

## Florida bill would mandate civics lessons in schools

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Hoping to turn out students who wouldn't embarrass themselves if quizzed on national television, Florida lawmakers are poised to enact a law that would force kids to pass a middle school civics test in order to get to high school.

"I call this the anti-Jay Leno bill," said state Senator Nancy Detert, the bill's sponsor, referring to the host's "Jaywalking" segment. "Because I'm not amused by the fact that nobody knows anything about their government -- although they all have an opinion."

Florida law says students in middle school must take social studies courses, including civics, but does not require them to pass a test to be promoted.

That would change under the bill. The test would make up 30 percent of a child's final grade in the 2013 school year; by 2014-15, a student would have to pass the test in order to complete the course and move on.

Test results would factor into school grades by the 2013-14 school year.

The bill already passed the House and sailed through a Senate appropriations committee Tuesday on its way to a full vote on the floor.

Lawmakers heard their own lecture on the subject during last year's session, when retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor urged them to emphasize civics education. The effort failed in 2009. This year's bill is called the Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act.

The Florida Department of Education supports the legislation, a spokesman said.

"A firm understanding of our government and our rights in society is vital in producing informed citizens and this legislation will help to ensure our students are learning this valuable information," said DOE spokesman Tom Butler in a statement.

Included under the civics umbrella: the roles of federal, state and local government; the three branches of government and the significance of historical documents.

The estimated cost of the annual assessment is \$1.5 million -- a figure Detert, a Sarasota Republican, called "ludicrous." She and another lawmaker vowed to put their heads together and figure out a way to bring the price tag down before the full Senate votes.

While educators have long sought more love for social studies -- which is often neglected in favor of FCAT-tested subjects like reading, writing, math and science -- some are worried that

the proposed law might go too far.

“For years and years and years we've asked to be invited to the adult table,” said John Doyle, who oversees social studies curriculum for the Miami-Dade school district. “We've asked to be included. Now that we are, people are starting to take a step back.”

He said he and others worry that holding students back from high school is too punitive -- and that the heart of civics education might be cut out.

“It needs to become part of their soul, if you will, to be active participants in our democracy,” Doyle said. “I'm not sure that the test is going to encourage that.”

Michael Ivory, a Miami Lakes Middle School eighth-grader who took civics in seventh grade, like most Florida kids, said the course opened his eyes.

“I've learned a plethora of things about the government,” said Michael, 14.

He got so interested that he traveled to Tallahassee for last month's rally for education spending. And he's part of an effort at his school to get legislation passed to make school zones safer.

He said he isn't sure so about that students should have to pass a civics test to get out of middle school -- but believes they should definitely have to take the course.

Sometimes, he said, he'll talk about lawmaking and adults will ask him to repeat himself.

Said Michael: “It did feel kind of cool to know about this kind of stuff at a young age.”