



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

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Contact: Rep. Don Vruwink, 608-266-3790

The Importance of Teaching Civics

By State Representative Don Vruwink

Our state schools superintendent Jill Underly recently talked about the importance of teaching civics education. She said: “Most of all, teaching civics will encourage us to be better citizens and to hold our legislators accountable and set a strong example for our kids of what it means to be civically engaged, but also to *engage civilly*.”

I agree completely.

For over 40 years, I taught the principles of American Democracy in high school classrooms. Today the Wisconsin Legislature is considering a bill to require civics education to graduate from high school. Superintendent Underly and I agree on the need to require credits in civics for all students to graduate from a Wisconsin high school.

However, the bill as drafted needs work. I voted against the bill because it was littered with terms and ideas that I taught in other courses like World History and United States History. I would like to see a civics course that uses best teaching practices with the engagement of students.

Until the 1960s, three courses in civics and government were common in American schools at different grade levels. But the Soviet launching of Sputnik in 1957 turned our attention away from civics toward science and mathematics. President Kennedy made going to the moon a priority in the 1960s, and put an emphasis on teaching science and math. That ideal continues today as schools encourage students to pursue careers in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields.

Has civics education been lost along the way? Maybe, maybe not. We put a lot of demands on our schools. Legislators frequently introduce bills for new topics that they believe should be part of the curriculum, such as anti-bullying and cursive writing. And now civics.

I applaud Superintendent Underly for making civics education part of her agenda for the coming year. Civics education can be part of classrooms at all grade levels. While kindergarten may be too early to teach about federalism and the separation of powers, those concepts are weaved into lessons at higher grade levels.

When I was in high school, I took part in a simulation of the Constitutional Convention. I was able to debate the importance of the different branches of government and the idea of checks and balances. These discussions created the interest I have today about how a functional democracy should work.

Our Founding Fathers viewed a well-educated citizenry as central to maintaining a strong republic. They viewed citizen participation in government as a right of all Americans. Civics teaches everyone not only to vote, but also to serve the community and work together “in order to form a more perfect Union,” as the preamble to the United States Constitution states.

Civics is part of a well-rounded education that teaches critical thinking, speaking and listening skills, how to collaborate and to advocate. Responsible citizenship requires that students understand the *history* that shapes the present; *geography* to understand the world; and *economics* to develop sound public policy. When students learn about civics, they become better citizens. They are more likely to vote, discuss politics with others, contact their elected officials, and run for office.

Our Founding Fathers tied liberty to civil virtue. As used in the Constitution, liberty refers to freedom from arbitrary and unreasonable restraint upon an individual. Liberty from the government does not mean that citizens can do whatever they want. Civil virtue is necessary for the success of any community, state, or national government. It is the duty of citizens to the common welfare of their community, even at the cost of their own interests.

Civics education teaches us that we can have different opinions on issues but still maintain respect for each other. Civics teaches what it means to be civically engaged, and also engage civilly.

State Rep. Don Vruwink represents parts of Rock, Walworth, Jefferson, and Dane counties, which include the communities of Whitewater, Milton, Edgerton, Footville, part of the Village of Oregon, and 15 surrounding townships. He can be reached at 608-266-3790, Rep.Vruwink@legis.wisconsin.gov, and P.O. Box 8953, Madison WI 53708.

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