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## Perspective: **A test of our Constitution**

### **Congress is back at work. But if we keep underfunding social studies, will students even understand what the Legislature does?**

By [Phil Primack](#)

Judging by the stump speeches they were making last fall, some of the newest members of Congress will soon be making impassioned pleas to “fight unconstitutional this” or “restore constitutional that.” (During the campaign, I kept expecting an ad by some self-declared “constitutional conservative” to end with “I’m Thomas Paine, and I approve this message.”)

As someone who teaches college students about the First Amendment, I’m for any resurgence in attention to our nation’s founding document. But then there are those be-careful-what-you-wish-for moments, such as the debate between Delaware senatorial candidate Chris Coons and his Tea Party-backed challenger, Christine O’Donnell. After Coons noted that the Constitution prohibits the teaching of religious doctrine in public schools, O’Donnell responded: “So you’re telling me that the separation of church and state is found in the First Amendment?” People lambasted O’Donnell, of course, but less reported was Coons’s subsequent inability to list all five of the freedoms specified in that amendment.

You’d think that such exchanges and all this fresh buzz about the Constitution would mean boom times for local social studies teachers. After all, Massachusetts law mandates the teaching of the state and federal constitutions to help prepare students “for the duties of citizenship.” But, alas, such noble intention has crashed on the rocks of tough fiscal times and shifting educational priorities.

Compare today’s textbooks with those from a few decades ago “and you see a clear diminution of serious discussion about the Bill of Rights,” says Gene Policinski, executive director of the First Amendment Center in Nashville. “Some of it is due to this smugness that we’ve always had these freedoms and don’t have to worry about losing them, which is usually the first step toward losing them.”

“We’re now getting into a third generation of people who probably lack the foundational understanding of the principles and values of our government they need to make the right choices as citizens,” adds Roger Desrosier, who taught social studies for 32 years in Millbury and is now the Massachusetts coordinator of an instructional program called *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution*. Case in point: A 2010 survey by the First Amendment Center found that one of every three Americans was unable to name even one of the amendment’s freedoms. (Need a refresher? They are freedoms of speech, religion, and press, and the rights to assembly and petition.)

Although Massachusetts has certain civics requirements, including one year of US history in high school, some social studies teachers say their subject is being neglected in favor of other

subjects. The situation worsened in 2009, when the state decided to suspend MCAS testing in history and social studies.

That's left some Massachusetts social studies teachers making an argument even they are surprised to hear themselves suggesting: They want their MCAS back. "The irony is that most of us social studies teachers feel that standardized testing is not all that beneficial," says Janna Bremer, the executive secretary of the Massachusetts Council for the Social Studies and a 39-year veteran of the King Philip regional school system. "But if we are to continue to be able to teach these concepts of government, social studies must be seen as important. And we are not seen as important unless we are tested."

It turns out the state wants to restore the test, too. "The only reason that MCAS testing has been suspended has to do with budget constraints," says JC Considine, spokesman for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The department is seeking \$2.5 million to resume conducting the suspended MCAS test in 2012, plus additional funding to help schools prepare students for it.

Of course, given the state's budget hole, that funding would probably require revenue increases, maybe even dreaded tax hikes. And it's hard to say whether today's voters would go for that. After all, we were taught an important lesson in new American civics last fall: Taxes are unconstitutional, right?

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## Letters to the Editor

As a history teacher for more than three decades at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, I always taught the Constitution as part of my American history courses. But it is very sad to read that there are actually history teachers who are asking that their subject – please! – have its own MCAS standardized exam (Perspective, January 9). Their logic runs something like this: MCAS is the tail that wags the dog; yes, it has strangled and narrowed school curriculums statewide, but unless our subject area gets strangled as well, kids won't pay attention to it. My advice to my former colleagues is to do what good teachers have always strived to do: Motivate your students by making your course so compelling that they have no choice but to be drawn into it. I am proud that my former school committee recently voted to sign a petition against the social studies MCAS. As I said in my testimony before the state Board of Education, "If you demand to measure everything you value, you will end up valuing only what can be measured."

Bill Schechter / Brookline