



Guest Editorial

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The Challenge of Civics Education

By Justice Ann Walsh Bradley and State Superintendent Tony Evers

On the “The Tonight Show,” television host Jay Leno frequently includes a segment called “Jaywalking,” where he walks the streets of Los Angeles with a microphone, accompanied by a cameraman. Leno asks random strangers potentially embarrassing questions, which often produces humorous answers. In one example, Leno asks a young person to name the three branches of government. After some hesitation, he answers “Upper, Middle, and Lower...?”

Despite the fact we may find these segments humorous, these responses also make us cringe. After all, one of the primary reasons our public school system was formed was to ensure that students would learn about our government, culture, and society. The upcoming Independence Day holiday offers us the opportunity to reflect upon the importance of civics education.

It is vital that our students understand our systems of government and economics. We also need them to comprehend topics including civil discourse and how individuals can access and influence the government at the local, state, tribal, and national level. Students need to learn how to meet and talk to people from different backgrounds, and understand that it is acceptable to disagree with diverse opinions in a respectful manner.

The annual Gallup/Phi Delta Kappan *Poll of the Public’s Attitudes toward the Public Schools* has asked Americans the primary goal of schools. Overwhelmingly, people in the United States have said that educating young people for responsible citizenship should be the primary goal of our schools. However, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test in Civics (2010) has shown a troubling trend. Student scores on this test have not significantly improved since 1998. Although 97 percent of students say they have studied civics or government in high school, the NAEP assessment results show that students are not retaining the information.

We are in an era of new technologies, reforms, and trends in education. They may seem overwhelming at first, but the tie to civics instruction and learning could be a central string tying them together. The progress toward “college and career ready” graduates across the country could be appended to include “community readiness.” A student body

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prepared for community readiness may help students become productive members of their communities, their state, nation, and potentially the world through civic preparation.

The Campaign for the Civic Mission for Schools has outlined several practices for improved civic learning. These include direct classroom instruction, discussion of current events and controversial issues, and service-learning and community service. By incorporating these practices into the existing K-12 curriculum, districts can increase student opportunities in learning civic responsibility and community involvement.

Recently, retired Justice Sandra Day O'Connor said in an interview, "Only about one-third of Americans can name the three branches of government, let alone what they do. More Americans can name a judge on 'American Idol' than a judge on the Supreme Court." We must work together to change that. Justice O'Connor is doing her part by promoting iCivics.org — an engaging online educational gaming website that she founded to help reinvigorate civics education. As state superintendent of public instruction and the state co-chair of Justice O'Connor's iCivics program, we believe that civics education is vitally important to the continuation of our country's government and economic systems. Increasing attention to civics education in the schools will help ensure that students understand not only the meaning behind this Independence Day holiday, but how to become college, career, and community ready upon graduation.

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