

# Deseret News

**150 reasons to check out our new location**



earn \$150\* for switching to KeyBank



©2012 KeyCorp. KeyBank is Member FDIC.

\*Additional restrictions may apply, ask for details.

## Education on the fundamentals of democracy is on life support

Rod Snow

Published, Sunday, April 29 2012 12:00 a.m. MDT



High school students meet in the White Chapel in Salt Lake City Wednesday, Jan. 25, 2012. More than 500 Utah high school students converged on the Utah State capitol participating in live debates. (Jeffrey D. Allred, Deseret News)

As a nation, we are facing some of the most difficult decisions that have challenged us in a long time.

As reported by the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics at the University of Pennsylvania and the article "Guardian of Democracy" by Jonathan Gould, the lack of high-quality civic education in America's schools leaves millions of citizens without the wherewithal to make sense of our system of government.

Consider, for a moment, that most high school graduates can name the three judges on American Idol, but very few know the number or the names of the Justices of the United States Supreme Court.

Surveys conducted over the past decade reveal alarming facts about the state of civics education in this country. Only one-third of Americans could name all three branches of government, while another one-third could not name any. Less than one-third of eighth graders could identify the historical purpose of the Declaration of Independence, and less than a fifth of high school seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy.

Civic learning is, at its heart, necessary to preserving our system of self-government. In a representative democracy, government is only as good as the citizens who elect its leaders, demand action on pressing issues, hold public officials accountable and take action to solve problems in their communities.

In some states, civics is not taught at all in junior high or high school. In Utah, civics education is a required course at the high school level.



High school student Shae Thompson participates in events developed to spur civic engagement from teens. (Jeffrey D. Allred, Deseret News)

While we are fortunate in that respect, much more could be done and the Utah State Bar is committed to improving Utah's civics education standards.

The Bar's Committee on Civics Education is supporting public education by supplementing high school students' classroom learning about civics, specifically with regard to the judiciary and the rule of law, with an interactive program focusing on analytical and language art skills. Already, more than 200 lawyers have volunteered to teach a one-hour course in judicial independence in this exciting pilot program.

Another Bar-sponsored program aims to ensure that low-income students have access to reading material. Sadly, in certain communities, the ratio of books to children is an unacceptable one book for every 300 children. "Books from Barristers" provides new books, donated by Utah lawyers and other generous individuals and entities, to underserved children in Utah on the topics of law, government, history and civics.

Also, the Utah State Bar's Young Lawyer's Division has instituted a "Choose Law Program," which encourages students in middle school and high school, particularly underprivileged students, to "choose law" early in their educational careers.

As a State Bar, we are excited about these programs because we see the very real need in our communities. We also recognize there are many other actions we can take to improve education on the fundamentals of our democracy, including electing people who recognize the importance of civics education, encouraging teachers and administrators to take advantage of related Bar programs and volunteering, as individual lawyers, to participate in these programs.

A citizenry educated regarding the concepts of our system of government is critical to our free society, and the members of the Utah State Bar are committed to ensuring that our students have access to quality civics education.

---

*Rod Snow is president of the Utah State Bar. On May 1, the Bar and its 10,000-plus members will celebrate Law Day 2012, with the theme of "No Courts, No Justice, No Freedom."*

---

Copyright 2012. Deseret News Publishing Company