



American Identity Project



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Teaching Students What it Means to Be an American





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Richard D. Kahlenberg is Director of the American Identity Project at the Progressive Policy Institute. He is the author or editor of 19 books, including *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles Over Schools, Unions, Race and Democracy* (2007) and *Class Matters: The Fight to Get Beyond Race Preferences, Reduce Inequality, and Build Real Diversity at America's Colleges* (forthcoming, March 2025.)

TEACHING STUDENTS WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN AMERICAN

As America grapples with growing attacks on democratic values and increasing racial divides, public schools offer a crucial opportunity for a better path forward. To counter rising illiberalism, foundations, and researchers push for sensible reforms such as more civics instruction and accountability, but the more profound challenge lies in shaping a shared American identity.

In his biography of teacher union leader Albert Shanker, Richard Kahlenberg highlights a story told by former Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander. A group of education leaders were stymied when asked a basic question about why America has public schools. Shanker provided a provocative answer: “To teach children what it means to be an American.” Shanker believed that beyond literacy and job skills, public schools must instill shared democratic values to ensure the survival of America’s unique experiment in self-governance. Without this common foundation, Shanker warned, the nation risked fracturing into isolated factions.

Today, a quarter-century after Shanker’s death, America is more divided, and its commitment to common democratic principles is weaker. White identity politics from the right threatens this unity, and left-wing identity politics, though often well-meaning, can also erode what binds Americans together. There is an urgent need to celebrate legitimate racial, ethnic, and religious identities while strengthening the shared democratic values that unite us.

To address these challenges, the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) has launched the American

Identity Project, led by Kahlenberg, that asks: “What does it mean to be an American today?” In a highly polarized country, what precisely are the best ideas and values that bind together what author Heather McGee calls a nation of “ancestral strangers”? In addition, once those American values are identified, what are the best ways to instill them in school children? What exactly should the public schools be doing to teach a common American identity that inculcates a deep and healthy sense of reflective patriotism?

The project will promote a balanced approach to American history that acknowledges past injustices while highlighting democracy’s capacity for self-correction. It will avoid the politically motivated and slanted histories generated by the far left and far right. It will reject the dystopian vision of the 1619 Project, which frames the country’s founding around the importation of enslaved people, and the gross inaccuracies of Trump’s 1776 Commission, which absurdly mischaracterizes progressivism as a threat to American values.

To foster an appreciation for liberal democracy, the project aims to teach students the consequences of living in systems that don’t protect freedoms and emphasize the unique principles that have made America resilient. The project will examine how public schools can bolster a common American identity centered around the values in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution that counters both right-wing white identity politics (that sees only white Christians as “real Americans”) and left-wing essentialism (that sees a person’s race, ethnicity, gender, and religion as far more critical than what citizens have in common as Americans.)

PROJECT INITIATIVES:

Reports

The core of the project will be the publication of a series of PPI reports on how public education can help strengthen American identity, and, thereby, bolster liberal democracy. The project's opening 48-page report, "Teaching Students What it Means to Be an American" (July 2024), outlined nine important policy areas to be developed in a series of forthcoming reports. Reports will provide context and highlight positive exemplars of the following promising ideas:

1. Policymakers should provide more time, resources, and accountability for students to learn their civic inheritance and shared American history. In a nation whose federal government spends 1,000 times more money on STEM education than civics, it's important to place greater emphasis on sustaining American democracy.
2. Schools should spend more time teaching what it is like to live in nondemocratic countries, where there is no right to free speech or to criticize the government. Doing so could inspire the enhanced American patriotism found among immigrant groups, who know from first-hand experience the comparative blessings of American liberty.
3. Schools should teach an honest and hopeful account of American history, which frankly recounts America's sins but also the ways in which liberal democratic norms made redemption possible. Most Americans support a middle path between faddish efforts that denigrate America at every turn and the jingoistic approaches employed in some red states.

4. Schools and colleges should completely overhaul Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), and Ethnic Studies programs. At their best, these approaches can uplift students of color. But today, they too often demonize other groups. They must be reinvented from the ground up to remove grossly inaccurate and insulting race essentialist thinking.

5. Schools and colleges should teach what is distinctive and exceptional about America, its culture, and its literature. Students should ask: if a foreign country invaded America, what monuments and artifacts would be most important to try to preserve because they go to the essence of what it means to be an American?

6. Forging social cohesion is much easier when schools are integrated by race and class than when they are segregated. Policymakers should support efforts to voluntarily integrate schools through public school choice and housing policy rather than compulsory busing.

7. Community service programs in school and national service programs after high school can instill in young people a sense of purpose and patriotism. They also have the potential to bridge divides between Americans of different races and economic groups, and programs should be consciously structured to capture that unifying possibility.

8. Schools and colleges should do a better job of teaching students the art of civil discourse. Programs and practices should be established to allow for robust freedom of speech and thought while preserving a sense of community.

9. The federal government can support these various policies without trying to impose mandates. For example, a race to the top program could sustain promising practices in history, civics education, school integration, and community service.

Media Engagement

PPI will place op-eds and articles in major outlets, expanding the reach of these ideas beyond policy circles. These pieces will distill the core messages of the reports and offer concrete steps for education reform. The opening report, for example, was summarized in a [shorter article](#) in Ruy Teixeira's *The Liberal Patriot*. PPI will seek to place op-eds in outlets where the Project Director has written in the past, including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Atlantic*, *Slate*, and *Washington Monthly*.

Podcasts

PPI will produce a series of podcast discussions with experts, educators, and policymakers, exploring what it means to be an American and how best to teach these values to the next generation.

Book Publication

For the ideas in the report to receive the maximum circulation, the reports will form the basis of a book with a powerful narrative drive. The book will make ideas come alive by telling the story of the American credo and highlighting the individual schools and colleges that are doing an exemplary job of teaching students what it means to be an American today. The book will generate reviews and lead to podcast appearances and forums to bring attention to the central ideas advanced by the American Identity project.

Outreach to Key Constituencies

The project will engage key groups such as politicians, Jewish organizations, teacher unions, business leaders, veterans, and immigrant organizations — each with a vested interest in building a more robust American identity. PPI will engage in outreach to the following:

- 1.** Enlightened left-of-center politicians who would like to create a durable majority and know that having ideas associating themselves with patriotism the way JFK and FDR did could be an essential path forward. Governor Wes Moore, who is pushing a Service Year in Maryland, exemplifies this approach.
- 2.** Jewish groups which are rightly terrified of rising antisemitism and know that teaching the American creed is a powerful safeguard against Jew hatred. Fern Oppenheim (Brand Israel Group), David Bernstein (Jewish Institute for Liberal Values), and Eran Shayshon (Atchalta) note in a June 2024 [article](#) in *e-Jewish Philanthropy* (EJP), “We believe the best defense against antisemitism is restoring the commitment of Americans to the nation’s founding principles under which American Jews and other minorities have thrived.”
- 3.** Enlightened teacher union leaders, who are horrified by considerable strides in school privatization in the last couple of years and recognize that if the system of public education is going to survive, it must move away from race essentialism. Because the teacher unions have the most political muscle of all the education groups, they are also the key to moving teachers and schools to a better vision of teaching history

and government that can help preserve public education. The Project Director has written about teaching American identity in the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)'s Albert Shanker Institute [blog](#).

4. Business leaders who have a strong interest in preserving rule-bound democratic capitalism, especially if Donald Trump wins the 2024 presidential election when the rule of law is likely to come under greater stress.

5. Veterans Groups who know the importance of building a cohesive American identity. They have fought for these values, sometimes at great personal sacrifice, and recognize that declining patriotism is making it harder for the military to recruit an all-volunteer fighting force.

6. Enlightened immigrant organizations that are interested in uplifting the fact that immigrants are particularly patriotic. While the project also recognizes that borders have moral significance and citizens owe more to one another than to people from other countries, enlightened immigrant groups recognize that in order to fight off white xenophobia, they need to emphasize the ways immigrants treasure America.

Lever for Change

By working with state policymakers, school boards, and teacher education programs, the project aims to reshape civics and history education to emphasize shared American values. PPI will work with the following groups:

1. Policymakers, mainly at the state level, who shape state history and civics standards. In doing so, PPI will rely on its extensive contacts with

state policymakers. PPI will also reach out to federal policymakers who can support states and localities seeking a better job teaching the American civic creed.

2. School boards and teacher unions, which help shape curriculum. The National School Boards Association, which is looking to preserve public education, will be a target for outreach on building a curriculum with broader public support than some of the narrow race-essentialist programs in vogue today. Teacher unions also have an influence on curriculum, not only via influence over school boards but also through programs such as the AFT's "share my lesson plan" directed at teachers. In reaching out to teacher unions, PPI will rely on the project director's strong relationship with the AFT and President Randi Weingarten, going back two decades.

3. Teacher education schools, which train teachers. As the opening PPI report makes clear, teacher education schools are a big part of the problem today because they often emphasize racial and ethnic identities rather than a shared American identity. Teacher education schools are important because state standards and even school board curricula may be disregarded once teachers close their classroom doors. PPI will work through teacher union officials to connect with education schools.

WHY PPI?

PPI and its director in this effort, Richard Kahlenberg, are well equipped to execute the American Identity Project and have a long track record of success. PPI has a strong history of supporting international efforts to promote liberal

democratic values globally through such organizations as the National Endowment for Democracy. This record on democracy issues abroad gives PPI strong credibility in efforts to strengthen democracy at home.

PPI also has a proud history of promoting national service, a signature issue for New Democrats. In the 1980s, PPI and its sister organization, the Democratic Leadership Council, laid the groundwork for President Bill Clinton's landmark legislation establishing AmeriCorps. Publications, including *Citizenship and National Service: A Blueprint for Civic Enterprise* (1988); *The New Progressive Declaration: A Political Philosophy for the Information Age* (1996), and *The AmericaCorps Experiment and the Future of National Service* (ed. Will Marshall and Marc Porter Magee, 2005), have championed service programs as a means for advancing opportunity, social cohesion, and patriotism. The American Identity project builds on that long tradition.

PPI has strong relationships with policymakers, including members of the National Governors Association. Unlike some other think tanks, PPI has a track record of moving ideas into policy. The best examples over the years include creating public charter schools, emphasizing work over welfare, community policing, and reinventing government.

Forging national identity, by its very nature, requires building bridges across Americans with different ideological outlooks. PPI has a very long history of doing so. While proudly embracing pragmatic liberalism, PPI has long sought common ground with conservatives on a large number of issues, from housing policy to welfare reform.

Richard D. Kahlenberg, Director of the American Identity Project at PPI, will lead the work on teaching students what it means to be an American. His track record of making a difference in education policy generally — and his substantive background on issues of racial identity and civics education specifically — is strong.

Kahlenberg has been a thought leader on education issues for three decades. The author or editor of 19 books has been labeled “the intellectual father of the economic integration movement” in K–12 schooling. He has also been called “arguably the nation’s chief proponent of class-based affirmative action in higher education admissions.”

Kahlenberg has helped bring about change on both issues. In K-12 education, the number of school districts and charter schools that considered socioeconomic status as a factor in school assignment to forge greater social mobility and social cohesion has grown enormously — from two districts educating 30,000 students in 1996 to 171 districts and charter schools, educating 4 million students in 2020. In the higher education arena, the *New York Times* noted his impact on the way colleges are approaching affirmative action in a new legal environment: “He is the guy who is the big theorist of alternatives to affirmative action. ... A lot of people are really intrigued by what he is proposing and a lot of people really support it.”

Kahlenberg also has a track record in bringing attention to his ideas and has written numerous articles for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Atlantic*, *The Economist*, *Slate*, *New Republic*, and *Washington Monthly*.

As project director, Kahlenberg will bring a strong background in identity politics, civics, and American identity issues. He spent several years researching *Tough Liberal*, a biography of teacher union leader Albert Shanker, who championed teaching American identity and a love of liberal democracy. Kahlenberg has also written several books on civil rights, racial identity, and finding ways to bring students of different races together to see what they have in common. For almost a decade, he has been thinking and writing about civics education, most notably in an [extensive report](#) and [an accompanying Atlantic article](#) with former D.C. schools superintendent Clifford Janey.

Finally, Kahlenberg, like PPI, can build bridges across political divides. He has done so on charter schools, affirmative action, and housing policy issues. And on the issue of civics education, he has forged common ground with such disparate groups as the American Federation of Teachers (he is a board member of the AFT's Albert Shanker Institute) and the Fordham Foundation (which is sponsoring a [forum](#) featuring his recent report on Teaching Students What It Means to Be an American.)

INVESTING FOR IMPACT

The American Identity project seeks to strengthen liberal democracy in America, reduce racial polarization, and strengthen a common American identity by helping to shape how students are taught civics, American history, and the value of

free speech at the K-12 and collegiate levels.

The reports, related articles in national media, and podcasts will seek to influence the thinking of several vital actors who are in positions of power to help bring about change:

- State policymakers who can shape education standards;
- School boards, who can shape curriculum;
- Education schools that can shape the way teachers approach issues of racial, ethnic, and American identity, civics, and history;
- Several key constituency groups (outlined above) who can influence state policymakers, school boards, and education schools, such as teacher unions, Jewish groups fighting antisemitism, business leaders, veterans, and immigrant groups.

Ultimately, if the project can have an effect on crucial constituency groups and policymakers and improve the way schoolchildren are taught civics, history, and the American credo, it could do a small part in advancing the much larger projects of strengthening public schools, fighting white nationalism and antisemitism, reducing racial polarization, nourishing reflective patriotism, and sustaining liberal democracy,

Each generation needs to be taught democratic values anew to know what defines them as Americans. Among the towering issues of our time, few are as important as this one.



The Progressive Policy Institute is a catalyst for policy innovation and political reform based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock.

Founded in 1989, PPI started as the intellectual home of the New Democrats and earned a reputation as President Bill Clinton's "idea mill." Many of its mold-breaking ideas have been translated into public policy and law and have influenced international efforts to modernize progressive politics.

Today, PPI is developing fresh proposals for stimulating U.S. economic innovation and growth; equipping all Americans with the skills and assets that social mobility in the knowledge economy requires; modernizing an overly bureaucratic and centralized public sector; and defending liberal democracy in a dangerous world.

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