

SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR ON CIVICS EDUCATION

Editor's Note: At the invitation of the Florida Legislature, former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor spoke to a joint session on April 7, 2009. Since retiring from the Court, she has been campaigning throughout the nation to explain the importance of civics education. The following is an edited transcript of her brief remarks.

Thank you.... Good morning. It's such an honor for an unemployed cowgirl to be invited to this spot and to be able to meet with you today. I'm really thrilled. It's great to be in Tallahassee.

Between my time as a judge in Arizona and then on the Supreme Court, I've served on courts in this country for well over 30 years, so I'm used to receiving cold receptions from legislators. This is such an unusual occasion to be welcomed so warmly in a legislature. It's a nice change of pace, and it also brings me back to my roots because, as you have heard, before I was ever a judge, I was an Arizona State Senator and served for a time as the Majority Leader of

the State Senate. And that was an exhilarating and a very educational experience for me.

I know that old adage that laws are

like sausages: It's better not to see how they're made. But I guess that makes me an oddity. I don't mind watching sausage being made. And I quite liked helping to make and shape the laws in Arizona, even though both those processes sometimes involved a lot of unusual ingredients.

Now, I'm willing

to bet that most citizens would be interested in the lawmaking process, as well, if they had an opportunity for some kind of hands-on learning. And that's what I want to talk to you about briefly today: the need for

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civics education in our schools and the enormous importance of taking a hands-on, interactive approach to teaching civics.

Self-government, which we have enjoyed in this country, cannot survive unless people—our citizens—are willing to get engaged and understand the commitments necessary to make democracy work. It was for that very reason that public schools were created in this country in the first place: to produce citizens who have the knowledge and the skills and the values to sustain our form of government, our democracy.

But, today, civics, government, and indeed American history are being pushed out of the classroom, and the results are as dismal as they are unsurprising. Almost half of our states today no longer make civics, government, and American history requirements for high school students. Now, surveys show that approximately 75 percent of our nation's population cannot distinguish the role of a judge from that of a legislator. They believe that judges are politicians in robes.

Forty percent think the Constitution permits the President to ignore a Supreme Court ruling if they believe doing so will protect the country from harm. Only about a third of people in this country can even name the three branches of government, much less say what they do. Now, compare that to the two-thirds of Americans who can name at least one of the judges on "American Idol." Or the nearly three-quarters of our citizens who can

name at least two of the Three Stooges. Now, I think these numbers are disheartening, and cynicism tends to fill these gaps in our knowledge. Statistics show that there's a very strong correlation between ignorance and distrust of our government. We must take action to reverse the trend of removing civics from our schools before this cynicism begins to suffocate our democracy. [applause]

Now, let me tell you why I'm particularly happy to be here today: because this Florida Legislature has shown a commitment to doing something about this problem. In 2006, Florida's Middle School Reform Act brought civics to students at the middle school level. I think that was a good move, because that's before the kids get too full of themselves in high school, and it's at a time when they're eager to learn—they're really great, that's a perfect age to start.

This act of this legislature sets you apart from a great majority of states across the nation, and I am certain that Florida in the future is going to reap benefits from taking that action. Those students are going to grow up to be good citizens wherever they live. And civics education is about teaching students how to think and how they can be involved in their own communities to make them better. And it's about teaching students that one person can ignite political fires on the ground, and those fires almost always begin with a very small spark.

Now, I know it sounds cliché, but it's absolutely true. It takes a renewed commitment for each

generation to continue the great experiment that we Americans undertook in 1779 in self-government. And you are doing your part to be sure that the next generation is prepared to take on these challenges.

I read about some students here in Tallahassee who took their civics lessons to heart a few years ago. Florida Supreme Court Justice Fred Lewis and Florida Law Related Education Association Director Annette Boyd Pitts took the time to teach some young students about a Supreme Court case—it was *Tinker v. Des Moines*. And that’s the case that, you may remember, affirmed the right of a group of students to protest the Vietnam War, at that time, by wearing black armbands in school. And these young Tallahassee students, a few months after learning about the Tinker case, had their own silent protest in the school’s cafeteria to demonstrate against the poor quality of the food. But that kind of engagement and proactive spirit is exactly what civics education is all about. It was good; it produced some results. And I congratulate your efforts here in Florida.

For my part, since stepping down from the Court, I’ve been working to address civics education in various ways, including through the Internet. I have a team of people at Georgetown University in Washington and Arizona State University in

Tempe, Arizona, that are developing a free, interactive, online website and program with a civics curriculum called, “Our Courts.” I was in the judicial branch, and I saw the lack of understanding in that area.

And you can visit it at www.ourcourts.org. We have games to put on that website that will enable the students to play the role, to understand a legal issue, a basic issue, and to play the role of a lawyer—for or against—and maybe the role of a judge, in deciding the issues. Some of the games are still in the development stages, but a number will be online, in full, starting this summer, which is about a month away. You can already see on the

website some good demonstrations of what the games will look like.

And the Our Courts Project has a couple of components. First is a series of interactive activities, to be used primarily in classrooms. They’re very teacher friendly, and they can be used as civics curriculum that exceeds state and national standards, or it can supplement some existing curriculum. The second part, when it’s complete by the end of this summer, is designed to interest the students in their free time—their spare time.

We know from studies that children these days spend about 40 hours a week using media, whether it’s computers or television or video



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games or music. And that's more time than they spend in school. It's more time than they spend with their parents. And if we capture a bit of that, as we teach young people about civics and civics engagement, it's going to be a big step in the right direction.

One of the games we're designing is a fast-paced interactive world that allows students to choose cases to research and argue as if they were the lawyers. And in this fictional world, the rule of law is just being developed. So, with the outcome of each case, the world is going to change in various ways. And this allows students to see how the law and their choices about it can have big impacts on the world about them. And I think that through games and online discussion and social networking, the Our Courts website allows students to express themselves about relevant issues and to share ideas about civics projects that could make a difference. And they'll learn how to tackle problems that we have from the perspectives of different players in our government—things that each of you do every day.

Now, I think this kind of interactive media approach is a powerful tool that can leverage the way things

are done. And the new experts who hold the key to all that potential are the young people of our nation. They are experts—I'm an old grandmother, and my grandchildren are so much better at computer use than I am. It's a night-and-day difference—but it's a very exciting project, and we have a long way to go to rejuvenate our nation's commitment to building good citizens. But it does start with you, our nation's legislators, and I'm confident that you're going to continue to give this subject the attention it deserves and to continue to set some good precedents for the rest of the nation.

And I hope that other states, all across the nation, will follow your lead. I appreciate very much you taking the time to let me visit with you today. You don't have much time to do all you have to do—you have a big budget gap to fill. [applause] And we do in Arizona as well. I don't know how you're going to do it. We're struggling in my home state, and I'm sure you are, too.

But thank you so much for being here today and for setting a good example, starting with middle school education. I'm very grateful. Thank you. ❧



Worthy Words

*“Socialism is workable only in heaven, where it isn't needed,
and in hell, where they've already got it.”*

– CECIL PALMER