Amy Jo Baker
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The Case for Civic Education

"*The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.*" Thomas Jefferson

In the midst of an international war on terrorism, where groups such as Al Qaeda and others are bent upon destroying Western civilization, it is more critical than ever for the young people of this nation to understand our documents of freedom: the Declaration of Independence; the Constitution and Bill of Rights, and others, to internalize what we are about and why the principles of this nation are worth defending. This year, we are undertaking a peaceful "revolution", the election of a new President, and it is imperative that citizens of all ages understand all the candidates' positions on issues of importance that directly impact the future of our communities, state, and nation.

Since Social Studies is a discipline that defines the human experience, it is controversial in nature and subject to debate. As teachers it is important to teach students to think critically, analyze information, make informed decisions, and to be tolerant of opposing viewpoints. As the French philosopher that embodied the Enlightenment, Voltaire, said, "I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to my death your right to say it." We, as educators and adults, need to model civility and decorum so that we can explore solutions to the problems that face us and keep an open dialogue about the issues. The role of the teacher is to serve as a facilitator of learning that engages students in thinking about issues not telling them what their own personal political opinions are.

What does it mean to be a "good citizen?" The founding fathers believed in the concept of civic virtue; that is, when you work to help others and promote the general welfare, you are practicing civic virtue. They believed that it was important to teach these concepts to young people and to elect leaders that practiced civic virtue or concern for the common good of the people. George Washington remains the model of what it means to be a good citizen. He embodied the civic virtues that James Madison in Federalist Papers #55 believed as indispensable for a self-governing republic: civic knowledge, self-restraint, self-assertion, and self-reliance.1

Since 1972 when the 18 year old vote was introduced, the number of young people voting has declined. This is a disturbing trend that should cause concern since young people are long time stakeholders in the political process. Let's engage our students! Consider making plans to take part in the National Student/Parent Mock Election scheduled for October 30, 2008 and/or the Texas Secretary of State's Project Vote Mock Election. As we celebrate Martin L. King Day, Black History month, and President's Day, we should be mindful of a citizen's most important

civic duty: to vote and remember there are those who have died to provide us with this privilege.

The media plays a valuable role as communicators of information in this process. Teachers and students should be encouraged to take advantage of the many resources that public television has made available to educators to support the efforts to increase civic literacy. In the months ahead we will focus on some of the programs and resources available to support all aspects of education in general, and civic education in particular.

Edward Everett Hale once said, “I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something I can do.” What we can all do, is to practice and promote good citizenship and civic education by exercising our most sacred right: the right to vote. Why? Because the future of our nation depends on it and the future leaders of our great nation deserve nothing less.

As summarized from the lesson plans for “Rediscovering George Washington” http://www.pbs.org/georgewashington/