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Let's Require Civics Education at All Levels

A Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett
September 26, 2013

After many years away from the formal classroom, I am teaching again. When I left graduate school in 1968, I was hired on to teach civics to high school seniors. I ended up with a different teaching position, and after one year of teaching, I took a 44 year fork in the road. Instead of teaching civics, I entered the real world of civics – the world of government and politics. Over that period I was heavily engaged in government at local, state and federal levels – working for and with governors, senators, congressmen, legislators, local government officials. Despite the low esteem in which folks in government and politics are often held and a general disdain for government by many, I have learned that the proper functioning of our government is the bedrock upon which our successful democracy stands – that one could aspire to no more nobler role than that of public servant ... making a positive difference in the lives of others. But I also learned that an equal or perhaps even more important role is that of being an active and informed citizen. A friend and I have been having long discussions about this lately. But it is not a new subject.

Thomas Jefferson once said: “An enlightened citizenry is indispensable for the proper functioning of a republic.” More recently, Ralph Nader said “There can be no daily democracy without daily citizenship.” They are right!

Yet today, here in the United States, meaningful citizen participation in our government is at a nadir. Adults and youth have a demonstrable lack of knowledge and understanding of history, geography, economics, and government. Between presidential elections there is a general disengagement of the voting public. We have an obvious decline in civility in American politics (just read the blogs, or listen to talk radio). In the media there is a triumph of celebrity over substance. I believe all this is at least partly because we no longer really teach and learn about Civics.

A 2006 National Geographic Society poll found that 88 percent of young Americans could not find Afghanistan on a map while 75 percent couldn't locate Israel or Iran either. The frightening thing is that by 2010 kids scored even worse than in 2006.

Now, there are some efforts being made to help, among them a web-based program supported by retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, a regular visitor to Montana, who recently received an honorary degree at UM.

O'Connor believes that the fundamental purpose of public education in America has always been to build good citizens. She has warned that “ill-informed high school

students soon become ill-informed citizens.” She has further noted that “Less than half of Americans today can name all three branches of government, yet three in four can name all of The Three Stooges.”

That, my friends and fellow citizens, is not acceptable. We need more civics in the classroom. And in getting started, or should I say “re-started,” in restoring Civics to the curriculum in our schools, public and private alike – and at all levels -- we should not just offer classes in civics, we should require them.

So, as I teach 20th Century Montana History here at Highlands College and Honors classes about Butte at Montana Tech, my thoughts and my efforts turn to building better citizens.

Our education policy makers, elected and appointed, need to do the same.

Over the last nine years, Governors Schweitzer and Bullock have strongly recommitted Montana to its historical tradition of support for education. Kindergarten & early education are more available, college is becoming more affordable and accessible. Yet, too many people see education only functionally -- as a route to a good job. It is that, but education must be even more – it needs to be a route to better citizenship. The people need it ... but our state and country also need it. Yes, we need better citizens if we are to extend the life of the longest functioning democracy in the world. And the first step to better citizenship is to require all students to take meaningful civics classes – at all levels.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte, thinking about building better citizens through civics.

Evan Barrett, Butte, has spent the last 44 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.