

*Remarks of Dr. Walt MacDonald  
President and CEO, Educational Testing Service*

*“Monitoring Civic Learning Opportunities and Outcomes:  
State of the Field and Future Directions”*

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## **Welcome/Introductions**

Thank you, Laura. And thank you, everyone, so much for participating in this VERY important conversation on revitalizing civics learning in America.

I want to thank the leadership of the Educating for American Democracy Initiative for the magnificent roadmap you’ve produced, and for persevering through such a politically fraught project. Our keynote speaker, Professor Danielle Allen, Director of Harvard University’s Safra Center for Ethics, has been a driving force of the effort.

Professor Allen is also the James B. Conant University Professor at Harvard. Given that James Conant was one of ETS’s founders and that he, too, viewed preparing students for citizenship a main purpose of education, we’re especially honored to have Professor Allen speak today.

## **The Stakes**

Is it an overstatement to say that we’re in danger of losing our democracy? Is the lull that we seem to be in at the moment just a break in the action before the next upheaval? Do Americans have the civic wherewithal to repel the firehose of misinformation, partisanship, and conspiracy theories that are dividing us against ourselves?

Or will we muddle through as usual? Maybe this is just the way democracies do it. We made it through last summer’s turmoil, through January 6, and through the pandemic. What else can possibly happen?

Here’s a short answer to THAT question:

[Graphic]<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [QAnon's new 'plan'? Run for school board \(nbcnews.com\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/politics-america/qanon-s-new-plan-run-school-board-nbcnews.com)



The “muddle through” approach strikes me as dangerously detached.

### **Civil Disagreement, Civic Friendship**

Whether the peril is real or overstated would make a good question for a high school civics unit on, say, the Civil War, national unity, and Reconstruction. The lessons could call on students to examine the past, connect the past and the present, consider the role of history in their own lives, and their role in the life and history of their country.

They would learn that President Lincoln asked a similar question in his remarks at the dedication of the national cemetery at Gettysburg: “Can a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal ... long endure”?

No doubt the students in this class would arrive at a variety of perspectives. But they would be perspectives informed by knowledge, research, debate, reflection, and intellectual honesty. And they would part friendly, if not necessarily friends.

It would be an excellent lesson, and you can find it in the “Educator Resources” section of the Roadmap, which so substantively and incisively charts a path forward for renewing civic education in our public schools.

### **Civic Ignorance**

In light of Americans’ political and cultural polarization, the Roadmap’s insistence on “civil disagreement” and “civic friendship” and a shared commitment to moving forward together could not be more timely or more urgent.

Social science research consistently shows Americans’ misunderstandings of their system of government and of such core concepts as checks and balances; whether Congress can establish an official religion or outlaw disbelief; and of the basic structure of government itself.

Yet policymakers and even many education leaders themselves have shown little support for addressing these gaps by strengthening civics education. The federal government spends about

\$50 per student per year on STEM fields, versus about 5 CENTS per student on civics. Fifty dollars versus five cents.

Even high school studies teachers are ambivalent. A RAND report co-authored by my colleague Laura Hamilton and one of today's speakers, Julia Kaufman, found that just two-thirds of social studies teachers thought it was "absolutely essential" for students "to embrace the responsibilities of citizenship."

Even fewer said it was "absolutely essential" that students understand basic constitutional concepts such as federalism, separation of powers, and checks and balances. Those are minority views, but they are sizeable minorities, and we should be concerned about it.

## **NAEP Results**

So it's no surprise that results on relevant NAEP tests are less than stellar. Overall scores on the 2018 NAEP eighth-grade Geography and U.S. History assessments fell from the 2014 test. In U.S. History, just 15 percent — 15 PERCENT — scored at or above the Proficient level.

Nothing good can come of this. Our system of government gives structure to our society. Without an understanding of that system — how it works, how it applies to one's own life, one's responsibilities to it, how to navigate it, how to improve it when necessary — there can be no commitment to that form of government, no loyalty, no true patriotism. What is patriotism if not a belief in the organizing principles of the society?

The point is often made that self-government is hard, sometimes tedious, often frustrating work. We can't expect people who don't know about their democracy — or appreciate their responsibilities to it — to MAINTAIN their democracy.

Education is not the only solution to this problem. But as is often the case, there's no solution WITHOUT education.

## **The EAD Roadmap**

For many of us, "civic education" conjures images of the 1950s. But in fact, it's a seamless complement to the 21st Century skills that we've emphasized so much in recent years: critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity, all of which are essential for successful, meaningful, responsible citizenship in a democracy.

21st Century skills also encompass social and emotional learning, which are so important in developing the "civil disagreement" and "civic friendship" highlighted in the Roadmap, and for good reason: Well-adjusted people respectful of differences don't join mobs, pummel police officers or resort to vandalism, arson or violence over policy disagreements.

The genius of the Roadmap is this: It creates an accessible, usable, ADAPTABLE framework to help teachers guide students to their own, informed beliefs. It does this by illustrating the civic skills, knowledge, values, and habits that are essential for the success of, and for success

IN, our pluralistic, freewheeling, rollicking constitutional democracy. Inquiry is its primary mode of learning.

### **Role of Assessment and ETS**

With regard to testing, the Roadmap is forward-looking in how assessment can be used not just to MEASURE learning, but to SUPPORT learning. It does this in part by elevating formative assessment over summative assessment.

Assessment for learning is a cornerstone principle at ETS as well. Like the Roadmap's authors, we believe that formative assessments are opportunities for teachers to find out whether their students are learning, and to adjust their pedagogy as appropriate.

Formative assessment can be especially useful in adducing evidence of learning among students who tend not to perform well on high-stakes tests. That makes them an effective tool for equity.

I don't want to spend too much time on ETS. I'll simply note that we've been deeply engaged in civics education and assessment at the K–12 level through the NAEP program, for which we've developed, delivered, scored and reported assessments since 1983; and in higher education through an outcomes assessment of Civic Competency and Engagement.

### **Conclusion**

America is exceptional in many ways. But there is nothing INEVITABLE about its survival as a constitutional republic. I sometimes think people conflate the two.

Our capacity for practical reassessment — to look squarely at our problems, figure out what needs fixing, agree on a plan, and get to work — is one of the many traits that make America exceptional.

It's important that civic education inculcate students with an understanding that self-government requires continuing renewal toward that "more perfect union" envisioned in the Preamble of the Constitution.

Given what we've been through and where we are today, that sounds like a wonderful national project.

Thank you for listening and for participating. I look forward to working with you in the future to improve and strengthen American democracy by improving and strengthening civics education.

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