Tackling the American Civics Education Crisis

BY MEGAN MCCLURE

Millions of American students and adults are unfamiliar with how their government works, leading experts to sound the alarm about a crisis in civics education. Armed with evidence of the lack of knowledge, the Civics Education Initiative and other programs aim to reverse a trend they say leaves American democracy vulnerable.

Less than 30 percent of fourth-, eighth- and 12th-grade students were proficient in civics, and a significant gap persists among racial and ethnic groups, according to the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics report. NAEP also reports a decline in the overall civic knowledge of high school seniors between 2006 and 2010. In addition, a survey of 1,416 adults by the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) revealed that only one-third of those surveyed could name the three branches of government. One-fifth of respondents think that a 5-4 Supreme Court ruling is sent back to Congress for consideration.

The results of this survey “demonstrate that many know surprisingly little about these branches of government … [and] offer dramatic evidence of the need for more and better civics education,” said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the APPC.

What led to this decline in civics education and knowledge? Three major changes helped drive the crisis, according to Dr. Lucian Spataro of the Civics Education Initiative (CEI). First, the country’s education system began to focus on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). “Parallel to that, standardized testing became the way to measure success and performance. Then, simultaneously, school and teacher funding began to be tied to the results of these tests,” he said. “These consequences had never before been associated with assessment.” Teaching what is tested became the norm and civics (along with the other “soft sciences”) was de-emphasized in the curriculum.

Those looking to remedy the situation are not starved for organizations willing to help. There are myriad groups providing legislative guidance, talking points, teacher lesson plans, and resources and programs for students.

The Civics Education Initiative

One such organization is the Joe Foss Institute, which realized that “students are not learning how to run our country, how government is meant to operate as outlined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, and more importantly, the history behind how our country came to be—the philosophy behind America’s values.” This realization prompted the Institute to create the Civics Education Initiative.

The goal of the CEI is to make passing the U.S. citizenship test a requirement for high school graduation. The reasoning behind the Initiative is simple: Civics education is necessary to produce well-informed, understanding citizens, committed to participating in the American system. The initiative recommends teaching and testing students on American civics. The CEI is working with various stakeholders, including lawmakers, to make passing the 100-question test (answering at least 60 questions correctly) necessary for graduation.

Fifteen states have passed bills requiring high school students to pass the U.S. citizenship test in order to graduate or that civics be included in existing courses or tests. Twenty states are considering similar legislation in 2017. The ultimate goal of the CEI is the enactment of legislation in all 50 states by Sept. 17, 2017, the 230th anniversary of the U.S. Constitution.

The initiative has met with pushback from teachers’ unions, the American Civil Liberties Union and advocates for students with disabilities, who claim it is an unfunded mandate that places even more pressure on classroom teachers who are already stretched to their limit. State lawmakers, however,
have been able to pass legislation by discussing the issue with key stakeholders and pointing out that there is no additional cost. The test is already provided and administered online, in multiple languages, by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS).

Other Civics Education Programs

There are also groups promoting civics education in ways other than legislation. Former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor founded iCivics.org in 2010. iCivics uses web-based games and online tools to help teach students important civics lessons. iCivics, along with the Annenberg Center, the American Bar Association, the Library of Congress and others have banded together to create the Civics Renewal Network, which provides high-quality, no-cost learning materials to teachers. Almost every state legislature provides hands-on learning about the legislative process and representative democracy. Through various programs such as mock sessions, page and internship programs, youth legislatures, citizen education forums and support for teachers, state legislatures are able to educate students and the public about the role of the legislative branch of government.

The We the People Program from the Center for Civic Education also promotes “civic competence and responsibility among upper elementary and secondary students” using simulated congressional hearings, textbooks and other interactive strategies.

The NCSL Legislators Back to School Program, in partnership with the Center for Civic Education, is also a source of free materials for state legislators interested in visiting classrooms to engage students in conversations and learning about representative democracy. It is designed to increase understanding about the legislative process and the job of a state legislator.

CEI and other allies of American civics education are seeking to bring attention to the “quiet crisis” of the decline of civics education. However, Spataro stresses that the CEI and other civics education organizations are "not the end-all be-all" for remedying the civics education crisis in America. They are starting points, meant to "shine a spotlight on civics education in America" once again.