

# Should Schools Teach Students to Vote? YES!

Diana E. Hess

**AT** the high school where I taught many years ago, there was a concerted effort to dramatically increase the demands made on students in response to the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report, which claimed that American schools were failing to prepare students and experiencing a “rising tide of mediocrity.” Teachers and administrators in my school deliberated for hours over what students should be required to learn, in what kinds of courses, and for what reasons. Attention focused on outcomes: what do we want students to know and be able to do *before* they graduate from high school and *after* they leave our school? While *A Nation at Risk* originated from concerns that U.S. schools were failing to adequately prepare workers who could help the nation compete economically, discussions in my school quickly broadened beyond workplace preparation. Specifically, we were concerned about *political education* and how schools should prepare people for informed and effective political participation.

To my dismay, the required government or civics course for which I advocated was not adopted. But the response to this course proposal paled in comparison to an administrator’s reaction to my suggestion that we consider requiring eligible students to register to vote as a condition for graduation. He was shocked. “Diana, how can you even suggest that?! It would be so wrong, so undemocratic, to require students to do something that should be their choice.” Yet this same administrator was infamous for rigidly enforcing a “no hats” rule. I remember thinking we had odd standards for what students should be required to do (take off their hats) and what they should decide to do on their own (register to vote in a democracy).

It is decades later and I am still thinking about what role schools could and should play to prepare young people to vote and to make it more likely they will

actually do so. I have come to change my mind about the wisdom of requiring registration. One reason is that this could violate students’ constitutional rights. A second reason is that enforcing it would lead school officials to inquire into students’ citizenship status, causing those who are undocumented to feel intimidated or unwelcome.<sup>1</sup> However, I do believe that there are many approaches that schools could take to prepare and encourage young people to vote. These approaches may be less dramatic than linking registration to graduation, but they are more comprehensive and likely even more effective in the long term.

In this column, I encourage educators, particularly the social studies community, to take up the problem of low and unequal rates of voter participation of young adults in a serious way. We must focus on what can and should be done

in the future to more explicitly leverage schools as important sites for increasing voter participation rates of young Americans. Schools should see this as a core part of their mission, and those of us involved with educating young people for political participation should be concerned with teaching them not just about political issues, voting, and elections, but also about *how to register* to vote and *how to actually go about* voting. This kind of school-based voter education is the most just and efficient way to reach the vast majority of young people in that it requires the content and pedagogical expertise that social studies teachers possess, and it supports the historic mission of schools to prepare young people for political life. This is a mission that is more under attack now than it has been in decades, but as educators we must refuse to yield, even in these times of increasing political polarization.

Voting patterns in presidential elections have traditionally shown that the turnout of young adults (ages 18-29) is much lower than that of older voters. Moreover, the economic and educational gap between those young people who vote and those who do not is typically larger. Young people who have had some post-secondary education are more likely to vote than those who drop out of high school or who graduate but do not continue their education. Poor young people have been much less likely to vote than those with more wealth, and



Community High School election judges Ryan Cooper and Lindsay Sayner oversee school-wide mock election. (Photo by Candace Barry)

African American and White young people have historically been much more likely to vote than Hispanics and Asian Americans.<sup>2</sup> While such gaps also exist among older people, they are more pronounced among young people. In other words, voting among young people is even lower and more unequal than it is among older people.

Many educators, political pundits, and the general public will view these low numbers as inevitable, natural, or worse yet, possibly even desirable. After all, we are living in a time when many states are engaged in battles about who should be able to vote. For a variety of reasons, there appears to be a targeted effort in some states to put unnecessarily particular and onerous limitations on the requirements of young adults to vote and to make it more difficult for schools to engage in voter education. For example, the Wisconsin Legislature

proposed a bill in 2012 eliminating a requirement that high schools work with local election officials to appoint special voter registration deputies at each school for the purpose of registering students and staff. There was opposition to the bill from the League of Women Voters, the City of Milwaukee Youth Council, and the Brennan Center for Justice. Regardless, it passed both houses and was signed into law by Governor Scott Walker. In the fall of 2011, a Florida high school teacher, Dawn Quarles, was charged with voter registration fraud for turning in her students' voter registration forms three days after the 48-hour submission deadline stipulated by Florida's new voting law. However, in June of 2012, a federal judge issued an injunction against the requirement, restoring the deadline for third party voter registration groups to 10 days after voters complete the form. Judge

Hinkle explained: "The short deadline, coupled with substantial penalties for non-compliance, make voter registration drives a risky business. If the goal is to discourage voter registration drives and thus make it harder for new voters to register, the 48-hour deadline may succeed."<sup>3</sup>

Among voting experts, there has been disagreement about what kind of impact the new—and largely more restrictive—voting laws would have on turnout. But we should be concerned that a recent study of young voters' understanding of state voter laws shows an alarming lack of knowledge about what the rules were regarding registration, voter ID, and early voting in their states of residence. This becomes even more disconcerting when we consider the fact that young people who are not registered and those with no college experience are even less informed and, disturbingly, are more

likely to believe that voter laws are stricter than they are, which itself could discourage participation.<sup>4</sup> While it is possible, perhaps even likely, that these new restrictions will lower the turnout of young adults, the historic reasons why so many of our youngest voters don't vote are even more important.

### Why is Youth Voter Turnout Comparatively Low?

There are numerous studies that investigate what accounts for the discrepancy between the low voter turnout of young people compared to older voters (a group whose participation rates, by the way, are not all that stellar either). The reasons range from lack of information about the political system, issues, candidates, and voting procedures to skepticism about whether their vote really matters at all. Many candidates do not focus on issues that resonate with young people and make relatively few

attempts to court their vote, causing many young adults to believe that political candidates are literally not speaking to them. The higher mobility rate of young people also poses a barrier to voting. And while it is certainly easier to educate and mobilize the 60% of young voters who attend college, it is much more challenging to reach the 40% who do not than it was in the past.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, some of the solutions to the problem of low and unequal voter participation by young adults are beyond the scope of schools. But many are not.

In 2010, high school students in teacher Mary Ellen Daneels's Community Leadership course at Community High School in the western suburbs of Chicago decided to investigate what caused many young adults not to vote. Students analyzed information in the Illinois Civic Health Index and surveyed their peers (many of whom are voting age) to find out what factors might deter

young people from voting. One simple reason was they did not register to vote, and so even if they developed an interest in an election as the campaigns heated up, they may have missed the registration deadline. Daneels's students chalked this up to "lack of planning." Others who took their survey reported being wary of the process of voting, in particular not wanting to look "foolish" at the polling place. Related to this, students in Daneels's course found that lack of information and understanding about the issues and candidates also presented a barrier to voting. If people literally do not know who to vote for, they are unlikely to vote. In addition, there are some students in this school who have parents who either are undocumented and cannot vote, or have had bad experiences with the electoral process in their home nation. Finally, the student researchers learned that some of their peers lacked respect for voting.

# ECHOES and REFLECTIONS

## Holocaust Education for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Classrooms



### *Echoes and Reflections* is the leading Holocaust education program.

*Echoes and Reflections*, developed for educators of middle and high school students, includes a robust curriculum with over two hours of video testimony from survivors and other witnesses of the Holocaust, a dynamic professional development program that has reached over 16,000 educators and community leaders across the U.S., and interactive digital activities on [IWitness.usc.edu](http://IWitness.usc.edu).

**No-cost training programs are being offered near you. Register at [www.echoesandreflections.org/training](http://www.echoesandreflections.org/training)**

[www.echoesandreflections.org](http://www.echoesandreflections.org)

Contact: Ariel Korn, Program Coordinator  
Tel: (212) 885-7949 Email: [echoes@adl.org](mailto:echoes@adl.org)



USC Shoah Foundation  
The Institute for Visual History and Education



Students at West Chicago's Community High School participate in a mock election hosted by the Community Leadership class and the League of Women Voters.

(Photo by Candace Barry)



They simply did not place much value on the franchise.

The students in the class worked with teachers to develop a plan that would explicitly and concretely seek to improve voter education in their school. To combat the registration problem, all the civics teachers became voter registrars. Throughout the year and with the help of students, these teachers began regularly registering students, faculty, and staff—in class, during lunch periods, and before and after school. One day last winter, before the presidential primary, I e-mailed Mrs. Daneels with a question about their registration efforts. In her reply, she happily reported, “I registered 33 students yesterday!” This made me wonder about the number of students who are eligible voters while still in high school. Mrs. Daneels reported that 128 of their 554 seniors would be 18 in time to vote in the 2012 national election, and 323 of them would be 18 by April 2013 (when spring elections are typically held in many states). Nationwide, approximately 33% of the country’s 3.5 million seniors were old enough to vote in November, and 56% of them will be 18 by April.<sup>6</sup> We often think of civic education as preparing students for future participation, but for many of them, their “first vote” could be while they are still in high school. And for the six states where students can pre-register at 16 or 17, the power

of in-school registration drives is even more pronounced. Five weeks before the November 2012 General Election, Mrs. Daneels reported to me that she thought virtually all of their students who were eligible had registered to vote.

But being registered to vote cannot be equated with being *prepared* to vote, for the goal is informed voters, not just voters. Moreover, just because many students in the school are not old enough to vote does not mean they should not be learning a lot about voting, elections, candidates, and issues. This is not only to prepare them for the future when they can vote, but so they are able to participate in the election in other ways (as campaign volunteers, election judges, or even non-partisan get-out-the-vote drives). To combat both wariness and lack of information, Community High School partners with the League of Women Voters to have a Mock Election replete with real voting machines loaned from the Board of Elections. The Community Leadership class prepares voter information guides with candidates’ biographies and policy statements. These information guides are based on the issues that students identified as significant to them (via informal surveys). The voter information guides are distributed to all students in the school before the Mock Election, and in addition to helping prepare students to vote themselves, the aim is for these guides to be taken home

and shared with family members. During semesters when an election is occurring, it becomes a central theme in the required 12th grade government course, and students complete an extensive election assignment requiring them to demonstrate their understanding of key issues and the candidates. The school hosts Debate Watching Parties, and this year Community High teamed up with a neighboring school to host over 200 students who showed up to watch the first debate between President Obama and Governor Romney.

But students don’t just learn about elections, they take part in numerous election-related activities. Some work for local, state, and national candidates, or for campaigns for local referendum questions. This year, through Mikva Challenge-Suburban, some students traveled to the swing state of Wisconsin the weekend before the election to work for the candidates they supported.<sup>7</sup> Students were also encouraged to serve as election judges and were released from school to do so. For the fall 2012 election, 56 students were signed up to serve in that role. In addition to activities aimed at helping students build the knowledge and skills to vote, the Community Leadership class also works on the apathy problem. Students not only write letters to the editor, but also create flyers showcasing contemporary and historical advocates for suffrage to be hung up at local businesses and other venues encouraging people to vote.

The voter education program at Community High School is an unusually extensive, well thought-out, and comprehensive program.<sup>8</sup> It is for all students, regardless of age, and without regard to enrollment in a government course. While those in the required government classes will certainly have more exposure to content related to voting and elections, other resources and learning activities are for all students, including the Mock Election, the Debate Watching Parties, the Candidate Forums, and volunteering on campaigns and as elec-

tion judges. And although the focus is on preparing informed voters, the mechanics of registration and actual voting are not ignored. As simple as this seems, it is quite important. No one likes to look foolish in public, and getting experience with what happens at a polling place in school, with instruction, is likely an effective way to lower one barrier to participation. For students who are old enough to vote, there are many opportunities to register: *all* civics teachers are registrars, students are involved in the registration efforts, and teachers register adults at school functions as well. Clearly, the teachers at Community High School are playing a big role in the voter education program, but it is particularly impressive that many students are not just the beneficiaries of these efforts, but are actively engaged teaching their peers as well.

### **Obstacles to Voter Education in Schools**

While the bar that Community High School sets for voter education is very high, there is much that any school can learn from their multi-faceted approach. But for many teachers and schools, the obstacles to ratcheting up voter education are both real and numerous. For one, there is often a lack of comprehensive attention to voting in state social studies standards, and other “official documents” that give direction to the content of the social studies curriculum. Another obstacle relates to the ways in which increasing political polarization in the United States makes teaching about politics—even something as Mom and apple pie-esque as voting—more controversial. Finally, a narrowing conception of the mission of schools makes it easier to lose sight of our obligation to politically educate all students.

### **Voting in the “Official Curriculum”**

In the recent NAEP civics test, only 68% of 12th graders reported that they had studied politics, voting, or

elections in school, a slight decrease from the previous NAEP test.<sup>9</sup> This is not surprising given that in some states high school students are not required to take a civics class, and in many government courses, voting is not given robust attention. While many history courses may include important historical information about voting in the United States, it is not as commonplace for teachers of those courses to include instruction on how to vote, current elections, or even contemporary political issues. Research into the checkered approach to voting-related content in many states’ social studies standards provides insight into what guidance teachers are receiving about what is important and what is not.

My colleague at the Spencer Foundation, Ben Firke, recently completed an analysis of content about suffrage, voting, and elections in all secondary state standards for history and civics plus the Advanced Placement U.S. History and Government course guides. There is some mention of voter-related content in all of these documents, but none takes a comprehensive approach, and few had any depth to speak of. This conclusion was based on a process by which he sorted content into five categories: voting as a process, voting as a civic duty, federal laws and amendments about voting, suffrage movements, and the study of politics and elections (see sidebar on p. 286 for more details). He then analyzed the relative coverage of each of these categories in all the documents and found that neither state standards nor AP course guides thoroughly “cover” voting related content. As a case in point, in states’ civics standards, only 15 states included voting in at least three of the categories, and only seven states presented voting through at least four, and only Illinois did so through all five. This is troubling in the sense that voting is a multifaceted democratic phenomenon that should be understood as more than simply a procedure or the history of particular suffrage movements.

Other key trends are that voting is overwhelmingly framed as a “civic duty,” and that voting standards appear far more often in civics courses than history courses. (Only five states have no standards regarding voting in their civics curricula, but 16 failed to mention the topic in history standards—yet history is the more common graduation requirement.) There is nothing inherently wrong with this; it is self-evidently good that students are taught that voting is a key responsibility of being a good citizen. However, one wonders if this leads students to lump voting with all the other adult-defined “duties” that they would rather avoid. Maybe the message would achieve greater salience if students learned how women and minorities suffered great persecution and hardship to attain voting rights. This might lead them to conclude that voting is a concrete responsibility rather than an abstract “duty,” or even a privilege that should not be taken for granted. Even so, students will not be equipped to actually exercise this privilege without exposure to content about current elections, political issues, and how to register and vote.

Of course, in every state there are teachers, social studies departments, schools, and entire districts that go well beyond what is included in the standards. That may be what is needed if schools are going to take seriously the obligation to educate young people for electoral participation.

### **Political Polarization**

Elections are, by definition, partisan. Schools, conversely, should be non-partisan. This difference creates a challenge. Teachers need to teach about partisan activities in a non-partisan manner or they risk being accused of trying to influence students to support one candidate or political party. This challenge is not a new one, but it is more pronounced in times when the nation is politically polarized—as it is now.

# How State Social Studies Standards Treat the Topic of Voting<sup>12</sup>

An analysis by Ben Firke identified five categories of content important for the study of voting and the electoral process, and examined how they are treated in state social studies standards.

1. “Civic responsibilities or duties.” These standards deal with voting as a key component of being a good American citizen who participates in the democratic process and culture. For example, California requires that students “Understand the obligations of civic-mindedness, including voting,” while Illinois requires that students “Describe responsibilities that citizens share during an election.” For history curricula, only four states mention voting as a civic responsibility or duty, while 31 states and the U.S. Government AP exam mention voting as a civic responsibility in civics curricula.
2. “Processes and procedures of elections.” This category is comprised of standards that deal with the practical basics of how elections and voting take place—voter registration, referenda, local voting requirements and controversies (such as D.C. congressional voting rights), and other specific factors of how voters elect candidates to office. Example standards include Indiana (“Explain how citizens in the United States participate in public elections as voters and supporters of candidates for public office”) and Minnesota (“Analyze how the United States political system is shaped by elections and the election process, including the caucus system and procedures involved in voting”). Only two states include this category in their history standards; 24 states include processes and procedures in their civics curricula.
3. “Laws and Rights.” The standards included in this category involve federal voting laws such as the Voting Rights Act, Supreme Court decisions affecting voting, and constitutional amendments. This includes standards such as Georgia’s “Identify how amendments extend the right to vote,” and Nebraska’s “Examine federal civil and voting rights since [the] 1950’s, e.g....voting rights legislation.” Twenty-five states include this standard in history curricula, while 14 states include it in civics curricula.
4. “History: Suffrage movements, famous elections, people, and events.” These standards deal with famous historical movements in which voting rights or elections were at the foreground of national controversies. For example, Delaware’s standards include multiple questions on women’s suffrage, such as “Why did women’s suffrage trail behind male suffrage?” whereas Oklahoma’s curriculum includes, “Compare and contrast segregation policies of ‘separate but equal,’ [including] disenfranchisement of African Americans through poll taxes, literacy tests, and violence.” Twenty-two states and the History AP include the history of voting and elections in their history standards, as compared to six states for civics.
5. “The Study and Science of Elections.” These standards examine how campaigns are run, trends in voting and demographics, the roll of the media, polls, and organizations, the development and roles of parties, and other nuts-and-bolts aspects of voting and elections pertaining to elections on a more “macro” level than the individual citizen casting their ballot. Examples include Connecticut’s standards (“Analyze the role of technology, media and advertising in influencing voting and law making”) and Texas’s (“understand how population shifts affect voting patterns”). There are seven states that include the study/science of elections in their history curricula, as well as 21 states and the AP Government program that include the study of elections in their civics curricula.

Political polarization refers to moments in time when political discourse and action bifurcate toward ideological extremes, causing a crowding out of voices in the middle and leaving little room for political compromise. This polarization also creates a climate of distrust in the political system, a distrust that transfers onto schools. This makes it more likely that even non-partisan political education will be misinterpreted as political proselytization, as evidenced by a recent study conducted to gauge what social studies teachers and the general public thought should be taught, and in what ways.<sup>10</sup> Nearly half of the public feels that “too many social studies teachers use their classes as a ‘soap box’ for their personal point of view.”<sup>11</sup> It is hard to know exactly what the members of the public mean by personal point of view, but the phrase “soap box” is often associated with political views, so it is reasonable to infer that they are concerned that teachers are sharing their political views, and doing so in a way that is inappropriate.

I believe that the 50% of the public that thinks social studies teachers are using their classrooms as soapboxes has an empirically unwarranted view. That said, in a time of intense political polarization, teachers need to be even more careful about ensuring that the climate and curriculum in their classroom is non-partisan, especially when teaching about political issues, elections, and voting. There are time-honored mechanisms for achieving this goal, notably, selecting curriculum materials that provide a best-case fair hearing of different points of views on controversial political issues and using pedagogical strategies that require students to fairly consider multiple perspectives.

## Reclaiming Political Education as the Schools’ Mission

While there is overwhelming rhetorical support for the vital role that schools can and should play in helping young people develop as informed and engaged citizens, in reality this important

mission frequently takes a backseat to other goals, including test scores or college and career preparation. The kind of high quality, robust, and comprehensive political education that both students *and* U.S. democracy need is simply not present in many schools. Clearly, voting is just one element of political engagement, and schools need to go well beyond educating young people for thoughtful electoral participation. However, it would be foolhardy to suggest that elections do not matter or that voting does not matter. It is a significant problem that young adults vote in fewer numbers than older Americans. Equally concerning is the inequality in the rates of voting among young adults. The very legitimacy of democracy is undermined significantly when the franchise is so unevenly exercised. Schools cannot solve this problem alone, and they should not be expected to. But they must do their part. As sites of non-partisan political education, schools can and should make it more likely that all students are fully prepared to be informed voters. Given that in many high schools as many as one-third of seniors are already old enough to vote in fall elections, and well over half would be old enough to vote in spring elections, it is also critical to remember that for these students we are not just educating for future participation, but helping them make informed choices now. The young adults at Community High School are getting exactly the kind of comprehensive, high quality, robust political education they deserve. Now the challenge is to make sure that all other young people get what they deserve as well. 📖

#### Notes

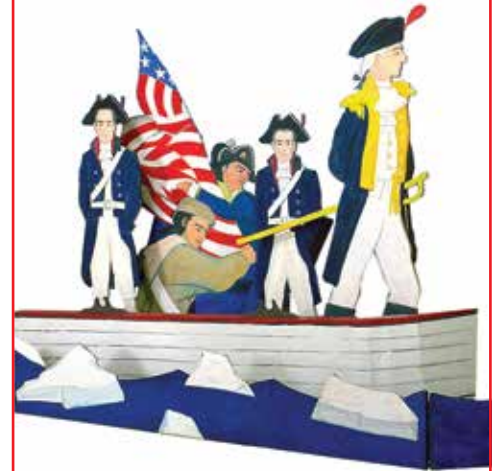
1. It is also important to bear in mind that there are many completely legal and fully documented students who are not eligible to vote because they or their parents are of foreign nationality; even permanent residents of the United States who hold “green cards” cannot vote in federal elections.
2. For the most comprehensive and current information on the turnout of young people in the 2012

- elections, visit the website of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), at [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org). For information on youth voting by demographics, see: [www.civicyouth.org/quick-facts/235-2/](http://www.civicyouth.org/quick-facts/235-2/)
3. Judge Hinkle’s opinion: [brennan.3cdn.net/27b7dc85758f8a5fdd\\_a1m6b5aiy.pdf](http://brennan.3cdn.net/27b7dc85758f8a5fdd_a1m6b5aiy.pdf)
4. For information about young adults’ knowledge of state voter laws, go to: [www.civicyouth.org/wpcontent/uploads/2012/08/YEF\\_CollegeExp\\_Frequencies\\_2012\\_07\\_30.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/wpcontent/uploads/2012/08/YEF_CollegeExp_Frequencies_2012_07_30.pdf)
5. Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). See “Educational Experiences of Youth Eligible to Vote (18-29),” at [www.civicyouth.org/quick-facts/youth-demographics/](http://www.civicyouth.org/quick-facts/youth-demographics/).
6. Gladys Reyes, a Spencer Foundation research assistant calculated these percentages using U.S. census data. For more details, contact the author at [dhess@spencer.org](mailto:dhess@spencer.org).
7. For information about Mikva Challenge, go to: [www.mikvachallenge.org/](http://www.mikvachallenge.org/)
8. Community High School is one of the McCormick Foundation and the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition (ICMC) Democracy Schools. Community High has completed a curriculum assessment ensuring a commitment to six indicators of civic learning preparedness, as well as finishing a strategic plan for subsequent school-wide civics learning initiatives. For information, see: [www.mccormickfoundation.org/page.aspx?pid=983](http://www.mccormickfoundation.org/page.aspx?pid=983)
9. The NAEP results are provided on page 39 of the NAEP report, which is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2010/2011466.pdf>.
10. For a more detailed explanation of the ways in which political polarization influences political education in schools, see: McAvoy and Hess, (in press), *Classroom Deliberation in an Era of Political Polarization, Curriculum Inquiry*.
11. D.K. Lautzenheiser, A.P. Kelly, and C. Miller, *Contested Curriculum: How Teachers and Citizens View Civics Education* (American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 2011), 4.
12. If you would like to see the data charts he created for this analysis, please e-mail the author at [dhess@spencer.org](mailto:dhess@spencer.org).

**DIANA E. HESS** is the senior vice-president of the Spencer Foundation and a professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (currently on leave). She researches how secondary students experience and learn from the discussion of controversial political issues in social studies classes. Her first book, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion*, won the Exemplary Research Award from NCSS in 2009. She is currently writing *The Political Classroom: Ethics and Evidence in Democratic Education with Paula McAvoy and Courting Democracy: Teaching about Constitutions, Courts, and Cases*.

She would like to thank Mary Ellen Daneels, Ben Firke, Gladys Reyes, Raymonda Reese, Amato Nocera, Paula McAvoy, Keith Barton, Peter Levine, Maya Lopuch and Lauren Gatti for their assistance with this column.

# Smithsonian American Art Museum



## Where history is present.

July 8–12, 2013  
July 29–August 2, 2013

Make history present at the **Clarice Smith National Teacher Institutes**. Explore connections among American art, technology, and your curricula during a week-long program at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.

[AmericanArt.si.edu/education/dev/cs](http://AmericanArt.si.edu/education/dev/cs)  
202-633-8387

*The Clarice Smith American Art Education Initiative is supported by a generous gift from The Robert H. Smith Family Foundation.*

Alex Katz, *Washington Crossing the Delaware: American Flag, Boat, and Soldiers* (detail), 1961. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Martha Jackson Memorial Collection