

*Failing Liberty 101*¹

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For the past ten years or so, my research team at Stanford has been interviewing young Americans in their high-school years about what U. S. citizenship means to them. The range in their responses has been astounding. Some of today's young aspire to positions of leadership in our society. They prepare themselves by studying history and keeping informed about current events. They work for campaigns of major party candidates or for protest movements such as the Tea Party or Occupy Wall Street. Some run for student government, and some have organized effective efforts to change school policy on issues such as the elimination of athletic programs.

But such highly engaged students are only one small part of our contemporary student spectrum. In the study that I wrote about in the *Path to Purpose*, fewer than one-hundredth of the students whom we interviewed aspired to civic leadership roles (such as elective offices); and in other studies of youth perspectives on citizenship, we have found frequent expressions of apathy, lack of interest, and outright ignorance of past and present civic matters among American high-school and college students.

One high-school student, for example, told us with no apparent embarrassment, "We just had that (American citizenship) the other day in history. I forget what it was." Another student commented that "being American is not really special....I don't find being an American citizen very important." Another replied, ": "I don't want to belong to any country. It just feels like you are obligated to this country. I don't like the whole thing of citizen...I don't like that whole thing.

¹ *Educational Leadership*, April 2012, 69, 7, 22-26

It's like, citizen, no citizen; it doesn't make sense to me. It's like to be a good citizen - I don't know, I don't want to be a citizen...it's stupid to me." Many students are not quite so bald-faced in their indifference to citizenship as the ones that I have just quoted; but it is no exaggeration to say that civic responsibilities are among the last things on most young people's minds these days.

A democratic society, for its very survival, needs new cadres of young people educated in citizenship and dedicated to civic virtues to replenish its citizenship ranks over time. Without a younger generation capable of carrying on democratic traditions, a society will drift into anarchy and despotism, often in that order. And this is exactly the warning that Ben Franklin and other framers of our constitution left us with: the fear that future holders of the shining republic they created would become complacent and fail to exert the efforts required to sustain it. There are some troubling signs that we are reaching that point today.

The past decade has seen a steady drumbeat of indicators revealing glaring gaps in the civic knowledge, motivation, and interest of our student population. Indeed, we appear to be in the midst of what Sandra Day O'Connor has called a "crisis in civics education". In a recent National Assessment of Educational Progress, barely one in four high-school students scored "proficient" in their knowledge of citizenship. Of all the academic subjects tested, civics and its closely-linked subject of history came in dead last. According to the NAEP report, "a smaller proportion of fourth and eighth graders demonstrated proficiency in civics than in any other subject the federal government has tested since 2005 except history, American students' worst subject."

A recent Southern Poverty Law Center study concluded that our landmark civil rights movement, less than fifty years after its great successes, is now rarely taught and little known

among today's students. (I'll return to this lost opportunity at the end of this essay). An American Enterprise Institute study this year found that social studies teachers doubted that their students understood core U.S. citizenship concepts such as the Bill of Rights or the separation of powers. A recent Department of Education study found that only nine percent of our high school students were able to cite reasons why it is important for citizens to participate in a democracy, and that only six percent were able to cite reasons why having a constitution benefits a country. For more than a decade now, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) has reported sharp, step-wise declines in young American's awareness of civic and political events. This lack of knowledge, interest, and awareness is paralleled by the inaction of many young Americans: for example, even in the hotly-contested 2008 election, only 52% of 18-24 year-olds voted, with almost half our youth population staying home.

For a country that prides itself as the leader of the free world, we are surprisingly casual about passing along the interests, skills, and knowledge required for American citizenship to our younger generation. Neither civics nor history come anywhere near math or literacy skills in the priorities set by most of our schools today - and it shows. This is not at all what the Founders of our republic had in mind. Jefferson believed that cultivating civic virtue should be "the principal business of education". Washington and Madison imagined a national university that would teach good citizenship to America's younger generations. The tradition of placing civics at the center of schooling in this country continued for much of the 19th and 20th centuries. In his visit to America in the 1830's, Tocqueville noted that, the "general thrust" of American schooling "was directed towards political life", unlike in the fading nations of Europe. When waves of new immigrants reached these shores in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, one explicit mission of our public schools was to teach them to how be citizens in a democracy. A recent report from the

Leonore Annenberg Institute at the University of Pennsylvania has noted that "until the 1960's, three courses in civics and government were common in American high schools: *Civics*, *Problems of Democracy*, *U.S Government*." Since then there has been a "decades-long decline" in civics instruction, fueled by increasing pressure on schools to raise student scores on basic tests of reading and math skills.

There is no gene for citizenship. The capacity for citizenship is not a biological given: it must be learned. Like any activity that relies on knowledge and skill, it can be learned well or it can be learned badly, either with sound knowledge and good judgment or with irrationality and ignorance. The good news is that, in a democracy such as ours, everyone can learn to participate in constructive citizenship activities, regardless of family background, cultural heritage, or social status. The bad news is that we are failing to provide large sectors of our youth population with an education that is sufficient to this task.

What can we do about this? First, citizenship instruction must be placed front and center in U. S. classrooms rather than relegated to the margins. We must ensure that our students learn essential civic concepts such as the separation of powers, representative government, and the meaning and importance of the Constitution. Some fine programs for such teaching now exist, (such as those noted in the report civicmissionofschools.org/site/guardianofdemocracy). But such programs are not widely used, in part because the assessments that drive the priorities of schools only infrequently test for civic knowledge.

And civic knowledge, though important, is not enough. For effective participation in a democratic society, motivation - what I have called *civic purpose* - is also essential. A young person must care enough about the society to be willing to act, and even to sacrifice if called

upon. Jefferson noted that "to preserve the republic we must love it... everything depends on establishing this love in a republic; to inspire it ought to be the principle business of education". If we are to educate students for this kind of civic purpose, we need to adopt teaching methods that are far from the norm in most of our classrooms. In order to spur their students' motivation to become active, engaged citizens in our democracy, our schools must:

1. Inspire students with examples of civic leaders who today's students can identify with. This means teaching students about the real lives of people who have contributed to the common good, with all their human imperfections, rather than presenting students with two-dimensional cardboard versions of remote historical figures. It also means selecting cases that share some of the students' own experiences and background.

2. Unchain the teaching of history from its strict chronological sequencing. Recent cases often can be presented in a more compelling manner to students than cases of people who lived under long- departed, unfamiliar social conditions. Once students are captivated by civic cases that they can understand and relate to, it is easier to return to a chronological historical narrative that could interest them in the events and people of the distant past.

3. Foster justifiable pride in the best traditions of our country, especially traditions that have extended liberty and equality to ever-expanding sectors of the population. This does *not* mean refraining from teaching a critical perspective on wrongful acts or mistaken policies in our nation's history; but it *does* mean placing these errors in the positive context of efforts that have led to progress toward the ideals of the Founders. In order to develop motivation to act, students must have hope that citizens can make a difference; and they also need, as Jefferson noted, a love of the republic, the basic attachment known as patriotism. Whatever the society's present or past

failings, there is ample material in American history to promote such an attachment, and devoted citizenship requires it.

4. Focus on the particulars of American citizenship rather than abstract notions of global or "cosmopolitan" education. Although concerns of universal human rights and social justice are important to convey, they do not in themselves provide a realistic route to civic education. The serious tasks of citizenship that students need to learn are played out on a local or national level rather than a global one. We do not pay taxes to the world, we do not vote for a world president or senator, we do not serve in a world army or peace corps, and we are not called to jury duty in any world courtroom. To conduct citizenship activities intelligently and responsibly, our students must know how the American system operates; and they must care enough about it to make the effort to get involved.

For many of today's schools, these last two recommendations will require an about-face from their present approach. In some educational circles, the notions of national attachment and pride seem out-of-date, or mid-educative. A recent book about the future of citizenship by a law professor expressed this now-common perspective in the following way: "Longstanding notions of democratic citizenship are becoming obsolete ... American identity is unsustainable in the face of globalization". As a replacement for attachment to a nation-state, it is argued, "loyalties...are moving to transnational communities defined by many different ways: by race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, and sexual orientation". Persuaded by this and similar positions, many educators are turning to "cosmopolitanism" and "global citizenship" as the proper aim of civics instruction, de-emphasizing an attachment to the United States in particular. As global citizens, it is argued,

students' primary identification should be with the humanity of the world. This perspective is reinforced by an emphasis on critical thinking regarding this country's failings.

It is true that today's students must learn to operate on a global plane, for both economic and civic reasons. It is also true that it is important for students to learn to think critically about their own country's past act and present policies. But a global perspective need not be taught in opposition to their identity as citizens of a particular nation; and critical thinking does not mean ignoring the positive achievements of the American democracy. Discouraging young Americans from identifying with their country - and, indeed, from celebrating the traditional American quest for liberty and equal rights - is a sure way to remove their most powerful source of motivation to learn about citizenship.

Why would students exert any efforts to master the rules of a system that they have no respect for and no interest in being part of? To acquire civic knowledge as well as civic virtue, students need to care about their country. More than this, in times of national peril, they must care enough to sacrifice for the common good if needed. Over the course of our history, love of country has been a foremost motivator of such sacrifices for the greater good, in battles both against tyrannical forces abroad and social injustices domestically.

It is especially odd to see the neglect of American identification in schools with large populations of immigrant students (which includes most public schools these days). Educational critic Diane Ravitch has written of an observation that she made when visiting a New York City school whose principal proudly spoke of the school's efforts to celebrate the cultures of all the immigrant students. Ravitch writes, "I asked him whether the school did anything to encourage students to appreciate American culture, and he admitted with embarrassment that it did not."

These and other American students are being urged to identify with, on the one hand, customs from the native lands they have departed and, on the other hand, with the abstract ideals of an amorphous global culture. Lost between these romantic affiliations is the essential identification with the nation where these students actually will practice citizenship. Adding to the dysfunction of this educational choice, as Ravitch writes, is the absurdity of teaching "a student whose family fled to this country from a tyrannical regime or from dire poverty to identify with that nation rather than with the one that gave the family refuge".

Young people will devote their energies and talents only to causes they believe in. When students care about their country, they become motivated to learn about it and contribute to it: in this way, informed citizenship and civic purpose grow out of a basic sense of attachment. Young people become motivated to act when three conditions are in place: they identify with the object of concern; they perceive that something needs to be done on its behalf; and they have hope that something can be accomplished by their efforts. Teaching students to think critically about their society is indeed beneficial; because it can help establish the "deficit" condition that something needs to be done to improve our society. But at the same time, students must be given hope that their efforts can achieve results. They also need to believe that the society worth their efforts and their sacrifices. For this last condition, students need to learn about positive success stories of our past.

Fortunately, U. S. success stories are not hard to find. I noted above one opportunity that is currently wasted in too many of our schools: the landmark civil rights movement of the mid-20th Century. The civil rights movement is an ideal subject for conveying an understanding of

citizenship and a sense of civic purpose. It contains every one of the attributes of compelling teaching that I have identified in this essay:

- The civil rights movement is recent enough that living people still remember it; and students can easily recognize the goals, struggles, and social conflicts that defined the major events. Thus it establishes the conditions of familiarity and personal interest.
- The civil rights movement made tangible progress in extending rights to millions of previously disenfranchised people; yet it is not yet entirely complete. Thus it establishes a condition of optimism in the context of an existing deficit that still needs to be remedied- a maximally motivating combination.
- The civil rights movement is an American story that played out in the context of the Constitutional ideals and laws of the United States. As Martin Luther King stressed in his rousing 1963 *I have a dream* speech: “my dream is deeply rooted in the American Dream”. By learning about the civil rights movement, students can learn about universal values of human rights and social justice in the context of the particulars of American citizenship – another propitious combination.
- The civil rights movement embodied the fundamental aspirations to liberty and equality that have animated the best moments of American democracy since its founding. During the civil rights movement, people fought for their own rights, and many people joined them, thereby fighting for *other* people’s rights. It is this

kind of material that is most likely to inspire students' interest in citizenship and motivation to participate.

Beyond teaching vital subjects such as the civil rights movement, schools should create opportunities for young people to participate in civic and political events within and beyond the boundaries of the school. In the classroom, coursework can draw connections between students' own lived experiences and problems faced by historical and contemporary civic leaders. In one experimental program developed by U. Penn's Annenberg Center for Public Policy, Central High School in Philadelphia held a forum for current mayoral candidates at the school, where students could question the candidates on civic issues of concern to them. On another occasion, students from the school joined with students from other Philadelphia schools to share civics projects on topics ranging from global warming to the gun violence. This kind of real-life, face-to-face civic experience is highly motivating for students, especially when combined with peer interaction. When integrated into a solid curriculum that conveys the essential concepts of government and American history (perhaps supplemented by catchy new-media instruction such as *iCivics*), such immediate, in-person experiences can bring American citizenship to life in the classroom.

Outside the classroom, by participating in community civic and political events, young people can be given a sense of their own key roles in the continuing saga of our society's search for a more exemplary democracy. When they realize they can make a difference - indeed, that their contributions are truly needed - they will be on the road to developing strong civic purpose. This requires conveying to students a pride in the past and a faith in the future of our republic, as well as optimism regarding their own potential to improve our society once they have gained the necessary understanding and commitment.

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Author's note: The research discussed in this article has been supported, in part, by grants from the Spencer Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York to the Stanford Center on Adolescence.

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