

Greetings!

*The Center for Youth Citizenship would like you to join us in helping to make character a part of every child's life and education. **Expect Character!***

*~Joseph P. Maloney, Executive Director*



## Back to School: Conversations with Youth on Citizenship, Patriotism and Their Future Course

For the past two years, schools receiving federal funds have been required, by Congress, to hold conversations on the Constitution on or around September 17th. Originally branded by President Truman as Citizenship Day, this annual date marks the day in 1787 the U.S. Constitution was signed. In 1952, this celebration date was endorsed by congressional declaration to highlight and retain efforts designed to recognize the contribution of various immigrant citizen groups as well as to promote allegiance and patriotism to our country in post World War II America. Obviously, following WWII, our nationalism was being polished and our adversaries, the communists at the time, were building walls, trying to bury us economically or planting spies to obtain cold and space war advantage. Sound familiar?

For the last half of the 21st Century, since 1952, this noted big "C" day had no federal, state, or local government required activities. Article X of the Constitution has traditionally left education curriculum to the then 48, now 50 states (Hawaii and Alaska both became states in 1959). However, most recently, a congressionally placed mandate for schools was issued as a result of an appropriation bill (P.L. 108-447) and promoted as part of a national curriculum program campaign. This time, motivation for renewed patriotism was tied to another incident occurring, on September 11th, 2001; the terrorist airliner attacks on the U.S. Increased


interest in patriotism, centered in times of crisis, war and turmoil, has been occurring throughout history and used to positively bring citizens together.

But there have been times in history where individuals have also used the flames of patriotism for special interest and destructive purposes or agendas. Again in the 1950's, led by Senator Joseph McCarthy, a congressional committee questioned individuals on their allegiance and patriotism and unfairly characterized many as subversive or communist sympathizers. This witch hunt and related tactics caught the innocent as well as those posing a threat to our country. Hopefully we have learned to be leery of veiled approaches that limit participation or minimize freedoms, debate or discussion of legitimist and divergent viewpoints. Labeling individuals as un-patriotic or un-American has never proved productive.

Our Constitution has also been misused by some for personal gain. For example, in post Civil War Days, northern carpetbaggers used the cover of reuniting a divided country and several new Amendments to the Constitution (13th, 14th & 15th) to converge on southern communities to seek political or commercial advantages. Samuel Johnson's (1775) famous quote "Patriotism is usually the refuge of the scoundrel" was an indictment against false patriotism. In our current times still another type of potential misuse of decrees of patriotism

is often present. Today everything appears more partisan and competitive and win at all costs tactics are being used. So how does the average citizen discern the difference between honest and sincere patriotic efforts and those employing smokescreen tactics to market, deceive and mislead? Are citizens, regardless of their left or right of center convictions, equally capable of using bandwagon and other flag-waving manipulation techniques in their attempt to capture a political or market edge? Probably so! So how do fair-minded, issue-driven citizens, distinguish between the good, bad and the jingoistic? The appropriate use versus misuse of patriotism and our revered documents has to be judged by an informed, ever alert and serious thinking citizenry.

Will the results of this new congressional requirement, (i.e. for schools to hold some type of activity on one day for some period of time for some number of individuals), do great things for students and their ability to discern positive from blind and misused patriotism? Probably not! So who will benefit from this mandated enthusiasm and related expenditures? Some may conclude that we are going backwards with our country's history and government programs for youth. Do we need some patriotic instruction for our future citizens? Probably so! Should we expand our existing efforts by employing a traditional program and strategy developed for post World War II without a discussion on what skills,



knowledge and practice all youth need to have to effectively participate as citizens in the 21st century? Probably not! Re-packaging the old indoctrination type patriotism programs and strategies to help in preparing our own youth or even other youth in eastern bloc or Middle Eastern countries for democratic citizenship may be extremely costly and without any intended or tangible improvement results for future citizens.

So, what can we do to move forward with depth and substance to adequately and effectively prepare our children and their children for the future? For those of us tired of too much political salt on all of our daily constitutional and non-constitutional bread, regardless of what wing is being flapped, Constitution Day still may offer an excellent reminder and opportunity for some of us to make lemonade in the form of real meaningful conversation; but only if we will take serious advantage of this call for dialogue and discussion. **Here are some suggestions for the Citizenship, Constitution or call it what you want Days ahead:**

✓**Start positive!** Help students recognize the need to know and learn about what is right with our system, community, state and country. Being patriotic is a good thing! Being a skilled learner, thinker and problem solver is also very important. We are, by majority, a good intent people; maybe a little out of shape, a little apathetic, or a little self-centered, but for the most part of good will and with the desire to do the right thing! Building on a foundation of success and “positivity” will provide a proper mindset for youth to spring from to solve problems, make responsive improvements and to work through interpersonal conflicts and overcome differences.

✓**Ask, what’s in it for us!** Talk to your students about both their rights and responsibilities! We need to revisit the fundamentals that define our daily

relationships and cultural agreements that set the basis for rules and protocols on how things get done in a democracy. For example, we should all understand that our rights end at another’s nose! We shouldn’t short sheet our children but instead give them responsibilities at home, school and in the community and hold them accountable. We must work ourselves out of the “what’s in it for me” box. Of course, we must continue to value our individual rights, especially our freedoms of speech and expression. We must also talk about the quality of community life, family and collective interest. A good way to start is to remind students and youth about where their ancestors came from and the contributions of various citizen tapestry groups. We are all in the American melting pot or salad bowl!

✓**Teach serious thinking!** We must continue to exercise our freedom to think while we respect others and value the unpopular or different view! Blind patriotism and complacency, cannot be the standard especially in this day and age of very complex and difficult issues. For example, balancing our security needs with our liberties is a very, very difficult challenge and will require much commitment, work and cooperation of purpose. Patriotism by itself will not get us through this one. Depth in thinking will led to constructive action.

✓**Start local and small!** Too many of us become cynical when we feel powerless or feel we can’t do anything constructive about a condition or problem. Your local home, school, and community offer the best learning and action opportunities for our young citizens. One of the big lessons of our written Constitution has to do with the motivation for its enactment---the abuse of power. Past citizens were very aware and concerned about the abuses of power by a king or person or group that could subjugate another. Abuse can come from government, the majority over the minority or from special over general interest. Size, money and

unfair competition practices are factors that often help to create or expand the potential for the abuse of power. Let’s empower good citizenship by challenging our children to help accomplish the many necessary everyday things that need to be done locally. We have plenty of opportunities in our own back yard to build on before we tackle Washington, D.C.

✓**Practice justice and fairness!** For sure, we all must continue the job to broaden youth’s understanding of the content of our key national documents. But don’t stop there! Teach the principles and processes that underlie these documents and the foundations for the rule of law, not men, at the local, state and national levels. Let kids know how we do things is as important as what we do! Or remind them that the ends don’t justify the means, no matter how noble. And of course, modeling “walking the talk.” As Adlai Stevenson said “Patriotism is not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime.”

These are just a few ideas to begin the discussion. Yes, to start the conversation! Talking with our children and students can be the best way to bring citizenship alive everyday. It doesn’t matter what we call or label one day or a week. Try talking to your kids and students about these things on days other than just September 17<sup>th</sup>. The months of October through August have some great opportunities in them as well. So what are you waiting for? Carpe Diem!

*Joseph P. Maloney is the Executive Director of the Center for Youth Citizenship (CYC). CYC believes that it is our duty to prepare and inspire our children to be responsible citizens committed to acting with character. Through Character-Based Citizenship® partnerships, CYC helps schools and communities teach youth the fundamental behaviors, habits, skills and actions that prepare them for academic and community success and full participation in our democracy. Contact Dr. Maloney or CYC at [cyc@scoe.net](mailto:cyc@scoe.net) or (916) 228-2322.*

