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## My Turn: Civic learning key to democracy

*By Vee Gordon*

Last week marked the 221st anniversary of the signing of America's Constitution, and students across the nation will spend a few minutes hearing about the ideal that led to the birth of our nation. However, in this new school year too many schools will not teach the knowledge and attitudes necessary for active leadership.

Civic learning has been in decline over the past generation, and the last decade has witnessed an especially steep decline as high-stakes testing forces schools to devote more time to literacy and math at the expense of civics. At this point in time, most schools only feature one civics course in high school as a graduation requirement.

Today, too few high school students are able to explain how citizen participation helps democracy. Most young people lack the tools to shape their communities through citizen participation. Low-income and minority students score even lower on these issues. Since the American public education system touches the daily lives of more citizens than any other national institution, it needs to prepare every young person for a life of engaged and informed citizenship. If education doesn't prepare students to think critically about what they hear from politicians and the media, how can we expect them to answer the challenges -- at home and abroad -- that will face America in the decades to come?

Here in Vermont, the Legislature established the Council on Civic Education to get civics education on the books in every school district. We are working to restore the civic mission of schools through teacher conferences, direct classroom contact with teachers and administrators, supporting the social studies department at the Department of Education, and building resources for teachers to use.

Only if we show a commitment to improving the quality and quantity of civic learning can we fulfill the promise of our state and federal constitutions, and look forward to a thriving democracy for generations to come.

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