MERICANS ARE RIGHTLY CONCERNED that schools are not providing students with the knowledge and habits necessary to be good citizens. With the notable exception of volunteer activity, every form of civic engagement among the young has declined. About half of those aged 18 to 29 voted in the 1972 presidential election. By the 1996 election, however, the share had dropped to less than one-third. While 58 percent of college freshmen polled by UCLA in 1966 considered it important to keep up with politics, only 26 percent thought so by the end of the 1990s. Even though young Americans are more educated than ever before, they pay far less attention than previous generations did to traditional news sources like newspapers and network television. And few of them use new media such as the Internet to replace traditional sources of news about world events.

In response to these trends, increasing attention is being paid to civic education in the schools. But strangely, at a moment when the schools seem capable of becoming a bulwark against civic disengagement among the young, a rising chorus of skeptics is casting doubt on the whole enterprise of civic education. In practice, they charge, civic education is ineffective and potentially harmful. The materials used in social studies courses, where most schooling about the political process occurs, are too often built on a foundation of moral relativism, cynicism toward received traditions, and, as Chester Finn puts it, “Undue deference to the ‘pluribus’ at the expense of the ‘unum.’”

Critics also question the very idea of government-sponsored civic education. Public schools can—and should—teach students to become active participants in democratic life.
education, arguing that it threatens basic principles of intellectual freedom. It would be far better, they say, to leave the teaching of values to parents, churches, and private schools. Thus we would avoid the sorry spectacle of government's promoting some values at the expense of others.

So how should we assess civic education as public policy? Let's consider three fundamental questions:

❖ Is it true that civic education makes no difference or even undermines students' interest and participation in civic life?

❖ Have the efforts to promote civic engagement been sufficient to conclude that the experiment has failed?

❖ Are the differences in values among Americans truly so vast that it will be impossible to develop a reasonable public consensus on the goals of civic education?

The answers to each of these questions, I will argue, give us substantial reasons to doubt the skeptical position on civic education. However, I am not at all sure that those who wish to eliminate civics from the public schools care much about finding out the facts. Their interest in maligning civic education may stem from a desire not to improve the content of public schooling but to undermine public institutions altogether.

Does Civic Education Work?

It is important, first, not to exaggerate what schools can accomplish in this sphere. After all, families are the primary socializers in our society, and the mass media shape children's attitudes in pervasive ways. We cannot expect schools by themselves to transform apathetic, self-absorbed consumers into active and engaged citizens. Nevertheless, the best available evidence suggests that teaching students about current events, the political process, and how to get involved can make them more willing and able to practice good citizenship.

Consider the findings summarized in an excellent recent report, The Civic Mission of Schools, issued by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement:

❖ Formal instruction in the key elements of American history and the nation's governmental structure and processes is a crucial building block of civic education.

❖ Active discussion of current local, national, and international events should be incorporated into the classroom, especially issues of interest to young people. This can improve students' critical thinking and communica-
More than 80 percent of high-school seniors are already participating in some form of volunteer activity, which is one bright spot in the civic landscape. Nevertheless, more could be done to link community service with classroom instruction as well as other civic and political activities.

Extracurricular activities have long been known to contribute to students’ tendencies to become and remain civically engaged, even after decades have passed.

Giving students a voice in the management of the classroom and the school may well increase civic skills and attitudes.

Participating in simulations of democratic institutions may increase students’ political knowledge, skills, and interest, though the data are not conclusive.

Despite these benefits of civic education, it turns out that the skeptics are already getting their way in many respects. Until the 1960s, it was common for high-school students to take as many as three courses in civics, democracy, and government. Today, however, most students take only one government-related course. According to the Carnegie report, social studies courses also appear to be in decline. Community service is widely encouraged in high schools, but it is too often separate from the rest of the curriculum. Meanwhile, the singular focus of high-stakes testing on students’ math and reading scores largely ignores civic knowledge. Likewise, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) offers a civics assessment only once every ten years. This sends the signal that civic education matters very little.

If public schools are failing to teach civic knowledge, it is at least partly because they are not trying. To simply throw up our hands and say that public education agencies should now withdraw from civic education seems nothing short of perverse.

Uncommon Values?
The critics’ answer is that even if civic education does work, it is simply not a role that the state should undertake in a free society—or at least in a diverse society such as ours, where there are vast disagreements over political and moral values.

But do our differences make it impossible for us to arrive at reasonable consensus standards on the goals of civic education? To my mind, the answer is no. In fact, the nation has already developed reasonable national standards for the teaching of civics. The NAEP standards read:

Twelfth-grade students performing at the Proficient level should have a good understanding of how constitutions can limit the power of government and support the rule of law. They should be able to distinguish between parliamentary systems of government and those based on separate and shared powers, and they should be able to describe the structure and functions of American government. These students should be able to identify issues in which fundamental democratic values and principles are in conflict—liberty and equality, individual rights and the common good, majority rule and minority rights, for example, and they should be able to take and defend positions on these issues.

On the 1998 NAEP civics exam, just 26 percent of high-school seniors qualified as “proficient.” This is because the standards are genuinely demanding and because, as already noted, the schools are not making an adequate effort to teach civics. If anything, the NAEP civics standards, like the national standards formulated by the Center for the Study of Civic Education (a project in which I participated), might be criticized for being somewhat old-fashioned. Nevertheless, they are good mainstream standards, establishing an appropriate base of civic knowledge and competence that should be attained by all children. The same is true of the NAEP standards for the teaching of U.S. history. These standards do not emphasize indoctrination at the expense of critical thinking. On the contrary, the history standards say things like: students “should be able to communicate reasoned interpretations of past events, using historical evidence effectively to support their positions.”
What do critics find so bothersome there?

Critics rightly point to serious flaws in some guidelines offered for the teaching of social studies. The National Council for the Social Studies—the main professional organization in this field—has put forth guidelines that are less concerned with students’ basic knowledge of civics and history than with encouraging students to develop a “personal perspective” so they can make “choices.” Of course there are good and bad standards and practices for civic education. So why can’t critics chip in and promote the good standards? It would be deeply unfortunate for them not to do so based on the misguided conviction that the whole enterprise of civic education is wrong in principle.

Education and Indoctrination

But what of the “Orwellian” paradox of the government of a free people dictating political values in the name of civic education? In the pages of Education Next, James B. Murphy has argued that all education should aim to instill only academic and intellectual virtues—the love of learning and the critical pursuit of truth—and that this is incompatible with efforts to inculcate particular convictions such as “my country is good” (see “Tug of War,” Research, Fall 2003).

The assumption here seems to be that civic education will inevitably devolve into indoctrination—an assumption that is typically backed by some admittedly objectionable statements found in one social studies curriculum or another. However, most civic educators properly distinguish between empty propaganda and genuine education. To the extent that civic education involves teaching students about the structure of their government, the workings of the political process, and the issues that are debated in the public sphere, there is nothing essentially “Orwellian” about civic education or public schooling.

What of Murphy’s argument that schooling should promote only intellectual virtues like love of learning, not moral values or other political virtues? This proposal has the twin defects of being impossible and unattractive. Civic education is inseparable from education: no teacher could run a classroom, no principal could run a school, without taking a stand on a wide range of civic values and moral and political virtues. How could you conduct a classroom without taking a stand on gender equality? Are you going to treat boys and girls the same or not? Are you going to treat all religions in a tolerant manner? Do you care equally about the education of rich kids and poor kids? It would be nothing short of bizarre for schools to confine themselves to promoting only “academic” or “intellectual” virtues while leaving aside democratic virtues such as basic equality of concern and respect for all people. Important moral and political values constrain and shape the way we conceive of and advance the intellectual enterprise.

Education and indoctrination are indeed two very different things, but to describe classroom learning as “academic” or “intellectual” as opposed to “civic” misses the extent to which our conception of learning is infused with democratic values. It is quixotic and misguided to think we should, or even can, get civic education out of the schools. Civic education is inseparable from education: no teacher could run a classroom, no principal could run a school, without a civic element.

Chester Finn’s solution for the potentially indoctrinating effects of civic education is to allow parents to choose which schools—and thereby which civic traditions—they want for their children. But indoctrination is wrong in any school, whether public or private, secular or religious. Perhaps, however, the skeptics are not interested in civic education that teaches children about government and politics and encourages critical thinking about the major issues of the day. The argument that private schools are best equipped to deliver civic education may be driven by a different conception of what the term includes. It is sometimes argued that a robust civic and moral education requires the teach-
ing of values and virtues about which parents disagree. Because a robust education is necessarily controversial, it can happen only if parents can choose schools that reflect their personal moral and religious convictions.

This argument is worrisome. It certainly throws the whole distinction between education and indoctrination out the window. Indoctrination is antieducational whether it is undertaken by the government or by parents and churches. Parents already control much of what children learn. It may be that schooling would improve if parents were able to exercise more choices, but in the absence of common standards and accountability for the teaching of required subjects like civics, I would worry about whether nonpublic schools could be trusted to fulfill our aims for public education. The public has not only a right but also a responsibility to ensure that all publicly funded schools educate according to reasonable public standards.

The Persistence of Public Education

Previous research has shown that Catholic schools apparently do a better job than public schools of producing active and engaged future citizens. However, the “Catholic school advantage” with respect to civic education does not carry over to all private schools. Indeed, while the evidence is thin, it suggests that evangelical schools promote higher levels of civic engagement but also greater intolerance. In any case, enthusiasm for school choice should not carry over to all private schools. Indeed, while the evidence is thin, it suggests that evangelical schools promote higher levels of civic engagement but also greater intolerance. In any case, enthusiasm for school choice should not lead us to ignore the importance of either civic education in public schools or public standards for civic education in all schools.

The fact is that we are not walking away from public schooling. The voucher revolution shows no sign of happening. The current system serves the interests of many if not most Americans, especially suburbanites removed from the problems of inner-city neighborhoods and schools. Therefore, we ought to think about how public schools can do a better job of promoting civic engagement. It makes no sense to simply trust private markets, private communities, or private choices to deliver on such an important public goal.

As publicly funded school choice expands incrementally—as I believe it will and (if properly regulated) should—there will need to be an increased focus on public standards and accountability for civic education. The public has a basic and legitimate interest in regulating what is taught in all publicly funded schools. And it is very hard for me to see how civic education—knowledge of how the political process works and of the major events and conflicts in American history—does not count among the essential branches of a child’s education. In addition, the idea of civic education is popular with young people as well as adults—strong majorities of young people favor making civics classes mandatory in middle and high school. The extensive experience of other nations with publicly funded school choice also suggests that public dollars will inevitably be accompanied by extensive public expectations and regulations.

For all their admitted flaws, civic education courses and other school-based programs to promote civic engagement can and do make a positive difference. Moreover, research on civic education has expanded in recent years and become more sophisticated—we have begun to figure out what works. Meanwhile, good mainstream consensus standards for civic education have been articulated. These standards no doubt could be improved, but they have earned and deserve a reasonable bipartisan consensus. We have no reason for cynicism about civic education. Advocates of school choice should embrace the opportunity to demonstrate that private schools can do a good job at civic education, and common standards and testing are the only way to do so.

But do conservative critics care about civic education? The Bush administration came into office arguing for a renewed national commitment to service and citizenship (a fact that suggests civic education is not as ideologically contentious as critics charge). National service and volunteerism were keynotes of the president’s 2002 State of the Union Address, following the tragic events of September 11, 2001. National service and civic education programs were reorganized, under an impressive leadership team, as the USA Freedom Corps. The White House called for a major increase in spending on service and programs for civic edu-

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