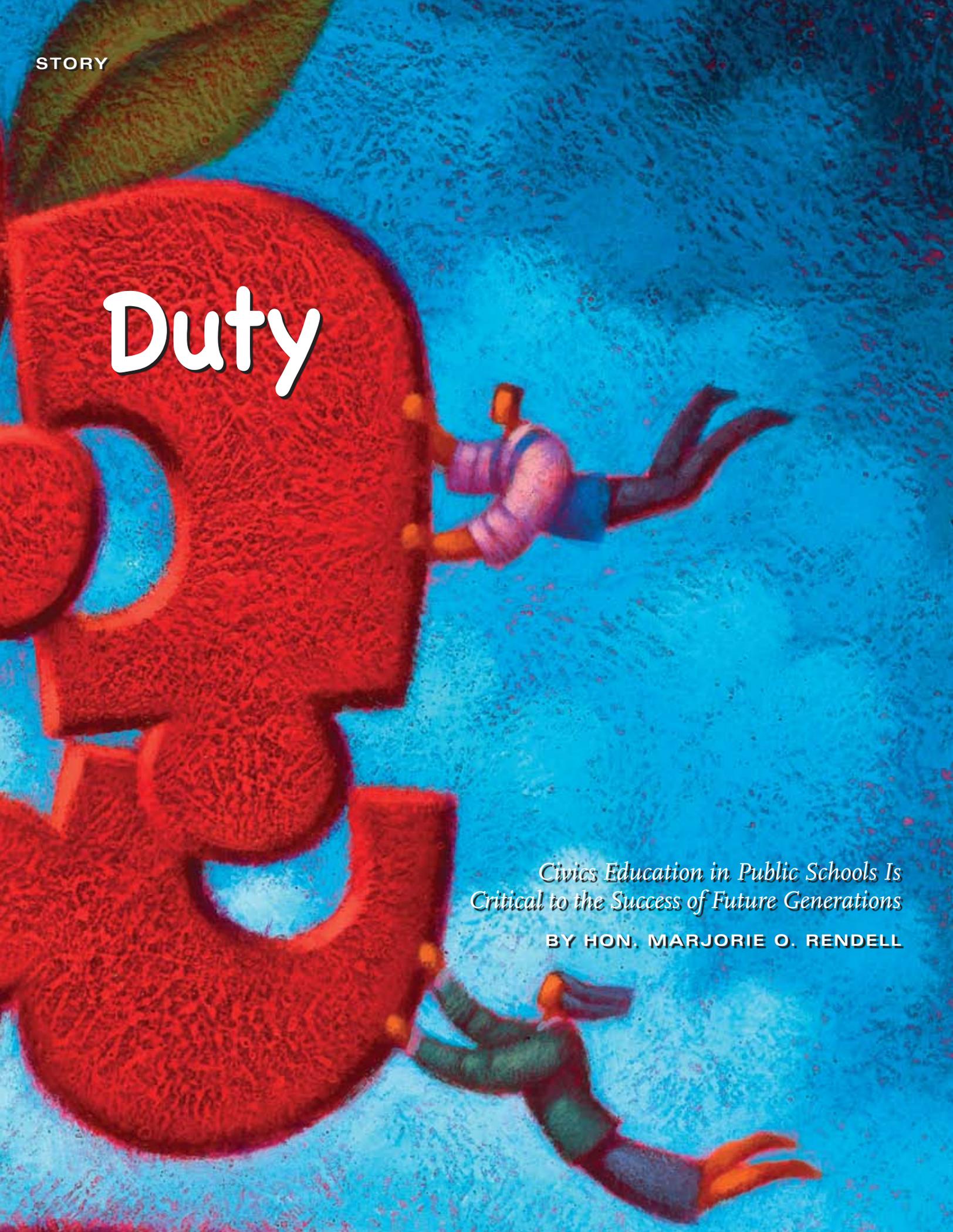


Civics



STORY

Duty

An illustration featuring a large, textured red letter 'D' on the left side. Two figures, a man and a woman, are shown climbing the right side of the 'D'. The man is higher up, wearing a purple and white striped shirt and dark trousers. The woman is lower down, wearing a green and white striped shirt and dark trousers. They are both reaching up towards the top of the letter. The background is a vibrant blue with a fine, pebbled texture. The word 'Duty' is written in a white, bold, sans-serif font across the middle of the 'D'.

*Civics Education in Public Schools Is
Critical to the Success of Future Generations*

BY HON. MARJORIE O. RENDELL

When my husband became governor of Pennsylvania, I decided to focus my efforts as first lady on promoting civics education. The inspiration for this initiative arose as a result of my experience presiding over a naturalization ceremony. Looking out over the crowd of joyful new citizens, I realized that they knew how special our citizenship is. They realized that our democratic way of life, our respect for the rule of law, our fundamental belief in equal opportunity, mutual respect, individual liberty and freedom for all — these things make us different. These things cause people from other countries to leave their homelands, sometimes risking everything, to come to America. We are indeed blessed.

If only more of us could realize how blessed we are. Too many natural-born American citizens lack an appreciation of how very special our democratic system of government is. Even fewer truly understand the responsibility we all have to ensure its continued vitality through knowledge and full participation. When Benjamin Franklin, at the end of the Constitutional Convention, was asked, “What have you wrought here? What have you given us?”, he famously responded, “A Republic, Madam, if you can keep it.”

Our children are democracy’s future. If we want our children’s future to be secure,

we must give them the tools they need to safeguard and continue our democratic way of life. How can we train them in citizenship in a way that is interesting, meaningful? How can we help them become well-informed, responsible, active citizens? Therein lies the challenge.

Unfortunately, we have not been meeting the challenge of late. We have all heard survey results that reveal how pop culture is drowning out our young citizens’ basic knowledge of our system and the workings of government. According to a 2006 study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, only one-third of those polled could name all three branches of the federal government. Another one-third couldn’t name even one of the three branches. A survey conducted by the National Constitution Center revealed that 59 percent of American teenagers could name the Three Stooges but not the three branches of government. In the most recent (2006) National Assessment of Educational Proficiency in Civics, only 22 percent of eighth-graders scored at or above the proficient level, while 27 percent of twelfth-graders (tomorrow’s voters) scored at or above the proficient level.

Cultivation of a sense of civic responsibility should begin in early childhood, when children are learning — at home, in their neighborhoods, and in school — the values that will shape their future conduct and relationships. At the stage when children are learning the importance of individual responsibility, cooperation, respect for oth-

ers and the importance of being part of a team, children also can be encouraged to self-identify as citizens.

Children reach out early on to identify with others, to be like someone else. (All too often, unfortunately, it is the popular singing artist or television action star who captures their imaginations.) We need to tell children about the important people who founded our country and have contributed in their communities, and encourage them to emulate the examples of these true heroes and role models.

Of course, it goes without saying (or *should*) that we ourselves — as adults, as parents and particularly as legal professionals — ought to be modeling the values of good citizenship.

The Pennsylvania Coalition for Representative Democracy (PennCORD) is a partnership, formed in 2004, that is uniquely positioned as a coalition of educational, advocacy and governmental organizations that are committed to improving civic learning for students in grades K-12. PennCORD’s Key Partners are the Pennsylvania Bar Association, the National Constitution Center, Pennsylvania Department of Education, and the Pennsylvania Governor’s Office of the First Lady.

The coalition’s mission is to encourage the creation of local civic learning policy to implement state standards in every school district by motivating community advocacy for better civic education and supporting educators across Pennsylvania with resources and training. Our goal is for every Pennsylvania school to prepare its students to understand and participate in their communities, society and government.

Building a solid foundation of civic learning for every student is the first critical step toward achieving this goal. PennCORD defines “active civic learning” as the integration of three learning spheres: civic knowledge, public action and democratic deliberation. We are spreading knowledge about available curricula and are showcasing several curriculum-based programs, called Keystone Programs, that have proven successful. They are designed to be easily adopted and replicated by schools and school districts, offering support, such as teacher training, that is available at little or no cost to the schools.

Through my work with PennCORD, I have visited countless schools and reviewed numerous educational programs and curricula aimed at developing civic values and attitudes, knowledge and skills. I have become convinced that we cannot start too

Get Involved:

To become a volunteer for Advancing Civics Education, a joint program of the Philadelphia Bar Association and School District of Philadelphia, please visit the Association’s Web site at philadelphiabar.org.

Volunteers will be assigned to teams of three-to-five attorneys and judges to visit a ninth-grade classroom once a month for the 2008-09 school year, in addition to classroom training, to teach a supplemental civics curriculum.

early in developing these skills, and that civic learning in various forms must continue throughout the educational experience, K-12.

For example, the Allentown School District has adopted a K-12 curriculum developed around basic values and desired behaviors. This program, titled the “*School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program*” (SVPDP), is based on four core concepts: authority, responsibility, justice and privacy. This program is an integration of two PennCORD Keystone Programs — “*We the People*” and “*Project Citizen*” — with additional curriculum from the national non-profit educational organization, Center for Civic Education.

SVPDP is designed to permeate the school environment and improve students’ civic knowledge, skills and attitudes. It provides teacher participants with training opportunities that support the curriculum. There is a built-in component of research and evaluation of changes in students’ civic knowledge and attitudes as they relate to tolerance of the ideas of others, civic responsibility, authority and the law, and social and political institutions.

In addition to classroom activities, teachers are expected to work on a showcase activity with the students — either a mock congressional hearing or a project citizen portfolio.

In June, the schools’ efforts are celebrated with a districtwide Civic Celebration Day. The Allentown School District is a diverse district of 18,500 students and the population comes from forty-three countries and speaks twenty-six different languages. The implementation of the program was challenging, but its success has surpassed all expectations. Research also shows academic growth, including reading, writing and math skills. In addition, a research study conducted in 2006 by the Allentown School District revealed that teachers perceived that the curriculum fostered problem-solving skills, and the focus on persuasive writing enhanced the students’ ability to “evaluate options, choose an option and support that option with facts.”

These outcomes are gratifying, suggesting that by teaching problem-solving, mutual respect, understanding and the need to make smart choices, we can lay the foundation for student discourse and for true participatory citizenship. If we are educating our students properly about participatory democracy from an early age, we should not need to convince them of its importance as they reach voting age.

Dispute resolution programs foster communication and participation. Project PEACE (*Peaceful Endings through Attorneys, Children and Educators*), one of the Keystone PennCORD Programs sponsored by the Pennsylvania Bar Association and the Pennsylvania Attorney General, shows students how they can participate positively in their elementary school communities by helping their peers work through conflicts without violence using peer mediation and other forms of conflict resolution.

“Patience, commitment, trust, setting a good example, reflecting, communicating, helping others, understanding.” This is not a theoretical list of the virtues we spend a lifetime hoping to achieve. This is what fifth-graders at an urban elementary school told David Trevaskis, president of the Pennsylvania Council for the Social Studies (PCSS) and Pennsylvania Bar Association pro bono coordinator, that they had actually learned from their participation in Project PEACE. Students also learn the difference between everyday conflict and the violence that is bullying.

Andrew Susko, Pennsylvania Bar Association president and a veteran of the Project PEACE program, having helped bring the program to Pennsylvania schools back in 1999, recently answered the question often asked regarding attorneys’ participation in the program: “Why are children who are not in trouble with the law talking to lawyers?” He explained: “Lawyers work with schools through Project PEACE to bring conflict resolution training and peer mediation education to the young people of the commonwealth and to teach them the importance of the rule of law in our democ-

racy.”

More than 140 schools at all levels have received Project PEACE training and hundreds of additional schools have been trained in other peer mediation and anti-bullying models. Although elementary grades are targeted, certain districts such as Montgomery County’s Abington School District have worked to develop K-12 conflict resolution, peer mediation and anti-bullying Project PEACE programs.

Service-learning initiatives that are being tried in our schools see this progression through into adolescence. Putting what they have learned into active use can only enhance outcomes. These activities complement substantive learning about how our democracy functions. Students must be at the center of the learning process and curriculum materials must encourage critical thinking, teamwork and interaction with classmates, teachers, parents and the community.

One of PennCORD’s Keystone Programs, “*Project Citizen*,” developed by the Center for Civic Education, reflects this student-centered learning process about how our democracy works by engaging students in a series of structured cooperative learning activities. It is used in more than sixty countries and is the center’s most widely adapted and implemented curriculum. *Project Citizen* equips students with the knowledge, attitudes and skills required for competent and responsible participation in the political life of their communities.

Project Citizen has been recognized as a model community service program. An independent assessment in 2000 of civic education programs funded by USAID

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from 1990 through 2000 found that Project Citizen had many of the characteristics of the most effective civic education programs: “It is highly participatory, it relates to issues that affect the participants in their daily lives, it produces tangible as well as intangible results, and it is firmly rooted in the community in which it takes place.”

The author also noted that the program provides students with a variety of research and communication skills that inform their participation, teach consensus-building and teamwork, and enhance their sense of efficacy as community members.

Project Citizen utilizes the scientific method in a five-step analysis of a civic problem and culminates with a simulated public hearing. Students’ work is displayed in a class portfolio containing a display section and documentation section. Students present their proposals to panels of real-life representatives of their community, often including representatives of governmental agencies and nonprofit organizations. As many as 50 percent of *Project Citizen* classes worldwide implement their action plans in the community, and approximately 20 percent are implemented by the governmental body associated with the plan. In Philadelphia, State Representative Dwight Evans has used this program as an after-school leadership program with great success.

Once in high school, students should fully be able to engage in exercises in citizenship aimed at gaining a better understanding of how our government and its component parts actually work, and how they can make a difference. Mock trial programs such as the Pennsylvania statewide

competition, which is run by the Young Lawyers Division of the Pennsylvania Bar Association, and the national mock trial competition, which will come to Philadelphia in 2010, are two such exercises. More than 300 teams compete each year in the Pennsylvania Mock Trial Competition.

Quite often teachers use the vehicle of a mock trial to teach responsibility, justice and the interworkings of the legal system. Some students engage in these programs because their interest was piqued early on by “fairy tale” mock trials in elementary school. Skilled teachers and lawyers often use the story of a familiar fairy tale to teach about the rule of law, authority, responsibility and justice. For example, picture a third grade class acting out the trial of Goldilocks for her break-in at the home of the three bears. The script for this trial is included in a lesson plan created by Scholastic Books for third and fourth grade, and is one of our Keystone Programs. It is also described in the Pennsylvania Bar Association’s Law Day Books.

Certain Philadelphia and area high schools feature Teen Courts in which students deal with real life matters involving the sentencing of students who have admitted to discipline infractions. According to Shawnette Nicole McKnight, vice president and chief justice of the Chester High School Youth Court, “Youth Courts are an opportunity for students to get a second chance to deal with their mistakes and turn it around.”

Ninth grade has been identified as the critical year for dropouts. In Pittsburgh, all ninth-graders participate in a structured civ-

ics program, *9th Grade Nation*, that aims to change this dynamic. Here in Philadelphia, our Bar Association, under the leadership of Chancellor A. Michael Pratt, is about to implement a program for ninth-graders in Philadelphia’s schools, “*Advancing Civics Education*,” which is modeled on the work of lawyers in Cleveland schools. Teams of three-to-five lawyers will visit ninth-grade classes for one class per month, focusing on law-related civic education. The subject matter will cover such concepts as the structure of our government and the principles that permeate our society and our Constitution. We are in the process of tailoring the curriculum and logistics, including mobilizing attorney and judge volunteers. We welcome anyone who is interested in helping to contact Amy Muldoon at the Association.

Former United States Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, a dedicated advocate for civic education, often refers to John Dewey’s sentiment about the need for democracy to be “reborn in every generation, with education its midwife.” She adds her own thought that the understanding of our democracy is “not passed down from generation to generation through the gene pool. It must be learned anew by each generation. It’s not enough simply to read or even memorize parts of the Constitution. Rather we should try to understand the ideas that give it life and give it strength still today.”

We at PennCORD believe that widespread use of the curriculum and programs discussed above will help reverse the trend of the disappearance of civics education in our schools. This is important not only for the substantive content-based knowledge about our country and democracy, but also for the development of the skills necessary for adult citizenship — critical thinking, problem solving and informed participation. With these tools, we can help our students (and possibly, in the process, ourselves) meet Benjamin Franklin’s challenge to “keep” the Republic entrusted to us by the founders of our nation. ■

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Hon. Marjorie O. Rendell, judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit and first lady of Pennsylvania, is a member of the Association’s Ad Hoc Committee on Public School Education and a lead partner of the Pennsylvania Coalition for Representative Democracy (PennCORD). Her e-mail address for inquiries relating to this article is mrendell@state.pa.us.

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