



UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE
Joel W. Solomon United States Courthouse
900 Georgia Avenue
Chattanooga, Tennessee 37402

CIVICS: WHO WILL TEACH THEM?

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We can say with a good degree of confidence that the vast majority of United States citizens desire to be good citizens. It is hard to imagine many people, if asked, would say that they strive to be poor citizens. We may disagree on what it means to be a good citizen, but within our own definitions, we all want to be good ones.

An important component of being a good citizen is being an informed and knowledgeable citizen. That means having a working knowledge of how our government is structured, how it functions, the role of the different branches of government, their separate powers, the branches' responsibilities, and the limitations on their powers. Without such knowledge, it is nearly impossible for us to fulfill our duties or wisely exercise our privileges as citizens.

Recent National Assessment of Educational Progress Report

Collectively, how do we rate as informed citizens? Unfortunately, national surveys generally show we are not acquiring and retaining the knowledge that makes for good citizenship. A recent example is the latest report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress ("NAEP"), which is often called the nation's report card. This assessment is required by Congress to assess and track the educational achievements of students in U.S. schools. The latest NAEP report, released just a few weeks ago, demonstrates that students are moving backward, not forward, in critical civics knowledge. The NAEP shows that only 22 percent of eighth graders were proficient in civics, including the U.S. political system, principles of democracy, and other topics. Meanwhile, only 13 percent of eighth graders were proficient in history. Both measures demonstrate a decline from the 2018 assessment. This was the first decline recorded since the NAEP civics assessment was first administered in 1998. This decline in civics proficiency, while only by two percentage points, is especially discouraging given the recent increase in focus and attention on civics education and knowledge. The recent NAEP report appears to show that we are falling further behind, rather than progressing as hoped.

The Founders Assumed an Informed Citizenry

The founders hoped and assumed that the nation would have an informed citizenry. Thomas Jefferson stated this assumption frequently:

- “A well informed citizenry is the best defense against tyranny.”
- “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”
- “An informed citizenry is at the heart of a dynamic democracy.”
- “I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power.”
- “Convinced that the people are the only safe depositories of their own liberty, and that they are not safe unless enlightened to a certain degree, I have looked on our present state of liberty as a short-lived possession unless the mass of the people could be informed to a certain degree.”

Other founders agreed. James Madison stated, “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.” Sam Adams stated, “If virtue and knowledge are diffused among the people, they will never be enslaved. This will be their great security.” Benjamin Rush stated, “Where the common people are ignorant and vicious, a nation, and above all, a republican nation, can never be long free.”

Knowledge of Civics Does Not Come Through Osmosis.

How did the founders expect successive generations of citizens would become informed and knowledgeable about our government? While today we think of schools and colleges as major sources of civics knowledge, at the time of the founding, public education was largely unknown, and a college education was rare. One figure is that in 1800, only around twenty-five colleges existed in the new United States. Yale, as the largest college in the United States, had only 217 students in 1800. Across the new country, just over one thousand students attended college.

Obviously, then, the founders did not think that succeeding generations would learn about the values, ideas, ideals, and beliefs of citizenship from schools. Nor did they assume that this knowledge would be passed on by osmosis or through drinking the water. Rather, they must have assumed that this necessary knowledge would be passed down through families, churches, public institutions, newspapers, and other available sources. The founders must have assumed that what makes us Americans would be intentionally passed down from one generation to the next.

Conclusion

We are blessed today with a large number of schools—elementary, secondary, public and private, and colleges and universities—and these schools must play an important role in civics education. However, we cannot rely on schools alone to educate current and future generations on civics. We each must play our part, too. If you know about civics, look for opportunities to pass that knowledge on. Civics education is still today, as it was during the time of the founding, a job for each and every one of us.

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