



CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS FOUNDATION

EDUCATING TOMORROW'S CITIZENS

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COMMENTARY

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"A Republic...If You Can Keep it."

by

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In 1787, shortly after the close of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, a woman interested in the proceedings approached Benjamin Franklin. "Well, doctor," she asked, "what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?" The venerable champion of American liberty replied, "A republic, madam, if you can keep it."

As we celebrate Constitution Week (Sept. 17-23), it would be wise to heed Franklin's challenge. A constitutional republic is not an easy form of government to maintain. It requires wise leaders more interested in the public good than in holding and using power. It requires an enlightened citizenry that understands and exercises its rights and duties and is willing to fight to preserve them. Moreover, both wise leaders and enlightened citizens must arise with each new generation, prepared and able to make the system work.

Nowhere is this more important than in California. California is the most diverse and multicultural of the 50 states. No single racial group composes a majority of the population and more than a quarter of the state's residents were born in another country. In addition, California's political system places high demands on its citizens.

From 2000 to 2006, California voters had to make decisions on some 90 state ballot propositions, and each year the electorate faces hundreds of city, county and community-college measures. California's governments need engaged citizens who keep themselves informed about the issues, who vote and who participate in the public-policy process. California businesses need leaders and employees who know how to negotiate and compromise, work together to solve problems and make sound decisions.

Our state's schools teach children to read and write, do math and use technology. So must schools educate the young about their constitutional heritage, the institutions and workings of government, and how to participate in a civil society as informed voters and as citizens committed to addressing the problems of their nation, state and communities. In short, California needs a world-class civics education for every pupil in every school.

Fortunately, we know what a quality civic education should look like. The Civic Mission of Schools, a report by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, identified educational practices that research shows are effective in developing knowledgeable and engaged

citizens. Students need quality instruction in history, government and law. Pupils need the opportunity to discuss current events and issues and participate in service activities linked to school and community problems and to what they are studying in the classroom.

Students should get involved in extracurricular activities and have a voice in school governance. Finally, students should take part in classroom simulations, such as mock trials and legislative hearings, to experience how democratic institutions work in the real world.

California already has a history-driven social studies framework and standards for all grade levels, but it lacks a consistent and comprehensive focus on civics content. It also fails to adequately address the development of civic skills. All students must learn how to analyze and evaluate public policies, state and support reasoned opinions and work with others to solve problems.

We must make sure our students are adequately prepared to address the public-policy issues and challenges California will face in the 21st century. Now there is a lack of instruction time for civics, indeed all of the social studies, in many California elementary schools. Because, federal and state mandates and assessment programs require performance gains in language arts, math and science, many schools, especially those serving disadvantaged student populations, have sacrificed social studies instruction for more time on these subjects. Unfortunately, missing critical civics content, concepts and skill development in these early grades will make it difficult for these learners to achieve proficiency as they progress through middle- and high-school civics course work, and ultimately as adult citizens.

Math, reading and science are critical, but so are civics and social studies. Schools need our support! To best educate the next generation of California citizens will require using well- researched and proven classroom and school practices. We must offer teachers and administrators professional development opportunities and the materials that incorporate these educational practices as well as encourage schools to support and adopt them.

Assuring a world-class civics education for every California child is everyone's responsibility. The California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools convened by the Constitutional Rights Foundation, in collaboration with the Center for Civic Education and nearly 100 civic and educational organizations, is working with public officials, legislators, educators, business leaders, legal professionals, parents and everyday citizens to strengthen civic education throughout the state.

Let's make sure our generation responds to Franklin's challenge. Our response must be: "Don't worry, Dr. Franklin, we will keep your republic."

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