Our Need for Better K-12 Civics Education

KUFM Commentary: September 22, 2010

By Otto Koester, Associate Director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center

How good a job do our schools do in teaching our children about our government, its principles and functions, and our responsibilities as citizens? We hear lots of debate these days about the need to improve education, but how often do we hear discussion of what students need to know about their government and obligations as voters and citizens? Thomas Jefferson once wrote that ignorance can’t be relied upon to preserve our liberty.

A few days ago, I was chatting with a veteran Montana high school social studies teacher who also serves as a consultant for other schools. I asked him what teachers, students, and parents tell him about their own experiences in K-12 civics. He paused a moment and said, “Well, you know, this is something about which I’ve been keeping a mental tally for almost ten years. Of those people I’ve asked, one out of every five says their civics teacher was the best and most influential teacher they ever had, while four out of five say their civics classes were boring and useless. The strange thing is that 17- and 18-year olds love to talk about government and politics because of the stage they’re at in their lives. Civics teachers can have such an enormous impact, and some do. But in the majority of cases, civics is almost a waste of time.”

Disturbed by what this teacher said, I decided to consult some professional educators to find out what research about American civic education says. The most reliable study mentioned was the National Assessment of Education Progress (or NAEP) project of the U.S. Department of Education. It turns out the findings were just as discouraging as those of the social studies teacher. The NAEP surveys--
out in 21 states, but not Montana--showed that only one in four students performed at moderately proficient or advanced levels on tests for civics. In other words, roughly three out of four students failed to achieve proficiency.

A few examples from the NAEP survey illustrate the problem more specifically. At the 4th grade level, 74% of students knew that U.S. laws must be applied evenly, but only 15% were able to name two government services paid through taxes. At the 8th grade level, 81% of students identified Martin Luther King as someone concerned about the injustice of segregation, but only 6% could come up with two reasons for having a constitution. And, at the 12th grade level, 90% of students understood that Social Security is of great concern to the elderly, only 9% knew two ways in which citizens can be of benefit to a democratic society. The U.S. Department of Education anticipates only modest, if any, improvements in the next NAEP results.

Granted, we shouldn’t always rely on national test scores, but let’s face it, the NAEP results can’t be ignored. Unfortunately the Montana Office of Public Instruction doesn’t keep systematic data on civics or social studies test results, but based on Montana’s national reading and writing scores, we can assume that our state’s civics scores would probably be comparable or maybe even a bit higher than the national average. Without such data, however, we don’t really know.

If the evidence of poor knowledge at the national level is clear, so is the value of a solid civics education. Many studies have shown that people who know a great deal about government, politics and public affairs tend to vote, and the correlation between years spent in school and political engagement is one of the best documented findings in American political research. Persons with little civic knowledge tend to see themselves as powerless and consequently abstain from political participation.
Adults with high levels of knowledge about government and politics vote consistently stick with their choices over time, and they assess leaders on the basis of policies and ideologies as well as character. Those with less knowledge, on the other hand, judge public officials mostly on the basis of perceived personality.

One of the major reasons young people do not participate in the electoral process is because they lack education—which disadvantages the poor. This also helps to explain why two out of three poor Americans are not able to state the views of political parties on government spending, whereas most wealthy Americans know exactly how Democrats and Republicans differ.

Given this gloomy picture, how can civics education in Montana be improved? One idea would be to create a special state-level commission to address the problem. Another is to offer more professional development opportunities for teachers to deepen their knowledge of civics pedagogy and content. A third might be for the Montana Digital Academy to craft more high-quality civics courses, taught by some of the state’s best teachers, to reach every school district in the state. A fourth might be for local school boards to require four years of social studies and civics as a graduation requirement.

Democratic values are not inherited. They change and evolve with each generation’s vision of its own future. While much is being done to improve student performance in math, science and reading, education in civics needs to be put on an equal plane. All of us—parents, teachers, students and employers—need to work together to rededicate ourselves to producing a new generation of citizens and voters that is more knowledgeable and engaged.

Thank you for listening. This is Otto Koester of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at The University of Montana.