



Ensuring the civic health of our nation

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Today marks the 221st anniversary of the signing in Philadelphia -- after a long, hot summer of debate and compromise -- of the new United States Constitution. And today as well, as on almost every other day, hundreds of people who came to this country from other lands will take the oath of citizenship. Before accepting them as fellow citizens, we require that they demonstrate a basic knowledge of the constitutional system constructed in Philadelphia and that they swear allegiance to that system.

But no such knowledge, test or oath is required of those born here. Rather, we assume that our schools and other institutions and programs are providing the civic education essential to the health and even the survival of our system of governance. But are they?

We regularly employ engineers and other experts to inspect and report on the nation's bridges, dams and highways. So, too, we should examine the performance of the institutions responsible for the civic education of our children. How well is that system performing its vital task?

Last year, the Oregon Youth Civic Engagement Study found that only a third of high school students scored at a level of "proficient" in a test of their knowledge of government. Only about a quarter of the students could identify Oregon's two senators. Those results should not be surprising, since most high schools offer just one civics course, often an optional class for seniors. As mandatory testing for math and reading have taken center stage, federal and local dollars have flowed away from social studies and civics education.

Fortunately, there is an array of effective programs that helps teach the fundamentals of active and responsible citizenship, from the basic values of fair play and respect for others at the elementary school level to a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between federal and state government for high school students. An Oregon nonprofit, the Classroom Law Project, works with educators, training teachers in age-appropriate civics education, bringing a thousand students together each year for a youth summit on a particular public policy issue and running mock trial and constitutional debate competitions.

In a hopeful sign, public attention is now being refocused on civics. A modest appropriation from the 2007 Oregon Legislature, foundation grants and new volunteers attest to community awareness of the need. And former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor has helped raise the profile of civics education, co-chairing the advisory council of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools and speaking forcefully on the issue.

But more needs to be done. Most middle and high schools in Oregon do not have in-class or extracurricular opportunities for learning about our constitutional democracy. And most high school seniors likely could not pass the test required of immigrants who wish to join them as U.S. citizens.

At the conclusion of the 1787 Constitutional Convention, 81-year-old Benjamin Franklin was asked what kind of government the convention had created. He replied, "A republic, if you can keep it."

If we are to keep our republic, we need effective civics education for all students.

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