

PRESS CONFERENCE

Tuesday, May 19, 1987

Education for Democracy Project

file w/ press conf mat 1/10

1

MR. SHANKER: I would like to welcome all of you to this Announcement of the Project for Democracy which is co-sponsored by the American Federation of Teachers, the Educational Excellence Network, and Freedom House. We are very heartened that we have obtained the support and signatures of 150 distinguished Americans, a very diverse group which includes leaders from the religious community, minority groups, youth service groups, labor unions, business; also historians, constitutional scholars and others.

The diversity can be seen when you have leadership from people from the American Way and the National Association of Evangelicals, Walter Mondale, and William Bennett. The 150 could have been 300 or 500 or a thousand or many more.

This represents the signers obtained by just writing basically to these people who signed on. It could have been much broader had we sent it out to a much larger list.

I think it is important to underline what the statement says. Unlike a good deal of recent educational thinking which promoted the notion that all

one needs is some method of arriving at something, whether it be in the form of critical thinking or whether it be in the form of reading skills, This approach is quite different.

It emphasizes very strongly the content or substance is important and the statement says that democracy is the worthiest form of government; that its survival, once spread, cannot be taken for granted, and its survival depends on passing on to youth our values on which democracy rests, and it is the responsibility of adults to do that, especially those of us who are involved in education.

In saying this, we are assured that there will be some controbersy. We reject the notion that all cultural practices are equally worthy or we should not be engaged in this endeavor becuase it smacks of ethnocentrism Or democracy is just something that we are promoting because it is our point of view and others are equally valid.

We believe that the values of freedom, of democracy, of tolerance of diversity, of equal rights, social and economic justice, the rule of law and self reliance and civic responsibility are preferable to their alternatives,

and we believe the curriculum should reflect this. The statement calls for a curriculum that emphasizes the historical struggle for democracy here and abroad at the present time and in history.

Undoubtedly one issue that will be raised is that this calls for a form of indoctrination. We reject any such charge. Indoctrination is an effort to induce belief by deliberate distortion, selection, and exclusion.

We do not propose to exclude the study of other types of government or other doctrines or other systems.

As a matter of fact, we specifically state that that is necessary to an understanding of democracy, necessary to that understanding is an understanding of what the alternatives and choices are.

Furthermore, we do not intend to present democracy as it exists in our country or other countries, present or past, as perfect forms of government to hide the flaws of the systems or to explain them away.

They are certainly an important part of the teaching of democracy and development of these values will be a discussion and weighing of alternatives.

We believe that this is an important addition to what is going on in the name of school reform. Much of that movement has not pointed to specifics.

Much of it has been in terms of are we competing with other countries in terms of the percentage of youngsters who can perform in one way or another. I wouldn't criticize that as an approach. I think that is an important analysis and we need to know that.

I think it is also important that we look to specifics and we have done that here.

This statement marks the beginning of a project and not the end of it. It is important to develop such a statement so that there is a point of view and a direction on which there is broad agreement which will guide our future work. I would just like to mention two of those projects that will flow from this.

This summer we will publish what we believe to be a landmark study of major textbooks social studies with a view to analyzing what events in history need to be emphasized as important turning points or important places where major new ideas or concepts were developed which are essential to the

development of the democratic values and democratic government and to what extent are these events covered in social studies textbooks, and how adequately are they covered.

We believe that this study will provide a basis not just for evaluating and analyzing textbooks now available, but should serve as a guide to textbook publishers in terms of the future.

A second program, a very important one, is that we intend to go out to the 50 states and train teachers to analyze the materials and books, curriculum guides now being used so that as textbooks are adopted or as curriculum materials are adopted in state after state, there will be in each of these states, the least, the very least, a number of teachers who will appear before state Boards of Education, or Curriculum Committees or local Boards of Education to say that they have analyzed and read the proposed materials and to use the type of thinking and type of analysis which you find in the statement before you set of standards which would argue for or against the adoption of particular textbooks or materials or sections of the curriculum.

Funding for this program, dissemination of Statement of Principles, is funded with grants from the United States Department of Education and the California Department of Public Instruction and several private foundations

I would like to thank in his absence Professor Paul Gagnon from the University of Massachusetts, Professor of History, who developed this statement and worked very closely with us. Unfortunately it is the time of final examinations and there are all those things that professors have to do, and therefore he is not able to be with us today.

I would like to express thanks to Ruth Wattenburg who has directed this project for us who is hiding outside.

I would like to share this time for presentation with people representing the two sponsors of this program.

First we will introduce

Raymond Gastil, He is the Director of the Study of Freedom at the Freedom House. The Freedom House is an organization which has monitored Human Rights Development for a long

time. It publishes the Annual Map which has been a very valuable source of the increase-decrease of democracy in every country around the world.

MR. GASTIL: Thank you much. I must say that saying that the map is a source of the increase and decrease in democracy around the world is a bit strong. We hope to record it. I don't think we actually cause it.

Freedom House, since it has been concerned with the expansion of freedom around the world since the forties, is naturally an organization that would be interested in supporting a project such as this. It is clearly true that we need more education in this country which is directed toward expanding the knowledge of students and deepening a bit of their background in regard to freedom.

I have always thought, for example that the Korean War, the experience that many people were brainwashed, as you remember the discussion at that time in the fifties about brainwashing of prisoners in that war--perhaps many of you don't, but those of us who are a little older do--and I always thought that one of the main reasons that brainwashing so-called was as effective as it was was the fact that people simply were not educated enough in democracy so they simply didn't have any background at all with which to confront the people who were questioning them and talking to them about it.

systems of government. I think it is very important that we have that background.

This project, it seems to me, is a very valuable one and I would like to emphasize the point that this is the starting point of the project. It is one of the first attempts to go public with what is going on and as Al said in the statement that was distributed to us, here, we are asking the schools to consciously focus on getting students to think critically about the knowledge, values and experiences that have shaped our world, particularly about political rights and civil liberties.

I think that the document is correct in saying that there is not enough information,

I think that it is correct in saying that relativism in regard to some of these basic values doesn't serve the body politic very well.

I think, however, we should think of this as a process, a developing process in which the particulars are how much students need to know, what particular things they need to know, how it should be taught, what form it should be taught we would hope to evolve with more experience with the statement and in trying to apply the statement over the next few years. It seems to me that it is the beginning of the process and we shouldn't assume at this point that

that we know all the answers

Thank you.

MR. SHANKER: Now I would like to introduce Diane Ravitch, the Chairperson of the od the Educational Excellence Network and the author of a number of books on educational history, and I might say that right from the very beginning of this project when a number of people sat down and tried to figure out how to pull this together, she has been there from the verybeginning in the teaching of democracy values and history especially as a majorconcern.

MS. RAVITCH: Thank you. I am really delighted with the statement and it is particularly helpful to me because in another of my capacities, in a different hat, I have been working in the state of California helping to redesign the history-social science curriculum K through 12, and the debate that has been going on as this thing was taking shape with discussions with teachers and curriculum people has been well, how can we teach history and teach a lot of history when we don't know whose history to teach. There are no common values. There is no consensus. In fact this statement clearly says that there is a consensus and it is not a matter of chosing your values or my values. The values that we all share are values of democracy and the democratic

tradition and history is very important in understanding what the democratic position is, what are its ideas, how did it come to be, what are the major challenges to it and what have been its major failings.

The idea behind this proposal is that history should be taught with objectivity, not with neutrality, and when you look at history, as you study history, you have to have a set of values that guide you or you can get get confused and lost.

When you study , it is impossible not to condemn human slavery. It is impossible not to condemn the excesses committed by the various totalitarian regimes, and how do you condemn them, not just from your own personal preferences, but you should have a carefully thought through and articulated view as to what are the conditions under which people can live free, what are the conditions under which there is justice and equality and rights guaranteed by the government, not rights that are extended for this year or this term or this leader.

So some of the specific proposals that are contained here I would like to just briefly review with you because I think they are very important.

First is that in teaching the democratic tradition, the democratic values, the statement and signatories feel

that it is very important to have much more time for history in the curriculum, the study of history and geography. We are not suggesting that we just set out a statement of principles and kids should learn the principles. They can't learn those principles unless they understand how the principles evolved over time. We are strongly urging history and geography be chronologically taught and central ideas, events and people that shape the world we live in.

We are further recommending more in depth studies in history and not just memorizing a parade of facts having to do with Greeks and Romans or some other history or society, but rather looking closely at how western civilization came to be, how it got the values that it has, how the U.S. came to be as it is, and these are historical studies.

We are also strongly recommending not just western history, not just American history, but also the study of non-western societies historically, and not just superficially skimming, but really taking one or more non-western cultures studying them in depth and always having this point of view, under what conditions can people enjoy rights, freedom those things we associate with the democratic form of government.

So the organizing focus of the proposal is the dramatic struggles of people around the globe and across the centuries to achieve freedom, justice and equality.

Some of the other proposals included in here require much more cooperation, for instance, between the schools and universities, so that the teachers and scholars can work together in reshaping curricula and critiquing the textbooks and coming out with better materials with which to teach democratic values.

The main point though that I would like to leave with you is this is a very strong statement that people from all sorts of organizations, people representing a variety of political views-conservative, liberal, all kinds of groups and religious viewpoints share a consensus. There is no longer serious debate about whether we have shared values. We do have shared values and they stem from our common participation in a system of government that we believe is worth understanding and worth preserving and which we believe won't be preserved unless we understand it. Thank you.

MR. SHANKER: Any questions?

QUESTION: Mr. Shanker, apparently you have rejected the idea of a separate course. You want a more diffuse approach. Isn't this raising the possibility

that the whole thing will evaporate into thin air if not more closely targeted?

MR. SHANKER: Well, it might have evaporated if you just had a separate course. That might be that you finish the requirement in six months or whatever it is, and then go on as if it is not important. It is an add-on. It is one of those things that some pressure group has put in there. It is unimportant to everybody, but I think making it an essential part of the social studies curriculum and I think that there undoubtedly ^{will} be some important aspects in the curriculum in English and literature as well as other parts of the curriculum. It gives it a much more appropriate place and a very important one.

We, by the way, have taken the same position on other issues. We don't believe in a separate course in critical thinking. Almost every educational deficiency, we have normally rejected that the way to handle it is to add another course. When adding one means that you have got to subtract something else, and that is not likely to happen and it is then likely to be confined to one period.

Learning about democracy and learning about history is not something that ought to be confined to a short period of time. It ought to be part of the education

from the beginning of elementary school all the way through high school and it ought to continue in higher education. We don't deal with that. However we ought to continue: ~~THIS~~ ^{IS} not something that is going to be gotten or learned with a single course. It can't happen that way.

QUESTION . . . I am thinking ~~of~~ the old problems of democracy courses that everyone was taught. I don't know if they are still taught or not.

MS. RAVITCH: If I can respond briefly, in California, the effort has been to make the teaching of democracy a strand that goes all the way through. Kindergarten and first graders learn about democracy *by taking* turns listening to people who don't agree and sort of teaching democratic values in that sense, sort of just classroom behavior. And then with the earliest curriculum starting with first grade, the stories that they read will be stories about heroes, men and women who changed the world, who have done important things.

This represents unfortunately something of an innovation in many schools because in the early grades they have virtually no historical content at all. So the effort in California if it is adopted by the State Board and it is coming up in the next couple of weeks or months, will be to infuse real content, real stories about real people and real

events in history back into the early grades where they were ousted years ago.

And the idea with democracy is not that it can be a separate course, because if it is a separate course, it can be taken out easily later on, but to make the teaching of history an opportunity to reflect on our values and the kind of things that I was talking about, to make it part and parcel of something that I think is integral to the curriculum because I think it is recognized that history is not written without values and it is not told without values, so being that that is the case, we have to scrutinize the values and make sure that they are the values that we as a society hold dear and that we find worth transmitting across the generations.

MR. SHANKER: Yes? -

QUESTION: Paul Gagnon in his paper makes a very compelling statement about the irresponsibility of those who advocate more of this and more of that in the curriculum without taking responsibility for what ought to come out. And I understand by Ms. Ravitch that what you are displacing in the early grades here is sort of the sociology-psychology based-stuff about family and community that now occupies that space.

How do you do assess the strength of that lobbying for that present rather content-less curriculum? I mean how tough a fight is this going to be?

MR. SHANKER: Oh, I think there will be a fight on it. I think the merit in this notion ~~will~~ have at least equal and I hope greater strength. I think that the results are very clear, some of them in here, as to what the results of the present program are, what do our students end up knowing and thinking.

I think a good deal of the responsibility had to be on the curriculum that is just too shallow, too spread out, a lot of the so-called mentioning, a lot of the story is missing. It is more sort of a chronology rather than history. It lacks the focus that develops that comprehension. I don't think it will be difficult to show that.

Certainly the results of various surveys as to what students know, and we are not talking about the drop-out, but those who are still in school--it is shocking.

QUESTION: A follow-up question. Since we don't have the materials that do what you are talking about, not by a long shot, how are you going to sell something in the absence of materials that convey the ideals that you are expressing? We don't have them. They don't exist.

MR. SHANKER: Well, I think we have got to wait for the textbook survey to come out. There are materials that are there now. They may not be as good as they should be. I am sure that they will get better as we keep focusing on what ought to be, but I do not believe that any school district can honestly say that we can't teach democracy in social studies because the materials are not there or we can't teach American history or western history.

MS. RAVITCH: I think that there are some good textbooks and I think that Paul Gagnon's Textbook Review will point that out, that they are not all totally disaster area, although some of them are pretty close to it.

Also it is entirely possible and many teachers already do it, to teach whether it is western history or non-western history or U.S. history entirely without a textbook, but using biographies, journals, original-source documents. You can do a fabulous course in American history using documents, reading the declaration of independence, reading the documents that are available to teachers and it is inexpensively available.

I think that a lot of teachers when you are discussing textbooks have to be encouraged to turn away from then.

I have to add one other word to something that Al was saying about teaching history. It is not chronology that we want to get away from, it is the kind of just spewing out facts that don't have a relationship to each other, or ~~just~~ concepts that sort of float in space, that aren't tied together.

Chronology is terribly important, and one of the recommendations here is that we are emphasizing in the proposal the importance of chronological narrative, the story, because if you leave chronology and history, then all you have are facts. All you have are things free-floating and you don't know whether the Spanish Civil War came before or after the Spanish-American War and whether they were different from each other, and I think in the NAEP Survey that is to come out this fall that Chester Finn and I are co-authoring, there was one question about the results of the Spanish-American War and there were quite a number of students who thought the Spanish-American War led to the to the destruction of the Spanish Armada.

(Laughter)

MS. RAVITCH: Chronology is important, and so is narrative.

MR. SHANKER: Yes?

QUESTION: What are the schools doing wrong

other than the sort of unfocused curriculum that you have been talking about?

Are they not teaching kids that democracy is good? Are they leaving it out, or not taking enough of a strong stand?

MR. SHANKER: As the statement points out, in the fifties, sixties and seventies, there was a reaction by American educators, and indeed probably a reaction by intellectuals generally in our society to what they considered to be the super patriotism of an earlier period, and this co-incided with the period of the civil rights revolution, when everybody looked back at our own past and saw that it was not pure and, indeed, had many stains and then we went into the Viet Nam period where people said it was because of patriotism and the way they taught us that people were willing to accept this uncritically were willing to acuept this, and then we went into Watergate and now we are into "Newgate" and so it is easy to swing from an extreme of the kind of uncritical sloganizing --I don't believe that was ever the case, but a view that we merely indoctrinate and preach a bunch of slogans to get people to blindly follow their leaders and their country over to the other side that says, well, it all a lot of hocus. It all

depends on your point of view. It is that kind of thing that led us into terrible situations, and the most important thing is, as a matter of fact, I think that some of the movement away from this was the feeling that you won't be considered smart unless you are critical, supercritical.

And you will seem to be one of the sheep uncritically following and not a person who is a critical thinker unless you can be kind of negative about our past and a little more positive about other societies to show how far you can extend yourself in understanding other points of view.

That clearly in our view wrong and it went too far. The plus that we come out of this with is that I think we will get greater accuracy and acknowledgement of the problems that our society and the democracies faced and to clearly show that democracies are capable of doing things wrong from time to time and inflicting injustice, but I think the other side of that is that we can look at these things and we can see that there is also a better system of dealing with those problems in a democracy than anywhere else, but I believe that is kind of a pendulum swing and part of that is still there. I think another part has to do with a greater level of education of

teachers. At one time when teachers were just beyond high school in training school, they probably got these courses that were just slightly ahead of where high school courses were and they went back and taught.

But as they now get bachelor's and master's and doctorate's and take all sorts of muckraking points of view and get involved in the complexity, that some of what used to be taught in elementary and high school seem simple and almost seemed like it was purified and overly clarified for the students, and there are some difficult decisions to be made there.

You obviously cannot give a graduate master's level course to kids who are in high school and elementary school. To what extent, when you make selections, are you being true or honest? You do have to simplify; to what extent is something you simplify, distortion?

Yes?

QUESTION: What are you going to do with the document?

MR. SHANKER: We are going to send it to all State Commissioners of Education, to all Superintendants of School across the country, Governors, Chairs of Education Committees of legislatures. We are going to publish it and get it to the more than 600,000 of our members. And

we hope that others who sign this and who are heads of organizations will also do that. We will have very, very broad distribution.

As I indicated that is to set the background and hope that people will come forward in each of the states and school districts and use the thought involved in this as a guide to the selection of materials and curriculum decisions within states and school districts across the country.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. SHANKER: Thank you.

- - - - -