



Citizenship 101

Are California's K-12 schools failing at civics education?

The statistics are sobering to anyone who worries about the health of America's democracy.

Just 13 percent of high school seniors in the United States showed a solid understanding of U.S. history, according to the 2012 Nation's Report Card survey.

Fewer than half of California high school seniors who were surveyed said it was their responsibility to be actively involved in state and local issues. That disengagement shows at the polls, as fewer than half of eligible young people ages 18 to 24 voted in the 2012 elections.

According to the 2010 Nation's Report Card for Civics Education, only 67 percent of high school students actually study the Constitution in school, and just 24 percent of them demonstrate proficiency in civics. On the 2012 National Assessment of Education

Progress Civic Assessment, less than one-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.

Those findings have prompted a state task force convened by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson and California Supreme Court Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye to call for a transformation in how civics education is taught, changing it from an "afterthought" 12th-grade government class to an integrated part of the curriculum at all grade levels.

"Most of our students are not prepared. It's so shocking," says Deborah Genzer, a senior analyst with the Administrative Office of the Courts and a staff member of the California Task Force on K-12 Civic

THINKSTOCK

Families can promote civic learning

- Take your child with you to the polls this November, urges Judi Balma, a political science professor at Fullerton College and the student outreach coordinator for the League of Women Voters of North Orange County. "We find patterns. If parents vote, kids will vote." High school students can also volunteer as poll workers to experience democracy firsthand.
- Take advantage of local resources, such as programs for high school students offered by the Constitutional Rights Foundation of Orange County. This nonprofit education organization offers a Constitutional Day conference each September, featuring top legal scholars and justices, as well as mock trial and peer court programs, a law day and a career forum. Their programs are available to all Orange County high school students at no cost to participating youth. For more information, go online to [crfoc.org].
- Ask your teacher and principal how they are promoting civic learning. A 2007 federal mandate requires that all public schools celebrate the ratification of the U.S. Constitution each fall, so parents can ask what their child's school does to celebrate Constitution Day, says attorney Alan Crivaro, a board member of Orange County's Constitutional Rights Foundation. School or youth groups can arrange superior court tours or visits to their city councils. The California Secretary of State's office has free resources to help schools conduct a mock election, says Deborah Genzer, a staff member of the California Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning.
- Go online. Retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor is a tireless promoter of improving civics education, and her nonprofit organization, iCivics, offers free lesson plans and computer games. Children can play games about the Bill of Rights, the branches of government, the Supreme Court and more at [icivics.org].

Learning. "Civics learning has been kind of pushed aside as one of the missions of our schools, and the courts are starting to feel the effects of that."

"We can look at the dysfunction in Washington as one result," adds Rob Vicario, history coordinator of the Orange County Department of Education. "My mission is to remind educators that it's one thing to prepare our students to be career and college ready, but it's equally important to have them ready for civic life."

Experts say that students' disengagement from civics is a result of many factors, including a focus on back-to-basics academic requirements and test-driven accountability that forced civics education out of the curriculum, as well as tighter budgets that have led many schools to cut field trips to Sacramento.

"High-stakes testing has narrowed the curriculum. There's a saying that 'If it isn't tested, it isn't taught,'" Vicario says.

For that reason, the task force recommended that civic learning be included in the state assessment system.

Another recommendation from the Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning is to rewrite the state's history and social studies standards to incorporate civic learning in every grade. Today, the focus of civics education is a semester-long government class taken in the 12th grade, which comes too late for the many students who have dropped out.

The history and social standards haven't been revised in 15 years, meaning the current standards do not even mention the 9/11 Muslim terrorist attacks, let alone the wars or concerns about national security and civil liberties that followed, the report notes.

The report also faults the current curriculum for focusing on memorization over participatory skills. In the primary grades, an effective lesson in participatory civics could involve a class brainstorming and writing its own Class Constitution to govern behavior in class, or a more complex project in which students and teachers work to organize a campus

recycling program or school garden.

At the higher grades, schools could reach out to government, business, the courts and nonprofit organizations to create projects and internships for students involving community issues of interest to them.

The task force also recommended that schools involve students in school governance and decision-making to create a culture that "embodies democratic values and principles." That's especially important in lower-income or minority communities that historically have lower voter participation rates, leaders say.

"Studies show that if your child attends a high-income school, it's two times more likely for your kids to be taught how to vote," Genzer says. "They need to let schools know that democracy is for everyone, not just for some."

That's just the kind of process that is happening at Savannah High School in Anaheim, which received a three-year grant from the S.D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation as part of its California Democracy School Civic Learning Initiative, says Steve Little, an AP government teacher and the school's civics learning coordinator.

To become a California Democracy School, Savannah is incorporating civics education for all its students. Administrators, teachers and students are working to involve students in the schools' governance by creating a student government in addition to its traditional ASB, which focuses on activities. Every fourth-period class has elected representatives to bring student concerns to the forefront, such as issues of student tardiness and discipline, bathroom cleanliness or the availability of buses.

"There's a lot of value in having them be active participants in what they're doing," Little says. "Our goal at Savannah has been to put a lot of it into the students' hands themselves. If they're taking ownership now, that ownership will go with them after they graduate."

Additional information about the K-12 Civic Learning Task Force's report and efforts to improve civic education can be found online at [powerofdemocracy.org]. 