

**Eleanor Roosevelt, "Good Citizenship: The Purpose of Education" *Pictorial Review* 31 (April 1930)  
(abridged)**

What is the purpose of education? . . . The conventional answer is the acquisition of knowledge, the reading of books, and the learning of facts. . . . Even more all-embracing than this is the statement made . . . by the Archbishop of York, that "the true purpose of education is to produce citizens."

If this is the goal-and in a democracy it would seem at least an important part of the ultimate achievement-then we must examine our educational system from a new point of view.

Theodore Roosevelt (taught) by . . . example that (people) owed something at all times, whether in peace or in war, for the privilege of citizenship and that the burden rested equally on rich and poor. He was saying that, no matter what conditions existed, the blame lay no more heavily on the politician . . . than on the shoulders of the average citizen. . . .

So young (people) of all kinds were hearing of a "service" which did not mean being a sailor or a soldier, a doctor or a minister, the only professions in which the word "service" had heretofore had a meaning! Thus began to be spread abroad the idea that "a service" was owed to the country in peace, and that this could only be rendered satisfactorily when every citizen took an interest in good government.

. . . More young men and more young women...have felt the need to understand their own government. In our schools are now given courses in civics, government, economics, [and] current events . . . But there still remains a vast amount to be done before we accomplish our first objective-informed and intelligent citizens, and, secondly, bring about the realization that we are all responsible for the trend of thought and the action of our times.

How shall we arrive at these objectives? We think of course of history as a . . . study of the life and growth of other nations, in which we follow the general moral, intellectual, and economic development through the ages, noting what brought about the rise and fall of nations and what were the lasting contributions of peoples now passed away to the development of the human family and the world as a whole.

Then we come down to our own history, observing the characteristics and the backgrounds of the people who founded our nation and those who have come to us since . . . We trace the reasons for present-day attitudes of mind and for the establishment of customs and points of view which make up the . . . thing known as the "American spirit." We study the (people) in our history who have really made a constructive contribution, and those who have held us back, in order that we may know what qualities of mind and heart formed the characters which have left a mark on their time.

Gradually from this study certain facts emerge. A nation must have leaders, (people) who have the power to see a little farther, to imagine a little better life than the present. But if this vision is to be fulfilled, it must also have a vast army of men and women capable of understanding and following these leaders intelligently. These citizens must understand their government from the smallest election

district to the highest administrative office . . . and each one must carry his own particular responsibility or the whole army will lag.

I would have our children visit national shrines, know why we love and respect certain (people) of the past. I would have them see how government departments are run and what are their duties, how courts function, what juries are, what a legislative body is and what it does. I would have them learn how we conduct our relationships with the rest of the world and what are our contacts with other nations. The child seeing and understanding these things will begin to envisage the varied pattern of the life of a great nation such as ours and how his own life and environment fit into the pattern and where his own usefulness may lie.

It is not, however, only in the courses bearing directly on history and government that citizenship can be taught. The child taking Latin and mathematics is also learning invaluable lessons in citizenship. The power of concentration and accuracy which these studies develop will later mean a man or woman able to understand and analyze a difficult situation. For example, arithmetic is necessary to a later understanding of economic questions. As citizens economic problems will often claim our attention, and the power to understand them is essential to wise solutions. . . . From the point of view of character-building, the harder these subjects are to master the greater will be the sense of self-mastery and perseverance developed.

The other school contacts-social activities and athletics-develop team play, cooperation, and thought and consideration for others. These are all essentials in good citizenship.

The practical side of good citizenship is developed most successfully in school because in miniature one is living in a society, and the conditions and problems of the larger society are more easily reproduced and met and solved... Learning to be a good citizen is learning to live to the maximum of one's abilities and opportunities, and every subject should be taught every child with this in view.

*Source: The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, <http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/documents/articles/goodcitizenship.cfm>.*

*See also Speech and Article File, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.*