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My Turn: Restoring our civic mission

By Paul L. Reiber

This week marks the 221st anniversary of the signing of America's Constitution, and students across the nation will spend a few minutes hearing about the ideals that led to the birth of our nation. In this new school year, however, too many schools will not teach students the knowledge and attitudes necessary for active citizenship.

Civic learning has been in decline for a generation, and nationwide 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. A generation ago, schools often mandated three civics courses as a graduation requirement, but today most American high schools only feature one civics course, and even that course may be optional.

The results of the decline of civic learning are clear. On a national 2006 assessment of student knowledge of civics, two-thirds of students scored below proficient. With less than a fifth of high school seniors able to explain how citizen participation benefits democracy, many young people lack the tools to shape their communities through citizen participation.

Just as worrisome is that low-income and minority students scored even lower on these assessments. Even as we are beginning to close the achievement gap in reading and math, a civic achievement gap is widening. How can our democracy reflect the true voice of "We the People" if only some students have the knowledge and motivation to speak out?

We as a society need to better prepare every young person for a life of engaged and informed citizenship. If families, communities and our schools do not place emphasis on civic responsibility, if we do not prepare students to think critically about what they hear from politicians and the media, we cannot expect them to answer the challenges -- at home and abroad -- that will face Americans in the decades to come.

Here in Vermont educators and members of the public have become involved in one program that is bringing needed attention to the importance of civic education in the home and at school. The statewide "We the People" program provides civics textbooks for students and professional development for educators, and has enjoyed widespread success in increasing awareness of our constitutions' influence on citizenship in Vermont and our nation. As one of those textbooks says, the program is meant to teach students "what it means to be a citizen in a country committed to ... liberty, equality, and justice." I learned just how effective the program is while serving as a judge in the program's capstone event: mock legislative hearings at the Vermont Statehouse. The deep enthusiasm of the student participants was infectious, and their civic knowledge profoundly impressive. As a Vermonter I'm proud to know that our educational system is producing students of this caliber each year.

Yet we still need to make more progress to ensure that we are providing that level of education to, and inspiring that level of civic engagement in, all of our youth. We must strive -- and by "we" I mean

not just educators, but all adults -- to instill in our children an understanding of the value of their constitutional heritage. We must impress upon them the importance of that heritage: It is no mere dusty thing under glass. Rather, our constitutions create a dynamic interplay between branches of government, between citizens and public officials, between state and nation. The health of those relationships, their active role in maintaining democratic principles, depends upon an invested and informed electorate. In 1787 while serving as minister to France, after reading a draft copy of the Constitution, Thomas Jefferson in a letter to his friend James Madison said:

"And say, finally, whether peace is best preserved by giving energy to the government, or information to the people. This last is the most certain, and the most legitimate engine of the government. Educate and inform the whole mass of people. Enable them to see that it is their interest to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve them. ... They are the only sure reliance of our liberty."

Only if we all show a commitment to improving the quality and quantity of civic learning will the young people of our state be prepared to be the stewards of that legacy, and to fulfill the promise of our state and federal constitutions. If our schools can return to their historic mission of creating informed and active citizens, and if we as adults will engage meaningfully with young people to encourage civic participation, we can look forward to a thriving democracy for generations to come.

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