



From the Office of Secretary of State

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The following op-ed was submitted by Secretary of State John Gale.

Citizenship starts with civics

During the summer, we do our fair share of celebrating, as a nation and in our local communities. Memorial Day, Flag Day and the Fourth of July offer opportunities for Nebraskans to display their patriotism and to a larger extent, pay tribute to our nation's veterans, living and dead.

As students return to the classroom, I'm hopeful that the spirit of civic mindedness continues to be included as an important part of a complete learning experience, along with the three Rs and student achievement. It is important that students learn to become engaged citizens.

As secretary of state, I serve as Nebraska's chief election officer. In that role, my office works to promote civic education and good citizenship through a variety of programs for students and communities. Some are aimed at boosting interest in the election process and voting. Another program encourages schools and their communities to honor their local veterans and to celebrate their patriotism.

In order to be a productive citizen, it's essential to have a working knowledge of American history and government. Unfortunately, national surveys indicate this is not necessarily the case. Five years ago, a poll conducted by the Marist Institute for Public Opinion found that one in four college students did not know that the United States declared its independence from Great Britain. A separate survey conducted by the

Annenberg Public Policy Center revealed that only one of three respondents could accurately name all three branches of the U.S. government. Another study in 2006 found that nearly 40 percent of 12th graders could not identify the purpose of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

The study of government and history is not about memorizing dates and names. History is the soil that nurtures our societal life, our traditions of liberty and freedom, and the positive values of our global community today. Students need to finish school, and certainly college, with a firm grasp of American history and our system of government.

In a memo this spring, Matt Blomstedt, Nebraska Commissioner of Education, encouraged educators in public and private schools to remember and comply with Nebraska's Americanism statutes when it comes to teaching students about civics and citizenship. As he explained, this state law was to instill the "love of liberty, justice, democracy and America" in the hearts and minds of our youth.

Commissioner Blomstedt noted that some may consider such requirements outdated, and implementing them, somewhat controversial. School districts should review the Americanism statutes and teach students about civics and citizenship.

This is part of what a good and complete education is all about.

Nationally, we struggle to exceed 55 percent voter turnout in presidential elections. In state gubernatorial races, we seldom exceed 50 percent turnout of registered voters. Not only is it challenging to convince people to vote, it's challenging to convince people to assume positions of leadership and run for local, state and federal offices. As adults, we have a responsibility to be role models for our children and demonstrate our commitment to civics and citizenship.

While representative democracy is sometimes messy and can sometimes seem impossibly deadlocked, it remains the best hope of mankind for a government with justice, liberty, freedom and the rule of law. We shouldn't give up on it nor should we fail to emphasize to our youth the fundamental truths and values of such a system as well as the history of how it came to be.

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