

These Americans Can't Answer Simple Citizenship Questions: Are Schools to Blame?

September 17th marks the anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution. To recognize "Constitution Day," the day "when all schools receiving federal funds are expected to provide lessons or other programming on our most important founding document," the folks at the Fordham Institute prepared [a special project](#). They examined the mission statements of the 100 largest school districts in the U.S. to see how many of them made citizenship and civics a prominent goal of education.

The conclusion? Most of the school districts were more concerned with ensuring college and career readiness than they were about producing good citizens who could carry on the mantle of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.



Such an outcome made me wonder: how did America's Founders view education? Was their mission in education to promote college and career readiness, or was it to promote the knowledge and morality necessary to govern a free people? The following five quotes provide an answer:

"Almost all Governments have therefore made it a principal Object of their Attention, to establish and endow with proper Revenues, such Seminaries of Learning, as might supply the succeeding Age with Men qualified to serve the Publick with Honour to themselves, and to their Country."– [Benjamin Franklin, 1749](#)

“Learned Institutions ought to be favorite objects with every free people. They throw that light over the public mind which is the best security against crafty & dangerous encroachments on the public liberty. ... They are themselves schools for the particular talents required for some of the Public Trusts, on the able execution of which the welfare of the people depends. They multiply the educated individuals from among whom the people may elect a due portion of their public Agents of every description; more especially of those who are to frame the laws...” – [James Madison, 1822](#)

“[I]n a free government knowledge must be general, and ought to be universal. ... In a government of three branches, commoners as well as nobles are under a necessity of educating their children, because they hope to be called to public service, where it is necessary.” – [John Adams, 1851](#)

“Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.” – [Northwest Ordinance \(1787\)](#)

“And whereas it is generally true that that people will be happiest whose laws are best, and are best administered, and that laws will be wisely formed, and honestly administered, in proportion as those who form and administer them are wise and honest; whence it becomes expedient for promoting the publick happiness that those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens ...” – [Thomas Jefferson, 1779](#)

What happens when our schools don't focus on the same education goals as those of the Founders? Perhaps the

following video will shed some light on the answer to that question: