

Putting the Teaching of American History and Civics back in the classroom

Bill Number: Oversight

Hearing Date: April 10, 2003

Witness:

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Testimony:

Mr. Chairman, it is an honor to testify before this Committee on this most important issue of civic education. By promoting civic education in our schools, you and the co-sponsors of this legislation, including our Senator Christopher Dodd, have proven that education is not an issue to be sidelined in the face of pressing current issues. Your actions have shown us that education is a pressing current issue.

Unfortunately, to many Americans, our government seems intimidating and difficult to understand. Civic education is the key to comprehending, appreciating and eventually participating in our democratic process. The "We the People, the Citizen and the Constitution" program, which is administered by the Center for Civic Education and funded by the United States Department of Education by an act of Congress, takes the logical approach to understanding our American government, by tracing its manifestations to their source, the Constitution.

Our Constitution provides government with powers and limitations, to ensure congruence with the Founders' greatest hopes of a benevolent government ruling under popular consent. To many Americans, the Constitution is a revered document, written on browned parchment with faded ink. But to my class, the Constitution is a living gold mine of philosophical, political and social history.

Our state champion Trumbull, Connecticut "We the People" class is led by the knowledgeable and charismatic Mr. Peter Sullivan. The most incredible achievement that our class has made, and that Mr. Sullivan has in no small way facilitated, is the critical mass of Constitutional knowledge we have learned. My favorite moments in education occur when concepts and new information can be integrated into an overall framework of the issue. A beautiful symphony of debate and exchange miraculously manifests every morning in our class. Mr. Sullivan might bring up an issue currently on the Supreme Court docket, or ask the class for any news they heard the night before. An opinion is expressed by a student, a rebuttal by another. A particularly progressive member of the class might apply the issue to its broader social ramifications. A more critical member of the class would then appeal to our logic and the realistic implications of the Court's decisions.

Here, in a brew of free, creative thought, coupled with a solid foundation of Constitutional knowledge on which to anchor our arguments, lies true learning. Not

learning without any application to our lives, but knowledge that sheds light and understanding upon issues affecting a government that is involved in so many issues that concern our daily lives.

“We the People” was a class I signed up for at the end of my junior year, with great expectations in mind. I had heard from many older students that the class was more than a class. It was hard work, to be sure, but the rewards extended beyond grades and test scores.

In two weeks, our team will be competing in the National Finals for the “We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution” program. Throughout the year, a common goal has driven us together, and together forward. I have seen miraculous things this past year. I have seen quiet, reserved students suddenly emerge, citing complex Court cases with confidence and vigor in our daily debates. Students who many dreaded would succumb to the great demands of the program have only flourished to become our leaders and exemplars. Simply put, well-designed programs in civics, such as “We the People”, taught by teachers like Mr. Sullivan, make a difference in the classroom.

Surely, such changes in our young people can only be for the better. A civic education, as buttressed by the “We the People” program, does not merely press rote facts into receptive minds. It challenges us to use this information as support for our own arguments and opinions. Undoubtedly, everyone in our class has learned more than they bargained for about the United States government and her Constitution. But the benefits of this civic education extend beyond learning. This program has allowed us to become involved in the government that we spend so much time studying.

The Constitution is associated with words which reflect the importance of the American citizen, such as ‘popular sovereignty’, ‘consensus’, and ‘majority’. It is clear who was intended to captain the ship of America; her people. Our nation is designed to be accessible, to its citizens and to incoming immigrants. To those who have ambition and a dream. For me, this lesson has only been confirmed by my experiences this year. “We the People” is not merely a mental exercise, or a contest of effort and knowledge. By learning about the government, one automatically becomes involved in it. I am here today, in front of the nation’s leaders, speaking with a message I hope to convey. I have learned in class that we are blessed with a participatory government. Now it has been proven to me.

The importance of developing these fundamental principles and values among my generation and future generations was noted by Judge Learned Hand in an article on liberty, published by the Yale Alumni Magazine on June 6, 1941:

“I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon

constitutions, upon laws, and upon courts. These are false hopes;

believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men

and women, when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can

save it; no constitution, no court, no law can even do much to help it.

While it lies there it needs no constitution, no law, no court to save
it...”.

Mr. Chairman, I thank the committee for giving me the opportunity to testify.