



## “Reflecting on ‘Democratic Communities’ and What It Means to be a Democratic Citizen’ in the 21st Century”



*By Dave Lehman, NSRF Interim Director*

““Democratic living is not given in nature, like gold or water. It is a social construct, like a skyscraper, school playground, or new idea...Democratic citizens are constructs, too.” (from *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life* by Walter C. Parker)

Our NSRF mission statement includes the phrase “...empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities.” So what does that mean?, what does that look like?, what are students and teachers doing in a “democratic community?”, particularly the students? Specifically, what are the skills, attitudes, and knowledge they will need to become empowered, not only within their school communities, but in their greater communities? What are the skills, attitudes, and knowledge needed for global citizens in the 21st century?

Carl Glickman (one of the conveners of the Forum for Education and Democracy), in a February 2008 essay entitled, “Closing the Participation Gap: A Thought Piece,” noted – “There are strong indicators that participatory democracy in America is in a state of grave decline.” He went on to add – “Connections to civic and religious groups are fewer; people are less connected to family and friends, more Americans live alone; people are less informed about public affairs; and trust in key institutions is low. Disturbingly, the decline in all these categories has been most pronounced among people with the least education.”

In a similar vein, Paul Woodruff (Professor in Ethics and American Society and Distinguished Teaching Professor in the Department of Philosophy, The University of Texas at Austin), in the “Afterword” to his book, *First Democracy: The Challenge of An Ancient Idea*, 2005, states – “...the United States seems to be moving away from ideal democracy” and asks the question – “Are Americans ready for democracy?” He then goes on to summarize the seven key ideas of his book asking a series of provocative questions that, as educators concerned about educating our

young people for global citizenship, we should consider:

1) Freedom from Tyranny (And from Being a Tyrant) – “...can chief executives be accountable and still effective?, must political parties always seek tyrannical powers?”

2) Harmony – “What is causing the climate of political anger than now appears to divide the country, and what steps can we take to moderate it?”

3) The Rule of Law – “Can the United States take on the unique dangers of policing troubled parts of the world and protect its own people while still observing the rule of law both at home and abroad?”

4) Natural Equality – “Can the United States reduce the political advantages of wealth?”

5) Citizen Wisdom – “How can the wisdom of citizens guide the state on decisions of increasing complexity?”

6) Reasoning Without Knowledge – “Can we employ free, open, and honest adversary debate in the service of good decision making?”

7) Education (Paideia) – “Will education merely train people for jobs?, Will education in the United States divide people into dogmatic groups, each bound on forcing its views upon the others?, Can a renewal of reverence give us the ability to see what is wrong with religious movements that claim to speak with the voice of God?, and Can education bring the people of the United States together around shared values, such as justice and reverence?”

In the Foreword to the 2010 book, *The Art of Creating A Democratic Learning Community*, by Sam Chaltain (Director of the Forum for Education and Democracy and Founding Director of the Five Freedoms Project), Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor reminds us – “... our public education system [is] the only institution in the United States that engages 90 percent of the next generation of adults, is governed by public authority, and has the explicit mission to prepare people for the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship.” She goes on to note, sadly, that “... the average American is more likely to know the five members of the Simpsons cartoon family than the five freedoms of the First Amendment.” Justice O'Connor closes her Foreword with this call to action – “Public education is a vitally important solution to preserving an independent judiciary and maintaining a robust constitutional democracy.... And for each student who is educated in intellectually engaging ways, we will gain the greatest strength a democratic society must have: an informed and engaged citizen able to think freely and independently and contribute to society as a whole.”

Lastly, by way of introduction, (Chinese born Michigan State University Distinguished Professor at the College of Education), Yong Zhao, in his 2009 book, *Catching Up or Leading the Way: American Education in the Age of Globalization*, says he realized in preparing initially to write about China's efforts to decentralize curriculum and textbooks, diversify assessment and testing, and encourage local autonomy and innovations in order to cultivate creativity and well-rounded talents – “...that what China

wants is what America [with its current overemphasis on standardized tests and prescriptive curricula] is eager to throw away – an education that respects individual talents, supports divergent thinking, tolerates, deviation, and encourages creativity; a system in which government does not dictate what students learn or how teachers teach; and a culture that does not rank or judge the success of a school, a teacher, or a child based on only test scores in a few subjects determined by the government.”

In the 2008 book by Tony Wagner (Co-Director of the Change Leadership Group at Harvard Graduate School of Education), *The Global Achievement Gap - with the provocative subtitle, “Why Even Our Best Schools Don’t Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need, And What We Can Do About It,”* - he poses the essential question for us: “What, then, does it mean in today’s world to be an active and informed citizen, and how does a democratic society best educate for citizenship?”



The following are some of the kinds of answers that have been developed to that question. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills provided the following framework of “skills, knowledge and expertise” a student should master to work and live in the 21st century:

- 1) core subjects
- 2) learning and innovations skills
- 3) information, media, and technology skills
- 4) life and career skills

Likewise the Metiri Group, a consulting firm in California, produced the following similar framework for the North Central Regional Laboratory:

- 1) digital-age literacy
- 2) inventive thinking
- 3) effective communication

4) high productivity and quality, state-of-the-art results

And the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union outlined the following combination of eight key competences of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed in the 21st century in order to “adapt flexibly to a rapidly changing and highly interconnected world:”

- 1) communication in the mother tongue
- 2) communication in foreign languages
- 3) mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology
- 4) digital competence
- 5) learning to learn
- 6) social and civic competences
- 7) sense of initiative and entrepreneurship
- 8) cultural awareness and expression

To return to our original authors above, Tony Wagner identifies what he calls “seven survival skills for teens today:”

- 1) critical thinking and problem solving
- 2) collaboration across networks and leading by influence
- 3) agility and adaptability
- 4) initiative and entrepreneurialism
- 5) effective oral and written communication
- 6) accessing and analyzing information
- 7) curiosity and imagination

Carl Glickman takes a somewhat different tact in identifying five “aspects of educating for citizenship:”

- “1) Education should build upon student interest.
- 2) Schools and school programming should reflect the fact that students need to examine, challenge, and improve upon conventional assumptions.
- 3) Education should enable students the capacity and choice to work and participate in communities different from the community of one’s birth.
- 4) Schools should be intellectually challenging places and involve students, faculty,

parent/caregivers, and community members in decision making.

5) Schools need to use a pedagogy of democracy throughout classrooms.”

And Yong Zhao in a section of his book with the heading – “Teaching Global Competencies: What Schools Can Do” – he outlines the following qualities of global competency:

“... To live in the increasingly globalized world, citizens need to be able to competently negotiate cultural differences and manage multiple identities, comfortably interact with people from different cultures, and confidently move across cultures as well as the virtual and physical world.” From here he goes on to describe three crucially important skill and attitudes:

“To do so, they need a global perspective – a deep understanding of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all human beings; a set of global skills – cultural knowledge and linguistic abilities that enable them to appreciate and respect other cultures and people and interact with other people; and global attitudes – emotional and psychological capacities to manage the anxiety and complexity of living in a globalized world.”

In his 2003 book from which the opening quote was taken, *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life*, Walter C. Parker (Professor of Education and Political Science, University of Washington, Seattle) reminds us that “...educators are the primary stewards of democracy. They must do what no one else in society has to do: intentionally specify the democratic ideal sufficiently to make it a reasonably distinct curriculum target, one that will justify selecting from the universe of possibilities a manageable set of subject matters, materials, instructional methods, modes of classroom interaction, and school experiences.” He goes on in his book to “...propose practical tools with which educators can draw children creatively and productively into this way of life, this civic culture” of “pluralism and equality,” and bases this on the following five assertions as crucial for educators:

“First, democratic education is not a neutral project, but one that tries to predispose citizens to principled reasoning and just ways of being with one another.

Second, educators need simultaneously to engage in multicultural education and citizenship education.

Third, the diversity that schools contain makes extraordinarily fertile soil for democratic education. Schooling is the first sustained public experience for children, and it affords a rich opportunity to nurture public virtue – for example, kindness and tolerance and the disposition and skills to dialogue across difference.

Fourth, this dialogue plays an essential and vital role in democratic education, moral development, and public policy. In a diverse society, dialogue is the avenue of choice to enlightened action.

Fifth, the access/inclusion problem that we (still) face today is one of

extending democratic education to students who typically are not afforded it...Democratic education is for everyone, and this certainly includes those who (for now) have the most power, for they are in a position to do the most harm when they lack virtue. Just as multicultural education is not only for 'others,' neither is citizenship education."

Parker's main "tool" for those who would be teachers/educators of democratic citizens is "deliberation," where diverse groups of students at any age are brought together in a variety of settings to deliberate, not just to "discuss," but to reason together, generate and consider alternatives together, and to arrive at a decision to do something, to take action on something that concerns them. For example, Parker notes that - "Elementary and middle school students are in an ideal setting to deliberate classroom and school policies together. High School students should be doing this as well, but they should also be deliberating pressing domestic and foreign policy questions, from environmental issues to questions of 'free trade,' haves and have-nots, and war and peace." He goes on in his book to discuss several specific examples of ways in which elementary and secondary school students can get involved and "deliberate."



David Sehr (Social Studies Teacher at West Orange High School in West Orange, New Jersey) in his earlier book of 1997 (actually part of a series on "Democracy and Education" edited by George Wood), Education for Public Democracy, offers the following detailed description of what our students will need to exhibit as global citizens, specifically the "Values, Attributes, and Capacities Needed for Public Democratic Citizenship." I will quote it in its entirety as it seems to provide such a thorough framework for us as classroom teachers, school administrators, and all educators concerned about developing democratic, global citizens:

"1) An ethic of care and responsibility as a foundation for community and public life

a) understanding of the interdependence of people as 'individuals-in-relations'

b) understanding of the need for individuals to live as responsible members of communities

2) Respect for the equal right of everyone to the conditions necessary for

their self-development

a) a sense of justice based on that right

b) principles of equal individual civil and political rights, and equal political power and vice, within a context which balances the right of individuals against their responsibilities to the larger community

c) acceptance of the fundamental equality of members of all social groups in society including that of social groups other than one's own

d) acceptance of a person or a groups' right to be different from oneself, or from accepted norms and values of the community, as long as the rights of others aren't threatened

3) Appreciation of the importance of the public

a) appreciating need to participate in public discussion and debate, and to take action to address public issues

b) recognizing need to expand and create new public spheres as sites for discussion and debate of public issues

c) understanding public nature of certain person problems

4) A critical/analytical social outlook

a) habits of examining critically the nature of social reality, including the 'commonsense' realities of everyday life

b) habits of examining underlying relations of power in any given social situation

5) The capacities necessary for public democratic participation

a) analysis of written, spoken and image language

b) clear oral and written expression of one's ideas

c) habits of active listening as a key to communication

d) facility in working collaboratively with others

e) knowledge of constitutional rights and political processes

f) knowledge of complexities and interconnections of major public issues to each other and to issues in the past

g) self-confidence, self-reliance, and ability to act independently (within context of community)

h) ability to learn more about any issue that arises"

Lastly, Sehr goes on to describe the "Characteristics of School Life Likely

to Engage Students in a School's Programs:"

- “1) an atmosphere in which students feel a sense of belonging or membership in the school community
- 2) a feeling of students' safety, both physical and emotional/psychological
- 3) schoolwork with intrinsic interest for students
- 4) schoolwork that is meaningful not only for school purposes, but also in the real world outside school
- 5) a sense of student ownership of their school.”

I will end with this from Walter C. Parker, and then a challenge to the readers of Connections. “Without democratic enlightenment [knowledge of the ideals of democratic living, including the ability to discern just from unjust action and the commitment to recognize difference and fight prejudice], participation cannot be trusted: the freedom marchers of the Civil Rights movement ‘participated,’ but so did Hitler’s thugs and so did (and does) the Ku Klux Klan. Participation without democratic enlightenment can be worse than apathy.”

So what do you think are the “skills, knowledge, and attitudes/dispositions” of a democratic, global student citizen? What do you do in your school to teach these to your students? We at NSRF would be interested in you sending us information about just how you teach these “skills, knowledge, attitudes/ dispositions.”

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Thank you for your support and attention. If you have any news, stories, resources or ideas for these Updates from the National Center, please let us know.

On behalf of the NSRF National Center,  
Dave, Leslie, Michele, and Scott

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