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 20 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* (2025)

TEACHING STUDENTS WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN AMERICAN

Today, America is facing four profound and interrelated challenges:

- Social cohesion is eroding on both sides of the political spectrum. Right-wing white nationalists see some citizens as more American than others and have poisoned the discourse by labeling opponents as enemies, while left-wing race essentialists undermine what we have in common as Americans.

- Historically, our civic creed has provided the glue that unifies Americans of diverse backgrounds, yet today, young Americans report much less faith in America and in democracy than older Americans.

- America's founders believed education was the safeguard of democracy. Yet our schools have fallen short, as many Americans have demonstrated a troubling tolerance for political leaders who defy long-standing liberal democratic norms.

- Paradoxically, figures who show autocratic tendencies are sometimes seen by Americans as particularly patriotic, underlining the need for those who stand firmly for democracy to embrace a proud American identity.

> "It is fashionable in some elite circles to denigrate patriotism, but a deep belief in American ideals has fueled much of the progress in this country, from advances in civil rights to those for women. If our schools do not instill a healthy love of our country's highest aspirations, we are greatly diminished as a people."
>
> **Advisory Board Co-Chair David Brooks**

As America grapples with these difficulties, schools and universities offer a crucial opportunity for a better path forward. To counter rising illiberalism, foundations and researchers have pushed for sensible reforms such as enhanced civics instruction and accountability. The more profound challenge, however, lies in shaping a shared American identity.

In his biography of teacher union leader Albert Shanker (1928-1997), Richard Kahlenberg highlights a story told by former Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander. A group of education leaders was 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. Because American national identity does not derive from a particular ethnic heritage, he said, the nation's civic creed is the only thing holding us together. Today, almost three decades after Shanker's death, America is increasingly divided, and its commitment to common democratic principles has grown weaker.

To address these challenges, the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) has launched the American Identity Project, directed by Kahlenberg and guided by a stellar advisory group of prominent Americans, that asks: "As our nation celebrates its 250th birthday, what does it mean to be an American today?" In a highly polarized country, what precisely are the best ideas and aspirational 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 and colleges be doing to teach a common American identity that inculcates a deep and healthy sense of what Alexis de Tocqueville called "reflective patriotism" that encourages debate about how to live up to the country's lofty ideals rather than blind loyalty to the nation?

"In 1872, Sen. Carl Schurz, declared: 'My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right.' To my mind, this is the core of the patriotism to which our young people should subscribe."

Advisory Board Co-Chair William Galston

"A nation cannot endure if its children are taught to loathe it. In a time of deep division and democratic backsliding, we must instill in the next generation not only a critical understanding of our history, but a proud sense of what it means to be an American. The American Identity Project is essential to renewing our civic spirit and strengthening the democratic values that hold us together."

Advisory Board Member Ritchie Torres

"At a time of great national division that only seems to be getting wider, it's enormously important that our public schools teach our young people a common American identity. That's good policy, good politics, and is truly what makes America great. It's time for those of us alarmed by Donald Trump to recapture the mantle of patriotism."

Advisory Board Member Doug Jones

GUIDING BELIEFS

The American Identity Project is guided by 10 central beliefs, which, taken together, constitute "An Education Plan to Strengthen Democracy and Social Cohesion."

1. In order to strengthen American democracy and bolster the common aspirational values that hold our society together, 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 on civics, it's important to place greater emphasis on sustaining American democracy.

2. Classes in American civics need to make clear to students that the ideas behind the Founders' commitment to liberty and political equality have antecedents that came centuries before 1776. Students must come to understand the philosophical foundations that undergirded the Founders' decisions to construct the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution in the way they did. These same principles supported the efforts of later generations of civil rights leaders to widen the circle of those who benefit from America's efforts to facilitate human flourishing.

3. Because almost one-third of young Americans say "democracy is no longer a viable system" and Americans "should explore alternative forms of government," 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.

4. Schools and colleges should teach an honest and hopeful account of American history – one that frankly recounts how America has throughout its history failed to live up to its liberal democratic ideals but also shows how those very ideals make progress and redemption possible. Most Americans support a middle path between faddish efforts that denigrate America at every turn and the jingoistic approaches employed in some states.

5. Schools and colleges should recognize diversity as a strength, but also affirm universal human values, uphold the ideal of merit, and dismantle the worst elements of diversity, equity, and inclusion bureaucracies and programs that neatly divide the world into the oppressed and the oppressors and employ divisive and insulting race essentialist thinking.

6. 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?

7. Because forging social cohesion and teaching democratic values is much easier when schools and colleges 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 and colleges through legally permitted race-neutral strategies.

8. Because community service programs in elementary and secondary schools and national service programs after high school can instill in young people a sense of purpose and patriotism, and also can bridge divides between Americans of different races and economic groups, voluntary service programs should be scaled to become a civic rite of passage.

9. Because vigorous debate and efforts to persuade fellow citizens are critical to a vibrant democracy, 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.

10. The federal government, through the courts and other branches of government, has a fundamental obligation to protect the civil rights and civil liberties found in the Constitution. Federal policymakers can also play an important role in supporting states and localities in strengthening democracy and social cohesion for the next generation without imposing mandates. A federal race to the top program, for example, could sustain promising practices in history, civics education, integration of schools and colleges, and community service.

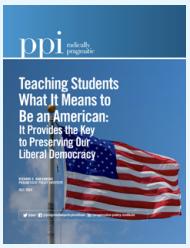
"My identity as a Black person, a Texan, and a gay man are all important to me, but my most cherished identity is that of being an American. It's critical that our students learn the shared values that bind us together across lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, region, and ideology."

Advisory Board Member Darren Walker

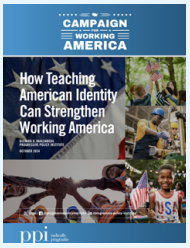
WHAT THE AMERICAN IDENTITY PROJECT HAS ACCOMPLISHED TO DATE

Since the American Identity Project was launched in 2024, PPI has produced a number of reports and webinars laying out the intellectual infrastructure of the effort.

REPORTS



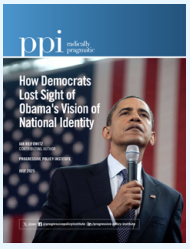
Richard D. Kahlenberg, "Teaching Students What it Means to Be an American" (July 2024) *(48 pages)*



Richard D. Kahlenberg, "How Teaching American Identity Can Strengthen Working America" (October 2024) *(10 pages)*



Richard D. Kahlenberg, "A Way Out of the DEI Wars" (February 2025) *(33 pages)*



Ian Reifowitz, "How Democrats Have Lost Sight of Obama's Vision of American National Identity" (July 2025) *(14 pages)*



Richard D. Kahlenberg and Ruy Teixeira, "Bobby Kennedy, Liberal Patriot" (American Enterprise Institute, July 2025) *(111 pages)*



Richard D. Kahlenberg and Lief Lin, "The Distortion of American Studies: How the Field's Leading Journal Embraced a Worldview as Slanted as Donald Trump's" (January 2026) *(74 pages)*



Richard D. Kahlenberg and Aidan Shannon, "The Rise of Economic Affirmative Action: Universities are Finding New and Better Paths to Diversity," (March 2026) *(29 pages)*



Richard D. Kahlenberg and Colin Mortimer, "What it Means to Be an American Today: Voices of a New Generation (CNL Essay Contest Winners)." (May 2026) *(15 pages)*



American Identity Project Advisory Group, "Toward a New Birth of Patriotism." *(June 2026) (6 pages)*



Richard D. Kahlenberg and Lief Lin, "Teaching American Democracy: Understanding Who We Are as Americans and Why," *(September 2026) (30 pages)*

WEBINARS AND PUBLIC FORUMS:



"Teaching Students What It Means to Be an American," Fordham Institute (October 10, 2024)



"National Service, AmeriCorps and the Future of Education" PPI and The 74 (June 25, 2025)



"Teaching Students Common Democratic Values in a Divided America," PPI and The 74 (November 13, 2024)



"What Robert F. Kennedy's Liberal Patriotism Could Teach Political Leaders Today," PPI and the American Enterprise Institute (September 29, 2025)



"A Better Way to Promote Campus Diversity" PPI, Bellwether, and The 74 (April 9, 2025)



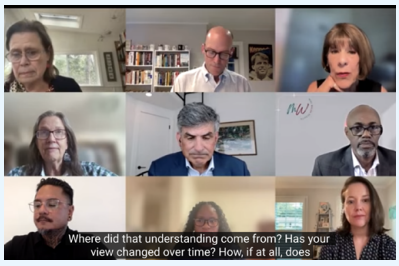
"Getting Beyond the DEI Wars," PPI and The 74 (November 13, 2025)



"Charters at a Crossroads: Navigating the Future of Public Education in an Era of Legal Change," PPI and The 74 (May 7, 2025)



"How Should Educators Teach America's Story?" PPI and The 74 (April 22, 2026)



"What Place Does Patriotism Have in the Schools?" Courageous Conversations and Better Angles (August 17, 2026)

MEDIA ATTENTION



Richard D. Kahlenberg and Ruy Teixeira,
"Democrats Have A Patriotism Problem Here's How to Fix It."
The Free Press
(November 19, 2025)



Richard D. Kahlenberg with Sen. Barbara Boxer, Katy Tur Report on
Democrats' Patriotism Problem,
MS NOW
(November 24, 2025)



Richard D. Kahlenberg and Lief Lin,
"American Studies Can't Stand Its Subject,"
Wall Street Journal
(January 22, 2026)



Douglas Belkin,
"American-Studies Journal Articles Biased Against U.S., Analysis Says,"
Wall Street Journal
(January 22, 2026)



Richard D. Kahlenberg,
"To Combat Antisemitism, Strengthen American Identity,"
Jewish Philanthropy
(April 10, 2026)



Rep. Don Beyer, Rep. Ritchie Torres, David Brooks, William Galston, , Linda Chavez, Johnny Taylor, Will Marshall. Laura Meckler, and Richard Kahlenberg
"Working Toward a New Era of Patriotism and Democratic Renewal,"
C-SPAN
(June 11, 2026)



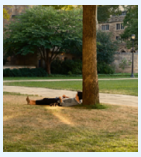
Richard D. Kahlenberg,
"How the Culture War Put Public Schools at Risk: Allegations about 'woke nonsense' imperiled a crucial source of Americans' common identity."
The Atlantic
(September 30, 2026)

MEDIA ATTENTION



Richard D. Kahlenberg, "Teaching Students What It Means to Be an American," *The Liberal Patriot* (July 3, 2024)

Richard D. Kahlenberg, "Time to Ditch DEI in Favor of Something Better," *The Liberal Patriot* (March 5, 2025)



James Traub, "Affirmative Action Is Gone. Can Class-Based Admissions Replace It? Richard D. Kahlenberg has long argued for colleges to weigh socioeconomic status to promote diversity. His position is more relevant than ever," *New York Times* (March 24, 2025)



Richard D. Kahlenberg, "Inside the Fight to Revive American Civics," *Washington Monthly* (January 15, 2026)



Editorial, "The Civic Future of America's Past," *Christian Science Monitor* (January 27, 2026)



Len Gutkin, "Does American Studies Have a Credibility Problem: A new report calls the field out for its racial politics," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 30, 2026)



Paul E. Peterson, "Top Academic Journal Sees American Through a Glass Darkly," *Education Next* (March 16, 2026)



Rick Hess, "How to Teach What It Means to Be American," *Education Week* (March 27, 2026)

Richard D. Kahlenberg, Timothy K. Minella, Jon A. Shields and Rick Hess, "How Higher Education's Ideological Tilt Matters for Teaching and Research," American Enterprise Institute, (April 16, 2026)

MEDIA ATTENTION



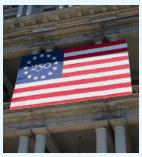
Richard D. Kahlenberg, "The Democrats Can't Let Go of Racial Preferences: How to Persuade Skeptical Voters to Take a Fresh Look at the Party," *The Atlantic* (May 13, 2026)



William A. Galston and Linda Chavez, "Toward a New Birth of Patriotism," *Democracy Journal* (June 11, 2026)



Richard D. Kahlenberg, James Traub, Robert Pondiscio and Louise Dube, "K-12 Civics Education on the Eve of America's 250th Anniversary," *American Enterprise Institute,* (June 11, 2026)



Ashley Murray, "Get Ready for the Semiquincentennial: Americans Celebrate a 250th Anniversary," *News From the States*, (June 24, 2026)



Richard D. Kahlenberg and Lief Lin, "What's Wrong with American Studies? The field's leading figures have no real response to the findings of bias," *Radically Pragmatic* Substack, Progressive Policy Institute (July 28, 2026)



Matthew Shea, "New report warns civics education fueling crisis in antisemitism, eroding support for Israel," *Jewish Insider* (September 10, 2026)



Richard D. Kahlenberg and Lief Lin, "Time to Teach Three Years of High School Civics," *Washington Monthly* (October 9, 2026)

LEVERS FOR CHANGE

The American Identity Project has three high-level objectives: to (1) strengthen American democracy; (2) enhance the nation's social cohesion; and (3) fortify the political attractiveness of supporting liberal democratic norms.

There are many ways to go about furthering progress toward these objectives, but one important way to do so is to develop and promote policies to shape how young people are educated about American identity and America's civic creed. This education occurs in civics courses, American history classes, and American literature courses at the K-12 and higher education levels, and in service programs outside of school.

In order to help shape the education of students, PPI is well-positioned to employ four primary levers of change. PPI will reach out to:

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

2. ***School boards, parent groups, 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 important influence on curriculum, not only via their sway over school boards but also through programs such as the AFT's "Share My Lesson Plan" directed at teachers. Although some teachers unions have played an unproductive role by embracing curricula that emphasize racial difference over a shared American identity, PPI is well-positioned to open a new dialogue on this issue. In reaching out to teacher unions, PPI will rely on the project director's strong relationship teachers unions, going back two decades.

3. ***Teacher education schools, which train teachers.*** 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 and others to connect with education schools.

4. ***Policymakers at the federal level, who can support states and localities seeking to do a better job teaching the American civic creed.*** Federal resources, for example, can encourage school integration, national service, and other important programs.

WHAT THE AMERICAN IDENTITY PROJECT WILL DO:

Advisory Board Debates at Colleges
In June 2026, PPI's American Identity Project Advisory Board, co-chaired by David Brooks and William Galston, published a statement, "Toward a New Birth of Patriotism," which recognizes that large numbers of young people express skepticism about America and our system of democracy and offers a better path forward. Building on the release of the statement at the National Press Club, a forum which was covered by C-SPAN, PPI plans to take the statement on the road and sponsor campus debates between Advisory Board members and professors who take different views of patriotism. PPI will sponsor these discussions at 10 elite American college campuses where skepticism of the American story runs particularly high. These forums will build in ample time for student involvement and engagement.

A Campaign to Improve Civics and American History Standards Reform in 5 States
According to a Fordham Institute report analyzing state standards, nearly half of states deserve grades of D or F in either American history, civics, or both. Some blue states lack strong standards in academic content, while some red states lack strong standards in hands-on civics learning. The Progressive Policy Institute will work with its network of policymakers to target 5 states where there could be an appetite to create a new set of American history and civics standards that emphasize both academic content and building the practical civic muscles of students. The goal will be for students to come away with what Alexis de Tocqueville called a "reflective patriotism," in which they take pride in their country's highest aspirations.

Anti-Americanism, Antisemitism, and the Formation of America's Future Leaders
In an op-ed in E-Jewish Philanthropy, PPI articulated the ways in which far-left academic theories can promote anti-American and antisemitic views in students. These theories view disparities in the success of countries and ethnic groups as invariably the result of discrimination. And rather than seeing conflicts between nations as a struggle between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes, these theories draw a simplistic dividing line between the powerful, who are viewed as oppressors, and others, whose lack of power deems those societies with special moral worth. Curiously, these theories appear to have taken strongest root in very wealthy institutions, such as fancy private high schools and elite colleges. PPI proposes to conduct a study, coauthored with a center-right organization, to explore the connection between anti-American and antisemitic attitudes at elite private high schools that disproportionately feed into America's leadership class.

PPI plans a parallel study to investigate the relationship between skepticism of America and antisemitism at elite colleges. This study will build off of PPI's analysis of attitudes documented in its report, "The Distortion of American Studies" and a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, "American Studies Can't Stand Its Subject." PPI's research found that the American Studies Association's flagship journal contained no

positive articles about America over a three year period and that the Association was virulently critical of the Middle East's sole liberal democracy, Israel. Research documenting connections between anti-American and antisemitic teaching on campuses is crucial because evidence suggests what happens on college campuses can have a profound impact on the broader American culture and American politics.

Time to Go Big on National Service

Almost 40 years ago, under the leadership of Will Marshall, PPI incubated a grand effort to make national service a civic rite of passage for young people. That thinking led to President Bill Clinton's AmeriCorps program, which has provided critical opportunities for young Americans to serve their country, but the program remains much smaller in scope that its founders intended. Today, the case for going big on national is even more compelling than in the 1980s. Our politics is broken and partisanship has skyrocketed. The faith of young people in democracy and in the American experiment has plummeted. And young Americans face tough economic challenges from the rise of artificial intelligence.

PPI proposes to launch a campaign of reports and national conversations to elevate the issue of national service. Working with other organizations that have been doing important work in this arena, PPI hopes to make national service a major issue for both Democrats and Republicans in the 2028 presidential campaign, laying the groundwork for a new birth of patriotism in the next administration.

Public Opinion Research

PPI regularly commissions polling and focus group research on a variety of issues. PPI will probe to understand some key puzzles. To take two examples:

- In a 2023 YouGov poll, 31% of youth ages 18-29 agreed that "Democracy is no longer a viable system, and Americans should explore alternative forms of government," (compared to only 5% of those over 65). PPI would like to commission research digging deeper into what is *behind* the skepticism of substantial numbers of young people toward liberal democracy. Through focus group and survey research, we think it's important to know: When young people say they don't believe in democracy, what precisely do they mean? Are they really attracted to nondemocratic forms of government, or are they just generally frustrated because they believe democracy has failed to deliver for them, because they cannot afford a home, and are having trouble moving up the economic ladder? Is the skepticism about liberal democracy concentrated among right-leaning Trump supporters who think a strongman is necessary to get things done? Is cynicism most deeply felt by left-leaning youth who see American constitutional democracy as favoring the interests of wealthy white people? Is democracy skepticism driven by some combination of the two? How does the suspicion of liberal democratic norms break down by race, gender, education, and family income levels?

- Likewise, how can we better understand why a party led by a president who violates democratic norms is seen as the more

patriotic option by a 19-point margin among working-class voters?

AI and American Values

Artificial intelligence models invariably embody value systems. Ask a question of the Chinese model, DeepSeek, and you will likely receive a very different answer from the one provided by Google's Gemini model or SpaceXSI's Grok model. These values matter because University of Washington research finds that AI models have "persuasive powers" that can alter an individual's initial instincts. PPI, whose team includes individuals with strong expertise in AI, proposes to conduct research and sponsor discussions with AI companies about how AI can be imbued with American values, including a commitment to reflective American patriotism, freedom, free enterprise, the dignity of all work, majority rule with minority rights, equal opportunity, dignity of the individual, optimism, the rule of law, and a rebellious spirit.

Discussions With Young People on What It Means to Be an American Today

In 2026, PPI sponsored an essay contest for young Americans about the contemporary meaning of being an American. The contest was held in conjunction with PPI's sister organization, the Center for New Liberalism (CNL), which has dozens of chapters of young people across the country. The three winning essays were published in a May 2026 report, "What it Means to Be an American Today." PPI and CNL plan to take these essays to between 10 and 20 local CNL chapters to generate debate and discussion among young people.

PPI Reports

The core of the project is the publication of a series of 10 PPI reports (7 of which remain to be written) on how public education can help strengthen American identity and thereby bolster liberal democracy and advance the ten guiding beliefs and policy ideas outlined above.

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. PPI will seek to place op-eds in outlets where the Project Director and members of the advisory board have written in the past, including the *New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Atlantic, Slate,* and *Washington Monthly.*

Podcasts and Webinars

PPI will produce a series of podcasts and webinar 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.

Forums

PPI will hold in-person forums on Capitol Hill and in selected states and localities to help influence the thinking of policymakers on how schools and colleges can forge a shared American identity around the American civic creed. PPI's extraordinary group of advisory board members provides a remarkable pool of intellectual firepower to draw upon for these discussions.

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.

Engagement with Policymakers and Others on "An Education Plan to Strengthen Democracy and Social Cohesion"

The project will engage with current policymakers and those running for federal, state, and local office to endorse the American Identity Project's 10 policy ideas and guiding beliefs (outlined above) that constitute "An Education Plan to Strengthen Democracy and Social Cohesion." Many Americans support these ideas and beliefs. For example, polling has found that most Americans want students to learn a balanced history — to be taught about slavery and segregation, but also to be taught about America's triumphs and the ways in which democracy allows for self-correction.

Interest group pressure, however, can push politicians toward one extreme or the other. By providing a platform for strengthening American identity and reflective patriotism, the project can support those who would like to be able to look beyond interest group demands and create a durable majority behind a defense of liberal democratic norms. Historically, political leaders from FDR to JFK to Ronald Reagan understood the importance of appealing to a generous spirit of patriotism. Today, Governor Wes Moore, who is pushing a Service Year in Maryland, exemplifies this approach.

As attention grows for the ideas in the American Identity Project, PPI will reach out to individual school district leaders and charter school leaders, and university leaders to see whether they wish to sign on to the Education Plan and put them into practice in their own ways. (The Chicago Principles related to free speech in colleges provide an example of the impact such a document can have.)

Outreach to Nine Key Constituencies on "An Education Plan to Strengthen Democracy and Social Cohesion"

The project will engage key groups such as Jewish organizations, teacher unions, business leaders, veterans, immigrant organizations, and young people — each with a vested interest in building a more robust American identity. These groups could also endorse the statement of beliefs for strengthening American Identity and encourage policymakers to support associated policies. PPI will engage in outreach to the following:

1. Jewish groups, which are understandably alarmed by 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."

2. Civil rights groups that understand that the greatest strides for civil rights have occurred when the mistreatment of racial and ethnic minorities is tied to the violation of the American Creed. Leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., understood that the cause of

civil rights was most likely to advance when the movement's leaders hoisted American flags and tied their cause to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, while opponents embraced the Confederate flag.

3. Enlightened teacher union leaders, at the local, state, and national levels, 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. To be sure, some teacher union leaders have unfortunately been at the forefront of pushing a divisive race essentialist ideology and are unlikely in the short term to support the principles of the American Identity Project. However, a subset of union leaders, recognizing evidence that private school vouchers have become politically appealing because public schools are seen as culturally out of touch, are likely to view moderation as a political necessity. 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. Sophisticated university leaders who recognize that higher education has been greatly weakened, substantively and politically, by sustaining a left-wing monoculture where students shout down speakers, and viewpoint diversity is lacking. This effort won't be easy. A number of college leaders have abdicated their responsibility in recent decades by imposing ideological litmus tests in hiring and allowing illiberal practices and indoctrination of students to fester on campuses. However, there is now a political opening. The appalling reaction of some professors and students after Hamas's October 7 massacre of Israeli civilians has opened the eyes of many university leaders to the moral rot on campus and paved a path for change.

5. Business leaders who have a strong interest in preserving rule-bound democratic capitalism, where the rule of law remains intact.

6. Parent groups that care deeply about how children are taught and play an increasingly influential role in shaping public policy in several states.

7. Veterans groups that 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.

8. Enlightened immigrant organizations that are interested in uplifting the fact that immigrants are particularly patriotic. It is undeniable that in recent years, some immigrant groups have failed to recognize that borders have moral significance and citizens owe more to one another than to people from other countries. But there may be an opening for dialogue with enlightened immigrant groups for a couple of reasons. For one, many recent rank-

and-file immigrants have moved to the right politically, so moderation is a prudent step for leaders of immigrant groups to take. Moreover, as right-wing assaults on immigrants escalate, immigrant groups have a strong self-interest in emphasizing the ways immigrants as a whole treasure America.

9. Young people who are dispirited with an inward-looking identity politics that encourages them to confine their focus to their own tribe and yearn instead for leaders who will ask them to serve their country. PPI's sister organization, the Center for New Liberalism, has a strong network of young people upon which the American Identity Project can call.

WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT THE AMERICAN IDENTITY PROJECT?

There are many groups that have been doing valuable work to strengthen civics and history education, and to promote civil discourse.The American Identity Project will build on those crucial efforts, partner with like-minded organizations where appropriate, and seek to highlight the good work that others are doing. It will, however, also add value in several critical respects:

1. Whereas many organizations focus on strengthening civics education, and others focus on trying to foster social cohesion, the American Identity Project seeks to merge these two strains, emphasizing that America's best aspirational values provide the critical glue that binds together Americans who come from an astonishing array of faiths, races, and nationalities.

2. Whereas some organizations critique white identity politics and illiberalism on the right, and others chastise race essentialism and restraints on free speech from the left, the American Identity Project will call to task divisive identity politics and illiberalism on both the left and the right, without fear or favor.

3. Whereas some organizations dedicated to civics shrink from the political arena, the American Identity Project recognizes that patriotism has enormous political resonance. While the project is not partisan and will work with pro-democracy leaders in any political party, it will simultaneously seek to address an enormous political challenge: those with authoritarian instincts have captured the mantle of patriotism in the United States, particularly among working-class Americans. The American Identity Project will capitalize on PPI's longstanding commitment to developing policies that appeal to working America. PPI will also rely on its thick network of centrist state governors, state legislators, and members of Congress who value the idea of strengthening a shared American identity and understand the political importance of recapturing the spirit of patriotism from the far right. PPI recognizes that educators do not have the luxury of avoiding cultural issues and instead must directly defang the far-right's appeals.

4. Whereas some organizations are focused solely on shaping the narrative of the nation's celebration of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the American Identity Project is committed to strengthening American identity through a multi-year endeavor.

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.

1. 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.

2. PPI also has a strong record on developing policies that appeal to working-class Americans through its "Campaign for Working America," led by former Rep. Tim Ryan (Ohio). As part of that effort, PPI has analyzed the ways in which appeals to "democracy" have not resonated with non-college-educated voters, but appeals to "patriotism" can be much more successful because working-class Americans of all races express higher levels of pride in America than do college-educated voters.

3. The notion of a common American citizenship — with reciprocal rights and obligations — has been central to PPI's thinking on a large array of issues.

    - PPI championed welfare reform on the basis of civic reciprocity: America owes its citizens education and training to support individual success; and able-bodied citizens owe the country a hard day's work.

    - PPI was a pioneer in backing the public charter school movement because states owe students a choice of educational opportunities, and at the same time, because charters provide a viable alternative to private school vouchers, which Balkanize America's diverse population into factions, and lack the civic mission of public education.

    - PPI has long opposed racial quotas but supported affirmative efforts to bring students of different backgrounds together to learn.

    - Most importantly, PPI 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. National

service allows Americans of different racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds to transcend their differences around a set of common activities and thereby develop an allegiance to America that goes beyond ascriptive group identities.

The American Identity project builds on that long tradition.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. Finally, PPI has a long history of working with prominent Americans to bring about change. The American Identity Project's stellar advisory group members, led by David Brooks and William Galston, bring a breadth of experience not only in formulating cogent answers to critical public policy questions but also in delivering positive change for the country.

Richard D. Kahlenberg, Director of the American Identity Project at PPI, will be the lead staffer 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 20 books, he 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.

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 sponsored a forum featuring his report on Teaching Students What It Means to Be an American).

> "As we celebrate the 250th anniversary of America's grand experiment in individual liberty and democratic self-government, what better time to reaffirm the primacy of our shared civic identity as Americans over our various tribal identities and loyalties? That's what makes U.S. pluralism a source of national strength, and it's the mission of PPI's new American Identity Project."
>
> **PPI President Will Marshall**

> "We need to address one of the central puzzles of modern political times: how those who champion the values America's Founders held dear are seen as less patriotic than those who threaten liberal democratic norms on a daily basis. We urgently need new approaches."
>
> **PPI American Identity Project Director Richard D. Kahlenberg**

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**, which 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, college leaders, young people, 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 its 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.

ppi

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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PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE
1919 M Street NW,
Suite 300,
Washington, DC 20036

Tel 202.525.3926
Fax 202.525.3941

info@ppionline.org
progressivepolicy.org