

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

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Witness:

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Testimony:

My name is Diane Ravitch. I am a Research Professor of Education at New York University and a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. I am a historian who specializes in the history of American education. It was my honor to serve as Assistant Secretary for the Office of Research and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education from 1991 to 1993.

I strongly support this proposed legislation.

In these perilous times, with our men and women engaged in combat on the other side of the globe, knowledge of history is clear. We rely on a volunteer force of men and women to protect our freedoms and our way of life. We rely on them to know what they are fighting for. They are on the battlefield and risk their lives because they love our country and what it represents in the annals of human freedom.

Although it is customary for people of a certain age to complain about the inadequacies of the younger generation, such complaints ring hollow today. Many Americans have been surprised to see the character of our young people on the battlefield. Many of us believed the image so often projected in the movies of a younger generation that is self-centered, lazy, shallow, and lacking in purpose. Certainly our adversaries believed this portrayal and believed that we as a people were soft and fearful, caring only for material comforts.

Now we know that the moviemakers' depictions of mass narcissism said more about Hollywood than it did about our young men and women. What we have learned in these past few weeks is that this younger generation, as represented on the battlefields of Iraq, may well be our finest generation. We have daily, almost hourly, seen demonstrations of remarkable courage, self-discipline, compassion, and strength. Free peoples everywhere should sleep better at night knowing that we are protected by a strong fighting force committed to the ideals of freedom and democracy.

Our nation has time and again been required to stand up for its ideals. Each time we do, we promise those who serve that their sacrifices will not be forgotten. We must keep our promises. The best way to keep our promises is to make sure that we teach the history of freedom and democratic institutions and that each generation learns again about the ideas, the heroes, the events, and the controversies that have made it possible for us to live in a free society. We must not forget those who have served on our behalf, nor forget why they served.

Each generation needs to learn about such important principles as equality, freedom, equal justice under law, individualism, separation of church and state, popular sovereignty, and limited government. Each generation needs to understand the rights and freedoms that we hold dear. Each generation needs to know how our nation was created and the struggles that it has endured in order to breathe life into our Constitutional guarantees and institutions.

History education is one of the most important responsibilities of our schools. Unfortunately, for many years, the teaching of history had a low priority. In the 1970s and 1980s, history in many schools was replaced by a mishmash of ill-defined social studies courses that taught things like group decision-making, consumer education, and social science concepts. In 1983, for instance, the New York State Education Department intended to replace the chronological study of history with a thematic approach in which events were merged with big concepts and taught without regard to cause and effect. A popular outcry prevented that from taking place.

In many states, history was submerged into social studies programs, and states adopted social studies standards that ignored chronological history. Civics too suffered when it was separated from the study of American history. The study of history has been making a comeback in recent years. Ten years ago, only four states-California, Virginia, Massachusetts, and Texas-had history standards to guide teachers. Today, after ten years of popular support for academic standards, about half the states now have history standards.

We know from the tests given by the National Assessment of Educational Progress that our students, especially in their senior year, have low scores in American history. In fact, the performance of seniors on the NAEP in U.S. history is worse than in any other subject, whether science, reading, or mathematics.

The greatest need in history education today is for well-prepared teachers who have studied history and who know how to make it vivid for youngsters.

Too many states have very low requirements for those who plan to teach history. In part, this is because of a longstanding tradition that anyone can teach history; just stay a few pages ahead of the students in the textbook, and you too can be a history teacher. That method is not good enough for teachers of math or science, and it is not good enough for history teachers either.

Our young people should study history with teachers who love history, who can go far beyond the textbook to get youngsters involved in learning about the exciting events and controversies that bring history to life; we need teachers who know enough about history to awaken the curiosity of their students and to encourage them to read more than the textbooks tell them and even to question what the textbooks tell them.

Sadly, the majority of those who teach history in our schools are teaching out of their field. According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, a majority of history teachers in grades 7-12 lack either a college major or minor or graduate degree in history. In many cases, they majored in education, not in an academic subject. The only field that has more out-of-field teaching than history is the physical sciences, that is, physics and chemistry.

Many states recognize that they must make extraordinary efforts to reach out and recruit qualified teachers of physical sciences, but there is no comparable awareness of the conspicuous shortage of qualified teachers of history. In part, the problem is one created by short-sighted state policies, which put more emphasis on pedagogical degrees than on knowledge of one's subject. The young person with a history degree who wants to teach may be required to take many courses in pedagogy, even another master's degree in pedagogy, whether relevant to teaching ability or not.

Another reason for the shortage of qualified history teachers is that our universities have not addressed this need. With few exceptions, their history departments have become highly specialized; in addition to narrow specialization, university professors tend to pride themselves on taking a highly critical, adversarial attitude towards American history and culture. Nor do university professors believe that it is their role to teach civics along with history. Few universities have programs geared to produce teachers of history and civics for the K-12 classrooms; they leave that to the social studies educators, who see history as only a small part of their very large and diffuse subject.

This is a case where Congress can help with very clear and specific goals: Supplying academies for teachers of American history and civics, as well as programs for motivated students of American history and civics.

The need is clear. We simply do not have enough teachers who are well prepared to teach these basic subjects. The legislative program is equally clear: to provide academies where teachers can gain the knowledge and skills to teach American history and civics effectively.

Many teachers today would be grateful for the opportunity to strengthen their knowledge of American history and civics in a two-week summer institute. Many who seek to deepen their understanding of these subjects would leap at the chance to participate in a Presidential Academy. The models of teaching and learning developed by these academies would supply an important service to our nation's schools.

There are many talented young people who would eagerly respond to the chance to attend a Congressional Academy in American history and civics. For those who love history, this would be a wonderful opportunity to inquire deeply into a field that is usually far too compressed. Many of these young people may well become the history teachers of the future.

One of the responsibilities of a free society is to teach its young peoples the principles of freedom and democracy. These principles do not exist in a vacuum. They have a history. They evolved over time. They were won with the sacrifices and struggles of generations of Americans. Students are not born understanding what they need to know about our government and way of life. They must be taught. This legislation will make an important contribution towards improving and strengthening our teachers and students of history and civics, and through them, will enrich the classrooms of America.