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BILLY or JAMES:
Which Madison Do Florida Students Know Best?

By Bob McClure

When Sandra Day O'Connor addressed the Florida State Legislature earlier this week, the former U.S. Supreme Court Justice lamented the state of civics education in America today. And it's easy to understand why.

A 2008 report issued by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) found that fewer Americans could name the three branches of government than could identify one or more of the judges on *American Idol*.

A 2006 survey commissioned by the McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum found that more Americans could name all five family members on *The Simpsons* than could name all five First Amendment freedoms.

And a 1998 survey commissioned by the National Constitution Center found that far fewer American teenagers could name the Chief Justice of the United States than could identify the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.

"Today, civics, government, and American history are being pushed out of the classroom," Mrs. O'Connor said, "and the results are as dismal as they are unsurprising."

Indeed, the ISI study found that even many college graduates lack "civic literacy" – partly because most

universities do not make up for deficiencies in civics education at lower levels. (In fact, seniors at Yale, Duke, Princeton, and Cornell actually scored lower on a test of basic civics than the freshmen at those prestigious universities!)

The reason these findings are so troubling is that it takes a renewed commitment from each generation of Americans for our nation's great experiment in self-government to continue to succeed. And it takes a thorough understanding of our nation's founding principles for Americans to be able to exercise their responsibilities as citizens properly.

Indeed, one of the reasons the civil rights movement succeeded is that leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. rooted their appeals for change in the enduring principles found in our nation's founding documents.

"When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence," King noted, "they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir."

A Ray of Sunshine

While O'Connor lamented the state of civics education nationally, she

rightly praised the prescience of Florida lawmakers who adopted legislation in 2006 calling for greater attention to civics education in the classroom. And O'Connor appropriately visited Tallahassee's Deer Lake Middle School, where civics teacher Cathy Schroetfer is spearheading a countywide pilot program for 7th graders, thanks to a grant from the Knight Foundation.

Still, more needs to be done, perhaps especially at the high school level where O'Connor says that students can sometimes "get too full of themselves" to take seriously the responsibilities of citizenship.

As a former high school educator, I'm well aware of the challenges of reaching this population. But I'm also mindful of the fact that many high school students will rise to the challenge if high standards are set for them – and if important information is presented to them in compelling ways.

To that end, The James Madison Institute will be officially launching a new Civics Education Initiative at a special event Thursday, April 16, at the Florida Historic Capitol. The event, which begins at 7 p.m. and is open to the public, will feature a presentation by Dr. Charles Kesler, a Senior Fellow of California's Claremont Institute. He served as an advisor to the James Madison Commemoration Commission established by the U.S. Congress.

Dr. Kesler will pay tribute to James Madison's life and influence in this, the 200th anniversary of the year (1809) Madison became our nation's fourth president.

While Dr. Kesler's presentation will certainly be the highlight of the evening, I suspect that many of the students in attendance will also enjoy the take-home quiz we'll be distributing at the event.

This fun quiz, which we're encouraging area teachers to consider accepting as "extra credit" work, will assess whether students know more about James Madison, "the Father of the Constitution," or Billy Madison, the film character made popular by Adam Sandler.

I have no idea what sort of results this "fun quiz" will generate (and we won't be using this occasion to embarrass anyone). But I do hope that in years to come, more and more Florida high school students will come to understand the genius of our founding fathers. And I hope that more and more of them will come to appreciate our nation's founding principles in the way that Martin Luther King, Jr. did.

That would no doubt please Sandra Day O'Connor and the members of the Florida State Legislature. And it would help ensure that our nation's great experiment in self-government will go on.

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