During the last two years, the Center on Education Policy, the National PTA, and Phi Delta Kappa sponsored forums to discuss public schools in more than 60 local communities. At these meetings, participants often cited two essential purposes of public education. First, people want public schools to prepare students adequately for jobs or for postsecondary education. Second, people want schools to teach children to be good citizens.

Little attention has been given to that second purpose in the national debate about the effectiveness of public schools. Participants in our local forums have reminded us to look at both purposes of schooling—preparation for further education and employment and preparation for citizenship.

In the national debate, assertions have often been made that private schools can do a better job of educating children than public schools. Private schools can indeed offer a good education to some children, but public schools by their nature are better able both to educate most children and help them become good citizens. In fact, American democracy depends on public education achieving both purposes.

Historically, schools have prepared students to be good citizens in four ways:

1. teaching students about the role of government in the United States;
2. upholding civic values by teaching students to be good citizens and good neighbors;
3. equipping students with the civic skills they need to be effective participants in a representative democracy; and
4. promoting tolerance and respect for diverse peoples and different points of view.

Civic Education

The first facet of preparing good citizens is to teach students how American government functions. Through the courses they take, students learn the history of the United States, the concepts and operation of our political system, and the fundamental principles and values upon which our system of government is based. Students also learn how our government and political system compare with those of other nations. Through their course-work, and by the examples of
People want schools to teach children to be good citizens.

To do this we must teach them how American government functions and prepare them for their roles in a democracy.

Teachers, principals, and other school officials, students learn what it takes to be good citizens.

**Civic Character**

Historically, one of the missions of American public schools has been to instill moral virtues in students that would help to make them good neighbors and good citizens. The early public schools (or “common schools” as they were known in the mid-1800’s) used great literature— including religious writings, hero tales, and fables to instruct youth in moral behavior. While private religious schools have maintained their commitment to moral instruction, character education became less prominent in public schools during the 1960’s and 1970’s. But today, public schools are returning to promoting civic values among students by using stories that illustrate good character and encouraging teachers, principals, and other adults to interact with each other and with students in ways that reflect good civic character. Many public schools are also establishing rules for student conduct that promote such virtues as civility, individual responsibility, respect for the rights of others, respect for the law, open-mindedness, and tolerance—behavior that all citizens should possess in a democratic society.

**Skills for Democracy**

The survival of a representative democracy like the United States ultimately depends on having a large group of well-educated citizens who will participate responsibly in political and public life. Thus, a third facet of creating good citizens is to prepare students for their role in a democracy. Educated citizens have many important responsibilities in a representative democracy. They select able leaders, understand the issues upon which they will vote, act as a check on the potential excesses of the government, recognize corruption in leaders and take appropriate action, and are not swayed by those who would undermine our democracy. Representative government also demands well-educated citizens who are willing to serve as civic and political leaders of their community, city, state, or nation.

In this process, public schools have a particularly vital role which is not equaled by private education. Public schools are mandated in all state constitutions and are required to educate all children—rich, poor, middle income, immigrant, native-born, those with disabilities. Furthermore, all children are required to attend school. Nearly 90% of all children in America are educated in public schools (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistic, Digest of Education Statistics 1997).

Moreover, because public schools must educate “all who come,” they offer all young people the opportunity to build their citizenship skills and thereby they help to ensure that our voters and leaders will come from all walks of life.

Students also learn about the functioning of a representative democracy through the schools themselves. Students can hone their participatory skills by serving on student councils or by running for class and student-body offices. Teachers often teach students about participatory democracy by allowing students to vote on issues that affect the classroom, work in teams, or lead class discussions. The nature of
public schools gives students a unique opportunity to observe and participate in the democratic process first hand by following school board elections, or attending public meetings. Parents and other adults who volunteer in the schools or serve on school committees are other common examples of the how the community is involved in making decisions about public schools.

Harmony and a More Perfect Union

A fourth, and often overlooked, facet of the citizenship role of public schools is to create harmony among a nation of diverse peoples. Attending public schools is one of the few experiences that people of different backgrounds share. In public schools, students are taught tolerance and respect for other races, ethnic groups, and religions, as well as for children with disabilities who usually receive their education in the regular classroom. In public schools with diverse student populations, students have the opportunity to learn and respect different points of view, to disagree amicably, and to reach livable compromises. In other words, public schools are the places where we all learn to get along with one another. Admittedly, not all public schools are meeting this ideal. Some schools are racially segregated. In other more integrated schools, students may self-segregate into like peer groups. But, in general, students in public schools have more exposure to different kinds of students than do students in private schools. For example, in school year 1993-94, nearly a third of children enrolled in public schools were racial or ethnic minorities, but only about a fifth of private school students were minorities. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing in the United States: A Statistical Profile 1993-94)

This role of public schools in creating social harmony is becoming more essential as the nation becomes more heterogeneous, particularly due to recent immigration. In 1997, 73% of the U.S. population was White, 11% Hispanic, 12% Black, and 4% Asian. By 2050, the population is projected to be 53% White, 25% Hispanic, 14% Black, and 8% Asian. (The Washington Post, “One Nation Indivisible: Is It History,” William Booth, February 22, 1998.) The United States was faced with similar major social challenges in the past, most notably the massive waves of immigration during the early decades of the 20th century. These immigrants had to be assimilated into American society, and public schools were a critical means of creating a common culture and teaching democratic virtues. We ignore this history at our peril.

Without public schools, children would most likely today attend schools that reflected their own racial, ethnic, religious, or economic background, much as in churches, social organizations, and other groups people join voluntarily. Without a common institution like the public schools that bring people together and promote tolerance and understanding, the nation would become more divided and people more fearful of those different from themselves. For example, some of the charter schools now being created are geared toward educating a particular ethnic group. In Michigan, one African-centered charter school starts the day with a pledge to “my African nation,” while another charter school that was formerly an
Armenian church school continues to enroll mostly children of Armenian descent. (U.S. News and World Report, April 27, 1998). While such schools can make positive contributions by focusing on cultures that may be overlooked in mainstream America, where do we draw the line? How many groups will seek their own schools, promoting their own cultures, and isolating their children from those with different backgrounds?

**Conclusion**

It is natural for parents, policy-makers, business leaders, and other adults to care whether public schools are doing a good job of preparing students for work or college. But in the process, all of us must also remember that public schools play a key role in maintaining our democracy. Public schools are uniquely positioned to provide an education to all children, to equip students with the skills they need to participate in a democracy, and to be an instrument of harmony in our society.

Public schools have been and continue to be one of the most important institutions for maintaining our freedoms and democracy. The vast majority of Americans—both leaders and ordinary citizens—are products of the public schools. The country’s economic success, the nation’s military prowess, and our influence throughout the world have been forged mainly by graduates of public schools. Without public schools, our nation would become more divided and less devoted to the democratic process, and the nation’s leaders would be less representative of all segments of the U.S. population.

It would be the ultimate irony of modern history if America should dissolve the unifying glue of public education and splinter along ethnic and religious lines just at the time that many of the world’s emerging democracies are looking to the United States and its institutions as role models for building their nations.