

TESTIMONY ON SB 120 (AMERICAN HERITAGE ACT),
SB 121 (PATRIOT WEEK) AND
SB 423 (GOOD CITIZENSHIP BILL)

JUDGE MICHAEL WARREN
MARCH 5, 2014 10:30 AM

Chairperson Lyons, Committee Members, ladies and gentlemen,

May it please the Committee,

I am Judge Michael Warren, of the Oakland County Circuit Court.

I am a former member of the State Board of Education, board member of Cornerstone Schools Association, and co-founder, with my then 10 year old daughter Leah, of Patriot Week. You will hear from Leah in a few minutes - she is a much more engaging speaker than I ever will be.

Patriot Week renews America's spirit by celebrating the First Principles, Founding Fathers and other Patriots, vital documents and speeches, and flags that make America the greatest nation in world history.

We are a nonpartisan movement, supported by a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization with a broad base of support in Michigan and in other states.

I am speaking today, however, on my own behalf.

A key purpose of public education is to ensure that students are prepared to be engaged and informed citizens.

Yet, studies upon studies reveal that, for a whole host of reasons - our students are not learning the essentials of the Constitution, civics, and history.

Here is just a sampling:

- 🗣️ Two-thirds of students scored below "proficient" on the last national civics assessment administered.
- 🗣️ Less than half of 8th graders surveyed knew the purpose of the Bill of Rights.
- 🗣️ Only 1 in 10 had age appropriate knowledge of the system of checks and balances.
- 🗣️ 77% of college seniors do not recognize James Madison as the father of the American Constitution.
- 🗣️ 78% of college seniors fail to recognize the words of the Gettysburg Address.
- 🗣️ Only 28% of the public - and 5% of the private - colleges and universities require

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- 🗣️ Only 28% of the public - and 5% of the private - colleges and universities require even a single broad survey course in American history or government.
- 🗣️ Nearly two-thirds of Americans cannot name the three branches of government.
- 🗣️ But three in four can name all of the Three Stooges.
- 🗣️ Almost 40 percent of citizens failed the citizenship test given to naturalized citizens.
- 🗣️ Approximately 75% of citizens could not explain why we fought the Cold War.

In Michigan, it is not much different:

- 🗣️ Over 70% of our 6th and 9th grade students fell below the proficient score in the MEAP Social Studies test.
- 🗣️ About 60% of our 11th graders are considered below proficient in Social Studies.

How we have arrived at this dismal state of affairs?

For several generations, our educational system has increasingly derided and ignored the importance of history, civics, and the Constitution. Much of the focus has been to noncore items with less rigor. More recently, because No Child Left Behind and the Common Core do not test civics, history, or the Constitution, they are given low priority.

Another of the key flaws of current educational system is that we generally teach American history chronologically - that is, in elementary school we teach about the colonial era and the Revolution; in middle school we teach about the antebellum era, the Civil War and Reconstruction; and in high school we teach about the modern age. Which means that our students last really focused on the Founding Fathers, the American Revolution, and the establishment of the Constitution in elementary school. We send our students out to vote and fight for our freedom with a 4th or 5th grade understanding of tGeorge Washington, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, Thomas Paine, the American Revolution, and the Constitutional Convention. That assumes they remember it at all.

Most schools also shove civics into a single semester or trimester in the junior or senior year. Many students are in clutches of senioritis and in some areas, large portions of our students have already dropped out.

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This is a recipe for disaster, which is borne out in the statistics.

Although there many solutions to the crisis, Senate Bill 120 (the American Heritage Act), Senate Bill 121 (Patriot Week) and Senate Bill 423 (the Good Citizenship Bill) will act as linchpins to renew the spirit of America through an increased emphasis on the Constitution, civics and history education.

One of the key ways to combat the education crisis is scaffold learning - i.e., covering history and civics in every year, in an age and grade level appropriate fashion - in which students loop back over content, but in an increasingly more complex and deeper fashion - think of it as a spiral staircase. This repeated learning will ensure retention. It also allows students to learn the basic facts in elementary school, in-depth understanding in middle school, and creative and self-directed learning in high school - so that when students graduate they have a 12th grade understanding of all American history, civics, and the Constitution, and are prepared for higher education, to vote, join the military, and engage the community.

The essence of Patriot Week is to create an annual renewal of the American spirit, and the Patriot Week and the Good Citizenship Bills do just that by requiring annual learning of the founding First Principles and the Constitution.

Another key to education reform is ensuring that our students understand what are the indispensable documents that form the foundation of America, and what they mean.

The American Heritage Act, and the Patriot Week and Good Citizenship Bills are all means to further this end by honing in on the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence as key materials to be taught, each and every year. And the Declaration and the Constitution are the cornerstones to learning about and preserving our republic.

As you know, what is tested is what is taught. The Good Citizenship Bill ensures that the right materials are taught by holding the schools accountable in the statewide assessments of state accreditation and testing.

These are all vital steps in substantially improving our educational system, and renewing the spirit of America.

One might still ask, why focus on civics, history, and the Constitution in this modern, global era of competition - shouldn't we be focused on math and science? Isn't American exceptionalism a quaint notion whose time has come and gone?

The answer is simple: no. America is the greatest nation in world history, and it is so because we are united by certain ideals - our Founding First Principles.

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We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

These words from the Declaration of Independence were revolutionary in 1776 and remain revolutionary today. They form the basis of the most exceptional nation in world history. Thomas Paine reflected that "The Independence of America, considered merely as a separation from England, would have been a matter of but little importance, had it not been accompanied by a Revolution in the principles and practice of Governments. She made a stand, not for herself only, but for the world, and looked beyond the advantages herself could receive."

James Madison echoed that "Happily for America, happily we trust for the whole human race, [the Founding Fathers] pursued a new and more noble course. They accomplished a revolution which has no parallel in the annals of human society. They reared the fabrics of governments which have no model on the face of the globe."

This freedom is our strength. Not technology, not wealth, not the military. What makes America great are our Founding First Principles articulated in the Declaration of Independence and embedded in the Constitution.

Yet it is all at risk. Abraham Lincoln explained: "At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from overboard. If destruction be our lot, we ourselves must be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide."

As a free republic, we are completely dependent upon an informed citizenry to ensure that our Constitution is defended and our unalienable rights are protected. We are fools to think that we can survive as a free people when we fail to understand our freedom.

Please approve these bills for consideration to the full House.

Nothing less than the survival of our country is at stake.

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God bless you, and God bless America.