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Civics education bill awaits the governor's signature

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Legislation to bolster the study of local, state, and federal governments in Florida's schools has passed the Legislature and is awaiting the governor's signature.



The "[Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act](#)" — championed by Rep. Charles McBurney, R-Jacksonville, and Sen. Nancy C. Detert, R-Venice, adds the following requirements for civics education:

- The reading portion of the language arts curriculum within the Sunshine State Standards is set to include civics education content for all grade levels, beginning with the 2011-12 school year.
- Beginning with the 2012-13 school year, students entering sixth grade would be required to successfully complete a one-semester civics education course in order to be promoted.

McBurney, a business lawyer, said teaching the state's children how our democratic institutions work is essential.

"If there is one subject we should be teaching our children, it is the importance of our republic and what it's all about," McBurney said.

Detert, a former member of the Sarasota County School Board, said too often civics education is pushed to the side; however, this bill not only calls for a civics course, but also an end of the course exam to add more importance to the subject.

"Our younger people know less and less about their government, and we really feel they should know more and more about their government," said Detert, noting that when 71 percent of students can't pass a basic civics test, "obviously we are doing something wrong in our schools."

Detert said the testing component was included in the measure because "we have found that what is not tested is not taught."



The bill requires the middle school civics education course to address the roles and responsibilities of federal, state, and local governments; the structures and functions of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government; and the meaning and significance of historic documents, such as the Articles of Confederation, Declaration of Independence, and U.S. Constitution.

During the 2012-13 school year, a statewide, standardized end-of-course assessment in civics education would be administered as a field test at the middle school level, and during the 2013-14 school year, each student's performance on the end-of-course assessment in civics education must constitute 30 percent of the student's final course grade. Beginning with the 2014-15 school year, a student would have to earn a passing score on the end-of-course assessment in civics education in order to pass the course.

Current law requires middle school students to successfully complete, among other courses, three middle school or higher courses in social studies in order to be promoted. One semester of the three social studies courses must include the study of state and federal government and civics education.

The bill seeks to have students discuss basic questions, such as:

- What are civic life, politics, and government?
- What are the foundations of the American political system?
- How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purpose, values, and principles of American democracy?
- What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and world affairs?
- What are the roles of citizens in American democracy?