



Education for Democracy

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By Doug Bailey

I got out of active campaign politics 20 years ago because it had become so negative. Ever since, the distrust caused by big money, bad ads and endless partisan bickering has only fed our public cynicism.

One way to take our country back is to vote. Maybe that will happen this time in record numbers. Another is to make sure that our young understand that the genius of the country is that each American generation redefines our freedom in its own terms for its own times. It's that "rebirth of freedom" thing. That's the way America and its dream never die.

That is the importance of civic learning in the schools.

In 2002 Mike McCurry and I began a post 9/11 program called Freedom's Answer to encourage high school students to secure ten voting pledges from their parents, relatives or neighbors – turnout not for a particular party but for America. The result was phenomenal: 2500 high schools, hundreds of thousands of students, millions of votes.

It proved what we need to remember: Our young yearn to be part of something greater than themselves. So the mission of our schools, in civics and all things, is to "teach the children well" and then get out of their way.

But while programs like Freedom's Answer can never reach every child, our schools can.

Benjamin Rush, a founding father, early abolitionist and signatory to the Declaration of Independence, said it well: "There is but one method of rendering a republican form of government durable – and that is by disseminating the seeds of virtue and knowledge through education."

The consequences of continuing to neglect the founding fathers' advice are staggering: On the 2006 national civics assessment, two-thirds of students scored below proficient; less than a fifth of seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy.

If the schools do not teach democratic citizenship, how can we expect our children to address the challenges that will face their generation? Policymakers at every level need to provide the flexibility, funding, and institutional support for effective civic learning.

We hear a lot these days that schools can't do all the teaching; it takes parents too. That is correct of course. But in civics, the opposite point needs to be made as well: When so many older folks are disinterested in or cynical about government, civic learning takes the schools as well as the parents.

Today marks Constitution Day, the anniversary of the covenant that defines America. The framers relied on the people to hold government accountable and push it toward common-ground. The constitution provides the stability, the people provide the change.

If our schools can return to their historic mission of creating informed and active citizens, we can look forward to a thriving democracy for generations to come.

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