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POP CULTURE OR CIVICS?

Is Tom Cruise's Baby Really More Important than the Constitution?

ARLINGTON, VA — High school seniors in Kansas are nearly three times as likely to know that Tom Cruise is the father of Katie Holmes's new baby girl (58%) as they are able to identify James Madison as the "Father of the Constitution" (20%), a new survey reveals.

According to the annual statewide survey – "Kansas High School Seniors 2006: The Status of Kansas Student Knowledge on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights" – Kansas students lack basic knowledge of America's Founding documents. Nearly half (46%) are unable to correctly list three rights named in the Bill of Rights, and only 48% know the words "We hold these truths to be self-evident..." came from the Declaration of Independence.

The survey, commissioned by the Bill of Rights Institute and conducted by Evaluation Solutions, an independent national evaluation firm out of Little Meadows, Pennsylvania, even showed a slight dip in student knowledge from the previous year.

"This survey reflects similar results nationwide," said Dr. Laurie Bagby, a professor of political science at Kansas State University. "As a university professor, I can attest to the fact that our students come underprepared in their basic knowledge of U.S. government and history."

On the positive side, seven in ten (70%) Kansas seniors do know that the primary purpose of the Bill of Rights was to limit the power of government, and six in ten (61%) understand that flag burning is not prohibited by the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

According to the Kansas survey report, "[t]here is evidence that targeted civics-government educational programs, such as the Bill of Rights Institute program, can improve student knowledge." For example, for those students whose teachers who have participated in the Institute's programs, "[m]ore than half of the students (53%) ... know that John Locke included 'property' as a natural right, while only 16% of Kansas seniors knew this fact."

The Bill of Rights Institute, a national non-profit educational organization, is entering the second of a five-year initiative to increase the knowledge, appreciation, and commitment of young people in Kansas to the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights. So far, the Bill of Rights Institute's programs for Kansas teachers have been favorably received.

"I found the Institute's seminar to be very well-balanced between content and methods," explained Patricia Dunnell, a teacher at Wichita Southeast High School (USD 259), who also finds their web site, www.BillofRightsInstitute.org, and other resources to be "useful and up-to-date." "I use them constantly for my Government class," she added.

The Kansas civic education initiative is funded by grants from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation, K.T. Wiedemann Foundation, American Citizenship Project Fund, Kansas Newspaper Foundation, Garvey Kansas Foundation, Pratt Family Charitable Foundation, and other Kansas foundations and individuals.

The survey, conducted in May and June 2006 of a random, statistically-significant sample of 380 high school seniors in Kansas, has a 5% margin of error.

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