



CASCADE POLICY INSTITUTE

# CASCADE COMMENTARY

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## Summary

The current rush to promote patriotism in classrooms should lead us to examine the role of schools in civic education. Private schools effectively teach citizenship, and are not beset by the same conflict of interest as government schools.

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***“Does it make sense to have the ultimate check on government—the people—instructed in citizenship by the government?”***

## Rethink civic education

*By Nick Weller*

The recently renewed sense of patriotism has increased the focus on civic education in American classrooms. Bob Chase, President of the National Education Association believes, “Of necessity, public schools will be a frontline institution in this new era. ... In the months and years ahead, it is our challenge as educators to guide an entire generation of young Americans to understand the freedom and democratic ideals that are at stake in this struggle.”

The new drive for civic education has thus far taken the form of activities to promote patriotism and unity. U.S. Education Secretary Rodney Paige asked schools to participate in “Pledge Across America” on October 12 by reciting the pledge of allegiance together with him and millions of other students and teachers. The U.S. House unanimously passed a non-binding resolution urging schools to display the expression “God Bless America” in support for the nation. The Parent Teacher Association of Oregon encouraged schools to create memorials as a “visible sign of solidarity” in conjunction with National Wreath of Remembrance Day.

Though well intentioned, we should question attempts to mandate patriotism. In the 1943 case *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson commented, “To believe that patriotism will not flourish if patriotic ceremonies are voluntary and spontaneous instead of a compulsory routine is to make an unflattering estimate of the appeal of our institutions to free minds. ... If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.”

The current desire for more civic education in the classroom should give us pause because it comes at a time of increased faith in government and lowered tolerance for political dissent. For example, in response to the September 11 attacks, *Wall Street Journal* columnist Al Hunt called for a “moratorium on government bashing.”

It is important to remember America’s long-standing respect for pluralism and dissent. We need to temper our desire for schools to do “something” with a sober reflection about the role of education in promoting citizenship. Public schools

are run by the government, making it difficult for such schools to teach students to be critical analysts about the role of government in a limited democracy. Does it make sense to have the ultimate check on government—the people—instructed in citizenship by the government?

Still, education plays a vital role in preserving freedom. As Thomas Jefferson said, “if a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.” Fortunately, private schools provide an effective alternative to the instruction offered in public schools.

In the fall issue of *Education Next*, published by Stanford’s Hoover Institution, David Campbell compared civic education in public and private schools. Campbell used National Household Education Survey data about students in assigned public schools, magnet public schools, Catholic schools, religious/non-Catholic schools and private secular schools. Adjusting for differences in student demographics, he focused on civic engagement (voluntary community service, civic skills and confidence in using civic skills), understanding of the political system, and tolerance for the opinions of others.

In engagement and understanding, Catholic schools outperformed the other surveyed schools. For both categories, students from other private schools performed as well as their public school counterparts.

Campbell also found that students in secular and Catholic private schools scored higher in political tolerance than public school students. However, students in government schools displayed higher levels of political tolerance than those in religious/non-Catholic schools. Campbell warns it is impossible to tell if lowered tolerance is a result of religion (regardless of school attended) or a result of school influence, because religiosity is generally associated with lowered political tolerance.

Campbell’s findings are consistent with four similar studies, providing strong evidence that, in his words, “private—particularly Catholic—schools are a means to the very public end of facilitating civic engagement.” The research dispels the notion that government schools are the only, or even the best, vehicle for teaching citizenship.

Civic education will flourish in a diverse school system that allows pluralism and dissent. After all, a questioning populous is as important as an informed populous for our long-term liberty.

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