



High Resolves
Creating Citizens & Leaders

Making the Case for Citizenship Education

Orange Paper #1



Making the Case for Citizenship Education

We live in polarizing times. Democracy, and the liberal values of diversity and tolerance on which it depends, are under siege. The causes of these issues are complex and the barriers to overcoming them are many, but broadening the reach and quality of citizenship education offers a vital, untapped path to addressing these problems.

Citizenship education, as traditionally defined¹ and practiced, normally happens on the level of the nation-state. Its meaning therefore typically reflects the values of a nation-state, and can take democratic and non-democratic, militaristic and pacifistic forms. And even within nation-states, especially democratic ones, the meaning of citizenship can become the subject of heated political and pedagogical debate. But if one accepts that democracy is worth preserving and that it embodies a set of common values that theoretically transcend divisions of race, class, gender, and Left/Right politics, then one can imagine citizenship education as being essential to binding the wounds that increasingly divide us within and across national boundaries.

Since World War II, citizenship education has gradually lost its sway to the point that today it is rarely practiced.² It first retreated in the face of a global reaction against authority and indoctrination, which followed the war and gained momentum with the rise of anti-colonial and civil rights movements. It took a further hit with the rise of the Asian economies and a determination in the West to ensure global competitiveness by re-orienting educational curricula around basic skills – reading, math, and science – deemed essential to the creation of productive economic units and growth.

The incentives established for teachers to teach these skills to the exclusion of other subjects have proven a powerful deterrent to the reintroduction of citizenship education, even where it has bipartisan political support. Whatever the metric – class time spent, standards, teacher training, use of proven, science-based pedagogies – we’re devoting less to citizenship in schools today, not more.

The resilience of democracy has proven no less contingent on citizenship education than the economy is on skills training. At least in the United States, a shockingly high percentage of students have little knowledge of the basic structure of democratic institutions, why they exist, what they do, or how they function.³ U.S. 8th graders have made no academic progress in basic civics since 2010: fewer than one-third of students scored proficient or better on civics tests, and only three percent or fewer scored at the advanced level in the subject.⁴ The not unpredictable result is an increasing lack of appreciation for democracy as opposed to other potential forms of government.⁵ And, in turn, this lack of appreciation has been one contributor to the rise of authoritarian regimes, a rejection of democratic and international institutions, and a reaction against immigration and increase in tribalism generally.

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1 For a traditional definition of citizenship education see T.H. Marshall's definition in Topolski & Leuven, 2008, p. 262.

2 Neal, 2017; Pondiscio. 2016.

3 Burgoyne-Allen, 2017; Kahlenberg & Janey, 2016.

4 Shapiro & Brown, 2018

5 <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Foa%26Mounk-27-3.pdf>

Fortunately, we are increasingly seeing a “happy convergence between the skills most needed in the global knowledge economy and those most needed to keep our democracy safe and vibrant.”⁶ Because citizens are made not born, education systems around the world have a crucial role to play in their making. Well beyond a simple knowledge of the workings of government, true citizenship education has the potential to forge national and international identities grounded in universal principles of human freedom, dignity, equality of opportunity, limited (but not necessarily small) government, and economics and social justice. The knowledge, dispositions and skills that enable effective citizenship must be taught as systematically as we teach math, language arts and science – from the knowledge of how democracies work, to the dispositions to embrace diversity and difference, to the skills for self-awareness and independent thinking, participating in groups, advocating for justice, engaging in civil discourse, collaborating effectively, and practicing inclusive leadership.

Indeed, 30+ years of evidence suggests high-quality citizenship education can contribute to improvements in both academic and non-academic outcomes.⁷ Documented benefits include:

- Supports academic success for all students.⁸
- Contributes to the reduction of academic achievement gaps for at-risk student populations.⁹
- Fosters civic knowledge, skills and dispositions, preparing students for informed, effective participation in our democracy.¹⁰
- Builds 21st century college and career readiness skills, including media literacy, collaboration and communication, critical thinking and problem solving.¹¹
- Lowers dropout rates and improves students’ chances of staying in school by making learning relevant and engaging.¹²
- Improves school climate as young people learn respectful dialogue, teamwork and appreciation of diversity.¹³
- Strengthens the engagement and relationships of schools and students with parents, families, civic leaders and organizations, and community partners.¹⁴



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We know more than ever about what high quality citizenship education looks like, and have sufficient tools and resources for teaching it effectively, from active pedagogical techniques, to real world applications like action civics, to simulations, to programs. More evidence will be useful, but the science of learning, and the leadership and evidence base generated by widely implemented citizenship programs over 30+ years, provides a blueprint for immediate, research-based action sufficient to inform more widespread and systematic citizenship education.¹⁵

And through a collective, global ecosystem approach that relies on knowledge and practice sharing, we can move the field forward even faster. “To accelerate progress ...the education sector should invest in a global ‘ecosystem’ for education that will promote cross-border learning and sharing of innovations and grow the capacity of leaders and practitioners”.¹⁶

6 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015

7 Brennan, 2017

8 Cohen, et al., 2009; Dávila & Mora, 2007); Torney-Purta & Lopez, 2006

9 Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Campbell, 2008

10 Vercellotti & Matto, 2010; Carnegie Corporation and CIRCLE, 2003

11 Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2013; Torney-Purta & Wilkenfeld, 2009

12 Starks, 2010; Dávila & Mora, 2007

13 Facing History and Ourselves, (accessed March 30, 2017); Flanagan, et al., 2010; The Carnegie Foundation and CIRCLE, 2006

14 Guilfoile, et al., 2016; Wilkenfeld, 2009

15 Gould, et al., 2011

16 Center for Global Education, et al., 2018

Given the urgency of the need, the mounting evidence of impact, and the readiness of the field to go to scale, the real question we need to ask is not “Why Citizenship Education?” but rather: “What are we waiting for?” We must question why we haven’t invested much more heavily in this important area, and we are left to wonder what crisis of democracy, injustice and social conflict it will take to open up the level of institutional investment in citizenship education the world so clearly needs.

If we want to be able to thrive in a world that is both free and diverse, and to solve the problems of the 21st century – the knottiest of which can only be solved through global collective action – then we must reverse course and deeply and systematically invest in citizenship education in secondary schools, and just as systematically strengthen the citizenship education ecosystem worldwide.

High Resolves is a non-partisan, non-religious, non-profit social venture specializing in the design and delivery of immersive learning experiences around citizenship themes for young people. The Orange Papers series are designed to share our insights and learnings to advance the discourse in this important arena.

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