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# Every Student A Citizen: Creating the Democratic Self

Educational Commission of the States

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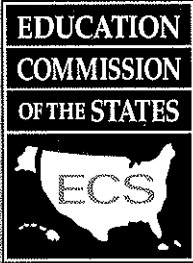
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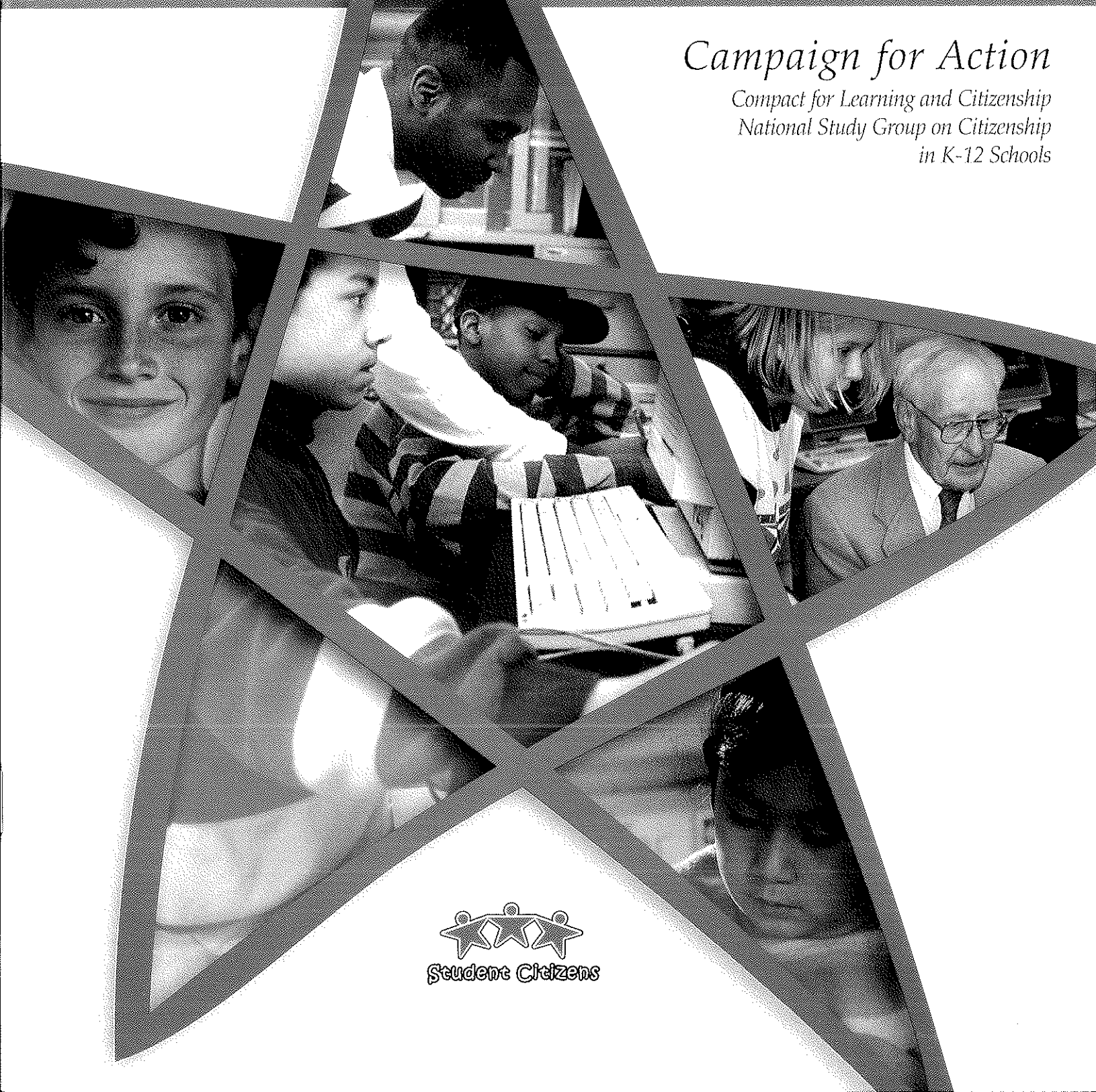




*Every Student A Citizen:  
Creating the Democratic Self*  
**Executive Summary**

*Campaign for Action*

*Compact for Learning and Citizenship  
National Study Group on Citizenship  
in K-12 Schools*



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



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## EVERY STUDENT A CITIZEN: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite 50 years of scientific and technological achievement, unabated wealth creation and gains in health, transportation, medicine, manufacturing and a host of other fields, a sense of "dis-ease" gnaws at the collective American soul. Something feels wrong.

A big part of that "something" is a deepening sense of civic disconnection. Many Americans are disengaging from fragmenting social structures that no longer address their real needs. They are repelled by cultural changes such as high divorce rates and explicit sex and gratuitous violence in films. Many feel overlooked and betrayed by governments that seem beyond the reach of ordinary citizens or captive to special interests.

At the same time, more and more Americans seem to be disengaging from even the most fundamental acts of citizenship, such as voting and keeping informed about public issues. These disconnects emerge in sharper, more painful relief among the nation's youth.

Young people today get mixed moral messages at every turn. Adults encourage them to delay personal satisfactions to pursue higher education, a better job or similar lofty aims, yet surround them with the temptations of a consumerist culture that entices them to "Just Do It!" and a media culture that promises instant gratification of frivolous desires – at no personal cost.

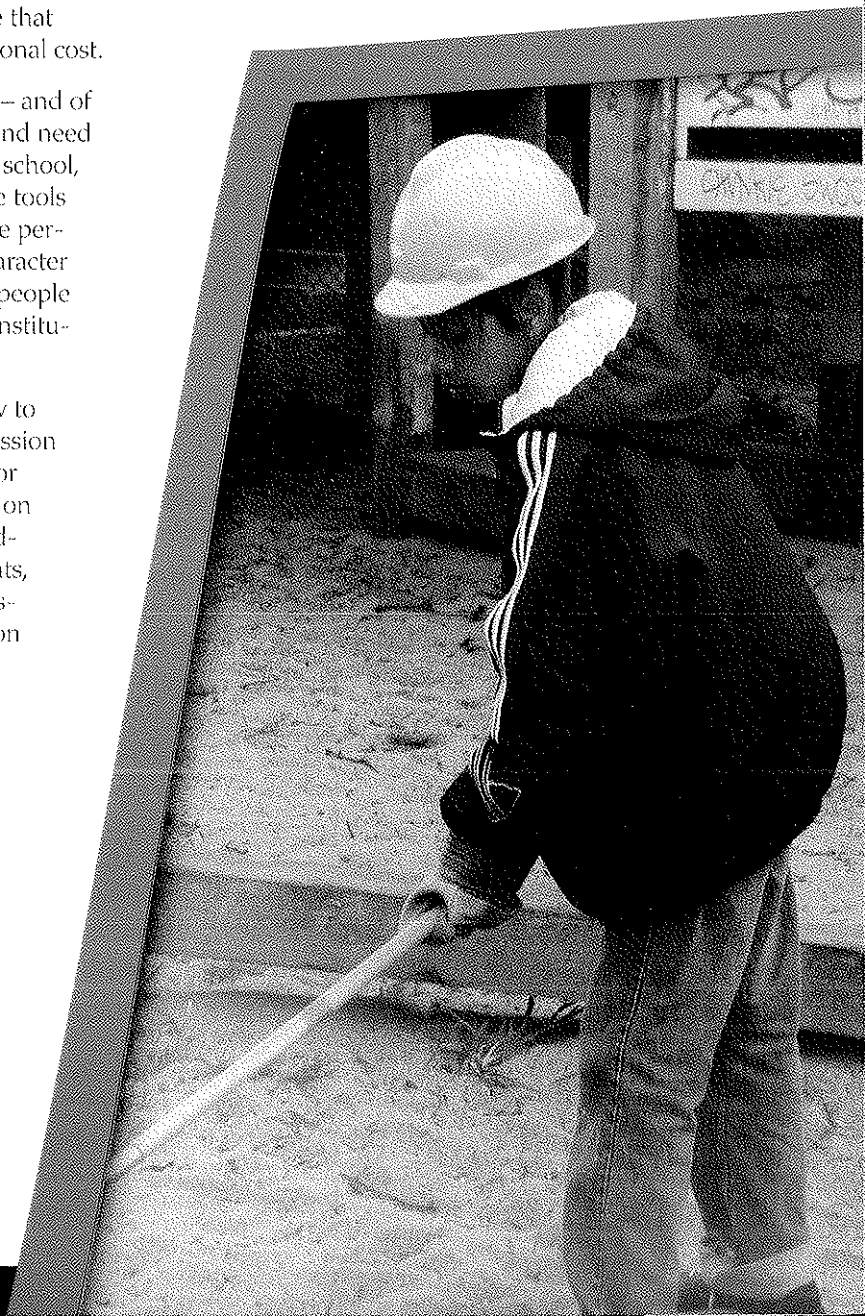
These mixed messages are eroding the soul of young people – and of American society. Young Americans and the schools they attend need an invitation to something better and higher. The purpose of school, after all, is not merely to provide the next generation with the tools they need to make a living, but also to help them discover the personal and collective means – the perspectives, strength of character and values – they will need to sustain our civilization. Young people need help in moving toward a higher regard for democratic institutions and a greater willingness to be involved in them.

To examine these issues and make recommendations on how to end this trend of declining citizenship, the Education Commission of the States' (ECS) service-learning initiative, the Compact for Learning and Citizenship, created the National Study Group on Citizenship in K-12 Schools. The 21-member group — including K-12 teachers and students, university faculty and students, representatives from national education associations, administrators of national civic education organizations, and education and service-learning consultants — focused on the goal of ECS' Every Student A Citizen initiative – *to engage all students in active citizenship and help education leaders meet schools' academic and civic missions.*

Implementation efforts for the *Every Student A Citizen* initiative focus on activities and services designed to achieve three goals:

- Articulate the pressing need to revitalize education's civic and citizenship mission
- Advance service-learning as a strategy that can challenge and guide students to meet their civic responsibilities
- Engage every student in activities that make a difference in their schools and communities.

4/10/98



National Study Group members were convened for a short time to focus on the specific issue of youth disengagement from civic literacy and experience. The group researched the evidence and existing efforts, surveyed potential solutions, answered questions and advanced the conversation, advocating for service-learning and contributing to this final report and call for action.

A secondary group of governors, lieutenant governors, writers, educators, foundation executives, chief state school officers, students and civic experts served as national responders. They read, reacted and responded to an initial draft of this report, the recommendations and call to action, and the components necessary to launch a national campaign to encourage and help young people be good citizens.

This report summarizes the deliberations of these people and their recommendations for moving forward in better educating students for citizenship.



### *Creating a Democratic Self*

Education for citizenship is not the same as civic education, which is concerned with academic skills such as how a bill becomes a law, although it includes acquiring civic skills and knowledge. Rather, education for citizenship is a moral enterprise. It is concerned with organizing schools in ways that give students opportunities to learn about citizenship and its importance, and acquire the needed skills and knowledge associated with it. It is based on the belief that it is just as important for young people to acquire a “democratic self” or a “civic self-understanding” as it is to gain specific civic skills.

The National Study Group sees two components in building this democratic self. First is the ability to recognize and acknowledge one’s self-worth and self-interest in collective decisions, that is, to identify one’s personal stake in public deliberation and decisionmaking. Students who lack a realistic self-understanding of their education situation cannot, for example, see the connection between a school board decision, what will happen to them in class and what they can do about that decision.

Second, it is important that young people see themselves as members of a public — a community. Without such an understanding, young citizens have no sense of what the common good is or their part in achieving it. They have to learn to recognize that a community is no mere aggregate of individuals, but rather a group of people who belong to one another because they share both a heritage and a hope.

Beyond these elements, being an effective citizen also means acquiring an education in civic skills that nourishes the ability and willingness to make judgments about what is best for the whole. These judgments are rooted in such principles as fairness, beneficence, self-denial, liberty, loyalty, honesty and a commitment to the greater good. A strong capacity for critical judgment and reflection, the ability to conduct critical inquiries about facts and decisions, and the ability to participate in public deliberations impartially and objectively are all significant and necessary civic skills.

In addition, the process of creating new citizens involves the ability to be inclusive, respecting the heritages, diversity and interests of others; to be comprehensive, seeking to understand others’ views; to be deliberative, willing to engage in mutual give and take without rancor; and to be cooperative, continuing to participate when things do not go their way.

Acquiring such civic skills is not a matter of teaching techniques or routines, or of creating an education “program” that will deliver civic knowledge and skills as one would teach a chemistry student the procedures for conducting an experiment safely. Participating responsibly and effectively in community life is more like a “craft,” an art form that uses people’s needs, rights and responsibilities as basic materials to create a common world. In such an understanding, the citizen (regardless of age) becomes a co-creator of his or her own environment. The institutions



and processes among which he or she lives can be re-envisioned as realities to be fashioned, rather than as givens to be accommodated. This way of looking at the results of education for citizenship leads to ownership – a stake. It is learned through practice, not out of a book.

### *Investing in Students Through Service-Learning*

The National Study Group is convinced that a curriculum that uses service-learning<sup>1</sup> as an integrating force, combining needed service to the community with strong academic content and structured exercises of reflection in the classroom, can provide this education for citizenship that youth need to become civically engaged in their communities. Schools are charged with serving the universal function of teaching all young people the knowledge, skills and attitudes that nourish all forms of civic engagement.

Too many schools, however, are caught up in the "reform mill," busily working to improve but forgetting that education is not about academics alone. As public policy in general has moved toward deregulation, leaner bureaucracies, and the privatization of social services and education, important considerations have been left out of the education reform discussion: the social and civic aims of education, and a concern for social justice, caring, inclusiveness and participation. Education for citizenship – through service-learning — is a serious approach to bridging this gap.

Observation and evaluation of schools that are civically engaged and work to instill principles of citizenship in their students show that the most successful are guided by what might be called "principles of best practice." A democratically engaged school:

- Is guided by an understanding of how democracy and community engagement relate to its mission
- Involves its stakeholders (teachers, administrators, staff, parents, students and community members) in a continuous and authentic way
- Holds learning at its center, including building strong partnerships with communities to develop democratic values, knowledge, skills, efficacy and commitment among its students
- Has a pervasive commitment to democracy
- Develops an infrastructure that supports the complex nature of democratic and community engagement
- Is a "full-use" institution, serving a variety of community needs
- Is flexible, responsive and sensitive to its external constituencies and promotes a culture of democracy.

<sup>1</sup> *Service-learning, as defined by the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, helps students or participants learn and develop by participating in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community; is coordinated with an elementary or secondary school, institution of higher education or community service program, and with the community; helps to foster civic responsibility; is integrated into and enhances students' academic curriculum or the education components of the community service program in which participants are enrolled; provides structured time for students or other participants to reflect on the service experience.*



## THE RECOMMENDATIONS

To begin to remedy the potentially dangerous lack of citizenship knowledge, skills and attitude among young people, the National Study Group recommends action at the local, state and national levels. It also recommends steps ECS should take and encourages schools, districts, states, students, parents and communities to find their own responses and avenues of action, to explore other ways to become involved in this critical call for civic action.

The recommendations that follow are ones policymakers, classroom teachers, school administrators, communities, parents and students can begin to act on today. They entail little mystery, are inexpensive to implement (most, in fact, are free) and highly leveraged. For the most part, since they reflect long-established beliefs, they scarcely require a change of heart. What they do require is a generous dose of political will and the leadership to create changes.



*For Schools and School Districts, the National Study Group Recommends:*

- Reassess the moral and democratic environment to learn what principles are taught deliberately, by inadvertent example or in the "hidden curriculum" of structures, procedures, decisionmaking, attitudes and behaviors.
- Align policies and their implementation with a coherent moral structure valued by all personnel.
- Implement programs of community outreach to involve community groups in creating democratic learning environments in all schools, giving careful consideration to restructuring measures that make it possible for students to participate in decisionmaking activities and governance.
- Institute regular school visits and presentations by locally elected and appointed officials and state legislators to provide a venue for discussing local political issues, especially those related to education.
- With the assistance of national, local and regional teacher-training institutions, design and offer a full complement of professional development courses that integrate all aspects of civic knowledge, skills and attitudes throughout the curriculum. These offerings should be predicated on a service-learning model and other experiential activities, using the local community as a classroom.
- Include, to the extent practicable, PTA and PTO members as students in these courses along with teachers to strengthen parents' status as their children's role models for civic involvement and commitment.
- Create on local school boards at least two student positions with full expression and participation in all decisionmaking activities and governance.
- Include in social studies, civics and government courses, stories and lessons that teach the traditions of how ordinary citizens have created real and lasting social change.
- Reconstitute PTAs and PTOs as Parent, Teacher, Student Associations/Organizations, according student members the same rights and responsibilities as adult members.
- Provide students opportunities to work individually or in groups on service-learning activities in their schools or community.
- Work with governments, regulatory bodies and authorities, and officials to create internship positions designed as service-learning opportunities for youth.



★ *For States, the National Study Group Recommends:*

- *Governors:* Provide forums to educate state legislators, members of state school boards, state chapters of professional education associations, state teacher organizations and unions, school principals and district superintendents about the importance of including civic education in the core K-12 curriculum. Focus these efforts on experiential learning, especially service-learning, as the gateway to education for citizenship.
- *State school boards:* Create at least two student positions with full student expression and participation in all decisionmaking activities and governance.
- *Legislators:*
  - Regularly visit local schools to explain roles and responsibilities
  - Establish student internship positions in legislative offices
  - Fund K-12 efforts that incorporate multi-dimensional curricula aimed at fostering civic responsibility, the development of civic skills and civic education, including funds for professional development of teachers and community outreach.

★ *For the National Level, the National Study Group Recommends:*

- *U.S. Department of Education:* Through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, promote and support civic education programs that engage students in service-learning activities.
- *National Goals Panel, Corporation for National Service and U.S. Department of Education:* Work together to assess the country's progress in the citizenship part of Goal 3 of Goals 2000: Student Achievement and Citizenship.
- *National Alliance for Civic Education:* Establish a national dialogue among organizations working on these issues, focused on how to engage young people in political action.
- *Corporation for National Service:* Rewrite guidelines to require that all Learn and Serve America programs for students K-12 and higher focus on fostering civic responsibility, the development of civic dispositions, and the knowledge and participatory skills of responsible citizenship.





★ For ECS

To begin to carry out the above recommendations, the National Study Group recommends that ECS, through the Compact for Learning and Citizenship, take the lead in helping state and local policymakers – governors, legislators, chiefs and superintendents – do the following:

- Assess the state of citizenship education in their schools
- Develop policies and plans for improving creation of the democratic self among their students
- Become part of the national campaign to implement the National Study Group's recommendations.

The study group and ECS believe furthering these efforts will require a three- to five-year period. Activities suggested for ECS include the following:

- *Dissemination and Communications*

Disseminate the *Every Student A Citizen* report to national, state and local audiences, such as policymakers, education officials, discipline-based organizations and parent groups, through a variety of means, including Web sites, meetings and work with the media. ECS believes it is critical for this report to be broadly disseminated, followed by targeted communication with various audiences.

- *Networking*

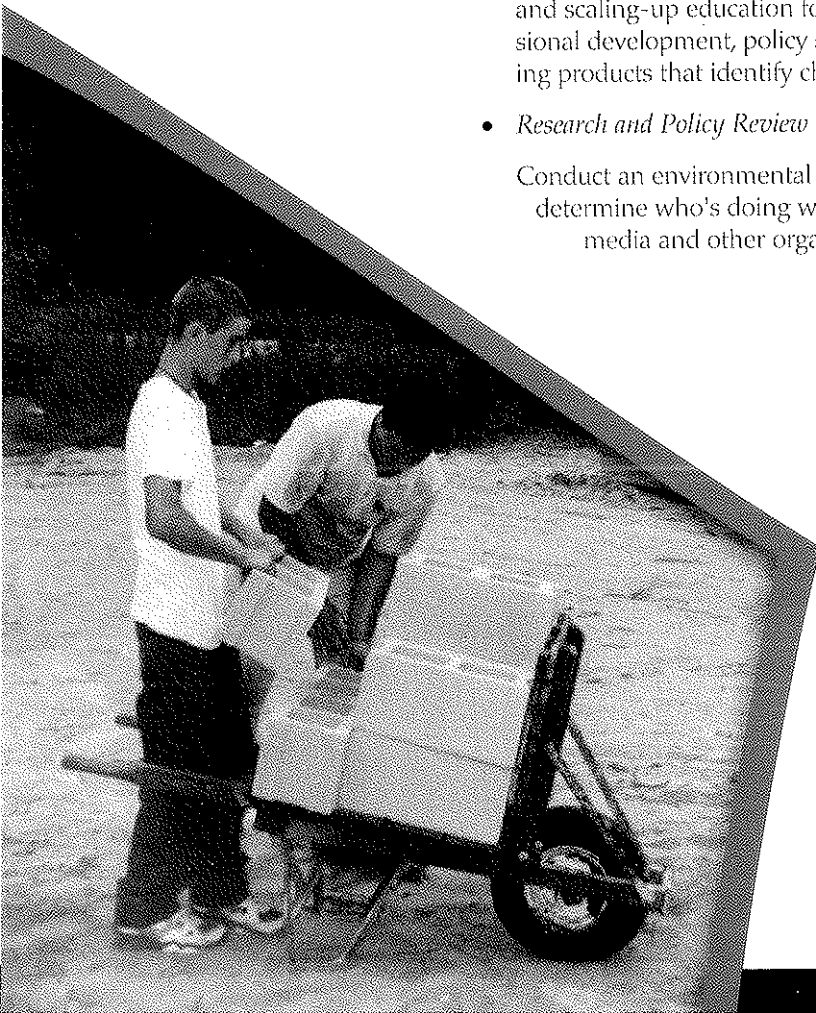
Develop partnerships with various national organizations and coalitions to promote implementation of the recommendations among their members.

- *Demonstration Project*

Design a strategy that engages a targeted number of states, districts and schools in infusing and scaling-up education for citizenship. The focus would be on such elements as professional development, policy support, partnerships, sharing of promising practices, and creating products that identify challenges and successful strategies.

- *Research and Policy Review*

Conduct an environmental scan of the existing research on civic and citizenship education to determine who's doing what on this issue and how it is being framed and covered by the media and other organizations.



## CONCLUSION

The turn of the century and the millennium marked more than an event on the calendar. Many Americans sense the nation is at a turning point for the experiment in democracy. Many citizens feel a historic opportunity is within their grasp – to educate and empower the rising generation to become active and responsible citizens. Schools, policymakers, citizens – everyone – need to work together to ignite the imagination of America’s youth, reinvigorate the vision of the Founding Fathers, and adapt it to the incredible social, technological, environmental and economic challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Indeed, this *can* be done if youth are helped to create a democratic self – in their communities, in their schools and in their own lives. To that end, teachers, parents, policymakers and school administrators, together with students, must resolve to place civic responsibility and service itself at the core of learning.

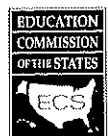
This pursuit of the democratic self through education for citizenship is well-informed by the observation of writer Neil Postman in *The End of Education*. He wrote:

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*“...public education does not serve a public. It creates a public. And in creating the right kind of public, the schools contribute to strengthening the spiritual basis of the American creed...The question is not ‘Does or doesn’t public school create a public?’ The question is, ‘What kind of public does it create?’”*

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If we do nothing to improve how students are educated for citizenship, we give up the ability to set the terms for the future of our children and, in the end, the nation. The opposite of doing nothing about citizenship education is not stasis. It is to concede that the disconnect Americans now experience as a problem inevitably will be a permanent condition. The decision to default is one the nation cannot afford.



## GETTING INVOLVED

Creating the democratic self is everyone's responsibility. The recommendations and national campaign described in this report identify specific action steps and responsibilities for all stakeholders to provide high-quality opportunities for America's youth to reach their greatest civic potential.

Many of the recommendations can be implemented by maximizing current partnerships and/or creating new collaborations. To get involved, check out the *Every Student A Citizen* initiative of the Compact for Learning and Citizenship section of the Education Commission of the States Web site ([www.ecs.org/clc](http://www.ecs.org/clc)), or contact Terry Pickeral, project director, [tpickeral@ecs.org](mailto:tpickeral@ecs.org).



The Compact for Learning and Citizenship (CLC) provides K-12 school leaders, legislators and other education stakeholders with resources, profiles and strategies to integrate service-learning through practice and policy. District superintendents and chief state school officers are invited to join. The CLC Web site ([www.ecs.org/clc](http://www.ecs.org/clc)) also provides links to other organizations, clearinghouses and resources. Contact Terry Pickeral, project director, 303-299-3636 or [tpickeral@ecs.org](mailto:tpickeral@ecs.org), or Lou A. Myers, project coordinator, 303-299-3644 or [lmyers@ecs.org](mailto:lmyers@ecs.org).

To download this report, *Every Student A Citizen: Creating the Democratic Self*, or its executive summary, please go to the ECS Web site – [www.ecs.org/clc](http://www.ecs.org/clc).

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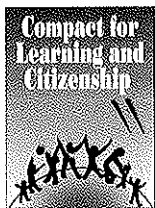
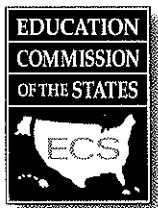
The Education Commission of the States is a nonprofit, nationwide interstate organization that helps governors, legislators, state education officials and others identify, develop and implement public policies to improve student learning at all levels. It is ECS policy to take affirmative action to prevent discrimination in its policies, programs and employment practices.

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