"Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government." -- Thomas Jefferson

According to President Barack Obama, making school days longer and extending the academic school year will increase learning and raise test scores among American children. However, it's not the length of the school year that is the problem so much as the quality of education being imparted to young people, especially when it comes to knowing American history and their rights -- what we used to call civics.

Clearly, the public schools are fostering civic ignorance. For example, a recent study of 1,000 Oklahoma high-school students found that only 3 percent would be able to pass the U.S. Immigration Services' citizenship exam, while incredibly 93 percent of those from foreign countries who took the same test passed. Only 28 percent of Oklahoma students could name the "supreme law of the land" (the Constitution), while even less could identify Thomas Jefferson as the author of the Declaration of Independence. Barely one out of every four students knew that George Washington was the nation's first president. None of the students correctly answered eight or more of the 10 questions, and 97 percent scored 50 percent or less.

This problem is not limited to Oklahoma students; it's a national problem. For example, a similar study in Arizona found that only 3.5 percent of public-high-school students would be able to pass the citizenship test, a figure not significantly exceeded by the passing rates of charter- and private-school students, at 7 and 14 percent, respectively.

A survey of American adults by the American Civic Literacy Program resulted in some equally disheartening findings. Seventy-one percent failed the test. Moreover, having a college education does very little to increase civic knowledge, as demonstrated by the abysmal 32 percent pass rate of people holding not just a bachelor's degree but some sort of graduate-level degree.

Those who drafted the U.S. Constitution understood that the only way to guarantee that freedom would survive in the new republic was through an informed citizenry -- one educated on basic rights and freedoms. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, "I know no safe depositary of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from

them, but to inform their discretion by education." Jefferson also recognized that the people "are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty."

Unfortunately, as the aforementioned surveys indicate, most Americans are constitutionally illiterate, and our young people are not much better. Despite the millions of taxpayer dollars spent on education, our schools do a poor job of teaching the basic freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Indeed, the major emphasis in public education today is on math and science. Yet even in those subjects, American students lag far behind when compared to students in other countries.

We would do well to heed Jefferson's advice on the subject of public education. He believed that pre-university education was to "instruct the mass of our citizens in ... their rights, interests, and duties as men and citizens." As for university education, Jefferson said it was "to form the statesmen, legislators, and judges on whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend."

Clearly, the ramifications of raising up untold generations of young people who are constitutionally illiterate are serious and far-reaching. These young people will be our future voters and political leaders. By failing to educate them, educators have not only done us a disservice but our nation as well.

So what's the solution?

Instead of forcing children to become part of the machinery of society by an excessive emphasis on math and science in the schools, they should be prepared to experience the beauty of becoming responsible citizens. This will mean teaching them their rights and urging them to exercise their freedoms to the fullest.

Some critics are advocating that students pass the United States citizenship exam in order to graduate from high school. Others recommend that it must be a prerequisite for attending college. I'd go so far as to argue that students should have to pass the citizenship exam before graduating from *grade* school. In fact, the goal of civic literacy is far from impossible. To pass the examination, one must only correctly answer six out of ten questions. To see how simple the test is, check it out at Rutherford.org/pdf/2009/US_Citizen_Naturalizatio

n_Test.pdf .

The federal bureaucracy lodged in Washington, DC, is out of control. Increasingly, under George W. Bush, the federal government disregarded the Constitution and systematically violated the civil liberties of American citizens on a mass scale. Unfortunately, Barack Obama is continuing a similar pattern.

And whose fault is it? When I was a child going to school, I was taught American history and how radical the so-called Founding Fathers were. I was required to take civics courses, and I knew the Bill of Rights. And by the time I had entered college, I was protesting government encroachment on our freedoms and liberties.

I was also taught that if students didn't learn, it's because teachers didn't teach. The unfortunate danger we now face is a government no longer controlled by the people and which no longer feels responsible toward them. This is a problem created by the educational system, but it is one that could be remedied by it as well.

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