

Commentary by Lee H. Hamilton and William F. Goodling

Democracy is hard work. Each new generation of Americans must learn that the freedoms we enjoy carry with them certain obligations — to be informed about issues, to listen to opposing views, to work in a civil manner to resolve the conflicts that inevitably arise in a nation as large and diverse as ours.

How are we doing at instilling in young Americans an understanding of our political heritage, and at equipping them to think critically and participate constructively? We are falling down on the job, according to “The Nation’s Report Card: Civics 2006,” issued recently by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The NAEP study showed that only 24 percent of fourth graders, 22 percent of eighth graders and 27 percent of twelfth graders have a “proficient” mastery of civics. “America’s school children are woefully unprepared to take their place as informed, engaged citizens,” lamented Charles N. Quigley, executive director of the Center for Civic Education.

At Gettysburg, Lincoln asked whether our country could “long endure.” His question remains relevant today. Our constitutional democracy is not a machine that will go of itself. It is a people-intensive work in progress. It demands time, energy, and knowledge from its citizens.

For our country to long endure, our young people need to appreciate and be committed to advancing the principles that motivated the Founders — equality, justice, liberty and opportunity for all. At an early age — certainly by middle school — students should be learning and practicing the thinking and participatory skills that democracy requires of its citizens: how to identify useful historical and contemporary data in an era of information overload and develop a logical, factual argument; how to deliver that argument persuasively in writing, and in a speech or debate; how to listen to opposing views, acknowledge the legitimate concerns of others, and negotiate toward consensus.

These skills are the glue that is needed to hold together our pluralistic society — what makes us “We, the People.” For our country to become a more perfect Union, we must arm our young people with a knowledge of history, and with the knowledge of how to be constructive citizens.

What happens if we fail to do this? Young people stop believing that they can make a difference. When they come of age, they fail to vote. They feel powerless to influence their government, and become alienated from it. They yield to cynicism and apathy. They become isolated from others, neglect their communities, and lose sight of the fact that they have obligations that extend beyond themselves.

When we fail to educate our children about our nation’s history and their obligations as citizens in our representative democracy, we miss an opportunity to enrich our children’s lives. And we

miss the opportunity to enrich our country through their involvement.

The good news is, a growing number of people are promoting the idea that civic education should get more attention in our schools. Leaders in government, corporations, foundations, the faith community, and others are starting to work cooperatively to emphasize how important it is for every American to understand and fulfill his or her civic responsibilities.

One such effort is coming September 11, when the Indiana Bar Foundation hosts the first-ever “Indiana State Summit On Civic Engagement,” in Indianapolis. The summit will examine the state of civic education in Indiana, focus attention on best practices for teaching civics in a lively and compelling way, and issue a call to action to ensure that there is a sustained commitment to civics instruction throughout our educational system — from kindergarten through college.

Similarly, the Pennsylvania Coalition for Representative Democracy campaign, run by the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, held a state summit on civics in 2006. The Coalition has provided every student in the commonwealth a “toolkit” to help them participate in governmental processes.

Thomas Jefferson put it well when he said: “Democracy is never a final achievement. It is a call to an untiring effort.” Let us all commit to sounding that call to new generations of Americans.

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 forthcoming Indiana Summit, call the Indiana Bar Foundation at (317) 269-2415 or e-mail CitizenSummit@inbf.org.