

The world as we know it changed dramatically at 8:47 a.m. on September 11, 2001. Since that crisp, clear day, when terrorists hijacked four commercial jetliners and killed thousands of innocent people, national and international politics have not been the same. Those dreadful events taught us about the cruelty and lethality of modern terrorism and forced us as educators to revise many of our assumptions about teaching U.S. citizenship and global issues. In the wake of September 11, U.S. education has begun to absorb seven important lessons.

1. It's OK to be patriotic.

For the past generation, our schools have disdained the teaching of patriotism. The Vietnam War, which ended in 1975, gave patriotism a bad name, especially on campus. The student movement of that era was angry and sometimes bitterly disillusioned with the United States because of the war; many of its former leaders became college professors. Eventually their hostility toward patriotism began to permeate the schools.

In response to the unprecedented attacks of September 11, however, the American public rallied around the flag, which is a symbol of our unity and our freedoms, and expressed a renewed love of country. Americans hung flags on their homes and cars and sang "God Bless America" to express solidarity with one another and with our nation's ideals.

This was an appropriate response to an unprecedented attack on our nation. With all of its faults, the United States is still a great land of freedom and opportunity. Just as we want children to feel pride in themselves, in their family, and in their local community, we want them to feel a sense of attachment to the nation that sustains our freedoms and rights.

2. Not all cultures share our regard for equality and human rights.

Since the late 1960s, U.S. education has embraced the dogma of cultural relativism—the belief that cultures are "different" from one another, but no culture is better or worse than any other. In the aftermath of September 11, we need to recognize that some cultures are actually barbarous when compared to our standards of equality, freedom, and human rights.

Although we have been loath to teach it, there are cultures in which political opponents and minorities are ruthlessly slaughtered, religious freedom is unknown, women are oppressed, schools teach hatred of differences, and punishments for minor infractions are inhumane. There are even societies today that still practice slavery. We should not tell our students that our nation's commitment to due process and the rule of law is no better than the practices of societies that abuse fundamental human rights.

3. We must now recognize the presence of evil in the world.

Part of our postmodern view of the world has required us as educators to assert that good and evil are old-fashioned terms and somehow obsolete. We have now seen acts of wanton evil, akin to what earlier generations saw perpetrated by the Nazis and Communists. What's more, this evil occurred in full view, broadcast live on national television. We watched as a small group of fanatics with a warped agenda slaughtered thousands of men and women—people of different nationalities, races, and religions—in the space of a few hours. Those who commit such acts are evil; those who stand for norms of civilized behavior based on the rule of law are good. We must acknowledge and teach the differences between them.

4. Pluralism and divergence of opinion are valuable.

What we have learned about the cultures that produced terrorism should make us appreciate the importance of pluralism and tolerance in our own society. We protect disagreement and debate; at a certain point, we resolve disputes by a democratic election or by the verdict of a jury of our peers. The people who lose elections are free to continue arguing and to run again; they are not shot or jailed for having different opinions. By the same token, we recognize that our schools serve as frontline democratic institutions, where students learn to discuss, debate, and respect differences of opinion. Even the lone dissenter has the right to have his or her voice heard.

5. Knowledge of United States history is important.

Some modern pedagogues maintain that knowledge—"mere facts"—is unimportant because there is so much of it, and it keeps changing and increasing all the time. These detractors compare teaching knowledge to pouring stuff into a child's head, an obviously abhorrent idea.

We can now say with some assurance, in the light of our present situation, that U.S. students need a solid grounding of knowledge about the history of the United States. They need to understand the origins and meaning of the U.S. Constitution, and they need to learn about the issues and events that shaped our institutions. Of course, students must learn to think critically, but the best way to do that is to think about real issues and problems in history, to see the causal connections among sequential events, and to understand how people have responded to crisis and conflict. One can't think critically about political and social issues in the absence of knowledge.

6. Knowledge of world history and geography is important.

The population of the United States comes from virtually every other nation in the world. As we learn about the rest of the world, we deepen our knowledge of the ways we are alike and the ways we are different from others.

Today, instant communications and rapid transportation connect the nations of the world, yet in some ways the differences among civilizations and nations seem as stark as ever. Just as we must know ourselves, we must also learn about others, seeing them as they see themselves but also seeing them through our own eyes.

We learn about others because knowledge of the world is good in itself; the sheer joy of learning, even about ancient civilizations that have disappeared, is reason enough for study. But we also learn about other nations because we can no longer afford to live in ignorance of others. As a nation, we are deeply involved in the economic, political, and social events that occur beyond our borders; we must know enough about them to act intelligently in the world, whether that means collaborating with others, helping others, defending ourselves, or minding our own business.

7. We must teach students to appreciate and defend our democratic institutions.

By now we understand that the freedoms we cherish are not a gift of nature. People in many other nations do not enjoy the right to speak freely, the right to disagree with government officials, the right to practice their religion without hindrance, the right to live where they choose, the right to vote in a multiparty election, and the right to form and join private organizations. Although we have seen a major expansion of democracy in the past dozen years, democratic rights and freedoms still do not exist in large portions of the world.

The way of life that we sometimes take for granted has evolved in the United States and other nations over many generations. It was not easily achieved. Others have died so that we could live free. The public reacted to September 11 so intensely because people realized that the ideas and institutions that we admire were under assault; the public understood immediately that this was no trivial challenge. It was indeed a challenge to the fundamentals of American liberal democracy.

As educators, we have a responsibility to the public, to the children in our schools, and to the future. The public expects the schools to equip students with the tools to carry on our democracy and to improve it. The public invests in education as a way of investing in a better society. Polls show that parents and the public want students to understand the fundamental processes of our system of government and to have a basic understanding of U.S. history and of its heroic leading figures. When state or national history standards neglect to mention George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, or Thomas Jefferson, a predictable public outcry ensues. It is not that people engage in blind hero worship, but that they understand that if these key figures are left out, the schools are probably not teaching U.S. history—at least not in ways that the public comprehends or values.

In light of what we have learned (or should have learned) since September 11, what should we teach our children about citizenship? Are they citizens of the United States, or citizens of the world?

The question answers itself. One can only be a citizen in that entity where one has representation, where one votes, where one is prepared to accept the responsibilities of sharing burdens with others (such as taxes, jury duty, and military service). Because there is no world government, no organization that conducts elections and maintains institutions, nobody can realistically be a citizen of the world except in a metaphorical sense.

And so our job as educators remains the same as it has been for many years: to prepare the students in our charge to sustain our democratic institutions and ideals. The religious and state authorities in some societies today use the schools to teach intolerance. In our society, by contrast, we expect our schools to teach basic democratic, tolerant, pluralist values, while helping students to develop good character. The U.S. public supports public education, both to provide equality of opportunity and to prepare our young people to protect and preserve our experiment in democratic living. As long as our schools act on that vision, we will count them among the institutions of democracy that are worthy of the public's respect and gratitude.