Presentation by
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Educating for Democracy

CASB Winter Legislative Conference – Feb 16, 2012

Thanks very much – honor to talk with you about the role you and your schools play in sustaining our system of representative democracy – or not.

Especially a privilege to have Judge Kane and former Representative Witwer here to engage in a discussion about the topic and then, I hope, to engage you in a conversation about how this fits with your view of your responsibilities as school board members.

I became more and more concerned about the state of understanding our people have about our system of government during my years in elected office – and I'll be interested to hear from Rob and Judge Kane about their experiences.

From questions at town meetings, to letters I received to requests for help from my office that should have gone to town or county officials, to comparing notes with colleagues in Washington, it became increasingly clear to me that a lot of our fellow citizens suffer from a serious degree of civic illiteracy.

It became more and more evident that it's difficult to manage the business and responsibilities of a representative democracy if the citizenry lacks a basic understanding of its role. And then sometimes there was even reason to wonder about some elected officials, too.

The Founders – especially Jefferson – fully understood that their experiment in self-government through representative democracy could not hope to succeed unless the citizens – the voters – understood what it was all about and were prepared and inclined to participate. That is, they knew that free public education had to be widely available and that one of its central purposes was to prepare young people for the rights and responsibilities as citizens – as participants in the democratic process.

It wasn't until Horace Mann in the 1840s that free public education really started to take hold. Until then, schooling had largely remained a privilege of the well-to-do – notwithstanding the fact that Jefferson realized its necessity 60 or 70 years earlier.

John Dewey gave voice to this civic mission of the schools early in the last century. Dewey's compelling aphorism: *"Democracy needs to be reborn in each generation and education is its midwife."*

Why is that?

Well, our governmental structure and the ways it works is complicated stuff, and we are not innately equipped to know what we are supposed to do and how to do it. We are not hard wired genetically as citizens. It involves learned behavior. That is, it must be taught.

One of my favorite statements from the Founders is Madison's explanation of what a Republic is all about. I like it a lot because it actually makes it sound like being a legislator is a high and honorable calling. In *Federalist* 10 he explained the

difference between a direct and a representative democracy and the reasons that a representative democracy was essential to the Republic to be established by ratification of the Constitution:

Let me read an excerpted version for you:

> From this view of the subject it may be concluded that a pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person, can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction. . . .
>
> A republic, by which I mean a government in which the scheme of representation takes place, opens a different prospect, and promises the cure for which we are seeking. Let us examine the points in which it varies from pure democracy . . . . .
>
> The two great points of difference between a democracy and a republic are: first, the delegation of the government, in the latter, to a small number of citizens elected by the rest . . . .
>
> The effect of the first difference is . . . to refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.

Admittedly, with its 18th C language, this is fairly esoteric material. But it is absolutely central to understanding our system of government. Conversely, without a grasp of such basics, we risk a becoming a people who are dismissive or distrustful of politics because our people don't understand it, probably because they were never taught it.

And, so I fear, that is what we have gradually become.

A few years ago the American Bar Association did an extensive poll to determine how well American adults understood their own government. The poll asked people to identify the three branches of government. Barely half the sample polled had the right answer. The remainder was evenly split between D, R and I, and local, state and federal.

I don't need to tell you that if the adult players don't know the rules, it's awfully hard for them to play the game.

So let's also take a look at the farm team for citizenship – our P-12 system.
And let me quickly assure you that I have enormous respect for the jobs you have and your willingness to do them. I always felt that folks in city councils and school boards have the toughest jobs in politics. Thanks very much for your service.

Anyway, back to the evidence for how the country is doing on preparing the next generation for citizenship.

As you know, the National Assessment of Educational Progress – better known as NAEP, or the Nation's report card – tests a broad cross section of our students on a

range of subjects. There is a NAEP test in Civics that is given every 4 years and was last administered in 2010 – so some pretty current data.

How did our kids do? Let me share the highlights

> Students in grades 4, 8, and 12 participated . . . . For each grade, questions were designed to measure their civics knowledge, intellectual and participatory skills, and civic dispositions. Results were compared with the two previous assessment years (1998 and 2006).
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> - In comparison to earlier civics years, the average score in 2010 was higher than the scores in both years at grade 4, not significantly different from the score in either year at grade 8, and lower than the score in 2006 but not significantly different from the score in 1998 at grade 12.
> - That held for percentages of students at or above Proficient in 2010 compared with 2006 and 1998.
> - The percentages of students at or above Basic in 2010 were higher than in 2006 and 1998 at grade 4, but not significantly different from previous assessment years at grades 8 and 12.
> - There were no significant changes in those scoring as Advanced in comparison to previous assessment years.
> - In 2010, thirty-three percent of students attended schools where administrators reported focused instruction in civics/government in fourth grade; eighty-five percent of students reported learning about civics in eighth grade; and ninety-seven percent of students reported studying civics or government in high school.

Those results may sound reassuring. However, the grade level scores all hovered around a score of 150 out of a max off 300, and something like two-thirds of students scored below "proficient" and 70% of 8th graders could not identify the historical purpose of the Declaration of Independence.

From our State standards, you would think Colorado must be doing a pretty good job in this area. Let me quote from the standards to which the state aspires for civic education:

> **Standards** (1998)
> **Intro**: Public education in the United States of America has a civic purpose: to prepare informed, and participative citizens committed to the preservation of the constitutional republic* of the United States. While family, churches, media, and many other institutions share in this responsibility, schools fill a very important role in developing civic competence by providing education about the core principles embodied in the foundational documents that define the United States system of government. . . . .
>
> Civics should be a central concern from kindergarten through twelfth grade, whether it is taught in history, geography, and other social studies courses, or in separate units or courses. It is through systematic instruction in civics and government that young people develop and apply the intellectual and participatory skills that result in understanding what government of the people, by the people, and for the people really means.
>
> STANDARD 1: Students understand the purposes of government, and the basic constitutional principles* of the

United States republican form of government.

STANDARD 2: Students know the structure and function of local, state, and national government and how citizen involvement shapes public policy.

STANDARD 3: Students know the political relationship of the United States and its citizens to other nations and to world affairs.

STANDARD 4: Students understand how citizens exercise the roles, rights and responsibilities of participation in civic life* at all levels - local, state, and national.

That all sounds pretty good. IF we are actually living up to the standards. And, of course, you have umpteen interests and factions pounding on you for your schools to do more and better on any number of goals.

How many of you have gotten calls or letters or heard comments at your board meetings about:

Better preparation in reading and writing?
In math?
In science?
How about improving the athletic program?
And, about civic education?

No question all these other areas of learning and development are important. But I do think that as a society we have lost track of that original, animating rationale for public education. We need an educated populace if our representative democracy is going to work.

Over the last decade, especially, we've seen a preoccupation with reading and math under the auspices of NCLB. And that has necessarily been reflected in what gets tested.

Although NCLB's influence may be waning, Colorado's new assessment (2011) scheme is still symptomatic. The Transition Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP) developed last year to replace CSAP tests provides:

- Math and reading will be assessed in 3rd through 10th grades
- Writing will be assessed in 3rd through 10th grades
- Science will be assessed in 5th, 8th, and 10th grades

But, TCAP does not test….

- Social studies

Now maybe our people don't need to be able to recite in Madisonian terms the philosophical underpinning of a Republic. But our people do need to know that this country and our 50 states are set up to be Republics, and the differences between that and a pure democracy.

If they live in one but expect the other, it's a sure prescription for frustration and disenchantment. Which, of course, is the dominant attitude of people toward politics these days.

Let me quickly stipulate that us former and current politicians are due our fair share of the blame. That's in part the result of some mixture of educational fatigue and pandering on their – our – part.

The educational fatigue comes from not having the energy – or maybe even the desire – for politicians to fulfill their role as educators themselves. It's enough, many feel, to struggle in the hyper-partisan environment to come up with the minimum compromises absolutely necessary to keep the ship of state (or ships of state) from foundering each year.

And we want them to try to educate their constituents to boot – to explain what it is they are up to and how it's supposed to work? You gotta be kidding!

But we're not, and we can't be, kidding. It has to go with the territory for our electeds also to be teachers. It is in the essence of the representative dynamic for those in office to come home and explain their decisions.

Here's where the pandering comes in. It is in the perpetuation of the idea that our representatives – at whatever level, from Congress to the General Assembly to City Councils or Boards of Education – are mere agents of popular opinion.

Those of us who hold office have to be proud enough of the work that we do – the time we put, in the homework we do, the consultations and deliberations we undertake before negotiating the compromises we make – we have to be proud enough of all that and the skills and knowledge it takes to do it to stand up and explain that the end result is the product of *judgment* not just some reflexive,

mechanical assessment of what the voters believe they want and therefore believe they are entitled to.

Politics is not arithmetic or polling. And if we let our people think it is, they will inevitably be disillusioned and turned off. And very hard to persuade that they should trust government.

Turning around our misperceptions and misunderstandings will take concerted effort over some time by both politicians and educators.

A little more about the politicians' piece and their proclivities to pander . . . .

I start with what I have experienced to be the incontrovertible proposition: that a representative in or system – at whatever level – is hired to exercise judgment and discretion based on expertise informed by deliberations and tempered by compromise – all in the cause of serving purposes greater than – but not disrespectful of – one's constituency.

It may be the greater long-term interests of the district, the city, the county, the state, the nation, the world. But our purposes in public life cannot be limited by the *immediate*, self-defined interests of the voters who elect us. And it is the duty of everyone running for office to explain that reality – to be a civics teacher about this fundamental truth.

This involves absolutely no disrespect for the voters. To the contrary, we must credit them with the intelligence to understand that leaders in whatever office

ought to take have a broader perspective and a longer-term view of what ultimately serves the public interest.

This should not come across as elitist. It merely reflects the practical truth that your spending countless hours studying curriculum issues, listening to professionals in the field, testing ideas with colleagues, being briefed on long range fiscal issues – all that does and should equip you to make decisions that better serve the interests of the community than the average voter's less-considered views would dictate.

That's nothing to apologize for. It's what Madison was getting at in Fed. 10.

This is why some of us – including some of your school board colleagues – are challenging the TABOR amendment in federal court. You may have read about yesterday's hearing in the paper this morning. The lawsuit is not only trying to restore a critical element of republican governance to the state – it is also an effort at education about our representative democracy and how it's supposed to work.

On the other hand, if people running for office perpetuate the myth that they are simply there to take instructions from the voters through some assumed means for knowing and slavishly adhering to the public opinion of the day – if that's how we explain our system to our citizens – we are doomed to continuing a dysfunctional politics.

It simply won't work. Unless you believe that the jobs you do – or that I used to do in Congress – can really be done just as well by anyone coming off the street with no preparation and all while handling all the other obligations of normal life.

No, we should not shrink from explaining that these are complicated jobs addressing complex issues. We wouldn't want them done by people who do not devote themselves to developing expertise and applying it – any more than we would want that our doctors to be stop training after getting First Aid Merit Badge.

These are not new or original thoughts. They were nicely expressed some 237 years ago by the great British parliamentarian Edmund Burke in his famous Speech to the Electors of Bristol. There he said:

> Certainly, gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business, unremitted attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living.

We are all stewards of the democracy. I hope I don't need to persuade you of that.

American democracy surely has to be protected. But it also has to be nurtured and cared for. It is a living thing.

I had a wonderful day a few summers ago, one with troubling yet inspiring reminders of our unfinished work.

First, there was a meeting with my old friend and colleague, John Lewis, to talk over some work on political reform. John is probably known to most of you as a Congressman from Georgia and one of the leaders of the civil rights movement in the 60s. You've seen him recently in the interviews around the dedication of the Martin Luther King Memorial in Washington.

Talking to John reminded me of what it was like in the 60's and the struggle always underway to right the wrongs in our society. John is an exceptional steward of democracy.

From that meeting I went up to attend the dedication of what's called Lincoln Cottage, which was undergoing restoration. This was the retreat where Lincoln spent a lot of time – located on a pleasant hill at the Soldiers & Sailors Home in D.C., a few miles from the White House.

I walked into the library of the cottage. This was where Lincoln is said to have drafted the Emancipation Proclamation. And I had just come from meeting with the grandson of emancipated slaves.

For me, it was terribly moving as I tried to imagine that man taking that courageous step in that place. Where did the power and courage come from that he exercised so magnificently in the Emancipation Proclamation?

I think about those two experiences, juxtaposed as they were. How it is that John Lewis did what he did? How was it that Abraham Lincoln was seized of a vision for the country that we are still trying to realize in its fullness?

And do our students today "get it"? Do they have that kind of grounding and vision for their country?

It's always instructive when someone from another country gives you a foreigner's perspective on America's political evolution.

In February 1977 I had just finished a stint as chief of staff for then Congressman Tim Wirth. My reward was my first vacation in 2-1/2 years and a first trip to Europe.

Jimmy Carter was the new President, and he was shaping a foreign policy that had respect for human rights as a central tenet. My journey took me to Prague, where Carter's policy was quickly applied in the wake of another crackdown on dissent by the Czech Communist government.

I was wandering around the courtyard of Prague Castle, when an older man in his fifties came up to me. In excellent English, he asked if I wanted to change money – and get a better deal than the lousy official exchange rate. I knew it might be a set-up, and quickly said "no."

But there was something *about* him – a certain distinguished dignity showed through his worn jacket and frayed shirt collar. Why not try to talk to him?

So, after some pleasantries, I asked him what he thought of my new President. Was he aware of his human rights policy? What did it mean for him? Did he want the US to make things harder on his country in hopes of eventually improving his human rights?

He thought for a moment. Then he said: "You should remember what your Presidents Washington and Jefferson said when your country began. And you should especially remember what your President Lincoln said after that battle during your Civil War."

I was stunned and moved. Here, in an ancient city in the middle of then Communist Eastern Europe, this stranger was giving me a lesson in American history and values. He saw how affected I was, and turned away into the crowd – seeming to not want to embarrass me.

I recovered, realized what an extraordinary thing had happened, and searched to find him. I wanted more. But he had simply vanished.

Remember, he said, what your President Lincoln said after that battle during your Civil War.

We have to figure out how to re-knit some semblance of a political community that can function – function with the give-and-take needed to work through, and work out, our differences. We must re-establish the civic community from which our politics draws its cues – both good and bad. We must all be stewards of democracy.

I'm afraid our preoccupation with being consumers affects our view of government and democracy. Put rhetorically, what is the difference between your relationship with the government and with Wal∗Mart?

For many these days, I'm afraid the answer is, "Not much." I suspect many people may *like* Wal∗Mart more. People tend to see both relationships as simply arms-length transactions: taxes for public services; money for products.

We do not feel we have much more of a stake in the government than we do in the store. The idea that we <u>are</u> the government is a foreign concept to many.

Politics – the messy process of electing representatives and then of having them engage in all that haggling and horse-trading – is not well regarded. After a generation of belittlement and derision, government has a bad image.

Politicians pander to us with simplistic arguments like "Government should be run more like a business."

But I fear most Americans don't appreciate or understand why requirements like due process and equal protection actually mean that we have to put up with some necessary *in*efficiencies in the cause of something more important – fairness and justice.

We need citizens who can take apart notions like "running government more like a business" and figure out what about the idea may make some sense and what is a red herring. It's just this ability for critical thinking that's such an important part of civic learning and the work you are doing in your districts.

As I mentioned at the outset, one of my favorite quotations for use in this cause comes from John Dewey: "Democracy needs to be reborn in every generation and education is its midwife." He further explains: "A democracy is more than a form

of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience."

No one quarrels with the importance of knowledge and skills in math, reading and science for any student to succeed in life. But let's not leave behind the foundation mission of public education, its civic mission: To prepare America's young people to be citizens – competent participants in self-government.

That civic mission was at the heart of the free public education movement in its early days. *These* days some people question if there's room for that mission. Is it still relevant and useful?

A firm answer to that question comes from the American people. When asked in national surveys the fundamental purpose of the public schools they give near top rank to "producing literate, educated citizens who participate in our democracy."

And, if that's not enough, young people themselves know that they need preparation for citizenship. In a national poll of 15-25 year olds, two-thirds favored *requiring* classes on civics and government in middle and high school.

That hunger for better preparation is also heard in focus groups with young adults, where many will tell you how ill prepared they feel for something as important as voting.

We Americans are congenital optimists. And those who are carrying the banner for civic learning absolutely believe that we will make a difference, that this is a winning cause.

If prompted, I believe most people would agree with John Kennedy did that "The ignorance of one voter is a democracy impairs the security of all."

The challenge now is to restore civic learning to its essential and rightful place as a central purpose of public education – to acknowledge that educating for democracy is as important as educating for economic success.

We have to recognize this central purpose not just rhetorically, but in practice – with classroom time and resources, with facts and meaningful experiences, with teacher preparation and accountability. Not just in the usual subjects, but across the curriculum and beyond the building.

This isn't only about living up to our own ideals, as important as that is. It is not just for our sake.

This wonderful, honorable and rich nation has wonderful, honorable and rich obligations to the world we lead. If American democracy falters, if American power lacks legitimacy, if American authority is not the authentic expression of our people, then our leadership is not likely to guide the world – or the country or the state – in the right direction.

The democracy lesson is not for someone else. It is for us.

As stewards of democracy, you know there is no more important work to be done.

It is fitting always to remember what was – and still *is* – at stake. David McCullough recounts that, in July 1776, the odds were long and the prospects for victory not so good. The British troops garrisoned two days' march away on Staten Island outnumbered the whole population of Philadelphia.

Still, they signed:

And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm Reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honour.

We can at least pledge a little more class time!

Thank you for your stewardship.