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Newsletter 29

Current affairs in Civics Education

In reviewing the events of 2024 and the challenges going forward, most of us will agree that we need to find the elusive means of both accepting our difference of opinion and uniting us as one nation, truly “indivisible with liberty and justice for all.” I contend that we must work from the bottom up, since working from the top down has consistently failed us, at least during recent administrations. We must enlighten this and future generations in good citizenship, informed patriotism and civil discourse. And I see this best accomplished by teaching more of the civics, government and US history currently taught in middle and high school, and college when applicable --- but with an added focus on current affairs that would address critical issues, e.g., foreign policy, immigration, climate change, and the economy and its relation to personal finances. And the students right now are the only captive audience that must listen to this message.

Cover these subjects with a good dose of media literacy and we have a base of informed citizens, voters or soon to be. Civics and United States History are currently taught in my state of Connecticut in middle and high school, though not to the extent that many of us would like to see --- only a half credit in Civics is now required for a high school diploma. Personal finance and climate change are scheduled to be added as requirements later.

Dana Goldstein in her December 21 article in *The New York Times*, “Why It’s Hard to Control What Is Taught in Public Schools” indicated that “for years, policymakers seeking to improve academic achievement ignored social studies [including Civics and US History].

Over the past two decades, federal and state standardized testing mandates pushed schools to focus primarily on math and reading.” No question that reading and basic math are key, but Civics was surely not the place to cut. Without Civics and the other basics of good citizenship, students cannot reach their full potential as contributors to society regardless of their mastery of the rest of their studies. I would point out here that many with whom I speak are of the opinion that both the quality and quantity of Civics now being taught are inadequate. Yes, regarding the quantity, but I am very familiar with the framework and standards relevant to Civics being taught in Connecticut, and they are outstanding as a basis for the curriculum.

Take a look at some issues most concerning voters in the recent elections, specifically personal finances and immigration. Were these adequately addressed in school, our youth at least would be better informed voters.

Of course, it is essential that staffs have specific support and guidance to teach these lessons in citizenship representing both sides of the controversies in an objective manner. This is especially important in today’s climate of misinformation with misdirected elected officials beholden to the most vocal extremists, liberal and conservative---and uninformed parents beating up on both school boards and school staff over books and curriculum.

Sarah Randazzo in her election day article in *The Wall Street Journal* “Teachers Leave Current Events Out of Classroom” stated that “It is hard to imagine a better backdrop for teaching students about the American political process. Yet many civics and history teachers say they are keeping current events out of their classrooms this fall.” She went on to quote Harvard Graduate School of Education’s lecturer, Eric Soto-Shed who said “What I’m seeing is everything from ‘This is too

hot, I can't touch it,' to 'These issues are too important for me not to take a stand'”

According to an August 14 article in *Education Week*, most teachers didn't plan to address the 2024 presidential election in their classrooms, with many citing the possibility of parent complaints and disrespectful classroom discussions. But I would contend that many teachers see this as the perfect opportunity to address both media literacy and civil discourse. I doubt very much that teachers and other mentors 50 years ago, when teaching citizenship and patriotism was paramount, shied away from controversial issues. Or how about the 18th and early 19th centuries when Hamilton's and Jefferson's conflicting ideas on effective government were taught?

Current affairs worked into Civics or US History lessons, would be an excellent way to start revising middle and high school curricula to focus more heavily on how our constitutional democracy works. If you think you've heard this before, you did. I addressed this topic in last April's newsletter and will undoubtedly keep harping on it for a while. In each of the lessons, weekly or otherwise, focus on one current issue related to that lesson. CNN 10, a daily news show for students over 13 and other viewers who want to learn about current events and world issues in 10 minutes or less, is one excellent source. It provides to school systems videos from the current news that can be selected specifically as aids for teaching current affairs and civics. They can be viewed in class and/or transcribed to take home much like the “Weekly Readers” of the past that are familiar to the more senior of our readers.

I would recommend that periodic, perhaps bi-weekly, lessons in US History or Civics focus on one critical controversial current issue with constitutionality considerations, e.g., immigration, voting rights, or the economy and the role played in it by the three separate branches.

There could be 10 or more issues selected for a school year that would be predetermined by the states Boards of Education in a menu from which to select. Or the teachers could make their own selections based on state guidelines. The issues would be presented offering pros and cons for classroom discussion and homework to evaluate sources and use evidence.

The Social Studies Framework in my state, Connecticut, when referring to “Motivation of Students” states that “Children and adults are naturally curious about the...world they inhabit.” I would add that questions and conclusions addressing the current world are more apt to motivate than those addressing the historic world. So, in order to foster motivation and a natural almost automatic desire to discuss with friends and family what is taught in class, and to foster civic engagement, the focus should be shifted more in the direction of the current issues.

I have just addressed the only real captive audience that we have that guarantees that the young, some of them high schoolers currently eligible to vote, others voters to be, are “informed.” But it also has the advantage of reaching another somewhat captive audience, the parents of these students.

If we can get this significant focus on current events included in the civics, US History, or other social studies courses, we can be well on our way to reaching both misinformed and uninformed parents. And putting these lessons on paper or a flash drive as a handout that students can take home and use to open an after school continuing dialog with their parents and siblings gives us a perfect opportunity to practice civil discourse.

Typical discussions on current affairs during these times might include: What roles did both Trump and Biden play that contributed to a lower

cost of living in the former's administration than in the latter's---what was Biden's role in creating the high inflation during his administration and what if any were/are the positive tradeoffs of his actions---what if any are the positive outcomes countering the well-known costs and societal burdens of our current inefficient immigration policies---should we be willing to personally sacrifice by paying higher energy and gasoline costs in order to develop clean air and sustainable energy, and control climate change---in discussing these issues should we consider the wellbeing of our current generation or should we be focusing more on future generations of our children and grandchildren?

Imagine if just 10 percent of families with children that listen to and take home these current affairs lessons would end up opening a continuing dialog after school based on these handouts, what a positive effect it would have in increasing the number of informed adults, informed voters--- the ultimate in rebuilding our democracy from the bottom up. It will be at least another generation before we will get this focus on good citizenship in middle and high school learning to take meaningful effect on the voting public, but the sooner we start, the better. In the meantime, however, there is something that we can begin doing right away, in time to influence the 2026 mid-term elections.

We can all better familiarize ourselves with the Constitution and other primary source documents. An excellent resource for this is "American Legacy – The United States Constitution – and Other Essential Documents of American Democracy" a small pamphlet available from the Center for Civic Education www.civiced.org . Make a point to engage in civil discourse with those of persuasions other than ours. Learn what "makes them tick." Then, from a better-informed position, we can contact our state and federal Senators and Representatives with

a good argument for why they should take our positions on critical issues up for vote.

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Step Forward America

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