. The information in the standards can guide staff development and methods courses and provide a framework for curriculum development. Based on what I am hearing from colleagues, teacher educators are certainly scrutinizing the standards and involving their students in similar evaluations. Since 1990, an enormous amount of time has been spent on the programs of the National Council for the Social Studies, the College and University Faculty Association, and other affiliated groups, as well as various teacher educator and administrative groups. If and how the

standards will change the content of methods and materials classes, however, remains to be seen.

It is folly to think that political scientists, or others who teach the social science disciplines, will change what they do based on documents designed and produced by educators. However, these professionals delight in assessing, and discussing, what children and young people know, or more specifically, what they do not know.

When the American Political Science Association (APSA) held its second annual meeting in 1905, one major presentation was "What Do Entering College Freshmen Know About American Government Before Taking College Courses in Political Science?" From that time on, the APSA has maintained a standing committee whose charge is to oversee projects devoted to pre-collegiate education in civics, government, and politics. (APSA Guidelines for Teaching: Recommendations for Certifying Pre-collegiate Teachers of Civics, Government, and Social Studies 1994).

Most recently, the group has published guidelines for teacher licensure. Not surprising to those in teacher education, or the civic education world, there is no mention of pedagogy. The document, rather, simply delineates the courses that should be required to qualify one for teaching. There is no mention of performance competencies, i.e., what a successful teacher of civics and/or government should be able to do.

The *National Standards for Civics and Government* give rise to a discussion of what teachers/students might do together to foster the development of humane citizens who are well-informed, willing to participate in democratic governance, and dedicated to the values and principles set forth in our founding documents. I predict that the standards will become the guide for studies designed to assess civic competence of students at the elementary, middle, high school, and college levels. As the emerging democracies reach levels where they have cadres of students adequately informed in democratic principles, there will, undoubtedly, be international comparisons, as well. If American educators do not take heed and re-examine what and how they teach civics and government, we may well be reading headlines in the future that indicate that students in Romania (or some other former Communist-bloc nation) scored higher on a test on democratic principles than American students (Mulcahy, 1994).

By then, no doubt, we will be in a new wave of educational reform, and involved in writing new improved competencies, goals, outcomes, objectives, essential elements, standards, or whatever they will be called. The volumes of today's standards will have taken their rightful place in the appropriate archives; their story will be the fodder for students doing doctoral studies. After all, as we know, the past is only a prologue.

Notes

1. Critical acclaim for the National Standards for Civics and Government have been sent to the Center for Civic Education from members of Congress, e.g., Senator Claiborne Pell, Senator Mark O. Hatfield, from leaders in the field of education, e.g., Albert Shaker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, Diane Ravitch, Senior Research Scholar, New York University, from national organizations, e.g., the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Association of American Publishers, the National Catholic Educational Association, the National Association of Evangelicals, from individual teachers, college professors, e.g., Professor A. E. (Dick) Howard of the University of Virginia School of Law, and from educational leaders in other countries, e.g. Barbara Malak-Minkiewicz, Polish Ministry of Education, Department of Teacher Training, The Netherlands.
2. *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1995* is the report of a survey done each fall of freshmen in colleges and universities across the country. The report may be obtained from the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, Mailbox 951521/3005 Moore Hall, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521.
3. *The Washington Post* began a series of articles, entitled, "Americans Losing Trust in Each Other and Institutions," on Sunday, January 28, 1996. They ran through February 1, 1996.
4. "Clinton calls for tougher school standards, exit tests," *Austin American Statesman* 28 March 1996.
5. "Board Approves Plans for NAEP Civics Test," *Education Week* 13 March 1996; *1998 NAEP Civics Assessment Planning Project: Recommended Assessment Framework and Test Specifications* released by the Council of Chief State School Officers and approved by the National Assessment Governing Board on March 2, 1996.

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