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Reviving the commitment to civic education

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This week marks the anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution, which over two centuries later remains the oldest continuously operating national charter on earth. Despite the brilliance of the Constitution's structure for democratic government, democracy can only come to life only through an engaged citizenry.

The creation of an informed and engaged citizenry was a core reason for founding universal public education. Twentieth-century education reformer John Dewey reiterated the public education system's commitment to the civic mission of schools: "Democracy must be reborn in each generation," wrote Dewey, "and education is its midwife."

Despite this commitment, education for and about democracy has suffered over the past generation. As the emphasis on literacy and math has dominated school reform discussions, schools are offering fewer required classes in social studies, civics and government.

As a result, most young people lack a good understanding of how our political system works and are therefore less inclined toward citizen participation. On the last civics assessment in the 2006 National Assessment of Education Progress, two-thirds of students scored below proficient and less than a fifth of high school seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy.

And it's not just about young people. An American Bar Association survey found that only half of American adults could correctly name the three branches of government.

In research done a few years ago by the Campaign for Young Voters, we learned that, of the young people who do not participate in politics, the reason is often that they didn't know enough to vote responsibly. They were hungry for the kind of information and understanding that comes from those courses in history, government, civics, geography and economics.

For the growing number of young people who do vote, we cannot make the mistake of thinking that the act of voting alone fulfills the obligations of citizenship. Active citizenship means following the news and engaging in civic and community service activities — activities that demand far more than the occasional trip to the voting booth.

Despite all this, national policy has shown virtually no commitment to educating our young people for democracy. That is especially ironic given the energy we have spent as a nation to

educate the former Soviet bloc and the Middle East about the principles and practices of democracy.

We don't seem to get the proposition that Dewey advanced. We have to keep working on this at home, too. Public schools in are the principal places where this mission has to be accomplished, where students learn about the country's great story and how a democratic society is supposed to work.

Restoring the civic mission of schools will require a joint effort by schools districts, states and the federal government. No one entity alone can effectively promote civic learning without the financial, institutional and policy support of the others. But the starting point has to be a broader understanding that we have a problem that needs attention.

The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, www.civicmissionofschools.org, was created to help policymakers at federal and state levels craft a policy framework to support schools and districts in expanding civic learning opportunities. The campaign has identified a number of approaches, from improved civics assessments to more service learning to professional development for teachers, to help restore a civic approach to learning as the cornerstone of American education.

The campaign has attracted prominent national leaders and is co-chaired by former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, former Rep. Lee Hamilton, and, from here in Colorado, our former Gov. Roy Romer. A few years after leaving Congress, I became the campaign's first director, in part because as a representative I'd seen firsthand the effects of the growing civic education deficit.

As we commemorate the ratification of the Constitution, we should remember that civic learning enables and requires each generation to embrace the Constitution anew, and to do so with knowledge, affection, humility and the awareness that we are in the constant enterprise of building "a more perfect union."