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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Massive investment in social studies and civics education proposed to address eroding trust in democratic institutions

By **Joe Heim**

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It has been a bad 12 months for the practice of civics in America.

The U.S. Capitol attacked by thugs. An alleged plot to kidnap a state governor. Bogus claims of widespread election fraud. Violent protests in the streets. Death threats against public health officials. And a never-ending barrage of anger and misinformation on social media directed at, and by, politicians, leaders, pundits and an increasingly bitter and frustrated populace.

As the battles have raged, trust in institutions — government, media, the law — has plummeted.

So how did we get here? And how do we get out?

For many close observers, a direct line can be drawn from today's civics crises to a long-standing failure to adequately teach American government, history and civic responsibility. Breadth has been emphasized over depth, they say, and the cost is a citizenry largely ignorant of the work needed to sustain a democracy.

Now, a diverse collection of academics, historians, teachers, school administrators and state education leaders is proposing an overhaul of the way civics and history are taught to American K-12 students. And they're calling for a massive investment of funds, teacher training and curriculum development to help make that happen.

The Educating for American Democracy (EAD) initiative will release a 36-page report and an accompanying 39-page road map Tuesday, laying out extensive guidance for improving and reimagining the teaching of social studies, history and civics and then implementing that over the next decade.

The partnership's diagnosis is urgent and unsparing.

"Civics and history education has eroded in the U.S. over the past fifty years, and opportunities to learn these subjects are inequitably distributed," the report states. "Dangerously low proportions of the public understand and trust our democratic institutions. Majorities are functionally illiterate on our constitutional principles and forms. The relative neglect of civic education in the past half-century—a period of wrenching change—is one important cause of our civic and political dysfunction."

civics, political science and social studies education contributed to the project, including many with disparate views and ideas about how the work should be done.

That emphasis on diverse viewpoints and input was intentional and necessary, said Louise Dubé, executive director of iCivics, a nonpartisan nonprofit founded in 2009 by former Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O'Connor to promote and create content for civic education in schools. Dubé headed work on the report along with leaders in civics education from Harvard, Tufts and Arizona State universities.

"This project is about restoring the ability to self-govern, and clearly we have a serious problem with that right now," Dubé said. "At the core of what self-government requires is for you to understand the history, to understand it from multiple perspectives to know more history, but also to be able to talk and discuss with others who disagree with you and to form a path forward. And all of those things are very critical right now."

Less memorizing of dates

The report calls for an inquiry-based approach that would focus less on memorizing dates of wars and names of presidents and more on exploring in depth the questions and developments, good and bad, that have created the America we live in today and plan to live in well beyond the nation's 250th anniversary in 2026. What students need, the report argues, is not a laundry list of facts, but a process that produces a better understanding of how the country's history shaped its present.

Before social studies standards in Pennsylvania were revamped, teaching the subject was like preparing students to do well in a game of Trivial Pursuit, said Shannon Salter, a high school social studies teacher and curriculum designer in Allentown.

She rattled off some of the previous teaching requirements.

"Did you teach the War of 1812? Did you teach Teapot Dome? Can your students memorize the capitals of all 50 states and spout them in alphabetical order?" Salter said. "It was all a list of items that you could recite on a multiple-choice test and treating it as though that was meaningful learning in history and social studies."

What students need, Salter said, is an awareness of how to get involved in the issues of their communities and a much better understanding of how systems work and how individuals can participate in the processes of electing, debating, governing and consensus-reaching.

With the new social studies standards, classes can build critical thinking skills that teach students "how to raise your voice in your community and advocate for your needs," Salter said. "They're learning to collaborate to solve problems and challenge the way things are so that the country continues to become that more perfect union that we envision."

The new focus on educating students to become more knowledgeable citizens calls for an investment in teacher training, curriculum development and an approach that would emphasize teaching of history and civics to the same degree as STEM and English language arts courses. The report doesn't provide an estimate of costs, but its goal is to

at Harvard University and one of the leaders of the EAD project. “We have had national will around investment in STEM education, and the results of that show themselves. My colleagues in STEM fields at the university level will say that they’re getting the best prepared students they’ve ever gotten. We can’t say the same thing in the domains of political science and history and things like that.”

No national standards

But while the road map provides guidance for states on how to implement the new approach, getting buy-in from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, territories and tribal nations won’t be simple. Unlike with math and science, there is no nationally agreed upon set of standards for teaching social studies. Each state issues social studies guidelines for school districts to follow, and these requirements vary widely.

Stefanie Wager, president of the National Council for the Social Studies, said that there has long been a need for a common vision and guiding document for social studies and that the EAD report and road map will meet it. But there’s still a lot of work to be done before states will get on board.

“Part of the reason we’re in the mess that we are in as a country is that we are so different in terms of what happens in states across the country in terms of teaching social studies,” said Wager, a former teacher who until earlier this year worked for Iowa’s department of education. “The road map has a good possibility of moving us in the right direction, but if every state does something very different with it in terms of implementation, then it loses its magic. The devil, I think, is in the details of how it is implemented.”

Paul Carrese, a member of the EAD’s executive committee and director of the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership at Arizona State University, said it was important that the group provide not a national curriculum but a framework that all 50 states, the District, territories and tribal nations would take seriously and embrace. He acknowledged the challenge that presents but said the need is urgent.

“We obviously think education for informed and engaged citizens is fundamental to national security and as important to the country as economic preparedness and competitiveness,” Carrese said. “For the civic fabric of the country, the situation couldn’t be more grave than it is right now.”

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