

OUR VIEW

Civics bee offers great opportunity for students

We're pleased to see the Eau Claire Chamber lining up for hosting a regional competition as part of the 2025 Wisconsin Civics Bee. We hope area students will participate as well.

Civics education in the United States was once a staple in the classroom. That has been called into question in recent years by observers both left and right. Studies have questioned whether students can pass basic tests about how American government works, and there's evidence that our educational systems are falling short on that count.

The Civics Bee is a comparatively open-ended way to address that gap. Students in sixth through eighth grades can submit essays that identify a specific problem, name individuals or organizations with whom solutions can be found, and explain how the solution includes some of the founding principles of the United States and its civic virtues.

There's not much in American society that can't plausibly be included under guidelines that broad, so students have an almost entirely blank canvas on which to work. The 100-point scale assesses how the essays meet the criteria, with points heavily weighted toward the last of the three. But it may be the 10 points allocated to research and reference use that are most important.

It's easy to see how multiple essays could be extremely well-written, with the judges' results placing them in very close competition with one another. It's also easy to see how students might skip over the research side of things, especially if they're already engaged on a social issue and feel like they know it well.

The opportunity to do their own research, to show how their arguments can be supported by facts, is invaluable. This isn't a run-of-the-mill paper, after all. We can't recall too many students who were thrilled at the thought of being compelled to research a subject they weren't particularly interested in. When that happens, the research itself becomes a negative to the student, undermining the intent of the lesson.

Think about it for a moment. How many adults outside of academics can actually remember the APA or Chicago styles of citation that our classes once demanded? There are fields in which citations are absolutely critical, but most jobs have little to no use for them. Thus whether we remember hinges largely on whether we took to the work in the first place.

Here, though, the students have the ability to choose for themselves and determine what direction they want to take. That's much more likely to hold a student's interest and to give them a personal investment in doing the research well. It's an experience far more likely to have lasting effects on how the student approaches future projects.

Why does that become important? Good research requires critical thinking skills that can only really be developed through doing. Critical thinking, in turn, applies in virtually every aspect of life. It's how you spot a scam or figure out a schedule. It's essential in ways people usually don't think about.

By giving students the opportunity to do their own research, their own thinking, on a subject they choose, the bee offers an invaluable opportunity that has the potential to change how they approach things for the rest of their lives. Combining that with the learning that inevitably comes with the research and writing is, to us, a big win.

There's plenty of time to weigh participation. Essays are due before 11 p.m. Feb. 4, 2025. That's a good 10 weeks or so for students to be able to figure out what they want to focus on.

Good luck.