Reading, 'Riting & Citizenship

Schools pledge attention to civics

By Bob Evancho

As civic-mindedness given way to civic illiteracy? If so, does the blame rest with our schools? A bill approved by Idaho's House of Representatives during the 1988 Legislature indicates some state lawmakers think so. After much debate, the House approved a state law requiring Idaho's public schools to place more emphasis on citizenship. Rep. Preston Brimhall, the bill's sponsor, contended the measure would foster more emphasis on respect for the law and the rights and property of others. It would also urge students to achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible.

Brimhall, an Idaho Falls Republican, and supporters of his measure argued that the state's schools are not stressing civic education and social matters enough. Violent television shows and movies, Brimhall added, have left children with little respect for the rights of others.

"I think in this state we've adopted the idea that we let things happen and then we treat them," Brimhall says. "It was my feeling that we need to do what we can to prevent these sociological problems which are going to consume us economically if we don't promote better citizenship."

Indeed there is a concern among some regarding a lack of civic learning in our schools. Part of it stems from sweeping criticism leveled at education and the teaching profession in recent years (see "Today's Teachers: Losers or Leaders?" FOCUS, Spring 1987) while other detractors claim schools don't have the wherewithal to help develop students into good citizens.

"Educators say they are already burdened with too many additions to the curriculum," Brimhall charges, "but the kind of instruction I envision would take about 10 minutes a week, it wouldn't burden them at all. The schools are teaching citizenship now in some respect, but in a very passive way."

After Brimhall's measure was approved it was sent to the Senate — where it died in committee. Several educators believe the bill met a proper fate.

"I'm really quite amazed at legislators who on one hand say that education is their number one concern and then come up with legislation like that," says Dave Schjeldahl, principal of Dora Erickson Elementary in Idaho Falls. "It indicates to me a real lack of knowledge of what's going on in the classrooms. It's not unique to Preston Brimhall. I think it's pretty typical of the legislators; they give it a lot of lip service, but I don't think many of them have been in a public school lately."

According to Schjeldahl, the civic education curriculum at Erickson — and the rest of Idaho Falls' District 91 — is much more than a pointless smorgasbord of social studies. Consider:

- Within the past year, civic leaders such as Gov. Cecil Andrus, Idaho Falls Mayor Tom Campbell, and state senators and representatives have visited Erickson.
- As part of their civic education requirements, Erickson second- and fifth-graders are instructed to write to public officials asking them about their role in government.
- To observe Idaho's upcoming centennial, a number of Idaho Falls schools staged an Idaho history celebration.
- District 91's A. H. Bush and Emerson elementary schools commemorated the bicentennial of the Constitution with programs that featured civic leaders, patriotic music and skits.
- In November, Erickson will hold a school election to coincide with the general election. Prior to that, representatives from the local election board will visit the school, show the students how a voting booth works, and discuss voter registration and the responsibility that goes with it.
- Beginning with the 1988-89 academic year, District 91 will install a new elementary social studies curriculum called "civic awareness." The courses examine and compare the various social studies based on international interrelationships and interdependence.

The Boise School District will also introduce a new K-12 social studies pilot program into its curriculum in September. According to Jack Craven, district curriculum director, the program is the result of extensive in-house research and development.

Civic learning, Craven says, has always been a part of the Boise School District's social studies curriculum. "At one time we did have isolated courses called 'civics' that concentrated on citizen-
ship,” he says. “Specialized courses like civics have fallen by the wayside, but the concepts inherent in those courses, I believe, have been inculcated into the broad spectrum of social studies courses that now exist.”

Lamont Lyons, associate dean of Boise State’s College of Education, also believes much of the criticism regarding inadequate civic education in today’s public schools is unfounded.

“The public has always had pretty high expectations of the school’s role in promoting citizenship and values,” he says. “Historically, that has been one of the primary purposes of education in this country. Among all the other complaints now about schools is that the kids don’t know enough about citizenship, or they don’t have the right values, or they don’t behave properly, or have the right commitments... but I don’t know through any kind of study that kids are that terribly lacking.

“You always see these surveys about what children don’t know, but I haven’t seen anything startling. Can we do a better job? Of course. But you can ask most people on the street the same questions and not get any better responses.

“When you look at the Boise School District, for example, you see progressively from grades 7 through 12 a very comprehensive social studies curriculum... There was a time a decade or two ago when many of the social studies classes were kind of fluffy, but not anymore—not from what I’ve seen.”

Despite the efforts to instill a social consciousness in America’s students, the materialistic priorities of their “me generation” parents can make the task difficult.

To counteract such failings, Robert C. Sims, dean of BSU’s School of Social Sciences and Public Affairs, supports proposals that would require students to perform community service. The original thought was to place the requirements in all college undergraduate curricula. “But it’s not just a university phenomenon,” says Sims. “The movement is stretching down into the public schools, too.”

In California, the state assembly is considering a law that would require community service for high school graduation. “Lots of communities are doing that for individual school districts, and schools in Atlanta now require 75 hours of public service,” Sims adds.

Such requirements, Sims believes, are essential to create a sense of civic responsibility. “You don’t just do it on a theoretical basis,” he states. “You don’t go into the class and tell people why it’s important; you actually get them out and do things for other people. The ‘doing’ is very important... At the public-school level, I think there needs to be an awareness of what each person’s responsibility is as a citizen — and part of that means to be an active participant.”

Fulfilling civic obligations and acquiring knowledge in the various social sciences are important in the shaping of good citizens, but teaching America’s basic values is perhaps the most crucial aspect of civic education. In Lyons’ opinion, these fundamentals underlie a much larger design.

“The whole purpose of civic education has been and should continue to be to foster some cognitive understanding of our basic values,” he says. “But more than that, some emotive commitment to them. There are some values that are so fundamental to our system, that if each generation doesn’t come to understand them, make some commitment to them, and renew them to give more full meaning to them, then the system won’t work. It’s the glue that holds us together.”