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Today's children need education in civics

By Senator Richard Lugar and Senator George McGovern

At the close of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, of which today is the 221st anniversary, Americans learned that they would have a new Constitution and a new government. According to the Constitution's Preamble, its goal would be to "promote the general Welfare and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity."

In our careers, we have pursued goals that we hope live up to the Preamble's ideal. While the two political parties are divided on many issues, the Preamble presents core principles that every American can embrace.

These shared principles led us to common ground: fighting hunger in America and abroad. We have worked to fully fund the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program that has fed 22 million children across the globe, strengthen and improve the Food Stamp Program and increase children's access to nutritious meals in the summertime.

Despite progress in alleviating global and domestic hunger, improvements are still needed in this area and others such as energy security and the fight against terrorism and nuclear proliferation. Meeting these great challenges of our time requires an engaged and educated citizenry.

This kind of citizenry that will harness politics as a tool for compassionate service and salutary change has its inception in education. Young people are not born ready to participate in democracy. Instead, they must be educated, both at home and by society, on the responsibility and importance of being active and informed citizens.

Decades ago, students often would take up to three civics courses in high school, which were complementary to middle school civics. Today, however, many high schools offer only a single, often optional, civics course that overlooks the role of citizens in democracy.

The result of the decline in civic education is, not surprisingly, a decline in civic knowledge and motivation. On the 2006 National Civics Assessment, two-thirds of students scored below proficient. Less than one-third of eighth-graders surveyed could identify the historical purpose of



the Declaration of Independence. Most alarming of all, less than one-fifth of high school seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy.

If students fail to understand their role in democracy, how can we expect them to mobilize to meet the great challenges of future generations?

Congress passed the Education for Democracy Act to highlight civic education as a priority and give teachers and administrators more resources to teach civics to children at all grade levels. We applaud the many schools across our country that are using the programs authorized under the act with a strong recognition of the benefits of teaching civics.

But we have more work to do. Restoring the civic mission of schools will require a stronger joint commitment by individual schools, as well as policymakers at the national, state and local levels. As a government and as a society, we must continue to make civic education a priority because the strength of our nation is reliant on how well we prepare our young people to lead.

John Dewey, a leading 20th-century education reformer, described the role that civic education must play in the long-term survival of American democracy: “Democracy must be reborn in every generation, and education is its midwife.”

Policymakers and educators have an obligation to embrace Dewey’s challenge. The text of the Constitution alone cannot guide America forward without the efforts of engaged and informed citizens to help fulfill the aspirations of its Preamble. Through civic education, we have the ability to educate future generations in an ever-changing world about the privileges we have as Americans and the responsibility that we must embrace in our quest to form a more perfect union.