

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

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Witness:

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Testimony:

Good Morning Senators:

I am so glad to be here today supporting Senator Alexander's proposed legislation to establish American History and Civics academies. Enhancing instruction in these areas is critical right now. We have to provide remedies for the problems Senator Alexander has identified: civic illiteracy, problematic textbooks, and the lack of requirements in some states for American History and Civics classes. Our student population is increasingly diverse, and we must enhance understanding of what it means to be an American for all those whose families have lived here for generations, but also for those new arrivals who have made a conscious choice to make their homes here in the United States.

I have been invited here to explain how the Tennessee Governor's School for International Studies can be a model for these academies. In its structure our school is very similar to what is proposed in this legislation. We have a director and a diverse core faculty chosen for expertise in the subject and for their teaching skills. Because international studies is such a broad field, we decided to make student teams focusing on different areas. We expect them to interact and share information. This year we have four teams, one studying Latin America and Portuguese language, another focusing on Sub Saharan Africa and Hausa language, a third dealing with East Asia and Chinese language, and the fourth studying Eastern Europe and Russia with Russian language.

Additionally, each morning all students address issues of major significance in today's world. This summer we will have a strong focus on the Middle East, other current flash points, environmental issues, development issues, human rights, and NATO and other alliance systems. This is not an exhaustive list. After lunch students attend issues analysis classes where they deal with foreign policy decision making, democracy and the conditions necessary for its survival, political systems, leadership, and other similar topics.

At this point we give a little free time from 3:30 until 5:30, unless there is a visit to museum or exhibition. We also have an international arts emphasis. For one week in the afternoons, visual and performing artists provide hands on instruction, culminating in a

production. Evening activities include lectures, simulations, international dancing, Model United Nations, foreign films, and international dinners. When the time really is free, participants swim, do their laundry, read, catch up on assignments, or just talk. You can see how intense this program is. We want to fit as much as possible into four short weeks. Our schools were designed to serve gifted and talented young people. I don't know what direction the admissions process for these academies will take, but it is key that students who really care about participating be selected.

A school for American History could be developed along these same lines. There are so many ways to individualize instruction. Students might concentrate on specific periods of history or on topics like foreign policy through our history, the development of immigration law, or civil rights growth. Senator Alexander spoke of the principles of American citizenship: liberty, rule of law, laissez faire, individualism, e pluribus unum, and the separation of church and state. Each could be an area of study for a small group at the academies, culminating in group presentations. These are merely suggestions. Academy faculties will develop stimulating curricula. The important point is that instruction be unique, individualized, and unpredictable. At the Tennessee Governor's School our primary goal has been to provide experiences which would not ordinarily be found in schools. We encourage our faculty to live in the dorms with students and interact with them as much as possible. There is never a day when students aren't around asking questions, engaging in debates among themselves and with faculty. Sleep deprivation is the norm. But then they return to their schools exhilarated, ready to share all their new-found knowledge.

This same scenario applies to the teacher academies. I'm sure you all know how little time teachers have today. School teaching has become an all inclusive operation--teaching a subject, guiding, teaching manners and ethics, paper work, guarding against litigation, coaching, hall monitoring, mastering the newest computer programs for attendance and parent contacts, lesson line, curriculum maps--the list is endless and what suffers is preparation in the subject. Teachers hardly have time left to read and keep up to date. This is why these academies are essential. When these teachers go back to their schools, they will have been involved in scholarly pursuits and will have developed lessons which reflect depth, and these lessons will be ready to teach. This can even help with textbook problems. I can't imagine anything better than to spend weeks in a stimulating environment with other people focused on history and government, while someone else is taking care of the day to day responsibilities. Teachers will return home more knowledgeable, rested, and ready to inspire students and other faculty.

Again and again, I encounter students who have attended Governor's School or who know someone who has, and I hear how their lives have been transformed by experiences in our classrooms and during late night talk sessions. Our students are now in the U. S. Foreign Service, in state government, in teaching, in all kinds of leadership positions, probably even in your offices; and many, many say that Governor's School was the shaping event in their lives. With this legislation you can make these same life changing experiences possible for even more students and teachers.

