

Thank you to the Committee for this chance to testify on behalf of Humanities North Dakota and the We the People program it helps sponsor in the state. My name is Chris Cavanaugh and I am currently a teacher at Bismarck High School.

Ben Franklin said more than 220 years ago “Nothing is more important for the public welfare that to form and train our youth in wisdom and virtue.” Those words still ring true today; however, the questions this begs are how do we go about “training” our youth in wisdom, virtue, and civic awareness? Is that training only for the young? What does it mean to be a citizen of the U.S. today and with that citizenship what rights, as well as responsibilities do we possess?

James Madison, along with his friend and colleague Thomas Jefferson, felt it imperative that the citizens of the United States “be enlightened” when it comes to the workings of government and the protection of their rights. Education, therefore, is essential to preserving liberty in the hearts of the people.

The best way to do this is to teach our citizen-students to think critically. Think back to your time in high school. What do you remember? Time with friends, that favorite teacher, or the time “Jimmy” fell asleep in Algebra and fell out of his desk? Those are the things we remember. When we get our citizen-students to think critically we are teaching them a way to think that they can use as active citizens, no matter their chosen profession.

We must learn to be critical thinkers and not cynical citizens. The cynicism that abounds today is a tide that civic education must try to stem. It is imperative that citizen-students be shown that what they think matters and provide for them avenues for their voices to be heard. This is also the goal of Humanities North Dakota and the We the People program in North Dakota.

The “We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution” curriculum was developed by the Center for Civic Education to commemorate the Constitution’s bicentennial in 1987. This approach to American government lets the students explore the philosophy behind the Constitution. After covering the philosophy, students look at the history of European and colonial rights. This leads to the writing and ratification of our Constitution and then the practical application of our laws in modern day society.

Students, in preparing to provide expert testimony in a mock congressional hearings must grapple with issues that are very difficult, such as “How does the US Constitution reflect this tension between limits on government and the people?” or, “What is the appropriate balance between limited government and empowered government today?”

There are no easy answers but the students must think, and they must strive to see the relationships between these ideas as they come into play in our society time and time again. And they must listen to those with whom they may disagree.

Franklin famously replied to a woman in Philadelphia in 1787, when he was leaving the Constitutional Convention, when she asked him what kind of government they had devised, “a republic, madam, if you can keep it” was his answer. The Republic can only be preserved by an emphasis on civic education for all persons in the nation.

The concerns over our current state of civic education are real, but how do we as a nation deal with these serious issues? Almost 20 years ago testing data showed that students were grossly deficient in civic knowledge and discourse and there was a K-12 push for reform. Unfortunately, testing data released by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in May, 2008, showed that students tested at almost the same levels. According to Charles Quigley, the former Executive Director of the Center for Civic Education, “America’s school children are woefully unprepared to take their place as informed, engaged citizens.” The NAEP results show that only 24% of students tested were rated at the “proficient” level. With the high stakes emphasis in math and language arts, civic education classes have been phased out. Current spending levels show the investment decline in the last 50 years to the point where civic education programs now attract just 1/1000 of the money spent on STEM subjects.

James Madison once wrote, “Who are the best keepers of the people’s liberties? The people themselves. The sacred trust can be no where so safe as in the hands most interested in preserving it.” Madison went on to explain how this “sacred trust” can be protected. “The people ought to be enlightened, to be awakened, to be united, that after establishing a government they should watch over it, as well as obey it.” When we fail to act in that common education for citizenship that Madison called for we do so at our own peril, and the peril of the republic.

Constitutional Scholar David Adler coined the term “Madisonian Monitor” in that all citizens must have a basic understanding of the workings of government and then to hold those we elect accountable to following the founding principles. Madison realized that a common education for citizenship, regardless of age, in a democratic republic was needed to establish an enlightened and united people, who could interact intelligently with their constitutional government and each other to secure natural rights and promote the common good. So, in response to a legislator from the neighboring state of Kentucky, who sought advice about the public education of citizens, Madison wrote: “A popular Government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

This is exactly what the “We the People” curriculum and Humanities North Dakota tries to do.
Thank you for your consideration on this most important issue.