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A civics lesson on the back of a dollar bill?

By Karen M. Kroll | Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor

Do you know the number of articles in the US Constitution? Can you identify the right outlined in the Fourth Amendment? Any idea which amendment abolished slavery?

Most Americans can only guess at the answers. In fact, a paltry 6 percent understand the rights and freedoms found in the First Amendment, reports The National Constitution Center, a nonprofit organization in Philadelphia.

For the past six years, Randy Wright and his students have been on a quest to end what they see as a dismal state of ignorance among their fellow citizens. Equally important, Mr. Wright, who teaches civics at Liberty Middle School in Ashland, Va., would like to expose America's friends - and foes - around the world to the ideals upon which the US was founded.

To reach these goals, Wright and his students have spent countless hours trying to move the Liberty Bill Act, which would place a condensed version of the Constitution on the back of the \$1 bill, through the US Congress.

The project began in early 1998 when Wright's students at the time presented the idea to Tom Bliley, then a member of the House of Representatives for Virginia, and Frank Hargrove, a member of Virginia's House of Delegates

Since then, students in successive classes of Wright's have had the opportunity to make presentations to the 105th, 106th, and 107th Congresses, the White House, and students at other schools and universities.

The idea has gained the support of senators and congressmen from both parties, as well as endorsements from several newspapers, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Military Order of the Purple Heart.

Although the Liberty Bill Act has yet to pass, Wright's students have gained a tremendous firsthand experience of democracy in action.

"Working on the Liberty Bill has increased my knowledge of the government and the Constitution more in the past few months than in my entire time at school," says Jay, one of Wright's eighth-graders.

"The Liberty Bill has given me the opportunity to participate in a congressional hearing, lobby Congress, and meet with a presidential aide," says Lindsey Keiter, a former student

of Wright's, and now a sophomore at the University of North Carolina. "These are things I never would have done if it were not for the Liberty Bill."

"Our staff was very impressed with [the students'] knowledge of the Constitution," says Rep. Eric Cantor (R) of Virginia, House sponsor of the bill.

The dollar bill is redesigned about once every 10 years, and today - as the nation battles terrorism and defends the freedoms outlined in the Constitution - could be an ideal moment to implement the Liberty Bill act, Mr. Cantor says.

The proposal is currently under consideration by committees in both the House and Senate. The six-year (and counting) endeavor to secure its passage has been slower than Wright imagined at the outset.

Outright opposition, however, has actually been fairly low key, although some vending manufacturers have voiced concerns about the cost of retooling their machines.

And some groups that want to eliminate the \$1 bill in favor of coins oppose anything that would make it more popular. However, the legislation allows for this: If the \$1 dollar bill is replaced by coins, the Constitution would move to the next-lowest denomination.

Still, Wright says he remains committed to the Liberty Bill. "I know that this is what I'm supposed to do," he says.

He speaks passionately about the idea, which came to him at 4 o'clock one morning, waking him from a sound sleep. He couldn't get it from his mind, and after several more sleepless nights, asked his students what they thought. "They were unanimous in their support," he says.

Wright and his students have poured their hearts into the project. Each summer, a group of students heads to Capitol Hill, where they break into small groups and walk the halls. They discuss the Liberty Bill with any senators and representatives who will listen.

Wright says he remains confident that the Liberty Bill eventually will become reality, as the potential benefits of simply adding the words of the Constitution to the dollar bill are too profound to ignore.

Americans would also gain a deeper understanding of the freedoms they enjoy each day, insists Wright.

At the same time, citizens around the globe would be exposed to the concepts of democracy and liberty, he says. The dollar bill is one of the most circulated pieces of paper in the world, he says, noting that two-thirds of the \$7 billion in existence circulate outside the US.

The dollar bill often is welcome even in countries whose governments are oppressive, or aren't allied with America.

"More countries would be quietly, peacefully, and slowly exposed to democracy," he says. "Over the long run, that may help us avoid a war."