Key Policies Highlighted at the Fourth Annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education

Hundreds of educators and policymakers gathered in Washington, D.C., November 18–20, 2006, for the Fourth Annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education. As the fourth of five national conferences to revitalize civic learning in American education, the congressional conference brought together delegations from each state and the District of Columbia to continue a dialogue about the importance of civic education and civic engagement and to affirm their commitment to leading efforts within their states to restore the historic civic mission of our nation’s schools.

“We simply cannot afford to be neutral when the future of our democracy is at stake,” said Center Executive Director Charles N. Quigley in his opening remarks to the more than 200 delegates in attendance. “Together we can set the standard for an educated citizenry that is needed to meet the challenges of the next century.” Quigley called for the establishment of a “systematic approach to the implementation of sound civic education programs.”

Joining the state legislators, chief state school officers, governors’ education advisors, and influential members of the private sector were more than 100 delegates from national educational organizations, offices of Congress, and the federal government.

The congressional conferences on civic education are hosted by the joint leadership of Congress and sponsored by the Alliance for Representative Democracy, a partnership composed of the Center for Civic Education, the Trust for Representative Democracy of the National Council of State Legislatures, and the Center on Congress at Indiana University. The conference has met annually since 2003 to lay the strategic groundwork for a nationwide,
state- and locally based effort to make civic learning a top priority in K–12 education.

During the past four years, 25 states have conducted benchmark surveys of current policies and practices in civic education, and legislators from 34 states have introduced 69 pieces of legislation to strengthen civic learning in schools. Twenty-four of these measures have passed. Legislation established official state commissions on civic education in ten states.

Seeking to build on these successes and expand the alliances forged as a result of the first three congressional conferences, delegates gathered again in November 2006 to share ideas and gain new perspectives to advance their local efforts.

Following Quigley's opening remarks, delegates attended a discussion between two veteran congressional leaders on the vital role civility and education play in sustaining our democracy. Former House Minority Leader Bob Michel of Illinois and former Texas Representative Charles Stenholm responded to questions posed by veteran political consultant Doug Bailey. Michel and Stenholm discussed the importance of civility and consensus in the political process. They noted that effective civic education can help stem the tide of resentment and partisanship in American politics.

The main plenary session of the conference focused specifically on the policy themes most vital to ensuring sound civic education in America's public schools. These key policy areas—standards, assessment, curricular requirements, and professional development—were the focal point of discussion among a panel of experts, including Center Associate Director Margaret Branson; Shelley Billig, Vice President of RMC Research Corporation; Dan Prinzing, Education Director of the Idaho Human Rights Education Center; and Bill Hughes, Superintendent of the Greendale, Wisconsin, School District. The panel, moderated by Terry Pickeral, Executive Director of the National Center for Learning and Citizenship at the Education Commission of the States, conveyed to delegates the importance of the key policy areas in the restoration of civic education.

Following the panel discussion, delegates broke into four smaller meetings, each focusing on one of the four policy themes. Each session featured a panel of experts who presented a more in-depth examination of the key issues concerning their specific policy area and guided a discussion among the delegates concerning the political, educational, and implementation challenges in making good civic education policy.

Throughout the weekend, delegates participated in smaller breakout sessions to engage in closer examination of the challenges and particularities of the key policy areas. Topics included youth voting, service learning, and the role of the judiciary in promoting civic education. Sessions highlighted various national organizations and programs committed to renewing civic engagement in the United States.

The central work of the congressional conference took place during state planning meetings, where state delegations developed plans for advancing state and local efforts to restore the civic mission of schools.

At the roll call of states on the final day of the congressional conference, each delegation announced its specific goals for 2007. Some delegations declared their intention to push aggressively for legislation that would mandate civics courses at the middle and high school levels. Other delegations revealed plans for statewide and regional conferences to promote civic education. States overwhelmingly affirmed the conference declaration, which calls on states to restore the civic mission of schools and notes the importance of civics standards, adequate K–12 curricular requirements, and high-quality professional development in improving civic education.

At the closing reception, former Congressman Lee H. Hamilton, Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University, urged conference participants to renew their commitment to the civic development of America's youth. Ray Simon, Deputy Secretary of Education at the U.S. Department of Education, and Deborah Price, Assistant Deputy Secretary of the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, addressed conference participants, commending them for their work in promoting civic education.
Two student groups made presentations at this year’s conference. High school students participating in the Teen Court program at Campbell District Court in Kentucky performed an abbreviated trial reenactment based on a misdemeanor case from their community. Judge Karen A. Thomas, Teen Court judge for the Campbell District Court, described Teen Court as a program that “demystifies the courts,” introduces students to the real processes of courtroom law, and demonstrates the living principles of America’s justice and legal systems.

Sixth-grade students from Doe Elementary School in Johnson County, Tennessee, who had participated in the Center’s School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program, presented curricular material from Foundations of Democracy, highlighting the concepts of Authority, Privacy, Responsibility, and Justice. The class also participated in We the People: Project Citizen and made significant strides in their civic knowledge.

A highlight of the fourth congressional conference was the inaugural presentation of the American Civic Education Teacher Awards, sponsored by the Center for Civic Education, the National Education Association, and the Center on Congress at Indiana University. Christopher Cavanaugh of Plainfield, Indiana, Galelyn McElroy of Prospect, Kentucky, and Donna Paolletti Phillips of Columbia, Maryland, were honored on the second evening of the conference for their remarkable dedication to the civic development of their students. A video presentation documented their exemplary classroom techniques, their perspectives on civic education, and the respect they have earned from students, colleagues, and administrators in their respective schools. Each teacher briefly addressed the audience, offering inspiring stories from the classroom and remarks on the value of effective civic learning.

To conclude the dinner presentation, U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Marjorie Rendell, First Lady of Pennsylvania, gave the keynote address. As a founding partner of the Pennsylvania Coalition for Representative Democracy, Rendell discussed the importance of the renewed spirit of democratic engagement in America and the vital role that civic education plays in the realization of that renewal. “Through curriculum that teaches civics,” said Rendell, “topics and questions arise that foster critical-thinking skills and inspire young people to reflect on and become actively involved in developing solutions that make for communities and a better world—not as incidental subject matter, but as the primary focus of a full and substantial educational learning experience.” Rendell also proposed new additions to the traditional standards of learning: “Today,” she said, “we must teach the ‘Five Rs’—reading, writing, arithmetic, and civic rights and responsibilities—in order to lay the strong foundation that enables our children to become true citizens of the world. Only then can we truly share our democracy.”

Rendell’s remarks encapsulated the mission of those attending the congressional conference. Encouraged by states like Florida, Kentucky, and Michigan, where robust campaign efforts have successfully influenced education policy to sustain civic learning, delegates left the conference with a renewed zeal for restoring citizenship education in their own states. A few delegations even made plans to reopen their states’ learning standards.

For more information about the congressional conferences on civic education, visit www.representativemocracy.org, contact Mark Molli (molli@civiced.org) or Ted McConnell (mcconnell@civiced.org) at the Center, or call them at 202-861-8800.