

aspensdailynews online

Here come new sons and daughters of liberty

by Nat Hentoff - 11/28/2012

In 2009, Sandra Day O'Connor received from Barack Obama the Presidential Medal of Freedom, traditionally the highest civilian award in this nation. The first woman on the United States Supreme Court, "her historic 25-term tenure on the court," the certificate said, "was defined by her integrity and independence."

But especially in recent years, O'Connor has solidified her place in history as a primary force in enabling more and more of our students to make the Constitution the very essence of America's public education system.

Her Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, which I wrote about last week, delivered a strong, liberty-saving message to students, parents, teachers, principals, school boards and the various media, including social media, in its 2011 "Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools" report, which Frank LoMonte covered for the Student Press Law Center:

"Schools should incorporate discussion of current local, national and international events into the classroom, particularly those that young people find important to their lives.

"Schools should offer opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities outside of the classroom.

"Schools should encourage student participation in school governance" ("O'Connor civics commission draws a road map toward freedom of expression. Will schools follow it?" www.splc.org, Oct. 14, 2011).

The last one about school governance reminded me of a speaking engagement I had years ago at a high school in Dayton, Ohio, where there was much strife among parents arguing with teachers' unions about the most effective ways to evaluate teachers.

I asked the students: "What if you were among those judging your teachers, including those who maybe shouldn't be teachers?"

The classroom came alive. Among the test questions they'd give teachers — as well as questions from students in other classes, where I went on to bring them in to evaluate their teacher — were:

“How much do the teachers know about each of us, how each of us learns or has trouble learning — maybe because of what’s going on at home or in our neighborhoods? And what do we want to learn about?”

Those students’ questioning of authority exemplifies some of the important findings from the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools’ study, as covered by the Student Press Law Center:

“The (‘Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools’) report even identifies ‘news comprehension’ as part of the package of ‘twenty-first-century skills’ that prepare young learners for participation in the workplace as well as the political marketplace.

“The rest of that package includes: ‘speaking, listening, collaboration, community organizing, public advocacy, and the ability to gather and process information.’”

“These, concludes the (O’Connor civics) commission, are the foundational ‘civic skills’ that no student should graduate without.”

In the spring 2011 edition of the Carnegie Corporation of New York’s “Carnegie Review: A New Civic Mission of Schools,” Karen Theroux focuses on the galvanizing importance of vigorous, often controversial, student debate and deliberation right in the classroom.

In my Boston high school, as well as many others I’ve visited, the students’ responsibility was to listen and pay attention to the teacher. There was very little interplay among students themselves.

But Theroux highlights a teacher I very much wish I had as a student, the University of Wisconsin’s Diana Hess, a professor of education I’ve interviewed for her expertise at involving students deeply into class discussions.

“In classrooms where there is ideological diversity,” Hess emphasizes, “the teacher’s job is to awaken kids’ awareness and normalize it, to exploit the multiple and competing points of view.”

Furthermore, Theroux makes the vital point that “other research has shown that involving students in democratic deliberation has school-wide impact on civic knowledge and participation, including community service.

“Importantly, such positive changes can be greater for disenfranchised youth and for students who initially demonstrate less interest in civic activities, indicating that good programs are indeed capable of reaching the students they were designed to reach.

“All students — not just a select few — will engage in civic activity in their schools

when given appropriate opportunity.”

All of this is beginning to happen in our republic, with more reverberating experiences to come, which, as Theroux writes, “would allow students to move from high school into college better prepared to engage in and learn about all aspects of citizenship, from volunteering to voting.”

The kind of reality-based learning that Theroux and O’Connor’s commission endorse will create citizens who find excitement, even fun, in thinking for themselves. It will also teach those politicians who represent them that their degree of independence and actual knowledge of issues will be regularly tested by the civic-minded students they serve who keep experiencing the Constitution from the inside.

The original Sons of Liberty included Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry and Paul Revere. Now we can add Daughter of Liberty Sandra Day O’Connor. She’ll help make going to school the daily adventure of being an active American.

Nat Hentoff is a nationally renowned authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights. He is a member of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, and the Cato Institute, where he is a senior fellow.