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# No Child Left Thinking: Democracy At-Risk in American Schools

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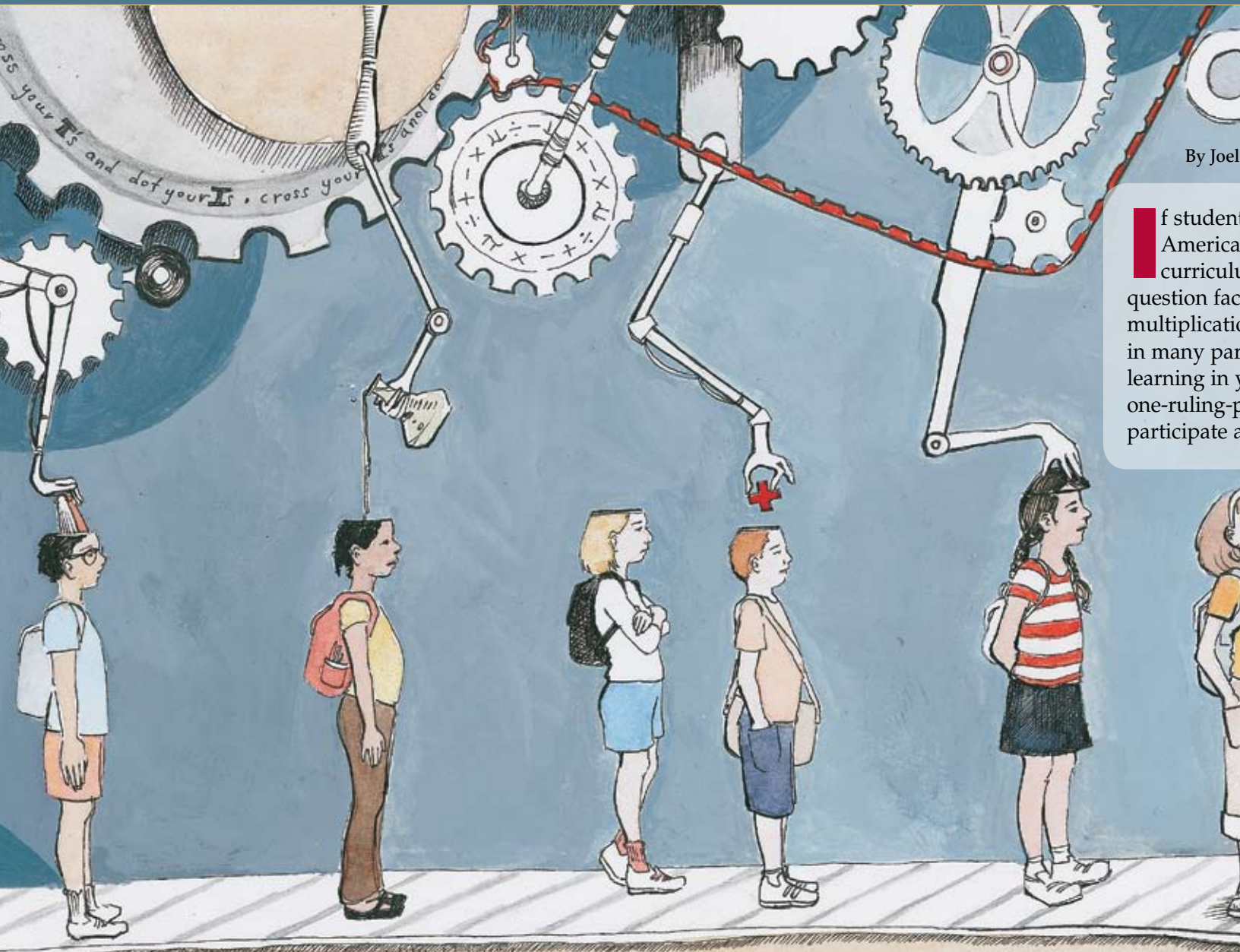
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# No Child Left

## Democracy At-Risk



By Joel

If students in American schools are not participating in a curriculum that questions fact-based multiplication in many parts of the learning in your one-ruling-participate a

# Thinking: At-Risk in American Schools

Westheimer

ts from a totalitarian nation were secretly transported to an  
n classroom to continue their lessons with new teachers and a new  
um, would they be able to tell the difference? I do not ask this  
etiously. It seems plausible, for example, that a good lesson in  
on, chemistry, or a foreign language might seem equally at home  
ts of the world. So what would be different about teaching and  
your local schools than in the schools of a country governed by a  
party dictatorship? Do students in the United States learn how to  
as democratic citizens in decisions that affect all of our lives? ➤



## Outlawing Critical Thinking

Sometimes, critical thinking is actually banned. In the past five years, a number of schools, districts, states, and even the federal government have enacted policies that seek to restrict critical analysis of historical and contemporary events in the school curriculum. In June 2006, the Florida Education Omnibus Bill included language specifying that,

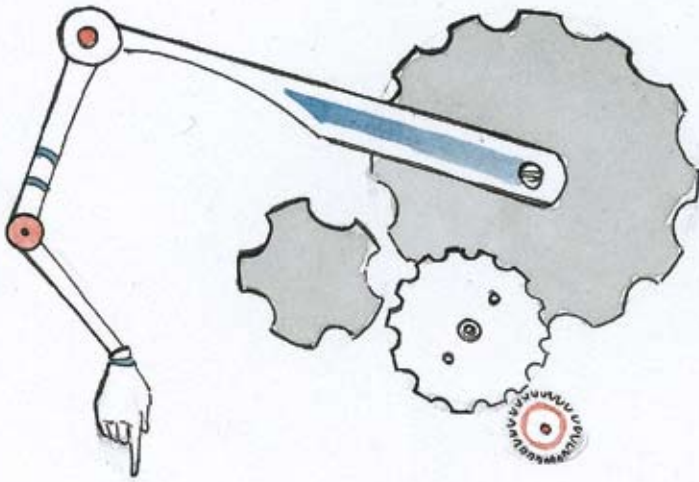
The history of the United States shall be taught as genuine history...American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable.

Other provisions in the bill mandate “flag education, including proper flag display” and “flag salute” and require educators to stress the importance of free enterprise to the U.S. economy. But I am most concerned with the stated goal of the bill’s designers: “to raise historical literacy” with a particular emphasis on the “teaching of facts.” For example, the bill requires that only facts be taught when it comes to discussing the “period of discovery” and the early colonies. Florida is perhaps the first state to ban historical interpretation in public schools, thereby effectively outlawing critical thinking.

Of course, historians almost universally regard history as exactly a matter of interpretation; indeed, the competing interpretations are what make history so interesting. Historians and educators alike have widely derided the mandated adherence to an “official story” embodied in the Florida legislation. But the impact of such mandates should not be underestimated – especially because Florida is not alone.

The drive to engage schools in reinforcing a unilateral understanding of U.S. history and policy shows no sign of abating. More and more, teachers and students are seeing their schools or entire districts and states limiting their ability to explore multiple perspectives to controversial issues. Students and a drama teacher in a Connecticut high school spent months researching, writing, and rehearsing a play they wrote about the Iraq war titled “Voices in Conflict.” Before the scheduled performance, the school administration banned the play on the basis that it was “inappropriate.” (The students went on to perform the play last Spring on an off-Broadway stage in New York to impressive critical review). In Colorado, a student was suspended for posting flyers advertising a student protest. In Bay City, Michigan, wearing a T-shirt with an anti-war quotation by Albert Einstein was grounds for suspension.

The federal role in discouraging critical analysis of historical events has been significant as well. In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education announced a new set of history and civic education initiatives that the President said was designed to teach our children that “America is a force for good in the world, bringing hope and freedom to other people.” In 2004, Senator Lamar Alexander



*"If being a good democratic citizen requires thinking critically about important social assumptions, then that foundation of citizenship is at odds with recent trends in education policy."*

Most of us would like to believe that they do. While a school in North Korea, China, or Iran might be teaching students blind allegiance to their nation’s leaders and deference to the social and political policies those leaders enact, we would expect that schools in the United States would teach students the skills and dispositions needed to evaluate for themselves the benefits and drawbacks of particular policies and government practices. We would not be surprised to learn, for example, that North Korean children are taught to abide by an “official history” handed down by President Kim Jong-il and his single-party authoritarian regime. A school curriculum that teaches one unified, unquestioned version of “truth” is one of the hallmarks of totalitarian societies. Democratic citizens, on the other hand, are committed to the people, principles, and values that underlie democracy – such as political participation, free speech, civil liberties, and social equality. Schools might develop these commitments through lessons in the skills of analysis and exploration, free political expression, and independent thought. And U.S. schools often support democratic dispositions in just such ways.

But teaching and learning do not always conform to democratic goals and ideals. Tensions abound, and in recent years some of the very foundations of democratic engagement such as opportunities for independent thinking and critical analysis have become less and less common. If being a good democratic citizen requires thinking critically about important social assumptions, then that foundation of citizenship is at odds with recent trends in education policy.

I run a research collaborative called Democratic Dialogue ([www.Democratic-Dialogue.com](http://www.Democratic-Dialogue.com)). The teachers, students, and university researchers associated with

Democratic Dialogue are all interested in the role schooling plays in strengthening democratic societies. We conduct studies to investigate the many different ways schools are fulfilling (or not fulfilling) their historic democratic mission to foster an educated citizenry, capable of informed engagement in civic and political life. These studies indicate a clear and troubling trend: much of current education reform is limiting the ways teachers can develop the kinds of attitudes, skills, knowledge, and habits necessary for a democratic society to flourish. Indeed, the goals of K-12 education have been shifting steadily away from preparing active and engaged public citizens and towards more narrow goals of career preparation and individual economic gain. Pressures from parents, school boards, and a broad cultural shift in educational priorities have resulted in schools across the country being seen primarily as conduits for individual success, and, increasingly, lessons aimed at exploring democratic responsibilities have been crowded out.

In many school districts, ever more narrow curriculum frameworks emphasize preparing students for standardized assessments in math and literacy at the same time that they shortchange the social studies, history, and citizenship education. Moreover, there is a “democratic divide” in which higher achieving students, generally from wealthier neighborhoods, are receiving a disproportionate share of the kinds of citizenship education that sharpen students’ thinking about issues of public debate and concern. Curricular approaches that spoon-feed students to succeed on narrow academic tests teach students that broader critical thinking is optional.

(former U.S. secretary of education) warned that students should not be exposed to competing ideologies in historical texts but rather be instructed that our nation represents one true ideology. Alexander sponsored his American History and Civics Education Act to put civics back in its "rightful place in our schools, so our children can grow up learning what it means to be an American."

Presumably, for Alexander, what it means to be an American is more answer than question.

I focus on history teaching here, but the trend is not limited to social studies. In many states, virtually every subject area is under scrutiny for any deviation from one single narrative, based on knowable, testable, and purportedly uncontested facts. An English teacher in a recent study undertaken by colleagues and myself told us that even novel reading was now prescriptive in her state's rubric: meanings predetermined, vocabulary words preselected, and essay topics predigested. A science teacher put it this way: "The only part of the science curriculum now being critically analyzed is evolution."

The high stakes testing mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has further pushed to the margins education efforts that challenge students to grapple with tough questions about society and the world. In a recent study by the Center on Education Policy, 71 percent of districts reported cutting back time for other subjects – social studies in particular – to make more space for reading and math instruction. Last June, historian David McCullough told a U.S. Senate committee that because of NCLB, "history is being put on the back burner or taken off the stove altogether in many or most schools." An increasing number of students are getting little to no education about how government works, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the evolution of social movements, and U.S. and world history. As Peter Campbell, Missouri State Coordinator for FairTest, noted, the sociopolitical implications of poor black and Hispanic children not learning about the Civil Rights movement, not learning about women's suffrage, not learning about the U.S. Civil War, and not learning about any historical or contemporary instance of civil disobedience is more than just chilling. It smacks of an Orwellian attempt not merely to rewrite history, but to get rid of it.

**T**he implications Campbell describes are not limited to poor black and Hispanic students. Any student being denied knowledge about historical events and social movements misses out on important opportunities to link his or her education to the quintessentially democratic struggles for a better society for all.

You might be thinking at this point that conditions might be bad for students unlucky enough to be in the public schools, but that, on the whole, many independent schools prepare students for a democratic society by offering a broad liberal education that asks students to grapple with difficult and contested policy

issues. Evidence indicates otherwise. As the goals for K-12 public education have shifted away from preparing active and engaged public citizens and towards more narrow goals of career preparation and individual economic gain, independent schools have in many ways led the pack. Pressures from parents, board members, and a broad cultural shift in educational priorities have resulted in schools across the country being seen primarily as conduits for individual success, and lessons aimed at exploring democratic responsibilities have increasingly been crowded out. A steadily growing body of research in the United States now echoes what former director of the UK's Independent Schools Inspectorate stated most plainly after reviewing data from an extensive study of British independent schools: because of the immense pressure to achieve high academic results on exams and elevate prestigious college entrance rates, independent schools are "over-directed" so that students do not have "sufficient opportunity or incentive to think for themselves." Increasingly following formulas that "spoon-feed" students to succeed on narrow academic tests, Independent schools, Hubbard warned, "teach students not to think."

Current school reform policies and many classroom practices too often reduce teaching and learning to exactly the kind of mindless rule-following that makes students unable to make principled stands that have long been associated with American democracy. The hidden curriculum of post-NCLB classrooms is how to please authority and pass the tests, not how to develop convictions and stand up for them.

### What Kind of Citizen?

All is not bleak when it comes to educating for democratic understanding and participation. Many teachers across the country conduct excellent educational activities concerned with helping students become active and effective citizens (see sidebar).

But even when educators are expressly committed to teaching "good citizenship," there is cause for caution. My colleague Dr. Joseph Kahne, Mills College, California, and I spent the better part of a decade studying programs that aimed to develop good citizenship skills among youth and young adults. In study after study, we come to similar conclusions: the kinds of goals and practices commonly represented in curricula that hope to foster democratic citizenship usually have more to do with voluntarism, charity, and obedience than with democracy. In other words, "good citizenship" to many educators means listening to authority figures, dressing neatly, being nice to neighbors, and helping out at a soup kitchen — not grappling with the kinds of social policy decisions that every citizen in a democratic society needs to understand.

In our studies of dozens of programs, we identified three visions of "good" citizens that

help capture the lay of the land when it comes to citizenship education: the Personally Responsible Citizen; the Participatory Citizen; and the Social Justice Oriented Citizen. These three visions can serve as a helpful guide to the variety of assumptions that fall under the idea of citizenship education. As Table 1 illustrates, they also lead to very different program decisions.

Personally Responsible Citizens contribute to food or clothing drives when asked and volunteer to help those less fortunate whether in a soup kitchen or a senior center. They might contribute time, money, or both to charitable causes. Both those in the character education movement and those who advocate community service would emphasize this vision of good citizenship. They seek to build character and personal responsibility by emphasizing honesty, integrity, self-discipline, and hard work. Or they nurture compassion by engaging students in volunteer community service.

Participatory Citizens participate in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state, and national levels. Educational programs designed to support the development of participatory citizens focus on teaching students about how government and other institutions (eg, community based organizations, churches) work and about the importance of planning and participating in organized efforts to care for those in need, for example, or in efforts to guide school policies. While the personally responsible citizen would contribute cans of food for the homeless, the participatory citizen might organize the food drive.

Social-Justice Oriented Citizens know how to critically assess multiple perspectives. They can examine social, political, and economic structures and explore strategies for change that address root causes of problems. These are the critical thinkers, and this vision of citizenship is the least commonly pursued in schools. We called this kind of citizen the Social-Justice Oriented Citizen because these programs emphasize the need for citizens to be able to think about issues of fairness, equality of opportunity, and democratic engagement. They share with the participatory citizen an emphasis on collective work related to the life and issues of the community. However, they make independent thinking a priority and encourage students to look for ways to improve society, and become thoughtfully informed about a variety of complex social issues. These programs are less likely to emphasize the need for charity and volunteerism as ends in themselves and more likely to teach about ways to effect systemic change. If Participatory Citizens are organizing the food drive and Personally Responsible Citizens are donating food, the Social Justice Oriented Citizens are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover.

Currently, the vast majority of school programs that take the time to teach citizenship emphasize either good character – including the importance of volunteering and helping those in need – or technical knowledge of legislatures and how government works. Far less common are schools that teach students to think about root causes of injustice or challenge existing social, economic, and political norms as a way to strengthen democracy.

Voluntarism and kindness can be used to avoid much thinking about politics and policy altogether. If that’s the case, then in terms of democratic citizenship, these programs are highly limited. Character traits such as honesty, integrity, and responsibility for one’s actions are certainly valuable for becoming good neighbors and citizens. But, on their own, these traits are not about democracy. A growing number of educators and policymakers promote voluntarism and charity as an alternative to social policy and organized government action. Former U.S. President George Bush Sr. famously promoted community service activities for youth by imagining a “thousand points of light” representing charitable efforts to respond to

those in need. But if young people understand these actions as a kind of noblesse oblige — a private act of kindness performed by the privileged and fail to examine the deeper structural causes of social ills, then the thousand points of light risk becoming a thousand points of the status quo. Citizenship in a democratic community requires more than kindness and decency;

**Democratic Educational Goals**

Recall my opening question: If students from a totalitarian nation were secretly transported to a U.S. classroom, would they be able to tell the difference? Both classes might engage students in volunteer activities in the community – picking up litter from a nearby park perhaps or helping out at a busy intersection near a school or an old-age center. Government leaders in a totalitarian regime would be as delighted as leaders in a democracy if their young citizens learned the lessons put forward by many of the proponents of personally responsible citizenship: don’t do drugs; show up to work on time; give blood; help others during a flood; recycle; etc. These are desirable traits for people living in any community. But they are

not about democratic citizenship. In fact some conceptions of personal responsibility – obedience and loyalty, for example – may work against the kind of independent thinking that effective democracy requires.

For more than two centuries, democracy in the United States has been predicated on citizens’ informed engagement in civic and political life and schools have been seen as essential to support the development of such citizens. “I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves,” Thomas Jefferson famously wrote, adding that if the people are “not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.” Belief in the fundamental importance of education for democracy has been long-standing. And yet these beliefs are at risk in schools today. For democracy to remain vibrant, educators must convey to students that both critical thinking and action are important components of democratic civic life – and students must learn that they have important contributions to make. Democracy is not a spectator sport. The exit of the Canadian War Museum in

**KINDS OF CITIZENS**

	<b>Personally Responsible Citizen</b>	<b>Participatory Citizen</b>	<b>Social-Justice Oriented Citizen</b>
<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	Acts responsibly in their community Works and pays taxes Picks up litter, recycles, and gives blood Helps those in need, lends a hand during times of crisis Obeys laws	Active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts Organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promote economic development, or clean up environment Knows how government agencies work Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks	Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures Explores strategies for change that address root causes of problems Knows about social movements and how to effect systemic change Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice
<b>SAMPLE ACTION</b>	Contributes food to a food drive	Helps to organize a food drive	Explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes
<b>CORE ASSUMPTIONS</b>	To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community	To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures	To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must question and change established systems and structures when they reproduce patterns of injustice over time

From: Westheimer, J. & Kahne, J. (2004). What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*. 41(2), 237-269.

## RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

The Council for the Social Studies website contains an archive of articles and lesson plans to help teachers engage students in the study of such current issues as the war in Iraq and terrorism. ([www.socialstudies.org/resources/moments](http://www.socialstudies.org/resources/moments))

The Choices for the 21st Century Education Program at Brown University publishes a wide range of curriculum units on historical and current international issues. Sample topics include *Confronting Genocide: Never Again?*, *Indian Independence and the Question of Pakistan*; and *A Forgotten History: The Slave Trade and Slavery in New England*. The website's *Teaching with the News* section provides online lessons at no charge on such topics as *Violence in Darfur*; *North Korea and Nuclear Weapons*; and *U.S. Immigration Policy*. ([www.choices.edu/resources/index.php](http://www.choices.edu/resources/index.php))

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility sponsors the website [www.teachablemoment.org](http://www.teachablemoment.org), which "aims to encourage critical thinking on issues of the day." The site offers readings, study questions, and links to useful sources that teachers can use to present lessons on many different topics. Recent examples include *The U.S. and Iran*; *BLACKWATER USA: Is the U.S. Privatizing War?*; *Energy and the Environment: What Can We Do?*; *Presidential Power: Executive Privilege*; and *The Death Penalty*.

Facing History and Ourselves engages students of diverse backgrounds in examining racism, prejudice, and antisemitism to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry. The organization's Web site contains many lesson plans and units with such titles as *The Armenian Genocide: Examining Historical Evidence*; *Eyes on the Prize: Tactics of Nonviolence*; and *Guilt, Responsibility, and the Nuremberg Trial*. ([www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org))

The University of Ottawa's Democratic Dialogue initiative has information about research projects, publications, and events to assist educators in "the pursuit of creative approaches to projects that engage themes of democracy, education, and society." ([www.DemocraticDialogue.com](http://www.DemocraticDialogue.com))

[Teachingforchange.org](http://Teachingforchange.org) provides publications and K-12 resources focusing on diversity, global citizenship, and the environment.

[TeachingTolerance.org](http://TeachingTolerance.org), a Web project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, offers subscriptions to *Teaching Tolerance* magazine and many lesson plans and videos at no charge for K-12 educators. At [www.tolerance.org/teach/index.jsp](http://www.tolerance.org/teach/index.jsp), teachers will find instructional kits on such topics as the U.S. civil rights movement, the Holocaust, and the United States' struggle to ensure liberty and justice for all.



"Current school reform policies and many classroom practices too often reduce teaching and learning to exactly the kind of mindless rule-following that makes students unable to make principled stand..."

Joel Westheimer is University Research Chair and Professor of Education at the University of Ottawa. His most recent book is *Pledging Allegiance: The Politics of Patriotism in America's Schools* (ed.) (Teachers College Press, 2007). Portions of this article are adapted from "Teaching Students to Think About Patriotism" (*Educational Leadership*, v.65, no. 5).

Ottawa, dedicated to a critical history of war, bears the following inscription:

*History is yours to make. It is not owned or written by someone else for you to learn . . . History is not just the story you read. It is the one you write. It is the one you remember or denounce or relate to others. It is not predetermined. Every action, every decision, however small, is relevant to its course. History is filled with horror and replete with hope. You shape the balance.*

I suspect many readers could imagine a lesson in democracy by beginning a discussion with just such a quotation. ☺

### Endnotes:

See <http://www.flsenate.gov/data/session/2006/Senate/bills/billtext/pdf/s0028.pdf>.

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