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Guest column on schools: All students deserve inspiring civics instruction

BY JOHN C. CULVER

When I talk to young people about my experience in government, they often ask what motivated me to get involved in politics. The answer is simple: Mr. Harry Robson, my ninth-grade civics teacher at Franklin High School in Cedar Rapids.

He and his teachings helped set the course of my life. He taught me how government works, how laws are made - and most important - how to use the political process to better our communities, strengthen our nation and improve people's lives.

I still have a vivid recollection of Mr. Robson, standing at the blackboard, drawing a diagram of the three branches of the U.S. government as he explained the genius of our constitutional system of checks and balances, a lesson I took with me all the way to the U.S. House of Representatives and later the U.S. Senate.

Today, unfortunately, too few students receive the type of civic education that my classmates and I experienced. Despite the valuable role that civics courses have historically played in sustaining American democracy, this critical mission has been increasingly neglected in our schools. Until the 1960s, most American students were required to take three civics courses before graduating from high school. Today, in many states, students are offered only a single - often optional - civics course in the 12th grade.

This is simply not enough. Many young people leave school lacking even a rudimentary understanding of how their government works and how it affects their lives. This lack of understanding leads to a lack of interest, a lack of trust and a lack of participation. While the media are abuzz with youth involvement in the current presidential race, the absolute numbers of young people interested in civics, particularly at the state and local level, is still troublingly low.

Our democracy is not guaranteed: It is the obligation of each generation to sustain it and renew it, lest it be weakened or lost. Our government, the oldest functioning democracy on the planet, is unique and extraordinary. While a robust system, its one vulnerability is its requirement for the active participation of an informed citizenry. Each generation must take up the mantle of its predecessors.

Our schools, whether public or private, are the single institution that directly touches nearly all American youth. Yet they are failing to fulfill their critical role in educating young citizens about our remarkable constitutional system. On the last national civics assessment, administered in 2006, two-thirds of students scored below proficient. Fewer than one in five high school seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy.

Every American citizen has an obligation to participate in our democracy, whether by voting, volunteering in a campaign or becoming or supporting a candidate for the local school board, city council, state legislature or U.S. Congress. That participation helps to determine the quality of daily life for each of us. Decisions as diverse as funding the local library, establishing a women's shelter,

repairing flood walls or going to war all rely on civic participation.

Mr. Robson taught me how unique our system of government is and how dependent it is upon an educated and active citizenry. Many other outstanding civic and government teachers today are working just as hard to do the same. Our schools need to support these teachers through curricula and class time that prepares students to be informed and engaged citizens. I am proud that in Iowa, my son, Gov. Chet Culver, has worked to include civic literacy as a part of the curriculum in all schools.

As we begin a new school year and I think back on my education, it saddens me that many students today have no Mr. Robson. We must recommit to civics education to ensure the continued vitality of our democracy.

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