

Can civics make a difference?

By Jim Nowlan

There is a push by a small but dedicated band (I am on the fringe of the group) that advocates for civics to be a required course in Illinois schools.

Could civics education cure, over time, what ails us when it comes to corruption, low voter turnout and a possibly declining sense of civic virtue? I think so, but it will take years.

The problem is that civics advocates are among a long list of boosters trying to claw back some time, respectively, for arts, music, geography, physical education, character education, and more.

These subjects have often been diminished by the understandable emphasis in recent years on STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) and English instruction.

A task force on civics education reported recently to the state school board and lawmakers that our state lags most others in this regard. Illinois is, for example, one of only 10 states that do not require a civics or American government course for graduation.

Illinois requires two years in high school of social science courses, which may be chosen from history, government, geography, economics, sociology, law, civics and maybe other courses. Indiana requires three years of such courses.

Oh, I should not forget that good old Illinois Constitution test requirement, which many administrators, teachers and students have regularly blown off since I was a student decades ago.

The civics deficit across Illinois society is significant.

For example, Illinois ranks high among the states in both actual and perceived corruption. And we suffer for it, as two-thirds of 70 Illinois business recruiters I surveyed two years ago said that perceptions of corruption by outsiders affected their efforts negatively.

As I have noted in this space, two-thirds of the students I surveyed in my classes several years ago at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign said they would be willing to bribe a judge in order to get a sibling out of a tough jam with a DUI charge.

Indeed, I think we have a culture of corruption in Illinois, in which more of us than we might realize would be willing to take advantage of state government if given a chance.

Also, over recent decades, Illinois has developed a significant Latino population, whose traditions and values were generally shaped in nations where democracy and the rule of law are less ingrained than here and where corruption is much worse than in the U.S.

One of the primary purposes of establishing public schools, as envisioned by Thomas Jefferson two hundred years ago, was to inculcate in our young the civic virtues that would sustain our fledgling democracy.

The task force on civic education I noted at the outset reported from its research that such learning translates into higher rates of voting, stronger communities, and indeed the cure for just about anything that ails us.

But can deficient civic culture be transformed? American society has shown that cultural attitudes toward smoking (which was cool when I was young) and driving under the influence have changed markedly. So, yes, cultural behavior can be altered.

I feel that regular required learning about our democratic ideals, government practices (good and bad), the role of elections, and our civic responsibilities may well be of great value, over time.

Yet how do we squeeze into a six-hour school day all that my friends and I and other groups want to put back into education?

I have long felt that our school day and year are too short. I feel we should gradually move from six hours of instruction to closer to seven and from 175-180 days to closer to 200, the latter being about the calendar in China's schools. After all, we are in a fight for our economic lives.

The state fiscal situation is dire. More money for education will be hard to come by soon. Pension liabilities apparently cannot be trimmed, say the courts. The state's \$20 billion program of health care for low income persons relentlessly costs more each year.

What to do? I don't know. Fortunately, I'm about out of space.

The first step is for Gov.-elect Rauner and his team to give us an honest assessment of our fiscal situation, something we have not had in years. It won't be pretty. Stay tuned.