

CIVICS, from page 10

American stands in stark contrast to the dangerous ideologies that produce corrupt regimes in other countries," Wilton Simpson, Florida's agriculture commissioner, said in 2021 while leading the state Senate.

The state also set forth four priorities for teaching civics. Those included the study of primary resources that undergird the roots of American exceptionalism and understanding rights such as how to advocate with government officials.

In practice, the lessons came under fire early as teachers complained the training was infused with Christian and conservative ideology.

More recently, as some students prepared to protest violence in federal immigration enforcement, state education commissioner Anastasios Kamoutsas threatened the certification of anyone who encourages or supports student walkouts or rallies during

school time. Soon after, he took steps to ensure that students' religious rights are protected by launching an email hotline for parents to report perceived violations in the schools.

Stephen Masyada, director of the Florida Joint Center for Citizenship at the University of Central Florida, said Americans have grappled with how to best prepare the youth for civic life since the nation's founding. Thomas Jefferson argued that schools should teach children to be patriotic, engaged citizens not just by providing book lessons, Masyada said, but also to help them understand how to make it happen in the real world.

Florida promotes the "informed patriotism" that Ronald Reagan advocated, Masyada said, teaching students not only their rights but also their responsibilities, including the acceptance of consequences for standing up for their views.

"It's not to create little liberals or little conservatives," he said. "It's intended to help students understand what it is to

be an active participant. ... Civil discourse matters. You need to do stuff that is ultimately not going to do more harm than good."

Real-time civics

The debate played out at a March 17 Pasco school board meeting.

Sitting at a board table decorated with banners marking the nation's 250th anniversary, Legg opened by introducing a civics plan he said is needed now more than ever.

The district will provide red, white and blue tassels to graduating seniors who pass the state's high school civics exam as a small incentive to take the test — which isn't a graduation requirement — more seriously, Legg said.

It will offer a two-year competitive scholarship worth about \$15,000 to a senior who plans to pursue a career in public service. And Legg said he will teach a course on civic leadership, worth six credits from the University of South

Florida, starting in the fall.

"I am so advocating we want their voices to be heard. But we want their voices to be effective," Legg said in an interview.

The board then invited student government leaders to report on school activities.

Board member Megan Harding, who initiated the idea, said she hoped the model will encourage students with concerns to bring them to student government, which in turn will tell the board.

"I truly believe that this shows what we as a district value," Harding said. "Civics isn't just something that we teach, it's something that we walk."

Soon after, a real-time example came to pass. The board held a public hearing on its code of conduct, including a proposal to remove language spelling out the rules for students to hold peaceful assemblies.

Nearly three dozen people filed into the board room, ready to voice their discontent.

Legg explained that assembly is a right equal to others, and it should appear in a list of all those rights rather than get a detailed separate section.

Opponents weren't having it. "In order to do a peaceful protest, we need to do it right," said Wiregrass Ranch High student Jacob Agnes. Keeping the specifics in the code is a "good safety net" to protect students who assemble and school employees who enforce the rules, he said.

Samantha Cooper, another Wiregrass Ranch student, said she looked to the school district to do what Legg talked about.

"We are guaranteed these rights," she said. "Teach us what these rights are."

The students came backed by several parents, educators and activists.

"I find it exceptionally ironic that each of you are celebrating civics ... yet here we are defending the right for students to voice their concerns," said Larry Richards, a founder of

Pasco Resists, an activist group that pushes for government accountability. "What is being removed is not just wording. It is clarity, structure and meaningful guidance."

After the meeting, Legg said he enjoyed hearing the students and others advocating for their views. He recalled how when he was a student, Mike Fasano, Pasco's tax collector, encouraged him to funnel his drive for change into meaningful venues.

Today, that's how he views the district's role in student civic engagement.

It shouldn't stop just because the board might streamline the code of conduct, he said.

Board chairperson Colleen Beaudoin said she left the evening with much to consider. She praised the manner in which the students expressed their views, stressed the importance of uninterrupted learning and wanted time to ponder how the conduct code should address it all.

The issue comes back to the board in April.

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