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SunSentinel.com

Tuesday, July 5, 2011

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Failing grades: Students aren't learning history and civics

By Robert Holland

July 3, 2011

Except for occasional alarms raised by scholarly commissions, the waning of U.S. history and civics as subjects taught in public schools has received little attention in education reform debates. Now, national report cards are littered with failing grades in basic civic knowledge, and that should be cause for deep concern.

Most of the education reform focus has gone to the crucial business of closing chronic minority achievement gaps in reading, math, and, lately, science and engineering.

While such initiatives have merit, the latest editions of what's known as The Nation's Report Card suggest the flimsy grasp American public-school students demonstrate on fundamental facts and concepts of American history and civics constitutes every bit as urgent a crisis in learning, with long-term national implications that cut just as deeply.

According to National Assessment of Educational Progress data published last month, only about one-quarter of American students scored at or above proficient in their grasp of U.S. history. The worst performance was by the high-school seniors, only 12 percent of whom reached proficiency, or a level of solid achievement.

While eighth-grade scores have risen slightly since 2006, those at the 12th-grade level have remained flat and indeed have budged little since the 1994 NAEP testing.

Perhaps most striking is the proportion of students unable even to reach the barebones level of "basic," or minimal competence in history or in civics. While the overall results are nothing to brag about, the average scores for minority kids are shockingly low.

In civics, 47 percent of black eighth-graders and an astounding 62 percent of black 12th-graders scored below basic. For Hispanics, the corresponding numbers were 44 percent and 50 percent.

What this means is half or more of these teenagers were not adequately prepared to identify a single right protected by the First Amendment or to recognize that the U.S. Constitution proclaims that government's authority is based on the people's consent. Ignorance extends not just to the nation's founding but to the modern era.

Solutions will ultimately need to correct the gradual de-emphasizing of U.S. history in public schools, slipping state history content standards, and state teacher-certification requirements that often approve social studies teachers with little or no formal history training.

Meanwhile, reforms for the billion-dollar teacher professional development industry must better equip teachers to instill these facts and concepts in students. Currently, civic organizations like the Bill of Rights Institute offer content-rich professional development like constitutional seminars for middle and high school social studies teachers around the nation. But the challenges of raising these scores is a vast one.

Just as problematic as a lack of formal history training is the proliferation of a radical strain of "social-justice multiculturalism" prevalent in many university schools of education. Its practitioners call on future teachers to question "oppressive" American societal influences rather than teaching students a basic knowledge of their nation's history and foundations in representative democracy.

This November, hotels around Chicago will fill with educators sent by school districts around the country to participate in the National Association for Multicultural Education's annual conference, where social studies teachers will satisfy their professional development requirements with seminars on "Oppression and Privilege" and "Educators Organizing for Social Justice."

In the end, the fact that tax dollars are going to bolster radical multiculturalist agendas at the expense of more substantive professional-development learning is both a symptom and a cause of the poor understanding of American history and civics. But it is evidence of misplaced priorities, and crucial resources, needed to address a growing crisis.

We can be thankful the United States is relatively far removed from any constitutional crisis. But amid what seems to be spreading turbulence in a complicated world, it would not be a good idea to rely indefinitely on voters present and future with such scant preparation in the principles of constitutionalism and their application in everyday life.

As policymakers deliberate on which school reforms are most important, it will be critical that these vital foundational subjects remain central to the discussion.

Robert Holland and Don Soifer are education analysts with the Lexington Institute in Arlington, Va.

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