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A solid education in civics is essential to democracy

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At the start of the republic, Thomas Jefferson recognized that education was critical if we were to maintain our new and fragile democracy: "And if we think them (the people) not enlightened enough, the remedy is to inform them by education."

At the turn of the 20th century, John Dewey observed that "Democracy needs to be reborn in every generation and education is its midwife."

The focus on creating citizens as the core mission of the public schools was reiterated in the 2003 Civic Mission of Schools report: "Recognizing that individuals do not automatically become free and responsible citizens but must be educated for citizenship, there has been a growing call for new strategies that can capitalize on young people's idealism while addressing disengagement from political and civic institutions so that we can better preserve and enhance America's tradition of citizen involvement. One of the most promising approaches to increasing young people's informed engagement is school-based civic education."

A generation ago, students had civics courses at the upper elementary, middle and high school levels. Today, most American schools require only one civics course at best, and the majority of school districts in New Jersey require no civic education course at all. The results of the decline in civic learning are staggering.

Although youth turnout this primary season was up, two-thirds of students scored below proficient on the most recent National Assessment of Education Progress in civics. Less than a third of eighth-graders could identify the historical purpose of the Declaration of Independence, and less than a fifth of high school seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy. Low-income and minority students scored even lower on these assessments.

In New Jersey, the situation is even more disturbing. Unlike 30 other states, New Jersey does not require a single civics course at any time in the K-12 education of our young people. An Inventory of Civic Education in New Jersey, conducted in the fall of 2004, revealed that only 39 percent of New Jersey school districts require all of their students to take a civics course in any grade. And this number has been reduced over the past four

years due to high-stakes No Child Left Behind testing.

According to a 2008 report by the Center for Education Policy, three-quarters of schools nationally have reported a decrease in the amount of time spent on social studies in order to devote more time to preparing for literacy and math exams. Except for students taking an American government elective (10 to 20 percent of the student body of any given high school), students in most New Jersey school districts are exposed to one week to one month of civic content knowledge as part of U.S. history, with little emphasis on the importance of citizen action.

We are graduating a significant number of young people who have no sense of what it means to be a citizen in a democratic society and no sense of civic responsibility. But we have an opportunity to change this. The state Board of Education is considering how high school graduation requirements should be changed to better reflect the needs of the 21st century. Most of the discussion has been focused on math and science. The High School Redesign Commission recommended that a semester of economics be required, but there was no mention of civics.

While math, science and economics are certainly necessary, education officials fail to consider the other purpose of high schools: to create citizens in a multicultural, democratic society. While not every student will grow up to be a scientist or a mathematician, every student will be a citizen. If our schools do not prepare students to think critically about what they hear from politicians and the media, how can we expect the next generation to answer the challenges that will face America in the decades to come?

Civics courses provide lessons about government, the Constitution and the rights and responsibilities of citizens and apply this knowledge for a better understanding of the changing definition of citizenship in the United States. Civics courses need not be boring, abstract and unconnected with community involvement. They can and should give our young people the tools for improving their communities and the desire to do so.

Every New Jersey student deserves civics instruction for his own enlightenment. Every New Jersey student needs civics instruction because only then can we look forward to a thriving democracy for generations to come.

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