

EDUCATING FOR
AMERICAN
 **DEMOCRACY**

Docket ID ED-2021-OESE-0033

PUBLIC COMMENT FROM Educating for American Democracy initiative Principal Investigators

Danielle Allen, Paul Carrese, Louise Dube, Jane Kamensky, Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Peter Levine, Tammy Waller

May 12, 2021

In August 2019, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the U.S. Department of Education awarded a grant to the Educating for American Democracy project to develop a roadmap for excellence in history and civic learning for all learners K-12. Over the course of the subsequent 18 months, 300 scholars, educators, practitioners, students, and parents, guardians, and caretakers worked together to develop that roadmap. We were a geographically, demographically, and viewpoint diverse group. We shared a common commitment to the need to reinvest in civic education and social studies and a belief that achieving such investment requires breaking through polarization in our national conversations around civic education and social studies. Unfortunately, the proposed priorities, as articulated, along with the response they have provoked, lead us in the opposite direction. We urge a reconsideration that retains the goals of educating all students in ways that respond to their diversity and of helping us all to address the country's hard histories, including the histories of enslavement and racism, while also prioritizing ambitious and rigorous learning in the service of civic strength, common purpose, and reflective patriotism. We define the last as uniting a capacity for clear-eyed criticism and honest reckoning with love of country and appreciation for its achievements.

Our roadmap has several key features: it is inquiry-based; we focus on the questions that all learners should have the chance to explore over the course of a K-12 education; the questions are bundled into seven themes; instruction is framed by six pedagogic principles; and we identify five design challenges that should establish the criteria for excellence in history and civic learning. We leave it to educators, schools, districts and states to determine how precisely to meet the parameters of the design challenges, which can also animate discussions with students and parents.

The seven content themes map out the disciplinary and conceptual terrain, as well as the skills and dispositional learning needed to support healthy civic participation. They encompass the material necessary to explore what it means to participate in American constitutional democracy; how American constitutional democracy came to be; the places and peoples of which it consists; how shared political institutions emerged, have been transformed, and operate now; the diverse array of benefits and harms that have been wrought by those institutions and the operations of power; the place of the U.S. in the world more broadly; and the ongoing debates that characterize contemporary American civic life, as well as the possibilities available to us now for concrete realization of our ideals.

In the Roadmap, we offer educators instructional principles and design challenges. The principles are intended to guide practice. The design principles articulate a need to balance sometimes conflicting values in designing excellent history and civics learning, and direct educators to the tensions and challenges of design that require their attention.

One of our instructional principles and two of our design challenges are pertinent to **Proposed Priority 1**. They are as follows:

INSTRUCTIONAL PRINCIPLE 1. Excellence for All

EAD teachers commit to learn about and teach full and multifaceted history and civic narratives. They appreciate student diversity and assume all students' capacity for learning complex and rigorous content. EAD teachers focus on inclusion and equity in both content and approach as they spiral instruction across grade bands, increasing complexity and depth about relevant history and contemporary issues.

DESIGN CHALLENGE 2: America's Plural Yet Shared Story

DC2.1: How can we integrate the perspectives of Americans from all different backgrounds when narrating a history of the U.S. and explicating the content of the philosophical foundations of American constitutional democracy? DC2.2: How can we do so consistently across all of America's historical periods and conceptual content? DC2.3: How can this more plural and therefore more accurate story of our history and foundations also be a common story, the shared inheritance of all Americans?

DESIGN CHALLENGE 4: Civic Honesty, Reflective Patriotism

DC4.1: How can we offer an account of U.S. constitutional democracy that is simultaneously honest about the past without falling into cynicism, and appreciative of the founding without tipping into adulation?

We have reviewed Proposed Priority 1 in relation to the above instructional principles and these two design challenges and offer some suggestions for improvement.

Proposed Priority 1 seeks to support the development of culturally responsive teaching and learning but in our view the rule provides a limited view of what is necessary to achieve that.

As per the rule, proposed projects must incorporate teaching and learning practices that--

- (a) Take into account systemic marginalization, biases, inequities, and discriminatory policy and practice in American history;*
- (b) Incorporate racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse perspectives and perspectives on the experience of individuals with disabilities;*
- (c) Encourage students to critically analyze the diverse perspectives of historical and contemporary media and its impacts;*
- (d) Support the creation of learning environments that validate and reflect the diversity, identities, and experiences of all students; and*

(e) Contribute to inclusive, supportive, and identity-safe learning environments.

Requirements c-e support the Educating for American Democracy themes, instructional principle, and design challenges listed above. Requirements a-b, however, would require modification in order to be supportive of the Educating for American Democracy framework.

Documenting and learning from entrenched patterns of marginalization, enduring biases, inequities, and discriminatory policy and practice in American history is indeed an appropriate part of civic learning. However, it is an incomplete foundation for civic learning. We are fortunate to live in a time when we can deliver complete histories to learners that integrate the perspectives of the many diverse people that have populated the North American continent and the United States over time. Moreover, we are also fortunate to live in a time where those narratives can emphasize the agency even of those who experienced oppression and domination, even as those narratives can also offer clear-eyed accounts of how and why people did wrong to others. **We can deliver full and accurate histories that can empower all learners as civic agents standing on an equal footing with one another. This requires, however, not only bringing the wrongs to the surface but also bringing forward the positive visions of democratic possibility and constitutional self-government that all the peoples of this country have developed over time.** The story of the innovations to overcome problems of racial injustice and other forms of domination -- indeed the possibility that a “new birth of freedom” corrects and completes the promise of America's founding ideals -- should be as central to this priority as the excavation of the failings of our constitutional democracy.

Importantly, civic learning addresses not only our past but also our present and future. Both the account of patterns of domination that persist in the present and the views of how best to overcome them in the present -- and for the future -- are highly contested. Consequently, we would finally recommend the addition of a sixth prong to these priorities, namely that projects incorporate teaching and learning practices that develop students' abilities to engage in and lead conversations about difficult, important topics across political differences. The Educating for American Democracy framework argues that an excellent history and civics education requires development of civic dispositions and virtues, to include civil disagreement and civic friendship across diverse political and philosophical views.