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Andrew Miller: If only Ron DeSantis had learned about democracy from my sixth grade teacher

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Mrs. Mohler was known and loved for tossing out impromptu philosophical questions to stimulate our preadolescent brains. She wanted to know, “What is a Republic?” “Why are checks and balances needed?” “Does the end justify the means?” and “What does it mean to live in a democracy?”

When I read that all high schools in Leon County, Florida, added ten more minutes to each day of the academic year, I thought about Mrs. Mohler. She was my sixth grade teacher in Highland Elementary School, located outside West View. (The last time I saw my school, it had become an apartment building. Oh, and my home was within walking distance of the school, but we took a school bus.)

Using the minutes

Florida administrators added those extra minutes to ensure students received the full 900 hours of instruction each academic year. Sounded reasonable to me, but then I thought: how will those extra ten minutes be used?

In Mrs. Mohler’s class, we eagerly dove into her philosophical questions, preferring to discuss ideas rather than practice the multiplication tables. But our teacher knew what she was doing.

She was teaching us to think critically, express ourselves clearly, and respect others' opinions. Although there were no lesson plans or open textbooks, we were learning American history, civics, and the rudiments of philosophy, some of which I still remember.

Mrs. Mohler wanted us to learn about America so we would be good citizens. Many Americans — who weren't fortunate enough to have her as their sixth grade teacher — are woefully ignorant about our country.

In 2011, Newsweek reported that 29% of Americans couldn't name the vice president. Forty four percent couldn't define the Bill of Rights, and 6% couldn't circle Independence Day on the calendar. I'm sure that's only gotten worse.

In 2024, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni found that when given four options and "Not sure," only 37% of college students identified John Roberts as the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Less than 1/3 knew which branch of the federal government has the authority to declare war and the same amount thought the Supreme Court oversaw impeachment trials.

Finding the test

Robert Pondiscio, of the American Enterprise Institute, certainly never heard of Mrs. Mohler, but he also wanted Americans to understand our history and civics. He suggested that every high school student should be able to pass the American Citizenship Test before they graduate. Sounds like a good idea to me, and I bet Mrs. Mohler would agree.

Why don't Florida teachers use those extra minutes to work through questions on the American Citizenship Test? Applicants are required to study all 100 questions, although only 10 will be asked. To pass, they must get at least six correct. Some are easy: Who was our first U.S. president? What happened in the United States on September 11, 2001? Others are more difficult: what year was the U.S. Constitution signed? How many voting members are in the House of Representatives?

In 2018, the Institute for Citizens & Scholars administered the test to 1,000 Americans. Results were dismal; Only 24% knew what Benjamin Franklin was famous for; 37% believed he invented the light bulb. Twelve percent thought General Dwight Eisenhower led troops in the Civil War, and six percent thought he was a Vietnam War general. Only 60% could name the countries that fought in World War II.

Of those surveyed, only 36% passed. Perspective citizens did much better. More than 96% passed.

The Trump administration recently upgraded the Citizenship test. The new version has 128 questions, and prospective citizens must correctly answer 12 out of 20. Simpler questions were replaced with more meaty ones: Why did the U.S. engage in the Vietnam War? In the Korean War? The correct answer for both is: "to stop the spread of communism."

"To stop the spread of Communism?" Now there's an exciting discussion topic.

Scripting the answers

According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, revisions will ensure that new citizens “contribute to America’s greatness.” A laudable goal, but new citizens must already be doing that since their pass rates were higher than for birthright Americans.

Twenty-first-century classrooms are more scripted than when I was in school. I doubt that Florida’s Governor Ron DeSantis would favor freewheeling classroom discussions about democracy, civil rights, slavery, and freedom of speech. If he allowed them, he would make sure they proceeded under strict guidelines.

Mrs. Mohler would not approve.

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