UNH Law School Event Honoring Justice O’Connor

I am delighted at this opportunity to say a few words about civic education at an event honoring Supreme Court Justice, Sandra Day O’Connor.

After demonstrating for 25 years that women are equally capable of interpreting the Constitution, Justice O’Connor stepped down from the high court and began her national education initiative, iCivics -- and it couldn’t have come at a more important time for the nation’s K to 12 social studies community.

You see, in 2006 civic educators were in despair over No Child Left Behind, as the misguided reform plan emphasized accountability based on high stakes testing, and in only two subjects, mathematics and language arts. After just four years of NCLB, instructional time in the nation’s elementary schools had increased 46% in language arts and 37% in math, but social studies instruction had decreased 36%. Less dramatic reductions also occurred in our nation’s middle schools.

In short, only three months after 9/11 and while we were at war in Afghanistan, our nation prioritized numeracy and literacy over civic understanding and participation. Social studies educators were stunned and disheartened.

It was at this time that Justice O’Connor began to speak out about the poverty of civic education in America. It was a much needed morale boost for the nation’s K-12 social studies teachers, and we will be forever grateful.

(On behalf of New Hampshire’s social studies teachers, I’d also like to thank retired Supreme Court Justice David Souter for a local morale boost when he returned to the Granite State and advocated for civic education. With the determined and talented leadership of attorney Susan Leahy, Justice Souter helped create Constitutionally Speaking, the New Hampshire Institute for Civic Education, and your fine lunch today.)
I wish I could say the future of civic education looks bright thanks to the end of NCLB and the emergence of the Common Core, however, this new reform plan also focuses narrowly on language arts and math. In fact, only 6 of the 604 language arts standards have any civics-related content. And, of course, the math standards have none.

Let me go further down the rabbit hole by sharing some recent findings:

- only 24 percent of high school seniors scored proficient or better on the most recent national civic literacy test
- only half of our 50 states require civics education for high school graduation
- annually, 90 percent of U.S. citizens do not contact any of their public representatives
- among the world’s 172 democracies, the United States ranks 139th in voter participation
- the emotional well being of college freshmen has hit an all-time low, and the rate of depression and anxiety among middle and high school students is on the rise
- Americans are living more demographically segregated lives, and they increasingly choose media outlets that confirm rather than challenge their views on most public issues.

One concerned analyst summarizes the situation as follows:

*We are living in a society marked by unhappy children, alienated youth, politically disengaged adults, stultifying consumerism, escalating inequality, deeply scary wobbles in the whole economic system, soaring rates of mental ill-health and a planet so damaged that we may well end up destroying the whole enterprise.*

Before you go searching for an anti-depressant or some other mood enhancer, let me now offer some thoughts on how we might go forward.

So far, I’ve suggested the Common Core is no answer and, second, we need state and national legislation that prioritizes rather than neglects citizenship education.

We also need to somehow make civic participation an identity that is pursued and prized by adolescents. How do we get young people to care about and develop expertise on social issues and problems, and to view an essential aspect of their lives as contributing to the public good, and maybe even aspire to become community leaders? How can we elevate
this type of self-identity to that of becoming a professional athlete, actor, super model, TV newscaster, singer, rapper, guitarist, designer, or rich person of any kind? Teachers and schools can't do this alone; it needs to be a national effort at adolescent value and identity transformation, and it needs to start in the elementary grades.

I may be a Pollyanna in this sports and celebrity-crazed culture, but I think most parents would take greater pride in seeing their daughters and sons receive public recognition for speaking out on contemporary issues or organizing worthy fund-raising efforts, than leading the volleyball team in spikes or being named to the homecoming court. In short, we can make this value shift – the country has done it before.

Students love to explore public issues, as they involve controversy about authentic, real-world problems where respected people disagree. And in the process, students begin to construct a larger, more mature self, as they discover their deepest convictions about what constitutes the good society, what values they privilege, what they and others ought to do, and, ultimately, who they are as public citizens.

Toward this end, the New Hampshire Institute for Civic Education hopes to initiate a K to 12 portfolio project whereby students -- with the help of teachers, parents and the community--document their 13-year development as public citizens through community service projects, issue analysis and advocacy, and many other activities in and beyond the classroom.

Due to time limitations, I'll mention just one other initiative of the New Hampshire Institute for Civic Education. This year we will be offering all-day workshops for middle and high school teachers interested in helping students learn how to examine public policy issues.

As you all know, thoughtful, respectful dialogue among our political representatives on so many issues is non-existent. And the media sound bites look and feel more like the hype of two sports teams, each armed with its own version of ESPN, FOX news at one extreme and MSNBC on the other.

We need to teach the next generation that competing visions of the good society are inevitable in a pluralistic, multicultural nation that prioritizes freedom of thought and expression, that liberty cannot survive without tolerance of differences, and that the art of compromise is necessary for a functioning government.
Our workshops will help students understand the structural features of public policy issues; that is, what history is relevant to the issue, what are the competing proposals for action, what are the underlying “world views” or ideologies, what are the ethical, legal, conceptual, and empirical claims and counter-claims that are being offered to justify and defend each side, and, most importantly, what might compromise entail?

The workshops will also discuss ways to ensure that students remain open-minded and respectful during discussion, and learn to control their emotions to more effectively share their views among peers and the broader public. Finally, we’ll discuss ways to ensure that students are exposed to the best arguments from each side of an issue, and how teachers can avoid biasing students toward their own policy preferences.

I wish I had time to discuss this year’s efforts at the elementary level, however, you can already see there are ways to combat civic apathy and incompetence. I wouldn’t be here today if I didn’t think we could make meaningful progress at the state and national level.

Thank you for your time and I very much look forward to tonight’s important event.