

# GOVERNORS FIGHT FOR CIVICS

by Shawntaye Hopkins

**BEFORE GOV. DOUG DUCEY** took the oath of office to become the governor of Arizona, he attended a dinner where he listened as speakers on opposite ends of the political spectrum championed the need for civic education in U.S. classrooms.

“There may be a lot of things that Democrats and Republicans disagree on, but educating our students about American civics is something almost everyone can agree is vital,” Ducey said.

Conversations about civic education and civic engagement have become more and more prevalent among teachers, legislators, secretaries of state, media and others. Governors—such as Ducey in Arizona, Washington Gov. Jay Inslee and former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell—have also voiced concern about the decline in civic knowledge among students and adults.

In February, Ducey spoke about civic education at a National Governors Association meeting. He encouraged other state leaders to follow Arizona’s lead. The first bill Ducey signed into law was the American Civics Act, passed in 2015 with bipartisan support, which requires all students in the state to pass a civics test before graduating from high school. Students are permitted to retake the test as many times as necessary. Arizona was the first state in the nation to pass such a law.

“This is the same test that new Americans take to gain citizenship,” Ducey said. “Shouldn’t our kids be able to answer the same questions?”

Ducey hopes increased civic knowledge will lead to increased civic participation.

“That might mean having more good people to represent our state in government,” he said. “It also might mean training the next generation of policy leaders who come up with new, exciting ideas to improve how government works from the outside. It might mean simply voting.”

## WASHINGTON GOV. JAY INSLEE

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee is one of several sponsors of the Civic Learning Initiative launched by the state’s Council on Public Legal Education. Inslee said he would like more people to understand the importance of city councils and state legislative bodies on their individual lives.

Washington state’s Civic Learning Initiative was modeled after a California civics program, according to the Civic Learning Initiative’s website. The initiative aims to address gaps in civic learning among K-12 students.

Inslee said an increased knowledge about how state and local governments work would mean better policies because more of the population, including young people and people with low incomes, would vote and participate.

“People have tended to think that only the federal government has an impact on their lives because that’s what they see on TV and social media,” Inslee said.

## THE RENDELL CENTER

When he was mayor of Philadelphia, former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell visited a private school where a third-grade classroom had been turned into a city. There were about 25



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students in the class and every student had assumed an essential role, including mayor, fire commissioner, public works commissioner, city councilmember and so on.

"The kids were on fire," Rendell said. "They loved what they did."

Years later, The Rendell Center for Civics and Civic Engagement would concentrate heavily on elementary school students.

"They really are capable of so much at an early age," U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Marjorie Rendell said of the students she often hosts for mock trials in Philadelphia's federal courthouse. "We just don't give them credit."

As a federal judge when Gov. Rendell took office, Judge Rendell had to make sure her role as first lady did not conflict with her judicial role. She took on civic education to help students understand the court system and started the Pennsylvania Coalition for Representative Democracy—The Rendell Center's forerunner—in 2004. The Rendell Center creates tools for teachers and opportunities, including literature-based mock trials, for K-12 students to practice and discuss civic engagement.

Ted McConnell, executive director of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, said the civic learning community would welcome and applaud the involvement of more governors who wanted to take the lead in the improving civic education.


"The true champions in the effort to restore the civic mission of our schools have been state legislators and the state level judiciary along with the federal judiciary," McConnell said.

No governor, "that we're aware of, has ever said they're against civic education," he said. But there's still plenty of room at the table for governors to get involved as interest in civic education increases.

Judge Rendell said a required civics test is a good start because it forces the issue into the schools and the information is important. But engaging students at an early age—before they become jaded teenagers—is crucial, she said.

And perhaps some of the young students playing make-believe—pretending to solve the

problems of a fictional city and hearing made-up court cases—will grow up to become real mayors and judges.

"Every governor, every mayor knows that we need citizens to participate more in our democracy—to participate as voters, participate by running for office, participate in asking legislators to pass certain legislation," Gov. Rendell said. "I would say to my fellow mayors and fellow governors, 'This works; our kids just need to have the door opened.'" 



#### OPENING DOORS FOR STUDENTS

PHILADELPHIA, Pa. —Former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell and Judge Marjorie Rendell started a civic education program while Gov. Rendell was in office that would eventually become The Rendell Center for Civics and Civic Engagement. The Rendell Center engages K-12 students in discussions about civic engagement and activities such as mock trials. Photo Courtesy of The Rendell Center