

# Patriotic Education and Civic Learning in Public Schools: Narrative Guide

## Understanding the U.S. Department of Education’s Proposed ‘Patriotic Education’ Priority

Public schools are where many young people are first introduced to civic engagement and the skills of critical thinking, engaging with diverse viewpoints, collaboration, and cooperation – skills that both support their success in life and contribute to a healthy democracy. The federal administration’s push for ‘patriotic education,’ based on a singular and ideologically-driven view of this country’s history, undermines this core function of our public schools and risks violating federal law prohibiting interference with local control over curricula — producing a chilling effect on classrooms.

The administration’s proposed ‘patriotic education’ initiative would allow it to prioritize considerable federal funding towards programs that foster a *“patriotic education that cultivates citizen competency and informed patriotism among and communicates the American political tradition to students at all levels.”* The administration defines patriotic education as *“a presentation of the history of America grounded in an accurate, honest, unifying, inspiring, and ennobling characterization of the American founding and foundational principles; a clear examination of how the United States has admirably grown closer to its noble principles throughout its history; and the concept that commitment to America’s aspirations is beneficial and justified.”* If enacted, the proposal would discourage the honest teaching of this country’s complex and sometimes difficult history, infringing the rights of school districts and states to determine their own curricula and the rights of students to be exposed to diverse viewpoints. You can read more about the proposed priority [here in the Federal Register](#).

This guide is a resource to support communications about this push for ‘patriotic education’ and is based on [public comments](#) submitted by [Education Law Center](#) opposing the U.S. Department of Education’s proposed priority.

### Talking Points

1. The Secretary of Education’s Proposed Priority on Promoting Patriotic Education erodes the ability of public schools to expose students to a diversity of views and cultural experiences—one of the most important ways in which public education contributes to community wellbeing and a strong democracy.
2. This country’s tradition of public education is founded on the idea that engaging students on a broad range of ideas will bring together people from different backgrounds, prepare students for citizenship, and enable them to become productive members of an increasingly interconnected world.

3. Mere exposure to complex or even objectionable ideas does not violate the law and is indeed necessary to support independent and critical thinkers. In fact, courts have interpreted the First Amendment to provide students with a right to “receive information and ideas” that include broad and diverse viewpoints.
4. By promoting a vague and ideologically motivated vision of “patriotic” education, the U.S. Department of Education would violate federal law prohibiting interference with local control over curricula and discourage schools from providing historically accurate and inclusive curriculum and instruction.
5. Although the federal government plays a critical role in ensuring the ability of states to deliver a high-quality education to all students, it is prohibited from mandating or controlling a state or district’s instructional content, standards, or curricula through grants, as this proposed priority seeks to do.
6. Moreover, if effectuated, this priority would deter the teaching of a complete, historically accurate, inclusive, and ideologically neutral education by creating fears of funding losses or federal enforcement actions.
7. Public education has historically been the key to strengthening communities and democracy. We [Org Name] oppose the Department’s adoption of this harmful priority and urge its withdrawal to ensure that public education equips all students with the knowledge and skills essential for democratic engagement.

### Changing the Narrative: Key Frames

Unpacking the Administration’s Narrative	Counterpoints
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Renewing Patriotism” and “renewing knowledge of the nation’s founding principles” suggest that civics education programs do not currently imbue students with an understanding of and investment in this country.</li> <li>● Advancing "patriotic education" reflects a broader push to control what ideas can be expressed in schools — such as the case with attempted curriculum changes and book bans. This definition for civics education threatens our democratic freedom and weakens the very foundation for civics participation.</li> <li>● Elected officials and organizational leaders may also state that civics education does not currently exist, and blame “diversity, equity, and inclusion” in an attempt to change or control school curriculum.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Public schools prepare students to thrive in a diverse society. To do this, students must have access to education that is historically accurate, culturally relevant, and inclusive of different backgrounds.</li> <li>● Effective public education programs build on student interests and connect to their experiences, culturally and historically.</li> <li>● Currently, public schools in all 50 states and Washington, D.C. cover civics/government, history, and geography according to their academic standards. By grounding students in how our institutions work and why our past matters, these standards help cultivate informed, thoughtful citizens, strengthening our democracy from the classroom up.</li> <li>● States’ adoption and funding of a neutral and inclusive civics curriculum is compatible with both tolerance of conflicting beliefs, and the embrace of diverse viewpoints that fuels our</li> </ul>

	<p>tradition of public education and strengthening our democracy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promoting one specific form of so-called patriotic education can limit students' ability to engage with different viewpoints, make informed decisions, and contribute thoughtfully to a free and democratic society.</li> </ul>
<b>Unpacking the Administration's Narrative</b>	<b>Counterpoints</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Framing public schools as "failed government schools" that are indoctrinating students, undermining family values, and pushing "radical left leaning" political agendas is intended to erode confidence in public institutions more broadly.</li> <li>A common criticism is that public schools supposedly do not foster ideals of American patriotism or center democratic models, which leaves room for the opposition to weaponize education in their political favor.</li> <li>Those in favor of a "patriotic education" may state that it will redefine the story of America, and promote positive views of liberty, citizenship and history.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highlight examples of civic action by students, families, educators, and community members that show how public schools support civics education, thoughtful debate, and democratic participation.</li> <li>Share personal stories from students about how their schools are building understanding of civics, involvement in civic action, and investment in the health of their communities.</li> <li>Reinforce how rewriting American history to erase certain aspects harms all students' learning, and stress that democracy in education is about ensuring every child has access to high-quality education without biased ideologies.</li> <li>Emphasize that public schools are vital public institutions that should not be weaponized or co-opted for partisan agendas.</li> </ul>