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LAW WEEK

Civics education is critical

Editor's note: This is the first of several articles written by members of the state Judiciary commemorating Law Week in Hawai'i.

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A teacher asked little Billy, who signed the Declaration of Independence? Little Billy refused to respond, and the teacher asked him again, but got the same result — no response.

The next day, the teacher posed the same question. Again, Billy refused to answer. The exasperated teacher called in Billy's father, and, in Billy's presence, she told the father: "Billy refuses to tell me who signed the Declaration of Independence."

The father turned to his son and said, "Billy, if you signed that silly thing, admit to it so we can get out of here!"

Although we may chuckle after reading the above anecdote, unfortunately it is a somewhat accurate illustration of the level of many of our citizens' — especially our younger generations' — knowledge and understanding of civics and government, brought about in large part by the de-emphasis on civics education in our schools.

Nearly a century ago, civics lessons were introduced into the schools as a way of helping the wave of immigrants arriving on our nation's shores assimilate into the mainstream of American culture. In the '60s, however, the Vietnam War, followed by the Watergate scandal in the '70s, brought much disenchantment and a loss of faith in traditional institutions and its leaders. As a result, there was a de-emphasis on civics education and an increase in apathy, alienation and the lack of knowledge of, and participation in, politics and government.

Recently, we are seeing more evidence of these consequences, which research studies have concluded is attributable to the absence of civics as a core subject in our schools. For example, in a 1997 nationwide poll of citizens of all ages conducted by the National Constitutional Center, only 6 percent could name four rights guaranteed by the First Amendment, which are freedoms we enjoy daily. Sixty-two percent could not name all three branches of government, and 33 percent could not name even one branch.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, considered the most authoritative source of data on the state of nationwide elementary and secondary education, reported in 1999 that many students learned a lot of facts about the American system of laws and constitutional government, but had difficulty understanding how those facts fit into the real world and how to use them to bring about needed changes in our society.

The Honolulu Advertiser reported on Feb. 28 that "Hawai'i had the lowest voter turnout in the nation in the last general election and ranked at the bottom in voter registration."

The right to vote is one of the most important rights and privileges in our democratic society; yet, we have failed to engage our citizenry, especially our young people, to participate in this most fundamental exercise of citizenship. According to Hawai'i's Office of Elections, there were 1,762 fewer voters in the 18-to-19 age group registered for the 2000 presidential election than there were in 1996.

Alarming, statistics indicate that voter turnout percentages have dropped more than 30 percent over the past approximately 20 years. These statistics should cause us great concern.

The rights, freedoms and liberties that are the very heart of our American constitutional democracy cannot and will not be preserved unless citizens are inclined to thoughtfully participate in public affairs, which requires basic knowledge about our government and how it works. However, civics education has not garnered the kind of emphasis and attention that is given to other subjects.

Because evaluators who assess our education system often rely on test scores in reading, writing, mathematics and science, those subjects receive the greatest attention in the classrooms.

Civics education deserves equal emphasis.

We must start focusing on conveying to our children the importance of community involvement, being informed and performing our civic duties, such as voting and jury service. We must also teach them to practice civility, have respect for the law and, above all, to respect individual worth and human dignity.

The re-introduction of civics and government as a core curriculum in our schools is the key to enhancing public-spiritedness, to enhancing public knowledge and understanding of government and, ultimately, to the preservation of democracy itself.
