Editorial: Too many in U.S. ignorant of democracy's basics

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In 1954, when the Supreme Court ruled that segregated public schools were unconstitutional, Chief Justice Earl Warren emphasized the importance of public education as a crucible for good citizenship.

"Today," Warren wrote, "education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship."

But a growing number of critics charge that education in good citizenship is being shortchanged by an American educational system that is focused on other "core competencies." The result is that too many products of that system are ignorant of the basics of how American democracy functions, and lack the knowledge to participate fully in the society it sustains. One of the most prominent spokespeople for this view is retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, the last member of the court to have held elected office.

In a 2008 article written with former Rep. Lee Hamilton of Indiana, O'Connor argued that "civic education has been in steady decline over the past generation, as high-stakes testing and an emphasis on literacy and math dominate school reforms. Too many young people today do not understand how our

political system works.”

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