

Shore up social studies education to shore up American democracy

Several years ago the National Assessment of Educational Progress released a frightening report on the state of social studies education in America: As of 2018 just 24% of eighth-grade students were proficient or advanced in civics. History had even worse results with only 15% of eighth- graders assessed as proficient or advanced. The reasons for this are manifold but chief among them is the simple fact that states and school districts have stopped taking social studies education seriously.

For many principals and superintendents, social studies classes are simply the dumping ground for patronage appointments and athletic coaches — people who rarely have provided solid evidence of their teaching abilities but who can pacify a job-seeking acquaintance or boost the athletic glory of the school. These trends are even more common in rural Kentucky where school districts often serve as the largest employer in the county.



By Jeffery Tyler Syck
Kentucky Lantern

Though such blatant corruption is never acceptable, it is the product of government policies and cultural attitudes that place social studies at the bottom of the educational ladder. A recent RAND report has highlighted that school funding is rarely tied to the assessment of history students. In short, neither the state nor the national government usually provides financial incentives that make schools prioritize social studies education.

Of course, such government malpractice does not develop in a vacuum. For decades, American society has emphasized science and math at the expense of the humanities. But those who are seeking to create a nation of engineers forget that we are already a country of citizens. History and civics provide the educational foundation that can sustain a democracy. If voters do not understand history or how government works, then how sound can their political contributions be?

States are beginning to become aware of the important role that social studies education can play in a democracy. State legislatures across the nation have started taking steps to alter the curriculum of history courses.

Kentucky has taken steps to try to shore up the declining civic knowledge that plagues our society. Secretary of State Michael Adams has called for increased civics education in the commonwealth. This call to action has been answered by the General Assembly which has taken steps to require more civics in Kentucky high schools and even provide a mechanism for assessing student knowledge. However, the General Assembly has thus far focused its attention on citizenship exams which emphasize random factual information more than the robust appreciation for political participation and constitutional norms that truly define a good civics education. Nor have any steps been enacted to penalize schools that fail to meet these expectations.

Truly these improvements will require schools to address the systemic issues that plague our educational system — rather than requiring a class here and offering an exam there. This means first and foremost taking more seriously the hiring of history and civics faculty. An easy solution to this is to more firmly tie funding to student performance in those subjects. However, tests are not always the best mechanism for understanding how well a teacher is doing nor does it mean that schools are guaranteed to prioritize funding over athletic prowess. For this to happen, full time faculty should be barred from serving as head coaches of athletic teams. Only by separating the athletic aspect of the school system from its educational side can it be ensured that schools will take education seriously.

At the end of the day, this suggestion can only take us so far. As a state, we need to once again understand that social studies is not an interesting but largely useless elective subject. American democracy is imperiled, crumbling away under a ceaseless onslaught of partisan bickering and misinformation. Better social studies education requires good teachers, more instructional resources and a thoughtful curriculum. This will not fix all of these problems, but it would certainly help.

Jeffery Tyler Syck is an assistant professor of politics and the director of the Center for Public Service at the University of Pikeville.

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House Bill 368 would hinder community journalism

A bill passed last week in the Kentucky House of Representatives would do away with the more than 50-year-old state law requiring local governments to publish public notices in their newspaper of record.

House Bill 368 would expand upon an existing law that allows counties with at least 80,000 residents to use a government-controlled website for their notices instead of publishing in the newspaper.

With HB 368, cities and counties are seeking that privilege regardless of the population of the county. Instead of a full notice, they could publish a smaller ad directing the public to a website.

I understand the desire to save money but a study by the Legislative Research Commission found that the average government agency spends less than public of 1% of that agency's budget on public notices.

Conversely, "legal ads" can represent a significant portion of a small community newspaper's revenue. Losing that revenue could shut many newspapers across the commonwealth down — resulting in less coverage for communities.



For The Record
By Janie Slaven, Editor

Even for newspapers who can withstand the loss of public notice revenue, I fear for their readers who may not have digital access to see the notices on a government website.

Despite these concerns, HB 368 passed the House last Wednesday afternoon on a 62-30 vote and has now been received in the Senate for consideration.

Although the bill passed out of the House, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Representatives Derek Lewis, Nick Wilson, Tom O'Dell Smith, Josh Bray, and Timmy Truett — who serve portions of Laurel County — for voting against it. Their votes show their commitment to transparency and community journalism.

Rep. Shane Baker couldn't vote due to illness but also expressed to me his support for community journalism.

With the bill now in the State Senate, I reached out to Laurel County's Senator Brandon Storm as well and appreciate his interest to monitor the situation. Should it come to a vote there, I humbly urge Sen. Storm and his colleagues to also vote against HB 368.

Janie Slaven is the editor of The Sentinel-Echo. She can be reached at jslaven@sentinel-echo.com.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Searching for family history

To the Editor,

I am writing to the community in hopes of gathering information about my great great grandfather, Isaac Lewis (born about 1862), who lived in Laurel County. He also lived in Rockcastle and Jackson Counties. His first wife, Elizabeth King Lewis was born around 1845, and died between 1880 and 1900,

but I cannot locate a record of her death. Isaac remarried in 1900 to Henrietta Reynolds Owsley. She is listed with Isaac in the 1920 census living with Isaac's son Alvin. Isaac is not listed in the 1930 census, so I assume he died between 1920 and 1930. I cannot locate a death record.

If anyone has any knowledge about

Isaac and/or Elizabeth, including family records, local stories, or even old photographs, please reach out to me at Pattyh54@me.com.

Thank you for your assistance in my family history research.

Sincerely,
Patty Lewis Horton
Westfield, Indiana

