A civic education in **American Pluralism and Civil Disagreement:**

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**UNITY AND DIVERSITY: THE CHALLENGE OF E PLURIBUS UNUM**

The EAD Roadmap strongly emphasizes powerful and shared themes within American history and our political and civic institutions. It uses phrases like “U.S. government,” “American life,” and “the American people” in the singular and strives to educate all students to share in American government.

As in the traditional motto of the United States—*E pluribus unum*—we have sought to balance this unity with not only attention to but also appreciation for the diversity and pluralism of American experiences. This diversity constitutes a key and indeed exceptional part of our shared national strength. Making unity from diversity is a foundational challenge in the United States; new meanings join the old across our centuries.

For much of American history, most schools presented U.S. history and civics largely from the perspective of white, Protestant, propertied men. Although there were important exceptions (often developed by and within communities of color), mass-market textbooks and state standards generally presented history and civics in this narrow way. Unity, consensus, and coherence were favored to degrees that made these presentations of the American past blinkered, if not fundamentally false.

Demands for a wider variety of perspectives began to gain traction in the 1960s and have strengthened since then. Historians and other scholars have achieved monumental advances in recovering evidence and promoting understanding of our diverse past. Much more is now known about the experiences of enslaved and free Black people in antebellum America, women and sexual minorities, industrial and domestic workers, immigrants from a wide variety of countries, and the diverse Native peoples dispossessed from the North American continent, to name a few examples. Both the push for diversity and the new scholarship have been major achievements. However, what might be called a checklist approach to diversity—naming specific groups or episodes in state standards and counting how often these groups are mentioned in curricula and textbooks—has come to substitute for deeper and more transformative inclusion.

... The EAD Roadmap therefore advocates a third stage of thinking about unity and diversity, to follow a stage of excessive narrowness or false unity and then a stage when named groups were included one by one, sometimes at a cost of coherence. We call this third stage diversity and inclusion for civic purposes.

At all grade levels and in all topics, history and civics must be taught in ways that incorporate a wide range of perspectives and interests into shared understanding, coherent even where it is complex, and grounded in appreciation for America’s ideals of liberty, equality, and rule of law—ideals which by their nature always call forth argument about whether we are living up to them. We should not teach diverse perspectives so that they can count as having been “covered,” but rather to accomplish these purposes:

- To develop skills to consider others’ perspectives, to understand how the world may look to our fellow citizens and civic participants, with whom we must govern the country and our communities together.
- To learn to interpret other peoples’ expressions of ideas and values—an essential skill for living and working together with fellow citizens and civic participants.
- To gain the intellectual humility that prevents us from assuming that we know more about other people (past or present) than we do, while inspiring the quest for a deeper understanding.
- To build knowledge that anchors complete understanding of how history’s many players intersected and interacted in the course of human events and made that history through those interactions, including conflicts.
- To build knowledge and interpretive frameworks that allow a genuine, thoughtful appreciation of all Americans.
- To recognize the unequal sacrifices that some Americans have made for the country, so that those can be appropriately honored.
- To give all children in the United States a legitimate sense that people like them matter to the public schools and the society as a whole.
CIVIL DISAGREEMENT AND CIVIC FRIENDSHIP

The EAD Roadmap poses such questions as “Why are civil disagreement and toleration of differing views important?” and “What is civic friendship?” Design Challenge 1 asks, “How can we help students become engaged citizens who also sustain civil disagreement, civic friendship, and thus American constitutional democracy?”

Civic education is less about learning answers to a set of contested and contestable questions than about learning to disagree well with one’s fellow citizens.

Robust freedom of speech is protected in American constitutional law, although the courts recognize some limits or parameters on it. Beyond any legal rights and regulations are norms and civic virtues about public debate that are essential to sustaining a constructive and healthy political order. Two of these civic virtues, which might be considered duties of citizens and civic participants in America’s constitutional democracy, are civil disagreement and civic friendship.

What is “civil disagreement”? It is the capacity and commitment to “fighting fair”—to engaging in debate with a commitment to honesty, trustworthiness, charitable interpretation, and moving forward together. Civil disagreement need not be characterized by “civility” in the sense of polished manners, but it should be characterized by a commitment to the well-being of one’s interlocutor as well as oneself.

Civil disagreement means using reasonable speech and writing when criticizing views or policies we oppose. What counts as “reasonable” can itself be debated, and it need not exclude expressions of emotion, including anger. However, civil disagreement requires focusing on the substance of the contending views and on the evidence undergirding them.

Among the famous moments of American history that exemplify civil disagreement, we could cite the opening and closing essays of The Federalist (1788), which call upon all debating the ratification of the 1787 Constitution to avoid questioning the motives or character of opponents and instead focus on the content and adequacy of the contending arguments. A focus on civil and reasonable argument helps us to elevate the quality and substance of our own views.

The closely related virtue of civic friendship reminds us that we should all regard one another as fellow Americans capable of sharing ideals, principles, and constitutional forms of self-government even as we vigorously debate our philosophical or policy differences.

Lincoln’s First Inaugural address, which closes by calling those on both sides of the controversy over slavery and secession to find “the better angels of our nature” rather than to descend into civil war, embodies both civil disagreement and civic friendship; the address is a detailed refutation of the legitimacy of the arguments for secession, yet there is no bitterness, nor any derogatory comment marring Lincoln’s vigorous pressing of his case.

The African American lawyer and civil rights leader Pauli Murray, best known for coining the concept of “Jane Crow,” advocated what she called “conciliation,” one of the “Four Dedications” to which Americans must commit themselves in order to move forward as a people. She explained, “To conciliate does not mean to make concessions of principle. It means to win over to principle, to gain by friendly acts, to reconcile and make consistent. All America is now engaged in various stages of reconciling its practices and making them consistent with the American Dream. . . .”

The program of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom—at which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream Speech”—exemplifies a deep commitment to righting injustice along with civic friendship. The program “demands” that Congress enact, “without compromise,” ten major reforms. It explains that the march “was conceived as an outpouring of the deep feeling of millions of white and colored American citizens” about racial injustice. As such, the event “will be orderly, but not subservient. It will be proud, but not arrogant. It will be non-violent, but not timid…It will be outspoken, but not raucous.”

The program adds, in words that might serve as inspiration for civic educators, “In a neighborhood dispute there may be stunts, rough words and even hot insults; but when a whole people speaks to its government, the dialogue and the action must be on a level reflecting the worth of that people and the responsibility of that government.” King emphasized the discipline and commitment required to bring a spirit of love to interactions with one’s adversaries but also proved the strength and power that lie in that orientation.

Educating for American Democracy has been grounded on the belief that students and teachers can practice these civic virtues in every classroom session and debate about U.S. history and civic principles, and that all Americans can practice these virtues as we undertake the work of self-government.