

FBA Announces Essay Contests for Middle and High School Students

by Maria Vathis



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Does it surprise you to learn that approximately 85 percent of Americans cannot correctly describe the “rule of law”? In a country founded on the ideals of self-government these statistics are alarming because they indicate that Americans are disengaged from their civic responsibilities.

Civics education in the United States is no longer a priority. As CNN.com reported in July 2013, “[w]e typically hear the performance of America’s children in reading, math, and science described as a crisis. But these are areas of strength compared with civics and history.”¹ One out of three U.S. eighth-graders score “proficient” or higher on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading, math, and science.² In contrast, approximately one out of five eighth-graders is “proficient” in civics and history.³ According to statistics from the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, two-thirds of students scored below “proficient” on the last national civics assessment administered in 2010, and less than half of eighth-graders surveyed knew the purpose of the Bill of Rights. Only one in 10 eighth-graders had age-appropriate knowledge of the system of checks and balances between our branches of government.⁴ Moreover, these results were the same as the results of the previous two National Assessments in Civics conducted in 2006 and 1998.

These statistics show that our youth is unaware of, and perhaps uninterested in, their rights. Civics education is necessary in order for the next generation to be productive participants in our system of government. According to Shannon Arko, a middle school English teacher from Aurora, Ill., “An increase in efforts to raise awareness about civics would help our youth not only be able to repeat, but to actually understand, their rights, because there are limitations on their applicability.”

For example, her students know enough to argue that the First Amendment stands for free speech, but they cannot explain what that means, and they often do not understand that certain parameters exist on those rights.

Since ancient times, democratic societies have recognized the importance of guiding and shaping the youth. According to Aristotle, “Good habits formed at youth make all the difference.” For the welfare of our

nation, there are many advantages to prioritizing the importance of civics education. One of the benefits of civil learning is that it prepares students for informed participation in our representative democracy. In addition, students of all ethnicities and backgrounds will be more likely to vote in elections.

As attorneys and judges, our profession provides us with unique ways to serve our community, and that includes raising awareness about civics throughout the nation. To inspire the next generation to learn about civics, the Federal Bar Association will hold an essay contest for middle schoolers and high schoolers in the fall/winter of 2016/2017. In order to appeal to this generation of tech-savvy students, we will take an innovative approach by allowing electronic essay submissions through a mobile application. Written submissions will also be accepted for those without access to the internet. According to Arko, the FBA’s essay contest “will help students build the skills necessary to succeed in the 21st century, such as the importance of being aware of current events and of meeting deadlines.” The FBA’s mission with the essay contest is to provide students with the opportunity to ponder the unique relationship between the three branches of government, why we have a representative democratic government, what sacrifices our forefathers made to implement that system, and the role that individuals have in sustaining a free society. In the wise words of Benjamin Franklin, “[T]ell me and I forget. Teach me and I may remember. Involve me and I learn.” ☺

Endnotes

¹Robert Pondiseio, *Do Our Children Know How to be Citizens?*, CNN.COM, www.cnn.com/2013/07/04/opinion/pondiscio-civic-education (July 4, 2013, 1:45 PM ET).

²*Id.*

³*Id.*

⁴*America’s Civic Learning Crisis: Preparation for Informed and Engaged Citizenship is the Co-Equal Goal of Education: A Fact Sheet*, CAMPAIGN FOR THE CIVIC MISSION OF SCHOOLS, www.civicmissionofschools.org/the-campaign/civic-learning-fact-sheet (last visited July 18, 2016).