Civics should be part of high school graduation requirements in New Jersey

Comments by

Arlene Gardner, Executive Director, NJ Center for Civic and Law-Related Education

to the New Jersey State Board of Education

January 21, 2009

I am Arlene Gardner, Executive Director of the New Jersey Center for Civic and Law-Related Education. I am speaking on behalf of the New Jersey Council for the Social Studies, the NJ Social Studies Supervisors Association, and the NJ Coalition to Support the Civic Mission of Schools which includes educators, parents, public policymakers and students concerned about the quantity and quality of civic education in our schools (see the attached *Star Ledger* article). I am here to ask you to include 2.5 credits of civics as a high school graduation requirement.

Why are thousands of teachers, school administrators, parents and even students asking you to include civics as a high school graduation requirement? Because it is not being taught. And it needs to be. Not just the purpose and functioning of government but also the skills for citizen action.

- A generation ago, students participated in civics courses at the upper elementary, middle and high school levels. Many believe that our students are still receiving an education in government and civic competency. However, they are not. A 2004 Inventory of Civic Education in New Jersey revealed that only 39% 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 No Child Left Behind. So, except for students taking an American Government elective (10-20% 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.

- The consequences of this lack of civic education are staggering. On the most recent (2006) National Assessment of Education Progress in civics (we don't have New Jersey specific-data because there is no statewide testing of social studies in New Jersey), less than a third of eighth graders could identify the historic 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.

- A 2003 report by the National Conference of State Legislatures revealed that those young people who *did* have a high school course in civics or American government were 2-3 times more likely to engage in civic activities and more likely to believe that they are personally responsible for making things better in society. So, civics courses can be effective.

- There is support for civic education from all quarters. Both the National Association of State Boards of Education and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills have emphasized civic literacy as a core part of 21st century skills. According to a 2004 survey by the Alliance for Representative Democracy as well as 30 years of polling by Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup, a large majority of the public believes that preparing students to be competent, responsible citizens is

one of the most important goals of the public schools, on par with preparing students for college and work.

- We know of no opposition to requiring a civics course for high school graduation. It has simply not been "on the agenda." But it needs to be. Since *every* student will become a citizen, shouldn't every student have the opportunity to participate in a civics course where he or she can gain the skills and desire to be an active participant in our democracy? Although New Jersey statutes and regulations clearly acknowledge the need for civic education; New Jersey, unlike 30 other states, does not require a single civics course at any time in the K-12 education of our young people. Unless required, it will not be taught.

- President Obama in his inaugural address yesterday told us that "what is required of us now is a new era of responsibility—a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world…This is the price and the promise of citizenship." A sense of responsibility does not happen by itself. It is taught. It may or may not be taught at home, which is why it must be taught in school. New Jersey needs to meet the demands of the 21st century—not just for reading, writing and math skills—but also for informed, engaged, vigilant citizens. That is why we need civic literacy as a requirement for high school graduation for all New Jersey students.

The Star-Ledger

A solid education in civics is essential to democracy

Monday, September 22, 2008

BY BRENDAN T. BYRNE, DANIEL J. O'HERN AND JOHN J. DEGNAN

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.

Brendan Byrne, former governor of New Jersey, is a partner at the Carella Byrne law firm. Daniel J. O'Hern, a retired justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court, is counsel to the Becker Meisel law firm. John J. Degnan, a former state attorney general, is vice chairman and chief operating officer of the Chubb Corp. They are the co-chairmen of the New Jersey Coalition to Support the Civic Mission of Schools.

©2008 Star Ledger
© 2008 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.