

Improving Civics Education Means Preserving America’s Character

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Civics education must be improved, but the plan by the new Educating for American Democracy (EAD) initiative for more federal activity would do more harm than good.

EAD’s plan includes more responsibilities for Washington bureaucrats, even though education is a state and local policy concern.

Reform to civic instruction should celebrate America’s promise of freedom, and EAD’s inclusion of Critical Theory undermines this commitment.

In his observations of American life that have remained relevant for nearly 200 years, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*, “If everyone undertook to...seek for truth by isolated paths...it is not to be supposed that any considerable number of men would ever unite in a common belief.”

It is this concept of “common belief” that builds a national character around a shared set of ideas passed on through history. “But without such common belief, no society can prosper—say rather no society can subsist,” Tocqueville wrote, “for without ideas held in common, there is no common action, and without common action, there may still be men, but there is not social body.”¹ The urgent priority for Americans today is not to create a new character, but to apply the lessons from their rich history to meet today’s and future challenges.

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Simultaneously protective of individual freedom while trusting in civil practices to sustain communities, and unified by the Constitution while unapologetically pluralistic, America's promise of opportunity for all citizens, regardless of ethnicity or background, is the national ideal. America is the first nation where this commitment pulled an entire culture out of the barbarism of discrimination and dedicated itself to equality under the law. "Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves," Abraham Lincoln said.²

Schools are a reflection of culture and national character and should be institutions that transmit these ideas through the teaching of history and government. These topics are generally considered "civic" instruction, a subject that is sorely neglected—an opinion shared by those on both sides of the partisan divide.³ Fewer than one in four eighth-graders demonstrated proficiency on a 2018 national civics test, a figure that has not increased in more than 20 years.⁴

A new initiative called Educating for American Democracy (EAD)⁵ is proposing to improve civic education in schools by increasing federal activity and blending progressive priorities, such as climate change, race and class consciousness, and gender identity, along with "action civics," with history and civics.⁶ Together, these approaches are not a compromise between conservative and progressive approaches to teaching, but a proposal that expands the federal footprint in education while adding instructional techniques from Critical Pedagogy to classroom activities.

EAD says, "In times of crisis, it is especially important that We the People unite love of country with clear-eyed wisdom about our successes and failures in order to chart our forward path."⁷ EAD's strategic plan, however, does not demonstrate that the organization is prepared to encourage states to give parents and educators more control over civics instruction, nor focus on America's unique contributions to people around world by modeling freedom and self-government. Instead, EAD calls for additional spending on public schools, more activity from the U.S. Department of Education in local school policy, and the use of "action civics," which calls students to be activists regardless of whether they can demonstrate knowledge of civic content.

Educating for American Democracy's Policy Problems

EAD Is Timid About America's Unique Character. America's contributions of freedom and prosperity to former and current generations, and its promise of opportunity to future generations, should be celebrated. These ideas are unique markers in world history.

Some sections of EAD’s plan, however, read like Critical Theory–style interpretations of America’s national character. For example, EAD offers lessons created by Learning for Justice, a group founded by the extreme left-wing Southern Poverty Law Center.⁸ One lesson calls for the use of deconstruction (a Critical Theory concept that redefines words to discover oppression) while calling for a discussion of income redistribution.⁹ Learning for Justice’s mission is replete with terms from Critical Theory, such as “intersectionality,” and offers training for educators in Critical Pedagogy, which is the application of Critical Theory to the classroom.¹⁰ Another lesson from the Smithsonian hosted on EAD’s site uses Critical Theory terms, such as “claim power” and “systems of oppression.”¹¹ EAD’s road map also lists the progressive priorities of climate change and gender identity as ideas that should be included in civics instruction.¹²

EAD deserves credit for its “key concept” of building “civic friendship through informed civil dialogue and productive disagreement,”¹³ and not all of the lessons EAD promotes are skewed. Critical Theory, though, leaves no room for competing perspectives.

Seemingly worried about too much love for one’s country, EAD asks: “How can we offer an account of U.S. constitutional democracy that is simultaneously honest about the wrongs of the past without falling into cynicism, and appreciative of the founding of the United States without tipping into adulation?”¹⁴

Yet the U.S. Constitution is a “glorious liberty document,” as Frederick Douglass said.¹⁵ In 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt called on citizens to “muster the spirit of America, and the faith of America.”¹⁶ In 1986, Ronald Reagan considered the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty as “the hope that is America.”¹⁷ Republican or Democrat, black or white, all American educators should teach their students that understanding the mistakes and wrongs in America’s past should not prevent students from still celebrating the imperfect people and events from history that made the freedom of the present possible.

EAD Advocates Increasing Federal Taxpayer Spending on Public Schools. EAD’s plan calls for more funding for K–12 schools, despite the fact that spending on public schools has increased for decades with uninspiring results.¹⁸ A federal proposal (supported by EAD’s coalition of organizations) introduced in 2020 that would implement much of EAD’s plan would require at least \$1 billion in additional federal K–12 and higher-education spending annually.¹⁹

Today, taxpayers already spend nearly double the amount they spent per public school student in 1980, after adjusting for inflation (increasing from

\$7,400 to \$13,700).²⁰ Over the past year, Washington approved more than \$60 billion in new spending for K–12 schools and is considering another \$130 billion.²¹ Yet the achievement gap in math and reading between low-income students and their higher-income peers is the same today as it was 50 years ago.²² Furthermore, national civics assessments reveal an achievement gap of 21 percentage points between white students and black students, and a gap of 18 percentage points between white students and Hispanic students.²³

EAD Expands the Federal Role in K–12 Instruction. EAD calls for Washington to increase the number of U.S. Department of Education activities, including “federal investment in research and development, along with federal support for data and metrics.”²⁴

Though EAD acknowledges “state-level leadership” in civic readiness, EAD’s plan proposes seven new responsibilities for Washington, including the building of “a robust national data infrastructure for history and civics; part of that infrastructure would be a regularly updated public collection of all the data Civic Learning Plans generate, and state civic excellence progress measure,” and funding for “demonstration projects in schools/districts to engage the community, educators, administrators, and students in developing civic excellence, and evaluate progress.”²⁵

Expanding the federal role in K–12 schools while also calling for states to adopt new academic standards and curricula—another part of the EAD proposal—would require significant homogenization of standards and content across state school systems. The U.S. Department of Education can only compare standards and outcomes if the standards and outcomes have enough similarities such that the material can be measured according to the same criteria.

Stated simply, by requiring Washington to oversee civics achievement, state assessments and curricula will become standardized, which centralizes decision-making in Washington at the expense of decision-making by local officials. While the EAD proposal says it is not a “set of standards,” the proposal then describes how the document can be used to create standards: “Standards and curricula can and should be developed in alignment with the *EAD Roadmap*” and states should adopt “social studies standards that align with the *EAD Roadmap*.”²⁶

EAD Recommends “Action Civics” at a Time When Public School Activities Are Dominated by Progressive Ideology. EAD says the organization has “the overarching goal of engaging young people as civic participants and preparing them to assume that role successfully.”²⁷ EAD later lists “action civics” as a “proven practice” to improve civic learning.²⁸

Heritage Foundation researchers have documented how action civics programs, such as EAD's partner Mikva Challenge, have encouraged students to campaign for public-sector union membership and advocate for transgender causes.²⁹

Policy Recommendations

Evidence supports the position that K–12 civics instruction in the U.S. needs improvement. The issue is how to achieve improvement. Reform to civics instruction should prioritize preserving America's national character, as well as the appropriate roles for different levels of government:

- **Including instructional guidelines that teach that America should be celebrated.** America's past failure to live up to its ideals of freedom and opportunity for all should not prevent Americans from cherishing their great achievement of overcoming that legacy.
- **Allowing states to redirect existing taxpayer spending from ineffective state and federal programs to state and local initiatives focused on civic learning.** Federal education programs are awash in spending, regardless of student outcomes. As Heritage researchers have demonstrated, from large programs, such as Head Start and the National School Lunch Program, to comparatively smaller initiatives, such as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, federal officials have no shortage of wasteful programs from which to redirect spending.³⁰
- **Maintaining civic instruction as a state and local responsibility.** After the promise of additional spending, Washington's most oft-used lever to prompt changes to state education agency and school policies is coercion. The Common Core national standards initiative, supported by the Obama Administration, resulted in significant new federal spending and technocratic changes to state education policies with no measurable improvement in student learning.³¹ Lessons from episodes such as this emphasize the need to eliminate Washington's heavy-handed bureaucratic influence in local schools.
- **Advocating student proficiency in civic concepts, not action civics.** Consistently low performance on civic and history assessments demonstrates that students are not ready to be activists for

political causes. If students do not know what they stand for, as the saying goes, they will fall for anything. Perhaps more troubling is that research finds that the most popular texts in colleges of education are books that encourage teachers to train students to be activists for progressive causes, such as Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.³² Action civics is especially dangerous when it is not paired with instruction that teaches students to be proud of the nation in which they live.

Conclusion

Thomas Jefferson wrote that education is important so that “every man” can “judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom.”³³ The sorry state of civics learning in this country means that not enough students are taught how to make such judgments today. If EAD is sincere about its proposal being a “living document,”³⁴ it should revise its plan to eliminate any ambiguity about education as a state and local policy issue—and any neutrality about America’s character, while rejecting references to Critical Theory. EAD should also remove its recommendation for additional federal spending on national civics metrics because this policy expands Washington’s already intrusive presence in schools.

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