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America Needs History and Civics Education to Promote Unity

A plan to help teachers instill an understanding that is complete and honest but not cynical.

Editor's note: This article is signed by six former U.S. education secretaries: Lamar Alexander, Arne Duncan, John King, Rod Paige, Richard Riley and Margaret Spellings.

Following years of polarization and the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, the world's oldest constitutional democracy is in grave danger. We stand at a crossroads, called to protect this democracy and to work toward unity. Current and future generations will look back to examine how we chose to act, and why.

A key part of our task is to reinvigorate teaching and learning of American history and civics in our nation's schools. A constitutional democracy requires a citizenry that has a desire to participate, and an understanding of how to do so constructively, as well as the knowledge and skills to act for the common good. Yet a history and civics education for the 21st century must also grapple with the difficult and often painful parts of our history—including enslavement, segregation and racism, indigenous removals, Japanese-American internment, denials of religious liberty and free speech, and other injustices.

We need teaching and learning that pursues an account of U.S. constitutional democracy that is honest about the wrongs of the past without falling into cynicism, and appreciative of the American founding without tipping into adulation. To turn pluribus into unum, we need curriculums that achieve a more plural and complete story of U.S. history, while also forging a common story, the shared inheritance of all Americans.

Regrettably, civics, which teaches skills of participation and the knowledge that sustains it, and history, which provides a frame of reference for the present, have been sorely neglected over the past half-century in U.S. schools. This cannot continue to be the case.

Right now, we collectively spend about 1,000 times more per student on science, technology, engineering, and math education than we do on history and civics. Where civics education is taught, it is often hampered by a lack of consensus about what to teach and how.

But there is a way forward that will let us rebuild civics and history alongside STEM education.

Despite our differences on policy and priorities, we believe that the Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy provides a promising path. The project is the result of a 19-month collaboration among more than 300 scholars, educators, practitioners and students from diverse backgrounds. The ambition of this plan is to re-establish civics and American history as essential components of education.

The Roadmap aims to renew the study of history and to rebuild civic education from the ground up, by providing guiding principles for states, local school districts and educators across the U.S. They, in turn, can establish their own standards and tailor curricular materials to their local communities. For example, using the plan, Texas may choose to devote more attention to the war between the U.S. and Mexico in the 1840s, while Massachusetts may choose to look more closely than others at the early phases of the colonial

conflict with Great Britain, in which Boston played a dominant role. The plan recommends key content and instructional strategies for history and civics at every grade level. And it does so with an eye toward meeting the wide-ranging needs of today's students.

The Educating for American Democracy Initiative offers a new vision for history and civics that supports educators in dealing effectively with fundamental tensions inherent in civic learning, integrates a diversity of experiences and perspectives throughout, and cultivates civil disagreement and reflective patriotism. As an example, the Roadmap can help teachers guide conversations among students about how we can integrate the perspectives of Americans from all backgrounds when analyzing the content of the philosophical foundations of American constitutional democracy. The recommendations of the Roadmap weave history and civics together and inspire students to learn by asking difficult questions, such as “What does our history reveal about the aspirations and tensions captured by the motto E pluribus unum?” then seeking answers in the classroom through facts and discussion.

Importantly, the Roadmap is not a set of national standards or a national curriculum. It is instead a call to action to invest in strengthening history and civic learning. It lays a foundation to deliver opportunities for excellence in civic learning equitably to all students.

The American K-12 education system has always worked to respond to the needs of the nation. The early republic emphasized history, reading and math. In the mid-20th century, the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik and the dawn of an era of global economic competition drove a turn toward investment in STEM education. And during the early part of this century, our attention has turned to preparing students from marginalized communities to succeed in high school and college.

Now the fragility of our democratic institutions is in plain sight. This is the time to give priority to history and civics education for American children.