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U.S. needs an educated citizenry

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At the close of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, 221 years ago this week, a crowd approached Benjamin Franklin. They asked whether the founders had created a monarchy or a republic.

"A Republic, if you can keep it," he replied.

Franklin's brief response captures the dual qualities upon which the survival of American democracy depends: an enduring Constitution, and an engaged and informed citizenry. Each depends on the other - citizens need the Constitution to guide them, and the Constitution needs citizens to infuse it with new meaning in each generation.

More than two centuries later, many believe that the democratic process Franklin helped create is incapable of meeting America's national challenges. A recent Pew survey reported that only a third of Americans trust the federal government as an institution.

This distrust of government leads to a vicious cycle. Declining participation causes a decline in the quality of governance, leading citizens to further disengage from the political life of their communities and the nation. How can we redress this democracy deficit?

The central feature of the democracy deficit is a knowledge deficit. There is a huge gap between what people need to know to be productive citizens and engage effectively in the democratic process. On the last national civics assessment, administered in 2006, two-thirds of students scored below proficient and less than a fifth of high school seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy.

Closing this knowledge gap requires us to recognize the role that public schools, as the single institution affecting more Americans than any other, must play in training young people for active citizenship. Franklin's vision of democracy - "if we can keep it" - requires sustained citizen engagement in local, state and national politics.

This sort of engagement is impossible without the proper education. While until the 1960s many

high schools required graduating students to have taken three civics courses, today most schools offer only a single, often optional civics course that overlooks the role of citizens in democracy.

We must once again make civic education the cornerstone of public education. This goal requires a joint commitment on the part of individual schools, as well as policymakers at every level.

My passion for improving civic knowledge and engagement led me to help establish the Pennsylvania Coalition for Representative Democracy (PennCORD) in 2004. PennCORD unites educational, advocacy and governmental organizations committed to improving civic learning for students in grades K-12. The key partners include the Pennsylvania Bar Association, the National Constitution Center, the state Department of Education, and the Governor's Office of the First Lady. Our goal is to prepare students to understand and participate in their communities, government and society. And, building a solid foundation in civic learning is the first critical step toward achieving this goal.

As fellow Pennsylvanian and Justice Robert H. Jackson once said, "It is not the function of our government to keep the citizens from falling into error; it is the function of the citizen to keep the government from falling into error."

Schools should promote civic learning, both in the classroom and through service-based learning, through inclusion in their school mission statements and integration into curricula at every grade level.

States and the federal government should include civics on mandated assessments to prevent it from being eclipsed by other subjects.

Franklin's message to the crowd outside Independence Hall so many years ago remains the defining challenge for Americans in the coming century.

All of our national challenges - from energy dependence to the rising deficit to the wars overseas - can be met by citizens who rise to the challenge of serving their communities and the nation.

Yet we can only keep the Republic if every school in America renews that spirit and preserves the citizenry that can guide us forward.

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