



**Response to Proposed Priority and Definitions:  
Secretary's Supplemental Priority and Definitions on Promoting Patriotic Education  
(Docket ID ED-2025-OS-0745)**

The National Academy of Education (NAEd) is pleased to provide this response to the proposed priority and definitions to the U.S. Department of Education for “Secretary's Supplemental Priority and Definitions on Promoting Patriotic Education.” The NAEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that advances high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Founded in 1965, the NAEd has approximately 350 members, including those in the United States and international associates, who are elected on the basis of their leading and trusted scholarship related to education. The NAEd undertakes research studies to address pressing educational issues and administers professional development fellowship programs to enhance the preparation of the next generation of education scholars.

The supplemental priority and definitions call attention to the idea of fostering a shared understanding and conception of American political, economic, intellectual, and cultural history, which is consistent with—and foundational to ensure—the promise of *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one). In order to live up to this foundational ideal, education in the United States must cultivate a sense of national unity while also embracing the rich cultural diversity and heterogeneity of points of view that define the American experience of democratic pluralism.

Recently, the NAEd engaged more than sixty leading interdisciplinary researchers in a peer-reviewed synthesis report, [\*Educating for Civic Reasoning and Discourse\*](#),<sup>1</sup> to identify learning principles and pedagogical practices necessary for effective civic preparation in K-12 public schools. This report does not advocate any particular position with regard to how students think through questions that arise in the public domain. Rather, it highlights the importance of preparing students to engage in civic challenges in ways that value complexity and avoid simplistic answers to complex issues. This report supports the basic democratic values articulated in the founding documents, and it further argues that inclusive curricula that build on students’ diverse lived experiences benefits their academic learning and development.

Drawing from this body of evidence, we highlight the following areas in which the Secretary's supplemental priority and definitions on promoting patriotic education can be improved.

**1. Ensure that students’ understandings of civic, historical, and political traditions are inclusive of the rich cultural histories that comprise American society.**

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<sup>1</sup> Lee, C.D, White, G., & Dong, D. (2021). *Educating for Civic Reasoning and Discourse*. National Academy of Education. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31094/2021/2>.

Throughout the course of its history, the United States has been characterized by high levels of ethnic, racial, religious, and other forms of diversity. Increasing demographic diversity is also seen in today's schools, where no one racial group is in the majority.<sup>2</sup> This demographic reality needs to be represented in order for students to fully and accurately appreciate the rich cultural fabric that comprises the nation and its history.

While knowledge of the influences of Western civilization and related philosophical underpinnings is necessary to understand and contextualize the founding documents, the founding principles, and the system of government of the United States, it is not sufficient. Students need to understand that the influences on American government, culture, and history are complex, sometimes contradictory, and still evolving, especially when it comes to living up to the ideals laid out in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. The proposed priority offers a too narrow focus on Western Civilization while underemphasizing the multiethnic histories and traditions—including Indigenous peoples, African Americans, and immigrant communities from across the globe—that constitute American society and have contributed substantively to the evolution of our system of governance.

The supplemental priority on patriotic education would be strengthened by inclusion of how Americans of all backgrounds have fought to expand civic and political participation and to create a more inclusive vision of democratic citizenship that sustains a pluralist democracy. Ignoring this part of history presents an incomplete picture of this shared understanding. In addition, positioning non-Western civilizations as peripheral marginalizes communities whose stories of patriotic service, sacrifice, and leadership are essential to understanding American democracy, history, and society. Finally, having a more inclusive approach aligns with research on effective teaching of how students learn. When curricula build on students' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds, it fosters greater learner engagement and sense of belonging, the development of deeper conceptual knowledge, and a sense of individual and collective efficacy for civic engagement.<sup>3</sup> Learning about the experiences of other groups also provides the opportunity to enter other worlds, which is essential to developing empathy, perspective taking, and fostering more positive intergroup relationships.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2021–2022, the K–12 public school student population included 54.7% non-white students, comprising 28.4% Hispanic, 14.9% Black, 5.8% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.9% American Indian/Alaska Native (National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). Number and percentage distribution of public elementary and secondary students and schools, by traditional or charter school status and selected characteristics: School years 2011–12 and 2021–22. Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22\\_216.30.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_216.30.asp)).

<sup>3</sup> National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures*. National Academies Press. doi: <https://doi.org/10.17226/24783>. See also, Lee, C.D, White, G., & Dong, D. (2021). *Educating for Civic Reasoning and Discourse*. National Academy of Education. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31094/2021/2>; Nasir, N., Lee, C. D., Pea, R., & McKinney de Royston, M. (2020). *The handbook of the cultural foundations of learning*. Routledge. Dee, T. S., & Penner, E. K. (2017). The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1), 127–166.

While some argue that teaching our students about the challenges to the vision of democracy articulated in our founding documents will lead students to not love America – such as about slavery, the impacts on Indigenous communities in the expansion of the U.S. territory, the impacts of historical antisemitism, historical relationships with our bordering neighbor Mexico, the practices of Eugenics, the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, or that women did not get the right to vote until 1920 – we argue just the opposite. Namely, that it is inspirational that we have a system of governance through which to peacefully challenge and transform these ethical dilemmas in our history. Supporting our students in understanding how we have been able to wrestle with these ethical dilemmas not only gives hope, but helps students to understand their potential as civic actors. Problems do not go away because we ignore them.

Finally, the supplemental priority includes a description of what constitutes American political tradition that includes the phrase “... with a focus on the first principles of the founding, their inclusion in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and their development over time that have shaped America's culture.” The emphasis on “first principles of the founding” is unclear, and we recommend that this phrase be deleted.

## **2. Include a broader emphasis on skills and dispositions for reflective patriotism in civic education.**

The proposed priority defines patriotic education too narrowly. While foundational civic knowledge as well as appreciation for America’s founding traditions and principles are an essential basis for participation in America’s constitutional democracy, reflective patriotism is also a critical part of a healthy democracy.<sup>4</sup> It prepares students to develop the capacity to embrace love for the United States while critically examining how its institutions function, including both successes and failures. This approach prepares students to engage with democratic processes through rational thinking rather than uncritical sentiment. This emphasis on critical thinking is essential as we live in a complex and highly interdependent world. The challenges we face and that our children will face in the future cannot be wrestled with simplistically.

There is a substantial and robust research base on civic education that has accumulated over decades and that the NAEd report *Educating for Civic Reasoning and Discourse* and its accompanying [executive summary](#) synthesized and developed into a set of learning principles and pedagogical practices for effective civic education.<sup>5</sup> While this broader framing includes concepts such as having a sense of shared identity, common purpose, and reflective patriotism, the NAEd report identifies a full range of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are necessary

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<sup>4</sup> Carrese, P. (2023). Civic preparation of American youth: reflective patriotism and our constitutional democracy. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 705(1), 39-52.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162231192166>.

<sup>5</sup> Lee, C.D., White, G., & Dong, D. (Eds.). (2021). *Executive Summary. Educating for Civic Reasoning and Discourse*. Committee on Civic Reasoning and Discourse. Washington, DC: National Academy of Education.

to fully prepare students for their future civic roles. Recent initiatives, such as the bipartisan *Educating for American Democracy*,<sup>6</sup> have produced similar findings.

We recommend that the term civic education replace patriotic education in order to (1) reflect this established knowledge and evidentiary base, and (2) incorporate an emphasis on the skills (e.g., reasoning and discourse skills) as well as dispositions (e.g., perspective taking, valuing complexity) that are necessary for youth to develop and exercise effective civic engagement in a highly diverse democracy such as the in the United States.

In addition, we share the following learning and pedagogical principles excerpted from the executive summary of the NAEd report, which reflect an emphasis on the skills and dispositions that can encourage a sense of unity and diversity that are mutually reinforcing:<sup>7</sup>

**“Attention to self-examination of implicit bias, problems of conceptual change, and weighing multiple points of view.** Civic learning should include a focus on the development of empathy for others, appreciation for multiple points of view, willingness to explore compromises that are informed by democratic values, and awareness of how pre-existing attitudes and emotions can influence perceptions and decision making” (p.4);

**“Education for civic reasoning and discourse should be taught through project-based, inquiry-oriented curricula and practices.** The focus of teaching and instruction for civic learning and discourse should be centered around complex social issues that are meaningful to students based on their interests, home experiences, community involvement, and other contexts beyond the classroom” (p.5);

**“Civic learning should occur in classroom climates that are conducive to student discussion and engagement. Teachers should encourage student voice and engagement by respecting and drawing on diverse student experiences.** Schools and teachers should provide ample opportunities and supportive learning environments to engage students in meaningful discussions of real-world issues” (p.5);

**“All of the core subject areas can contribute to the range of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students need to develop in order to investigate problems that emerge in the public domain.** Complex public issues necessitate the interrogation of knowledge from across content areas. Building on the vital role of social studies, other core subject areas also offer deep learning opportunities for students to value complexity, examine multiple points of view, empathize with others, engage in ethical reasoning, analyze evidence, and examine the reliability of sources of information” (p.5); and

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<sup>6</sup> Educating for American Democracy (EAD). (2021). Educating for American democracy: Excellence in history and civics for all learners. Available from <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org>.

<sup>7</sup> Banks, J. A. (2004). (Ed.) *Diversity and citizenship education: Global perspectives*. Jossey-Bass.

Finally, **“learning to engage in civic reasoning and discourse should explicitly include strategies to help students gather, analyze, and thoughtfully circulate information in digital and other media,** including identifying and combating misinformation.” (p. 5)

Promoting a more expansive view of civic education outlined in this response will encourage students to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for engaged citizenship, complex problem-solving, and deliberative reasoning—skills essential for addressing contemporary democratic challenges. Public schools should foster deliberative norms where students can develop a shared understanding of political and cultural traditions, safely present and respectfully understand multiple perspectives, and independently examine sources and evidence. This type of comprehensive civic education will help foster productive and informed discourse, strengthen students' capacity to navigate disagreements thoughtfully, and ensure that our multi-ethnic democracy in the United States will not only survive but thrive.