

*Commentary by Lee H. Hamilton and William F. Goodling*

Are our schools preparing students to compete in the 21st century economy? Many business leaders worry that they aren't, and so they are promoting education reforms to give young people stronger math and reading skills and competency with information technology.

We want to call attention to something else that will help students succeed in the global economy: A rigorous program of civic education. Simply put, we think good citizens make better workers.

Academic and technical skills, while necessary, are not sufficient to make an employee successful.

To thrive in today's highly competitive, fast-paced marketplace, workers need to have a "participatory mindset," taking personal responsibility to do their jobs well and be on the lookout for opportunities to make new contributions. Also, businesses value workers who can analyze a complicated problem, evaluate conflicting information, and clearly articulate an evidence-based opinion. And employers are looking for people who are able to collaborate with others on group projects and devise strategies that meld the best thinking of all involved.

Participating, analyzing, collaborating — all these are skills that effective civic education can help students acquire. Education Week's 2007 *Diplomas Count* report notes the high demand in the business arena for these kind of "applied" skills, stating that, "Employers complain more about a lack of [these] skills among high school graduates than they do about inadequate academic skills."

Fortunately, we are not starting from scratch in meeting the challenge of teaching these "applied" skills. Innovative thinkers in the civic education arena have already devised programs that teach students to be engaged, critical thinkers. Programs such as the Center for Civic Education's "We the People: Project Citizen" and Street Law's "Mock Trial" are based on collaborative, participatory learning. They involve students in collective projects that tackle complex social problems, helping young people develop skills and dispositions that will make them more effective citizens in our democracy, and more productive contributors to our economy.

Students who are exposed to dynamic teachers and curriculum in civics learn to listen to what people of different viewpoints have to say, to weigh what's reasoned and unreasonable in the arguments they hear, and to look for common ground and pragmatic solutions. They learn to be open to compromise, and to appreciate that conflicting interests are part of our free society. They come to understand that resolving conflicts is the function of democracy — it is what allows our nation to move forward.

They are more willing to take leadership roles in their schools and communities, and when they

enter the job market, they are better equipped to work constructively with people from varied backgrounds and cultures. Students who receive effective civic education are more likely to exhibit the qualities that employers prize above all — reliability, a strong work ethic, and a willingness to take personal responsibility.

We encourage school-reform advocates, business people, politicians and educators to join forces in a campaign to ensure that instruction in the essential characteristics of democratic citizenship is central to every student's education experience. We applaud state-based efforts to bring attention to this cause, such as the Indiana State Summit On Civic Engagement, convening September 11 in Indianapolis, hosted by the Indiana Bar Foundation. The summit will highlight best practices for teaching civics in a lively and compelling way, and call for a sustained commitment to civics instruction throughout our educational system — from kindergarten into college.

As a nation, we are having trouble talking reasonably to one another about public policy challenges. The quality of the public dialogue — our ability to reason with one another and to sort through issues — is poor, often little better than playground name-calling, rather than the deep exploration of challenges and their potential solutions that the times call for. The complexity of the problems we confront demands that Americans of different beliefs and perspectives think and reason together about what to do.

Our nation depends for its health on the active, informed engagement of its citizens. If each of us does our share to make America a more perfect union, a happy by-product of the effort will be a nation with people more capable of pursuing happiness in the economy of the future.

*Hamilton served from 1965 to 1999 as a Democratic U.S. Representative from Indiana. He is Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. Goodling served from 1975 to 2001 as a Republican U.S. Representative from Pennsylvania, and was Chairman of the Committee on Education and the Workforce. For more information about the Indiana Summit, call the Indiana Bar Foundation at (800) 279-8772 or e-mail [CitizenSummit@inbf.org](mailto:CitizenSummit@inbf.org).*