State officials, legislators, and educational leaders from throughout the country assembled in Washington, D.C., on September 20–22, 2003, for the First Annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education. The conference sessions focused on the current low levels of civic engagement and ways in which quality civic education for young people can help create civically engaged members of society. More than 350 delegates from all 50 states and the District of Columbia participated in the three-day conference, during which they developed strategies to increase the teaching of civics in their states by changing state educational requirements and practices. The delegates left the conference committed to leading aggressive state campaigns to expand and improve civic education in the nation's schools.

This was the first in a series of five planned annual congressional conferences on civic education hosted by the leadership of both Houses of Congress—Senate Majority Leader William Frist, Senate Democratic Leader Tom Daschle, Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, and House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi. The conference was sponsored by the Alliance for Representative Democracy, a collaborative effort of the Center on Congress at Indiana University, the Trust for Representative Democracy of the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the Center for Civic Education. The Alliance for Representative Democracy is funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

The primary participants were delegations from each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. A typical delegation was composed of five to seven members, including a facilitator, two representatives from the legislature (one from each chamber), a chief state school officer or their representative, the governor’s education advisor, and influential individuals from the private sector. In addition to the state delegations, there were approximately 50 representatives of national civic education organizations, national education and civic organizations with state and/or local affiliates, and interested offices of the federal government, including the Department of Education and several legislative offices.

The first day of conference proceedings at the Dirksen Senate Office Building began with remarks by former Congressman and Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University, Lee Hamilton. Delivering his address “What It Means to Be an American Citizen,” Hamilton described the important connection between civic engagement and civic education. Charles Quigley, Executive Director of the Center, followed with a comprehensive statement titled “What Needs to Be Done to Ensure a Proper Civic Education.” Karl Kurtz, Director of the Trust for Representative Democracy at the National Conference of State Legislatures, released the results of a new survey, “Attitudes of Americans Toward Democratic Institutions and Civic Education.” Judge Eric Andell, Deputy Under Secretary of Education of the U.S. Department of Education, and John Bridgeland, Assistant to the
The participants at the First Annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education acknowledge that there is an urgent need to address the low level of civic engagement in America. We recognize that

- Civic knowledge and engagement are essential to maintaining our representative democracy. While many institutions help to develop Americans’ civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, schools must have the capacity to prepare students for engaged citizenship. Civic education should be a central purpose of education essential to the well-being of representative democracy.
- Civic education should be seen as a core subject. Well-defined state standards and curricular requirements are necessary to ensure that civic education is taught effectively at each grade level from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Strengthening the civic mission of schools must be a shared responsibility of the public and private sectors at the community, local, state, and national levels.
- Policies that support quality teacher education and professional development are important to ensure effective classroom instruction and raise student achievement.
- Well-designed classroom programs that foster an understanding of fundamental constitutional principles through methods such as service learning, discussion of current events, or simulations of democratic processes and procedures are essential to civic education.

In recognition of these findings, we resolve to take action to reaffirm the historic civic mission of our schools.
President and Director of USA Freedom Corps, spoke about various activities and initiatives within the administration and expressed support for the goals of the conference.

The conference also featured leading figures in the field discussing four topics: (1) “Civic engagement in the political and civic affairs of the nation—the essential element of representative democracy”; (2) “Ensuring that civic education will be adequately taught in America’s schools: what must be done?”; (3) “The role of professional development in civic education”; and (4) “Lessons learned from successful civic education programs.”

Among the panelists were experts such as Richard Niemi, Professor of Political Science, University of Rochester; William Galston, Director, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, University of Maryland; and state officials, including Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Wisconsin; Richard Moore, State Senator, Massachusetts; Denise Merrill, State Representative, Connecticut; and Doug Hart, State Representative, Michigan.

Conference participants gained a first-hand appreciation of the impact of quality civic education programs by observing two student presentations. Four high school students from Pennsbury High School East in Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania, shared their experiences as participants in the Community Action and Problem Solving (CAPS) program, in which youth identify local environmental issues and create solutions to the problems they discover. CAPS is a program of Earth Force, a non-profit organization that offers service learning, hands-on science, and after-school programs.

A second student presentation by former students of Robert Frost Middle School, Rockville, Maryland, showcased the Center’s We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution middle school hearing. Displaying poise, humor, and a mature understanding of the subject matter, the students responded to a question on voter turnout in the U.S. Judges for this session included conference participants John Patrick, Indiana University; David Rudolph, Maryland House of Delegates; and Jeri Thomson, consultant to Senate Democratic Leader Tom Daschle.

The highlight of the first day was a dinner presentation by former astronaut and Senator John Glenn (Ohio), who acknowledged the importance of the efforts initiated at this conference and commended the participants for their commitment to follow through with their state action plans.

On the second day of the conference, each of the 51 delegations developed its own plan of action for carrying the need for reaffirmation of the civic mission of the schools back to their home states. The Center, as part of its ongoing Campaign to Promote Civic Education, will provide a planning grant for each delegation to
expand into a state coalition to strengthen civic education requirements in their states.

In the concluding session, a representative from each state delegation rose to declare that the state had a plan that they were going home to implement. In addition, the majority of state delegations voiced approval for the conference statement. (See the "Message from the Center" article on p. 2.)

At a closing reception, Senators Tom Daschle (South Dakota) and Lamar Alexander (Tennessee) spoke to the assembled delegates and emphasized the importance of civic education. Senator Daschle said, "The hard and unsung work of training America's children and citizens to be We the People is the work that each of you have undertaken. I applaud you for signing on to be leaders in your own states—to reinvigorate efforts to encourage all of our people to become attentive and active citizens."

The First Annual Congressional Conference on Civic Education ended with delegates prepared to return home to begin the work of advancing civic education in their schools. An example of this commitment is provided by State Representative Pat Farr, a member of the Oregon delegation, who wrote the following in an op-ed piece that appeared in the Register-Guard of Eugene, Oregon: "I hope to boost awareness in Oregon of the importance of involving this generation and future generations of students in what's happening in local, state, and national government. The result will be better decision-making and ultimately better government. A key challenge is that the rhythm of politics is very different from the rhythm of daily life for today's kids. While information in real life is instant, democratic government is a far more deliberative process. If we can teach in a manner that captures kids' attention and fosters patience in the sometimes snail-like pace of government, we can indeed be confident that we will leave our great country to a new generation that will make us even greater."

For information about the conference and each state's plans, visit www.representativedemocracy.org. For more information, contact Mark Molli at the Center's Washington, D.C., office (molli@civiced.org).