This year, Nebraska Sen. Julie Slama took a lead role in updating her state’s 70-year-old law on civics education. She had some experience from the not-so-distant past to guide that work — the time she spent as a student herself. The 23-year-old senator (one of the youngest people ever to serve in the Unicameral Legislature) still fondly recalls those civics classes and how her teachers approached lessons on government and citizenship.

“It wasn’t about memorization of dates and [historical] figures,” Slama says. “It was about the role of being a citizen, about discussing the issues of the day. From that, you learn that people can come to different conclusions about those issues, that disagreement is part of the process. And you learn to engage respectfully.”

But are most young people being exposed to a rich, meaningful civics curriculum?

Slama worries that many are not, based on her more recent experiences working with students as a track coach and as a counselor for the American Legion Auxiliary’s Girls State. Too many young people, she says, don’t know basic facts, such as the three branches of government, and aren’t equipped with the skills to be informed, active citizens.

She’s hoping this year’s passage of LB 399 will strengthen the curriculum offered in Nebraska schools. Her work on the bill reflects a national trend; across the country, state legislators have been exploring ways to put a greater emphasis on civics in schools, and to perhaps teach it in a different way.

In the Midwest, Illinois is often cited as a national leader in these efforts. Four years ago, with the passage of HB 4025, the state began requiring every high school student to take a stand-alone, semester-long civics course.

What distinguishes the Illinois law are some of the details, including how civics must be taught and how teachers are being helped with implementation. In Illinois, in addition to instruction on government institutions, course content in civics must incorporate the following: discussions of current and controversial issues, service-based learning opportunities and democratic simulations.

Shawn Healy, director of the Robert R. McCormick Foundation Democracy Program, says those three instructional practices all have proven to improve students’ performance in civics, and lay a foundation for active citizenship.

With service-based learning, for example, students may volunteer at a homeless shelter or food pantry as part of a lesson on poverty or the government safety net. With democratic simulations, classrooms turn into legislatures, with students becoming legislators and party leaders as they debate and pass mock bills.

“We’ve been able to build a statewide movement around improving civics education in Illinois because of that [2015] law,” Healy says.

The McCormick Foundation has led a philanthropic effort to implement the state’s new plan for civics instruction — by providing teachers with professional development training and resources. (The Illinois law states that “school districts may utilize private funding … for the purpose of offering civics education.”)

Nebraska’s LB 399 does not require a stand-alone civics course or any specific type of instruction. Instead, local schools are given one of three options: 1) administer to students the test that people must pass to become U.S. citizens; 2) require that students attend a meeting of a public body, and then complete a project based around that experience; or 3) require that students complete a project on important individuals or events in U.S. history and
Also under LB 399, each school district must have a committee meet every year, in public, to review and approve its social studies curriculum (based on state standards). That committee's final plan for how to teach social studies, including civics, must then be "made readily accessible to the public."

By:
Thursday, May 16, 2019 at 12:15 PM

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