

The Salt Lake Tribune

Stronger civics education would aid American citizens and democracy

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Salt Lake Tribune

Article Last Updated:09/15/2008 06:42:46 PM MDT

This week's anniversary of the signing of America's Constitution provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the health of our democracy, both on how far we have come and on the work that remains to be done.

We face many challenges as a nation. Energy independence, health care, terrorism and competition in the global marketplace are all serious issues that demand serious deliberation.

While our leaders have an obligation to address all these challenges, the responsibility cannot lie with them alone. Our students are America's future leaders, and - more importantly - America's future citizens. What can we do to instill in them the habits of engaged and informed citizenship?

One answer lies in civic education. More than 40 state constitutions mention the preparation of an enlightened citizenry as the reason for establishing public school systems, and our schools affect more citizens on a daily basis than any other institution. By teaching civics to every student, our future citizens will acquire the knowledge and dispositions that self-government demands.

The 2006 National Civics Assessment demonstrated that we must do better preparing our youth for citizenship when it revealed that less than a fifth of high school seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy. If students don't understand why participation matters, how can we be surprised at how many passive citizens there are?

While until the 1960s most high schools offered three civics courses, today students only take a single course. Recent education policies have exacerbated this trend. Three-quarters of schools reported a decrease in the amount of time spent on civics as a result of federal No Child Left Behind's requirements. While civic learning is becoming an afterthought of our educational system, circumstances demand that it be restored as a cornerstone of our educational system in order to protect the integrity of our democracy.

The more citizens are engaged in politics - from running for the school board to meeting with state legislators to volunteering on a presidential campaign - the less opportunity narrow special interests have to fill the vacuum. A democracy of activist citizens is the only way we can ensure government heeds the voice of "We the People."

Civics also helps students develop the critical-thinking skills that make them more discerning consumers of news. When our fellow citizens demand more thoughtful news analysis and less sensationalism, the media will listen and respond. Effective civic education can help all of us to persuade the media to re-emerge as a forum for debating the great issues of our time.

Incivility and extreme partisanship have worsened as citizens wall themselves off from those of differing opinions, receiving their news from limited sources and only engaging in discussion with those who already share their views. Civic education provides a common base of knowledge and a shared language for speaking about American democracy.

Civic education helps students engage with others of differing views. Debates in the classroom demand that students consider the arguments on both sides of an issue. The process of civil deliberation that leads to reasoned conclusions is not only a vital skill for students' own development, but it is at the heart of the process of self-government.

Here in Utah, a group of our citizens have joined together to strengthen civic education for all of our students. The Utah Coalition for Civic, Character and Academic Service Learning is a network of organizations, universities and state and federal agencies committed to helping Utah schools K-16 in accomplishing their basic civic mission. In addition, the Legislature has created the Commission on Civic and Character Education, chaired by Lt. Gov. Gary Herbert, which unites representatives of the three branches of state government and members of the public in efforts to foster, encourage and lead the mission of civic education.

Preserving the process of civil deliberation for the future ultimately lies not only with government, but also with an engaged citizenry. To ensure that every student has the knowledge and tools they need to become active citizens, we need to support schools in fulfilling their civic mission.

School districts, state government, and the federal government can grant more funding, institutional support, and flexibility to schools that want to pursue civic learning for every student. Schools should offer students civics classes and opportunities for experiential education grades K-16.

The anniversary of the signing of the Constitution on Wednesday provides an opportunity for policymakers at every level to join together in support of the civic mission of schools. Our ability to meet this challenge will not only determine the future course of education policy, but the long-term health and survival of our democracy.

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