



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.



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Students and Legislatures: A Two-Way Street | OAS Episode 30 | March 22, 2018

Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

For state legislators, their time during session is spent on the floor of the chamber, in committee rooms working with staff on writing bills, responding to constituent questions, and working with their colleagues or other state government officials on important issues. Many do this balancing the workload of their other professions.

There’s an active segment of state legislators who see another area that needs their attention, and that’s educating young people about government and ways that they can be active participants. We’ll get two unique perspectives on civic education today. Later in the program we’ll talk with Boston metropolitan legislator, Christine Barber (D), who regularly meets with students and encourages them to come to the capitol. She’ll talk about how she has seen a more active and pointed participation by students recently.

But first, we’ll talk with Kentucky state Senator Jimmy Higdon (R), who started participating in the National Conference of State Legislatures’ America’s Legislators Back to School Program, and discusses the two things that he wants to make sure students know that are needed to help our republic survive. And he discusses how one group of eighth graders changed his opinion about a piece of legislation.

We’re talking with Jimmy Higdon, who is the president pro tem of the Kentucky Senate. It’s a pleasure to talk with you today, senator.

JH: It’s great to talk with you today also.

Gene: Thank you. We want to get your perspective on a program the National Conference of State Legislatures sponsors called the America’s Legislators Back to School Program. I understand you’re an enthusiastic participant. Tell us why you got involved.

JH: Gene, I was at a national conference several years ago, really my first year that I was a legislator, and learned about the program. NCSL had surveyed a lot of school children about civics and one of the things they discovered: a very large percentage of school children had never met an elected official.

So one of the reasons that this Legislators in School Program was born was to get legislators out to schools where students could actually meet an elected official. I'm in rural Kentucky; that's probably not the case in rural Kentucky; a lot of students meet elected officials probably on a daily basis on the streets of small towns. But when you get into the urban areas, that's probably true: many kids have never met an elected official.

That kind of got me going and NCSL had some great information and programs to follow and videos and talking points and brochures for the students. I started 16 years ago when I was a state representative then, and I visited every school in my district. I'd go to the junior highs and high schools also. But now as a state senator with 25 elementary schools, I go to every elementary school in my district now.

Gene: Tell us about the reactions you get from the students, senator, and how does it vary from grade to grade?

JH: It varies from school to school. Some students are more enthusiastic and better prepared than others. But overall in Kentucky, social studies is taught in the fifth grade, and overall the kids are really... they're like sponges – they love to hear history and practical stories. And I ask a lot of questions of them, so I try to keep them engaged.

At the end there's a little video called Citizen Brain that I do for fifth graders and Citizen Brain is pretty cool. Then they ask me a lot of questions at the end.

Gene: Well senator, there's a sense across the country I think that millions of students and adults, for that matter, are a little unfamiliar with how their government works, and one could easily argue that people seem much more aware of politics in this country. But how would you characterize their knowledge of why government in America is structured the way it is?

JH: We teach social studies and civics I think at a spot in elementary school and, again, I think they're like sponges and they soak all that up. But as they continue through school, I don't think there are a lot of other classes that fill in to those things that they took in in the fifth grade, and I talk to them about our form of government and about the things that are required for a republic to exist.

You know, they get it and they understand it but, again, I think probably our biggest problem is we do teach it, they do learn it, but it's not that often put into a practical application. But I think schools are doing better now. I think they try to get the kids engaged. There are a lot of issues out there now that are high-profile that the kids are really very interested in.

Gene: I believe you said you've been doing this for about 16 years or so?

JH: Yes sir.

Gene: How would you say things have changed over time? Do you find students more engaged? Have you noticed any type of trend at all?

JH: I would tell you that fifth graders are fifth graders; I have not noticed a big change probably other than the clothes that they wear, their hairstyles. A fifth grader back in 2003 is not a whole lot different than a fifth grader now, and we haven't changed our core content a lot, what they're taught in the fifth grade.

I don't see a great deal of difference in them other than the environment around them has changed. I think on some things they're a little more knowledgeable because of our electronic age. Back 15, 16 years ago, they didn't really sit down and watch the news; they really were not that aware of the world around them.

And now with electronics, with the iPhones and computers and iPads and all the things that they have access to now, they do understand things that are going on in the country and around the world that they're interested in. So they're probably a little more worldly now than they were years ago.

Gene: Senator, you're a businessman; I understand you grew up in a big family and you served in the Army. How has your background shaped your interest in civic education?

JH: I've always tried to give back. My stay in the military was fairly short; I was in the Army Reserve. But as I was growing up, I always noticed these adults that participated in the things that I was doing and kind of made the program a little better because they were helping.

So when I got back home and went into the grocery business in 1976, I got very involved in activities to give back to my community. In fact, I was probably an overachiever. I probably did too much. But it was something that I really liked to do, and that took me to schools a lot; it took me to a lot of civic things.

I did fundraising to do some work at the local high school. So I was involved in a lot of things in the community. But in a community in rural Kentucky, any time you do something, it's going to revolve around school at some time or another.

Gene: Another unique characteristic of yours is that you served in both the House and the Senate in Kentucky. Has that given you a unique perspective when you're talking with students?

JH: It has. I've been fortunate: I've served in the minority in the House and I've served in the majority in the Senate. I know the difference between how serving in the minority certainly makes you a little more effective legislator. I think you have to work harder to get things done.

Kentucky has six congressional districts. I've actually served in all six congressional districts, which... there are probably very few legislators in Kentucky that could say that.

Gene: Wow.

JH: But yes, serving in the House and the Senate has definitely helped my knowledge base about the process.

Gene: So as you participate in this program and, again, I mentioned you're a pretty enthusiastic participant, what advice would you give to your colleagues across the country? Would you encourage more legislators to be involved in this program?

JH: I want to tell you, and I tell my legislators, young state reps and state senators, not necessarily young, but new: it's one of the most rewarding things that I can say happens to me on a weekly basis is to walk down the street and a young person knows you by name. The only way they know me is because I've been to school to talk to them.

It's very rewarding that they know you. It's very rewarding when you go and you share your knowledge and experience with them. It's very rewarding when you're there after class and they really want to know about you. They ask some personal questions. My number one question I get asked is: Have you ever met the president? And then the second one is, you know: How old are you? And the third one is: What kind of car do you drive? So it is extremely rewarding.

Gene: Any final thoughts that you'd like to share about civic education and public engagement, senator?

JH: As elected officials, anything we can do to help students understand our form of government, help them understand that there are two things that you have to do to make sure that our republic survives: #1: you have to vote, and most of them are too young to vote, but they understand the concept; they have to elect good people, because those people they elect actually work for them, and that's the way they need to look at it, that elected officials work for them.

A lot of people think it's the other way around, but their elected officials work for them. I want them to understand that, that we are accountable and we work for them.

The other thing that I try to explain to them, and they get it, is participating in the process. And I tell them a story about years ago when I was in the House of Representatives, there was a helmet bill, a requirement for anyone under 16 to wear a helmet when they rode a four-wheeler. And I was not in favor of that bill; didn't plan to vote for the bill 'cause I thought it was an intrusion... some kid would be riding a four-wheeler in their front yard and the police would stop and give their parents a ticket 'cause they didn't have a helmet on.

I got letters; I got 100 letters from eighth graders. One letter said: Dear Mr. Higdon, please vote for the helmet bill. Last year my brother was in a four-wheeler accident, didn't have a bruise on his body, but he died from a head injury. Had he been wearing a helmet, he'd be here today.

And I tell them: I changed my mind. Those fifth graders changed my mind. So even as a fifth grader, if you participate in the process, you can make a difference. Those fifth graders made a difference in that bill, and not just to do it as fifth graders as a writing assignment to write me a letter. I tell them: I've got plenty to do. They don't have to write me letters. But I want them to start in the fifth grade and for the rest of their life understand that if it's important to you; you need to participate in the process.

Gene: That's a terrific message to end on. We've been talking civic education with Kentucky Senate President pro tem, Jimmy Higdon. Senator, thank you for being on our program today.

JH: Well, thank you for allowing me to go on. Gene, it's certainly an honor and a privilege to talk to you and thank you for calling me.

Gene: We'll be right back with our interview with Massachusetts state Representative Christine Barber after this short break.

Break

Gene: We're talking with Representative Christine Barber from Massachusetts. Thank you, Representative, for being a part of our program today.

CB: Thank you for having me.

Gene: Tell us why you ran for office. What prompted you to get involved?

CB: I'm actually someone who never thought about running for office when I was younger. It seemed very separate from me and from my skillset. But I was involved on a lot of issues, on a lot of social justice issues and some community organizing, and I realized over time that the way change often happens is at the local and state level through politics, and got more involved in the political side.

And I worked for a couple of state representatives, both women, who were mentors and really showed me a different type of politician, and I learned a lot about what the government could actually do and a lot of good that I think government is capable of doing.

So the first time I ran it was actually because of issues in my neighborhood. So the neighborhood I lived in had problems with food access and equitable transportation and lack of affordable housing, and that was why I got involved. And as a state rep, it's a good connection for me between policy work that I've done and then local organizing work.

Gene: Because you've also served on the legislature staff, is that correct?

CB: Yeah. So I was a staff person in the legislature and I worked on healthcare reform in Massachusetts and I worked on healthcare advocacy outside. So I had worked on the policy side, but I'd also worked on the local level on different issues. So as a state rep, it kind of marries those two for me.

Gene: Do you think it's important for legislators to be reaching out to students these days?

CB: I do. I actually talk to students fairly frequently and kind of at every opportunity I can get. And I think there are a few different reasons for that. One of the things I do is I often have students shadow me also. So I'll speak to groups, but I'll also have students, usually high school or college students, come in and spend a day with me and shadow me at the State House and get an idea of the different kind of work that we do.

And I do that in part because I wish that had been there for me, and I want our government to be more representative of people in our communities, and some of that is getting more people to run for office. We don't have nearly the numbers of women or people of color in office and the only way to address that is to encourage more people to run.

But secondly, even for those who aren't interested in running in the future, young people want change, they interact with the government already, and figuring out the right tools about how decisions are made helps them to get involved and understand that they have a role to play too in our government.

Gene: So when you talk to students, what kind of questions do you typically get?

CB: It's a good question. So I actually had over 100 students come see me last week about gun control and addressing gun violence in their communities. And of course they talked about their issues, but they wanted to know how decisions got made and why it hadn't happened yet.

So they wanted to know more about how many people in the state are elected, what the power structure looks like, what leadership looks like, and that's an important part – we do have a diverse state; we have a lot of different viewpoints; and there is a process for getting things done. And I think it's helpful for them to understand that better.

Previously the kind of questions I would typically get were about me, about running for office and trying to understand why someone would do that: Why would you run for office? And usually we would talk about more local issues that I think are real to the kids too; you know, schools, parks, basic community safety, transportation.

But I think the shift is now they're talking about a really critical issue and one that does affect them and affects their community, and have gotten more serious about it.

Gene: As our country is politically divided as it is right now, do you believe that civic education is needed for students and adults?

CB: Yeah, I do. I think it actually benefits everyone. It's important for all of us to know how government works. Everyone cares about an issue or seeks some kind of change in their community. And I think understanding that government is a way, in many cases, to make that change and understanding the different levers, the different decision makers, even if no matter what side of an issue you're on, to understand how that process works is important to actually getting something done and playing a role in your community.

Gene: And so what lessons have you taken away from being a state legislator? What have you learned about government and the legislative process that you wish everyone else knew?

CB: So one is not to be shy about contacting your elected officials about issues that you care about. I was just talking to a constituent who said she was always worried to contact any elected official because she didn't feel like an expert on an issue.

We really do listen to our constituents. That's how we often set our priorities. There are so many different issues out there; we're pulled in a lot of different directions. So I rely on my constituents to let me know their concerns, to let me know their good ideas, even if you don't know every single thing about an issue is really important.

And I think the other is that government can be complicated, but it's okay to ask questions. And I don't assume everyone who contacts me knows about how the state legislative process works exactly, and I try to explain some things. But asking questions is fine. You don't have to be an expert.

Gene: So what question have I not asked you today about civics education and communicating with students?

CB: I think the one question is how we can do it more broadly. So it's actually interesting that we're talking today because in Massachusetts we don't require civics education right now, but we've talked about it a lot and there's actually a bill that was recently reported out of the Education Committee and it has pretty broad support to develop a civic curriculum and require students to learn civics, but also to create a project at the high school level, which I think is good – it makes it real.

So I'm hopeful that we're going to move this bill forward and we could actually take some important steps to build this into our everyday lives a little bit more.

Gene: We've been talking with Representative Christine Barber from Massachusetts. Representative, thank you for being on "Our American States."

CB: Thanks again for having me.

Gene: And that concludes this edition of "Our American States." If you'd like to know more about America's Legislators Back to School Program, we will put a link to the website in our description of this program at www.ncsl.org/podcast.

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