

Oregon civics teachers get lessons at the Capitol

Statesman Journal by Peter Wong – Sunday, December 6, 2009

Educators say third annual event offers valuable information

As two of Oregon's leading lawyers argued about whether the state should rewrite its constitution, two civics teachers in the Capitol audience said that debate brought to life the subjects they teach to schoolchildren.

About 100 teachers gathered Friday at the Capitol for the third annual conference sponsored by the Classroom Law Project, a nonprofit organization promoting better teaching to educate students about their civic responsibilities.

Ronald Kopp of Condon High School, in north-central Oregon, said he found the sessions valuable even though he is spread thin.

"I'm the social studies department at our high school," said Kopp, who teaches economics, geography, government and history at a school that has fewer than 100 students overall.

"There's a lot of stuff here that I can't get to in my classes because of limited time. But for me as a teacher, it's still valuable information because we can compare national and state situations when we talk about things in class. If I know about it, I can tell my kids a little more about it."

Linda Koller, who teaches at Wood Middle School in Wilsonville, has attended the conference all three years.

"It reminds me why I love teaching social studies, government and U.S. history," she said.

"This conference allows me to give them a better understanding of what is happening. So I take all these things back with me. Even though it's hard to leave my kids, this is such an inspiring thing to do."

A bill passed by the 2009 Legislature designates the first Friday in December as Oregon Civics Day for Teachers.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski was absent this year, but the conference still drew legislators, lobbyists, judges and prominent lawyers.

Among them were Jim Westwood and Charles Hinkle, two Portland lawyers and constitutional scholars who argued opposing sides of whether Oregon should call a convention to rewrite its 1857 Constitution. Voters have amended the state's basic charter numerous times since they approved citizen initiative measures in 1902 - far more than the 27 amendments to the U.S. Constitution in its 200-plus years of existence.

Westwood and Hinkle said afterward they agree the Oregon Constitution is a lot longer than the ideal basic governing document - and that the primary reason is citizen initiatives.

"Oregon has not fallen under tyranny with its initiative system, but it has fallen under the influence of petty demagogues of narrow view and limited foresight," Westwood argued.

Westwood said a convention would be useful in educating the public about Oregon's unwieldy Constitution, even if there were no great change.

But Hinkle said he doubted the chances of a new document in a statewide election, particularly if it restricted initiatives or reduced the number of statewide elected offices.

"There is no doubt that Oregonians have used the initiative system to create the kind of constitution that reflects their attitudes and values," Hinkle said.

Oregon voters in 1960 approved a commission to draft a new constitution, but lawmakers in 1963 fell short of the two-thirds majorities required to put it to a statewide election. Lawmakers did submit a modified version in 1969, but voters rejected it in 1970.

A bill for a 2011 constitutional convention died after a hearing during the 2009 session.

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CLASSROOM LAW PROJECT: (503) 224-4424.

Web site: <http://www.classroomlaw.org>