

*The diversity of values within
American society renders public schools
ill-equipped to produce the engaged
citizens our democracy requires*

faulty

Engineering

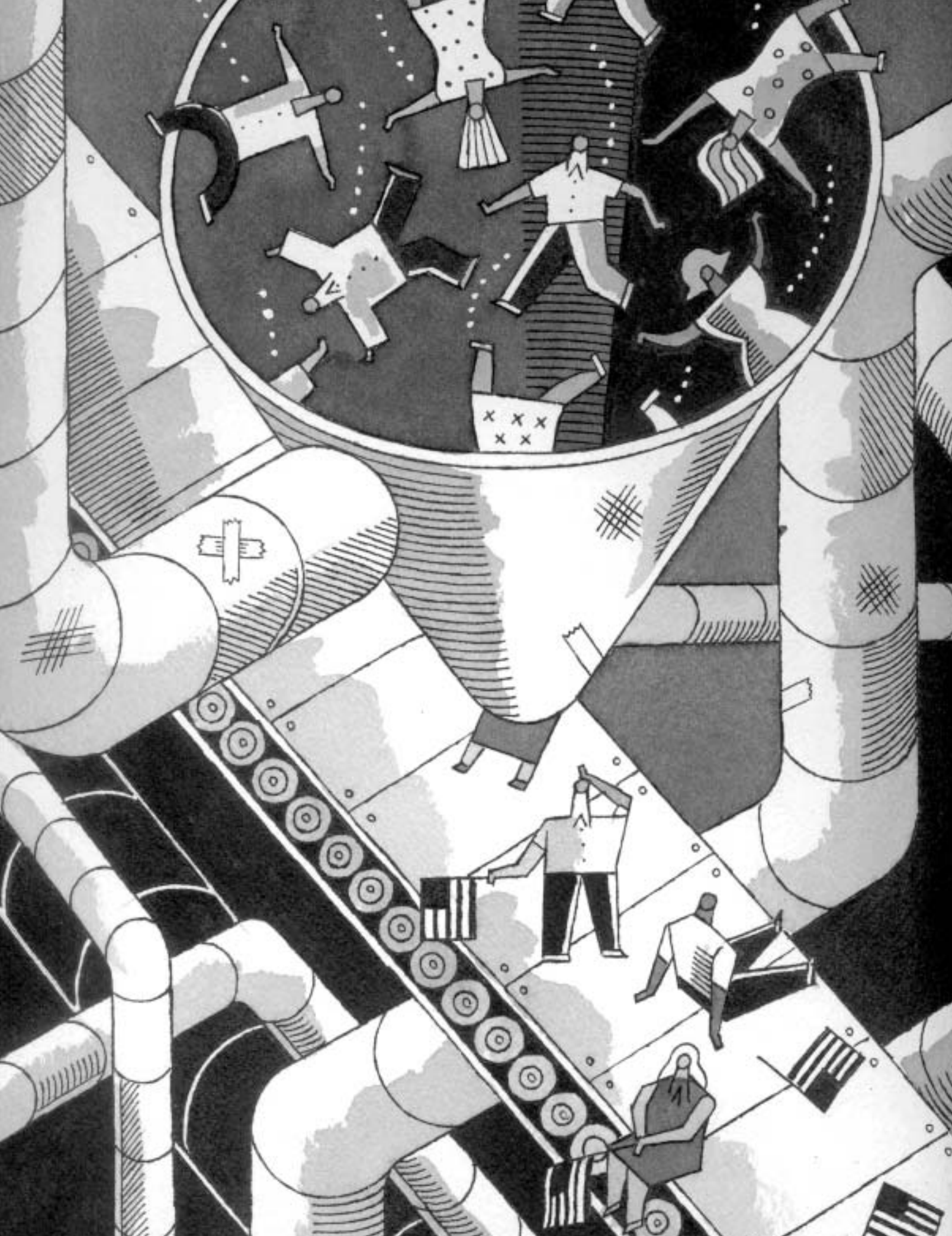
A large, bold, black letter 'E' is centered within a light gray circle. The 'E' is a classic serif font, and the circle is semi-transparent, allowing the text behind it to be visible.

VERY SOCIETY CREATES MECHANISMS FOR TEACHING its young what they must know to become contributing citizens. Yet in a liberal democracy such as the United States, the proper ordering of those mechanisms is beset by paradox: if free citizens are to rule the state, does the state have a legitimate role in shaping their values and beliefs via its public schools, universities, and other institutions?

Because Americans insist that government is the creature of its citizens, we are loath to rely on state decisions and institutions to instruct our children in how to think, how to conduct themselves, and what to believe. After all, civic education may sound like a good idea in theory, but in practice public schools could even do harm in this realm. Some educators harbor worrisome values: moral relativism, atheism, doubts about the superiority of democracy, undue deference to the “*pluribus*” at the expense of the “*unum*,” discomfort with patriotism, cynicism toward established cultural conventions and civic institutions. Transmitting those values to children will gradually erode the foundations of a free society. Perhaps society would be better off if its schools stuck to the three Rs and did a solid job in domains where they enjoy both competence and wide public support.

However, a free society is not self-maintaining. Its citizens must know something about democracy and about individual rights and responsibilities. They must also learn how to behave in a law-abiding way, respecting basic societal norms and values. Thus all educational institutions, especially primary and secondary schools, would seem to have an obligation to help transmit these core ideas, habits, and skills. Indeed, we fret when we learn of schools that *neglect* this role—the more so in a dangerous world where attacks on American values and institutions (and people) make it more important than ever to rear children who understand and prize those values.

by CHESTER E. FINN JR.



MANY YOUNG PEOPLE DON'T KNOW THAT THEIR STATE HAS TWO SENATORS and have difficulty distinguishing the New Deal from a poker game.

One of the more effective debating points scored against voucher plans, for example, is the charge that “Klan schools,” “witchcraft schools,” and “fundamentalist madrasas” will qualify for public subsidy while imparting malign values to their pupils. Yet should government define which values are sound? And how is that different from an Orwellian regime of authoritarianism and theocracy? A fine dilemma indeed.

Standards and Civics

Our quandaries grow more vexing still as the standards movement transfers key decisions about the content of education from local neighborhoods and communities to distant policymakers in state and national capitals.

Under federal law, every state must now have statewide standards in reading, math, and science, and nearly every state has also developed standards in social studies and other important areas of the school curriculum. Social studies standards typically focus not only on history, geography, economics, and government, but also on citizenship, social norms, and the like. Here, for example, is the opening of New Jersey’s description of its “core curriculum content standards for social studies”:

Citizen participation in government is essential in forming this nation’s democracy, and is vital in sustaining it. Social studies education promotes loyalty and love of country and it prepares students to participate intelligently in public affairs. Its component disciplines foster in students the knowledge and skills needed to make sense of current political and social issues. By studying history, geography, American government and politics, and other nations, students can learn to contribute to national, state, and local decisionmaking. They will also develop an understanding of the American constitutional system, an active awareness and commitment to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, a tolerance for those with whom they disagree, and an understanding of the world beyond the borders of the United States.

A worthy aspiration indeed, yet one that is rarely attained. There is ample evidence to demonstrate that U.S. schools have failed even to impart basic information to children about their country’s history and how its government and civil institu-

tions work. For example, just 26 percent of U.S. high-school seniors attained the “proficient” level on the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress civics exam. Just 11 percent reached that level on the 2001 assessment of U.S. history. (Fifty-seven percent scored below the “basic” level on that assessment.)

If young people don’t know that their state has two senators, don’t understand the separation of powers, cannot explain the causes of the Civil War, and have difficulty distinguishing the New Deal from a poker game, what chance is there that they are acquiring—from the schools, anyway—“an active awareness and commitment to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship”? Is it not imperative for schools to establish a solid foundation of basic knowledge on which values, attitudes, and behaviors can securely rest?

Outside the Classroom

There’s good news, too, but of a perverse sort: the very limits of schooling—both its ineffectiveness and the relatively small place it occupies in children’s lives—leave ample room for other influences to work on youngsters’ civic values and behavior. Parents, neighbors, churches, scouts, girls and boys clubs, the media—all play a significant role in sculpting children’s understanding of the world around them. America has a vibrant civil society that does a decent job of forging good citizens even if the schools don’t. That’s why so many young Americans do obey the law (if not necessarily the speed limit), do volunteer, do help old people across the street, do serve valiantly in the military, and so forth.

But we also know that many young Americans don’t vote, don’t read the newspaper, don’t serve their communities, and show dwindling interest in current affairs. Worse, there is the huge problem of young people whose lives are influenced mainly by gangs, street culture, hip hop, and the worst of movies and television. These young people lack good role models at home and have few ties to civil society.

Which brings the problem into clearer focus. Let me recap. First, we are ambivalent about the role of the schools in teaching citizenship. Second, U.S. schools don’t do a very good job today, either on the cognitive side or on the attitudinal and behavioral side. Third, though nearly all children suffer from the schools’ shortcomings on the cognitive side, many fare reasonably well when it comes to the behavioral aspects of citizenship, thanks to other healthy influences in



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their lives. Fourth, young people without such influences are doubly victimized by the schools' failings—because they have little with which to compensate, either in acquiring knowledge or in forging decent civic values.

The Pitfalls of Civics Education

Can this knot of problems be untangled and solved? Many are trying. Innumerable foundations, commissions, state initiatives, and federal programs are now seeking to renew civic education in American schools. But solutions run headlong into a series of barriers. Four of these seem especially troublesome.

◆ First, efforts to develop a civics curriculum are snagged by a basic truth about America: beyond a narrow core of shared beliefs (honesty, tolerance, obeying the law), Americans hold strong but often divergent views about the values they want their children to acquire and about the role of teachers and schools in inculcating those values. It may, therefore, be impossible for the publicly operated schools

of a society that is so diverse to do a good job of forging citizens. Consider the challenge of deciding what experiences constitute “service learning” for high-school students in jurisdictions where this is now expected as part of a civics class or social studies curriculum. Does volunteering in one’s church qualify? In an abortion clinic? Bringing coffee and donuts to grateful GIs at the nearby military base? Leading a protest against military action? When adults heatedly disagree about the value of such activities, how can a democracy’s public schools decide on their proper role in the lives and education of the young?

Fierce watchdog groups constantly scrutinize the public schools for signs of religiosity. Activists pressure schools to redefine “civic education” in terms of influencing public policy and engaging in political activity—while giving short shrift to being a good parent, dependable neighbor, and conscientious member of the nongovernmental institutions that compose civil society. And everybody gangs up on textbooks, which are afflicted by hypersensitivity to the possibility of bias or controversy. This baleful influence comes from both the left and the right.

Hence much gets omitted from class materials and much of what remains has been sanitized to the point of banality. This has the effect of depriving schools and teachers of many of the stories, books, poems, plays, and legends from which children might best learn the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, hero and villain, patriot and traitor. Moreover, the fear of being criticized by pressure groups encourages curriculum writers and textbook publishers to make their instructional materials value-free from the outset.

◆ Second, within the field of civics education, a battle rages between those who believe that the schools' responsibility is mainly cognitive (imparting specific knowledge to children) and those who insist that youngsters' behavior and attitudes are what schools should work on. It's one thing to explain the role of voting in a democracy, for example, but quite another to help young people acquire the habit of voting or internalize a sense of obligation that they must vote. For many civic educators, these habits, beliefs, and dispositions matter more than "book learning." For example, a recent Carnegie Corporation report, *The Civic Mission of Schools*, offers four takes on "competent and responsible citizens." The first of these says such citizens are "informed and thoughtful," which can mesh with a cognitive view of the school's role. But the other three—"participate in their communities," "act politically," and "have moral and civic virtues"—are harder to instill through conventional books and teaching. They rekindle old debates about the propriety and competency of schools' intruding into people's beliefs and behaviors.

Recall that, in the 1980s, a number of states poked into students' values and behavior through what was termed "outcomes-based" education. This began innocently and earnestly, as a logical response to the era's focus on school results rather than simply inputs. As it spread to include pupil attitudes, actions, and ideologies, however, many people balked at what they saw as government imposing patterns of behavior and thought on children under the guise of mandatory academic standards. For example, the Minnesota state board of education proposed in 1991 that high-school graduation should hinge on students' contributing to "global communities" and the "economic well-being of society," understanding the "interdependency of people," and "working cooperatively in groups." Rightly or not, some parents and religious leaders held that these smacked of socialism and one-worldism, if not Marxism, and that the state had no business imposing such things on its young people. The upshot was that most jurisdictions pulled back to the more strictly cognitive domains.

◆ Third, there are the limits of schooling itself. Between birth and age 18, a typical young American spends just 14 percent of waking hours beneath the school roof. That's barely enough time to cover reading, writing, and arithmetic well, much less to offset the harmful influences that may be at work on children during the other 86 percent of their lives. In response, one may want the school day or year to lengthen, and many good schools, especially those serving disadvantaged students, have striven to enlarge their portion of children's lives. But the overwhelming majority of schools start at about 8 a.m. and end around 2 p.m. Moreover, they are in session for only half the days in the year. Nor do children go near a public school until the age of five or six. How large a share of responsibility for shaping tomorrow's citizens is it practical for those schools to shoulder?

◆ Fourth and finally, the civic and pedagogical values of many educators differ from those of many parents. Faithful to "progressive" traditions and postmodern beliefs, too many education school professors signal to future teachers that they should abjure firm distinctions between right and wrong. Nowhere is this more evident than in the social studies—the part of the curriculum that is commonly held responsible for civics education.

The man in the street probably supposes that social studies consist mainly of history and civics, leavened with some geography and economics. At the end of a well-taught K–12 social studies sequence, one would expect young people to know at least who Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt were, why World War II was fought, how to find Italy and Iraq on a map, and what "supply and demand" mean.

If that were so, school-based social studies would contribute to the forging of citizens, at least on the cognitive side. But that's not what animates the experts who rule this field. They are more concerned with imparting multiple "perspectives" to students, as described in a position paper of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS):

Students should be helped to construct a personal perspective that enables them to explore emerging events and persistent or recurring issues, considering implications for self, family, and the whole national and world community. This perspective involves respect for differences of opinion and preference; of race, religion, and gender; of class and ethnicity; and of culture in general. This construction should be based on the realization that differences exist among individuals and the conviction that this diversity can be positive and socially enriching.

One may or may not find these to be valid goals for social

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studies, but it's reasonably safe to say that, as a framework for civics education in particular, they will stir dissent from American parents, voters, and taxpayers. Thus a clash is inevitable between what we can term the social studies view of civics and the popular view. Indeed, such a clash has been under way for decades. "During the 1930s," writes New York University scholar Diane Ravitch, "one national report after another insisted that social studies should replace chronological history and that young people should study immediate personal and social problems rather than the distant, irrelevant past."

Diversity in Civics Education

Can education reformers overcome these four barriers and place American schools on a sure-footed path to effective civics education? I think not, at least not through top-down reform strategies that emphasize uniform school practices, and certainly not as long as the real pressure for performance and accountability centers on reading and math.

There is, however, another possibility for strengthening civics education. It is to be found in the reform strategy known as school choice. Besides its other strengths, school choice sidesteps one of the big obstacles to better civic education: it accommodates the divergent views and priorities of ethnic and religious groups, parents, and educators, and allows them to tailor the approach to civics that they favor for their children rather than settling for awkward efforts at lowest-common-denominator consensus. Parents who decide that a given school's approach is not right for their daughters and sons are free to make other selections.

The accompanying risk is balkanization: discordant approaches to civic education as one school emphasizes Athenian values while another stresses those of Sparta. In response, choice proponents cite evidence that private school students are more civically engaged than their public school peers. They remind us that government-operated schools are doomed to do a lackluster job in this area. And they note that, as long as states retain the authority to establish core academic standards for all public schools, they have the opportunity to mitigate curricular balkanization, even in such fractious fields as social studies.

Although certain forms of school choice (tax credits, some voucher programs) abjure state academic standards and

tests, others (such as charter schools and public school choice) normally take them for granted. Hence if the state—or other cognizant authority—can get its civics standards right, can attach decent assessments to them, and can steel itself to insist that student performance in this field "counts," it will go a considerable distance toward infusing both standards-based and choice-based education reform with a decent possibility of making a difference in this field.

But those are enormous ifs. All the aforementioned obstacles in society and within the education profession impede any large political unit (such as a state) from attaining consensus about what should be in its civics standards—much less tying an enforcement regimen to them. Today's pressure to boost math and reading achievement makes it less likely that the requisite political energy and resources can be mustered on behalf of a field like civics. The fractures within social studies and the ambivalence of parents will tend to deter public officials from even trying very hard. Moreover, the aspects of civics that can be spelled out in academic standards and accurately assessed through statewide tests are almost entirely cognitive: well worth learning, to be sure, even a necessary precondition for successful adult life, but not exactly what people have in mind when they say that schools should forge "responsible citizens."

In the end, we may need to accept the fact that the school's—and the state's—role in this domain is simply limited: by its meager portion of children's lives, by its pedagogical weakness, by the absence of political and intellectual consensus, and by the modest capabilities of state standards and tests. We may do well to acknowledge that the solemn duty of readying young people for successful participation in adult society depends at least as much—and perhaps quite a lot more—on what happens to them when they are not in school.

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