State and National Leaders Gather for Civic Literacy Summit

(Washington, D.C.) – Key state lawmakers, educators, and justices will convene this weekend to review accomplishments and plan strategies for state campaigns designed to improve civic education in America’s schools.

The need for enhanced civic education is evidenced in various studies, including the 2006 Knight survey, which indicated that “our nation’s high schools are failing their students when it comes to instilling in them an appreciation for the First Amendment.” In addition, Americans give schools a C grade for the job they are doing in preparing students for citizenship, and give young people a C- for their civic awareness and engagement, according to a 2004 study by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of the Schools and the Alliance for Representative Democracy. Nevertheless, large majorities think civic education should be a central purpose of schools and are confident that schools can effectively teach civics.

More than 350 delegates from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and national education and civics organizations will participate in the Fourth Annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education, November 18–20, 2006 at the Washington Hilton Hotel in Washington, D.C. The delegates are leaders in their state’s efforts to strengthen and expand the teaching of civics in their schools.

Presentations include a discussion of democracy and civility by former House Minority Leader Bob Michel and former Congressman Charles Stenholm. Marjorie Rendell, Judge, Third Circuit, U.S. Court of Appeals, will provide the keynote address on Sunday, November 19. Other speakers include Ray Simon and Deborah Price from the U.S. Department of Education, and Brenda Welburn, Executive Director, National Association of State Boards of Education.

Since the first Congressional Conference three years ago, many states have created coalitions and passed legislation to promote civic education policies and practices in their states. For example:

- Of the nearly 70 pieces of legislation introduced in 34 legislatures, 26 have passed and 24 have been enacted into law
- Nearly every state has formed active state coalitions on civic education whose members include legislators, other state policymakers, and education officials
23 states have held – and 13 states have plans for – statewide conferences and summits
25 states have conducted surveys of current policies on civics – and 10 states have surveys underway – to identify state and local deficiencies and map future strategies

A typical state delegation includes state legislators, the chief state school officer or member of the state school board, and the governor’s education advisor. The delegates also include secretaries of state, state supreme court justices, state attorneys general, a federal district court judge, several school superintendents, and teachers’ association officials.

A highlight of the conference will be the inaugural presentation of the American Civic Education Teacher Awards on Sunday, November 19, 2006. The awards, a project of the Center for Civic Education, the Center on Congress at Indiana University, and the National Education Association, will be presented to three teachers selected from a nationwide search in recognition of their exemplary work preparing young people to become informed and engaged citizens. The teachers are Christopher Cavanaugh of Plainfield High School in Plainfield, Indiana; Galelyn McElroy of Central High School in Louisville, Kentucky; and Donna Paoletti Phillips of Robert Frost Middle School in Rockville, Maryland.

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the Congressional Conference is a project of the Alliance for Representative Democracy, a joint venture of the Center for Civic Education, the Trust for Representative Democracy of the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the Center on Congress at Indiana University.

“It is our responsibility to ensure that young people are equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to be informed and active citizens,” said former Indiana Congressman Lee Hamilton, Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. “We must continue to teach our young people about the importance of democracy and not fall behind in this critical subject.”

Charles N. Quigley, Executive Director of the Center for Civic Education, said, “Great strides have been made by the delegates over the last three years, and this year’s conference will keep that momentum going.”

“It is at the state level that the core education decisions are made,” said Karl Kurtz, Director of the National Conference of State Legislature’s Trust for Representative Democracy program. “By introducing and passing numerous civic education measures, legislators have made real progress in promoting the importance of the issue and moving it toward the top of the agenda.”

The Center for Civic Education is a nonprofit, nonpartisan educational corporation dedicated to fostering the development of informed, responsible participation in civic life by citizens committed to values and principles fundamental to American constitutional democracy. The Center administers a wide range of critically acclaimed curricular, teacher-training, and community-based programs.

The National Conference of State Legislatures is the bipartisan, nonprofit organization that serves the legislators and staff of the states, commonwealths, and territories. NCSL was formed in 1975 to improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures, to promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures, and to ensure states a strong, cohesive voice in the federal system.

The Center on Congress at Indiana University is a nonpartisan, educational institution established in 1999 to help the public become more familiar with Congress’ strengths and weaknesses, and its impact on the lives of ordinary people. The Center’s extensive program of civic education activities seeks to inspire young people and adults to take an active part in revitalizing representative government in America.