

A more perfect union

On September 17, 1787 — 234 years ago this month — the Constitution of the United States was signed.

This year, as every year, scores of our youth will sit in classrooms learning about democracy's sustaining win, as well as its noble cause — the creation of “a more perfect union.” But what does that mean?

The Articles of Confederation provided the first version of our federal government. Our leaders, including Benjamin Franklin, saw that a transformation was needed — a new, stronger Constitution. He was in such poor health at the time that he couldn't deliver his own speech, so he had James Wilson read it for him. In it, Franklin shared doubts about portions of the document, but still emphatically urged all present to sign it.

Our purpose in becoming a nation was in rejecting a single authority, the king. But more than that, we wanted to move beyond any single agenda. We wanted to provide a common defense, promote the general welfare, and embark on a path to secure these liberties through time.

The essence of “a more perfect union” is pursuing justice, embracing tranquility, and serving as a shining light on the hill for the world to follow.

America has been through so much over the last several years. People are more akin to talk at one another and not engage with one another and work out our differences. You hear the adage that elections have consequences — well, that is true. America is beautiful because it is the people who govern through the leaders they choose.

Youth and the future of voting

Recently the news organization, Politico, printed an opinion piece by Joshua A. Douglas, a law professor at the University of Kentucky. He is the author of the book, *Vote for US: How to Take Back Our Elections and Change the Future of Voting*.

Dr. Douglas asked a class of fourth graders about their views on how to design an election process. He was surprised at what bubbled to the top (as was I).

Instead of silence and thousand-yard stares, these students were engaged and

excited to share their thoughts. Douglas pointed out that as much as adults like to debate what students learn in school — and to shield them from controversial social critiques in the classroom — the group turned out to have strong, innate ideas about structural unfairness.

Sure, they were also interested in when recess began, but once he encouraged them to offer their own ideas about electoral fairness, the conversation took off.

They started from scratch to create their election system. The class was split between on voting age — they settled on 18, but some made a strong case for 16.

The conversation moved to why certain rules might be better or worse. To his astonishment, the kids understood the basic unfairness of a system in which one side is allowed to craft rules that will help the party in power. They said that it made no sense to let one side essentially shut the other side out of having an equal chance of winning.

They didn't know it, but they had offered the best critique of gerrymandering, which over the years has helped incumbent candidates, political parties or white majorities stay in power: It's simply not fair. Someone shouldn't win just because they run in a district that is stacked in their favor.

Without his prompting, students brought up difficult issues involving citizenship and immigration. One student shared that his parents are not U.S. citizens, but said they still were legal members of the community. On the one hand, he said, it made him want them to become U.S. citizens so they could vote. On the other hand, he found it unfair that they were not allowed to influence who is elected.

This insight is interesting since the most recent census data confirmed a long-suspected truth of change in our country. The single largest segment of our population is under 18 and for the first time, the minority population is now the majority.

We are more blended as a country than ever before, so creating free and fair elections should not be a foreign policy objective that we ask of other nations, but not ourselves. To be a more perfect union, we must be a guiding light for others, too.

However, elections are only one half of



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the coin — understanding how our government works is more important now than ever.

Markham Elementary Parent Day

Back in 2012, I was asked to present at parent day for my daughter, Carolyn Rose, then in the fifth grade. Nobody knows what an executive director for the nursery and greenhouse industry does, including my own father, so I focused on basic civics.

I started with who was president. Several of the kids raised their hands and shouted “Obama.” What was his first name? “President.” Well, OK.

What about our senators, our congressman, our mayor? Crickets, except for my daughter raising her hand. I dismissed that and directed my attention (okay, glare) to the ever-shrinking teacher in the back of the class. Anyone within a foot of me could almost make out the guttural growl. Moving on. Yes, let's move on.

How a bill becomes a law: Ms. Baker's fifth grade class voted for 15 more minutes of recess as our makeshift U.S. House. I asked if Mr. Morley's class, acting as the U.S. Senate, would vote the same. I was assured that they would.

So, they get more recess? Not so fast. Principal Garnett would most certainly veto the idea. Outrage ensued. I said they could override it but if the School Board, as the Supreme Court, said it was against the rules — then it wouldn't happen.

The birth of knowledge of the three branches of government arrived.

I love our great country and despite all the differences we see in the news, our future of a more perfect union lives on through this next generation. Just like it should be. ©