



Meeting Justice O'Connor at the ECS Forum: I-Civics and the Case for Civic Education

One of the keynote speakers at the Education Commission of the States National Conference in Atlanta this summer was retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. As a kid, I knew little of left and right politics, but knew that it was pretty neat that a woman was appointed to the highest court in the land. Getting to tell her the impact she had on me as a child was pretty neat. She is feisty and a hoot to boot!

She was there to address the educators at the conference on her project called I-Civics, which involves computer game programs to support teachers and students and the study of civics. Alarmed by the statistic that only one in three Americans can name all three branches of government, O'Connor challenges teachers of all content areas to incorporate civics into our lessons. I-Civics is not a resource simply for social studies teachers. The site offers terrific election-related materials and several interactive video game options to help students learn.

Justice O'Connor suggests that young people today spend about forty hours per week in front of a screen. This project seeks to capture a little bit of that time in front of a screen albeit in a game format to teach someone something. Teachers advised the program and its content. I-Civics has recently developed its 17th game that covers a range of the three branches.

"We are at a big turning point in our nation's history." As a culture, we face tremendous challenges, burdens on children and children's children. We need to think proactively about the skills we want our kids to have today- how can we prepare them to be engaged citizens who can affect what happens- that they are not helpless little cogs?

Here some additional notes from Justice O'Connor's presentation for your consideration:

The majority of education policy comes from states/ local legislators- decisions made affect everything in today's complicated world.

"Tell me and I forget, Teach me and I remember, Involve me and I learn" –Ben Franklin
Young people can encourage local action to get something done- very effective learning tool.

"Global knowledge economy" – students need to be taught skills of citizenship.
Students used to be taught civics in a very dry way by listening to teachers lecture, but they were taught-40 state constitutions site the importance of civics education.
Yet schools have drifted from original mission and Civics education has just about disappeared in schools today.

Less than 1/3 of Americans can name the three branches of government
2/3 of Americans cannot name a single Supreme Court Justice
From grade 4 to 12- disadvantaged background students score very lowly on NAEP tests in civics
70 percent of social studies teachers report feelings of being pushed aside in lieu of focus on math, science and reading

When civics is taught, students often think texts are boring and irrelevant. Need to get better with civic education- our nation will one day be dependent upon these current youngsters- harness the power of technology to help get the job done

Curriculum is quite expansive- kept it available at no cost to us- access it!
"Supreme Decision" game is on free speech
"Do I Have a Right?"- allows people to connect better with society in which we live

I-Civics is being used in 50,00 classes in all states
Have 16 new games on the way
70 different lesson plans in 14 curriculum areas