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A democracy without civics?

When asked, a third of eighth-graders didn't know the significance of the Declaration of Independence.

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Washington - September 17 marked the 221st anniversary of the signing of the Constitution. Students across the country spent a few minutes of their day learning about the remarkable work of our nation's founders.

This is nice, but America's schools should be doing a much more thorough job of honoring the civic mission that was the reason for their founding.

Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and one of the first advocates for public education in America, argued forcefully that schools play a crucial role in preparing the citizens of a democracy. "There is but one method of rendering a republican form of government durable," he wrote, "and that is by disseminating the seeds of virtue and knowledge through education."

With young people voting at higher rates than ever before, it might seem that the founders would be pleased with our progress. Yet civic engagement requires more than voting in presidential elections every four years. A healthy democracy demands sustained citizen participation, and our schools must give students the knowledge and tools to participate.

Sadly, civic education has been in steady decline over the past generation, as high-stakes testing and an emphasis on literacy and math dominate school reforms. Too many young people today do not understand how our political system works. They lack the tools to shape their communities through their own participation.

This shows up on national tests – though not, disappointingly, any of the tests our government uses to gauge school performance. On the last nationwide civics assessment, administered in 2006, two-thirds of students scored below proficiency. Not even a third of eighth-graders surveyed could identify the historical purpose of the Declaration of Independence. Less than a fifth of high school seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy.

Equally troubling, we face a widening civic achievement gap. Hispanic and African-American students are twice as likely as their white counterparts to lack civic knowledge and skills, while low-income students score significantly lower than middle- and upper-income students. In other

words, our schools' failure when it comes to civic education is especially stark in communities most in need of civic engagement.

If we hope to sustain American democracy, we need to treat civic learning as on a par with other academic subjects. To participate fully in our democracy, students need to understand our government, our history, and our laws. They need to appreciate the skills democracy imposes on us – consensus building, compromise, civility, and rational discourse – and how they can be applied to the problems confronted by their communities and our nation as a whole. Restoring this civic mission of schools will require a concerted effort in school districts, at statehouses, and by the federal government.

The federal government should embrace civic education when it revisits education reform next year. Developing and then mandating civics standards – and increasing funding for civic learning – would go a long way toward jump-starting progress.

States likewise can elevate the importance of civic learning by creating commissions to review thoroughly the state's approach to civic education, instituting civics as a graduation requirement, and funding professional and curricular development.

Schools, which the noted education reformer John Dewey called the "midwife of democracy," should include civic learning in their mission statements and incorporate civics – including discussion of controversial topics and the responsibilities of citizen engagement – into their curricula for students of all ages.

The anniversary of the Constitution and the upcoming presidential election offer a chance to reflect on the health of American democracy. Still, democracy is a sustained conversation among citizens over how best to govern their communities. It is not enough for this conversation to take place on one day, or even over the course of one campaign.

Our democratic discourse must begin in America's schools, which shape the attitudes and experiences of more citizens than any other institution.

The anniversary of the Constitution should be an occasion for reaffirming our long-term commitment to civic participation. That means restoring education for democracy to its central place in our schools. Only then can we fulfill the Constitution's promise of a more perfect union.

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