Delegations from each state and the District of Columbia and representatives from more than 100 national organizations attended the Third Annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education, held in Washington, D.C., September 24–26, 2005. Educators and policymakers discussed the current level of civic engagement in the United States and the role of schools in providing civic education.

In the keynote address to conference participants, Supreme Court Associate Justice Stephen G. Breyer extolled “the obligations and duties of citizenship,” a phrase that embodies the focus of the conference.

Conference delegates affirmed the critical role of classroom-based civic education in increasing engagement and declared their commitment to leading aggressive state and local campaigns to sustain and revitalize the historic civic mission of schools.

The 2005 congressional conference on civic education, hosted by the joint leadership of Congress, was the third of five conferences sponsored by the Alliance for Representative Democracy, a collaborative effort of the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Center for Civic Education, and the Center on Congress at Indiana University.

Two hundred and ninety-one state delegates, including state legislators, chief state school officers, secretaries of state or their representatives, governors’ education advisors, educational organizations with state and local affiliates, and influential individuals from the private sector participated in the conference. In addition to state delegations, national civic education organizations and offices of the federal government, including the Department of Education and several legislative offices, took part in the three-day dialogue on civic education and engagement.

In the opening address of the conference, Charles N. Quigley, Executive Director of the Center, challenged delegates to recommit to improving the status of civic education: “We want to further the momentum that has been established to provide all students in our nation the opportunity for a vital, stimulating, and effective civic education that...”

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Message from the Center

Promoting Civic Literacy in Kentucky

Guest Commentary
Trey Grayson
Secretary of State
Commonwealth of Kentucky

As the Chief Election Officer for the Commonwealth of Kentucky, I have a responsibility to ensure eligible voters are afforded the opportunity to exercise their franchise. This is a responsibility I take very seriously. Our nation’s elections administrators work very hard to make elections as accessible as is responsibly possible. Despite our best efforts, far too many citizens still do not exercise their right to vote.

This is a symptom of a greater national problem of civic disengagement. Numerous studies document the alarming rate of disengagement felt by our fellow citizens. A major part of the solution to the problem of civic disengagement lies in restoring the civic mission of our nation’s schools. High-quality civic education that both informs a student’s knowledge and encourages civic participation is just as important as preparing students for the workplace.

As I travel around Kentucky, I make a point of visiting as many schools as I can and have seen effective classroom practice of civic education in action. Programs like We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution and We the People: Project Citizen can make a major difference in the civic dispositions of our youth. We must ensure that every American schoolchild has the opportunity to experience high-quality civic education.

I am honored to be working with a group of Kentucky legislators, educators, judges, journalists, and concerned citizens to strengthen civic literacy. After the First Annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education in fall 2003, the Kentucky General Assembly passed a measure creating the Kentucky Workgroup on Civic Literacy and Engagement. I serve as Chairman of the workgroup in a joint effort with the administrative office of Kentucky’s courts, two able legislators, several respected academics, our state Department of Education and others.

Working together in a nonpartisan manner, we have created an ambitious program to restore the civic mission of our schools. In October 2004 we held a state Civic Literacy Summit to build support and interest in this endeavor.

The workgroup has been extremely busy during the past year. Our legislative team members, Senator Jack Westwood (R-Crescent Springs) and Representative Tanya Pullin (D-South Shore), introduced three resolutions in support of the critical work being performed by the workgroup to revitalize civic education and civic engagement. Two of the resolutions, HJR 109 and HR 87, passed.

The workgroup held 11 regional meetings statewide. The purpose of these meetings was threefold: (1) to inform the citizens of the Commonwealth of national and state research highlighting the crisis in civic education and initiatives to reinvigorate the discipline in our schools; (2) to showcase successful local civic education initiatives, both school- and community-based; and (3) to provide a forum in which to gather data from participants regarding their perspectives on the subject. In addition to regional meetings, the workgroup sponsored a second summit that was held October 4 and 5, 2005, in northern Kentucky.

The legislative resolutions and much of what we shared at both the regional meetings and state summit was informed by current national research conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Civic Mission of Schools report, and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

Most recently, working in conjunction with the Center for Civic Education, the workgroup produced a professional development video devoted to the internationally acclaimed Project Citizen curriculum. The video, which features sixth-grade students from A.B. Combs Elementary, located in rural southeastern Kentucky, aired on KET on October 28 and

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promotes their productive engagement in political life."

Lee H. Hamilton, former Congressman and Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University, encouraged delegates to harness the energy of the conference and asked state delegates to return home committed to providing students with the civic education tools needed to combat indifference and apathy. Hamilton said that it is important to give young people the knowledge and skills necessary to form the dispositions required for informed and effective citizenship.

State delegations convened during the conference to discuss plans to implement high-quality civic education programs within their states. Many delegates focused on adopting civic education legislation, reforming state civics standards, broadening civic education coalition partnerships, and holding state civic education summits.

Legislation to improve civic education has been introduced in 31 states since the first congressional conference in 2003. Fourteen of these measures have been approved. Twenty-one states have hosted civic education summits to assure that civic education remains in the spotlight of education reform.

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Tom Foley, former Speaker of the House (left), and Howard Baker, former Majority Leader of the Senate (right), engaging in a "Dialogue on Democracy" moderated by journalist Judy Woodruff (center). The former members of Congress discussed the need to promote civility in public life as a way of maintaining Americans' engagement with their government.
At the opening session of the conference, Tom Foley, former Speaker of the House, and Howard Baker, former Majority Leader of the Senate, engaged in a “Dialogue on Democracy,” responding to questions from moderator and veteran broadcast journalist Judy Woodruff. The former congressional leaders focused on the need to promote civility in public life in order to maintain the engagement of the people with their government.

The dialogue provided momentum for an open forum discourse titled “Implementing the Key Policies: Action at the State, District and School Level,” moderated by Charles Merritt, Director of Government Relations at the Education Commission of the States. Allen Weinstein, Archivist of the United States, delivered the keynote address. Michael S. Greco, President of the American Bar Association; Timothy Davis, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Close Up Foundation; and Rita M. Lashway, Deputy Executive Director of the New York State School Boards Association discussed the theme “Our Role in Promoting Civic Engagement and Civic Education.” Suellen K. Reed, Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction, convened the panel.

Two student groups demonstrated quality curricular approaches to civic education. Students from Alan Brodman’s 2005 We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution national championship class from East Brunswick High School in East Brunswick, New Jersey, presented a simulated congressional hearing on concepts of citizenship during the second day of the congressional conference.

Elementary school students from the East Bay Conservation Corps Charter School in Oakland, California, presented several aspects of their curriculum, which focuses on successful service-learning techniques that create a civically engaged community.

Stephen G. Breyer, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, delivered the keynote address on the importance of educating America’s youth to foster a more engaged and enlightened citizenry. Breyer discussed the importance of involving citizens in public policy: “We carry on what is politely called a conversation or what is less politely called a big screaming match. And who gets involved? It involves teachers, it involves the classroom, it involves professors, it involves civil liberties groups, it involves police chiefs, it involves newspapers and articles and journalists and everybody under the sun.”

Civic education is essential for participation in a republican democracy, Breyer said. “Why does democracy work in America? It’s called participation. And where does it come from? It comes from education...it comes from systems in grammar school, in high school, where...you learn how government works, not just on paper, you learn how to cooperate with each

Civic Mission of Schools Underscored at the Third Annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education

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Two student groups demonstrated quality curricular approaches to civic education. Students from Alan Brodman’s 2005 We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution national championship team from East Brunswick High School in East Brunswick, New Jersey, presented a simulated congressional hearing on concepts of citizenship. Jeri Thomson, former Secretary of the U.S. Senate; Richard T. Moore, Massachusetts State Senator; and Barbara J. Pariente, Chief Justice of the Florida Supreme Court, served as judges during the hearing, probing the students’ knowledge of constitutional principles. The content of the students’ discussion allowed them to join the debate on concepts of civic responsibility, civic engagement, and civic renewal. A number of the students’ former classmates returned from their first year of college to attend the event.

Students from the East Bay Conservation Corps Charter School in Oakland, California, present service-learning aspects of their curriculum to delegates at the congressional conference.
other.” Concluding his remarks, Breyer told the audience that he agreed with the East Brunswick students on the purpose of high-quality civic education: “That’s what we think is important, and that’s what the students said: they were talking about the obligations and duties of citizenship.”

On the final day, delegates discussed the obligations and duties of their own state’s coalitions. Deborah A. Price, Assistant Deputy Secretary of the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, praised quality civic education practices and emphasized the need to fund effective civic education programs and policies. Karl Kurtz, Director of the Trust for Representative Democracy of the National Conference of State Legislatures, gave a visual presentation titled “Representative Democracy in America: Voices of the People” that complemented Price’s vision of well-funded, successful programs that ultimately lead to a civically engaged nation.

In a lively concluding plenary session that resembled a political convention, a representative from each state’s delegation arose to recommit to the campaign to promote civic learning in schools. The delegates presented their 2006 action plans to the general body, and many states’ coalitions pledged to further the civic mission of schools by implementing specific policies, by regularly revisiting these policies, and by ensuring that promising practices in civic education reach every American classroom.

At a closing reception at the Dirksen Senate Office Building, Senator Michael B. Enzi of Wyoming, Chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, lauded the accomplishments of state delegations and urged them to continue to improve the status of civic education in the United States. Conference delegates briefed their members of Congress on their statewide efforts to strengthen civic education. Many congressional offices offered support to the delegates and their activities. Delegates returned to their states and organizations with renewed momentum to promote civic engagement and civic education. They resolved to advance the civic mission of schools and promote the obligations and duties of citizenship.

The Fourth Annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education will be held at the Hilton Washington Hotel in November 2006.

For information about the congressional conferences on civic education, visit www.representativedemocracy.org. For more information, contact Mark Molli (molli@civiced.org) or Ted McConnell (mcconnell@civiced.org) at the Center.