

OPINIONS

Students lambaste *NSP* over 'Dumb American' label

Editor:
Attached are letters to the editor concerning Sarah Hayden's Sept. 14 opinion article, "Students' lack of knowledge earns label of 'Dumb American'."
Sean Marmion and I have co-written our thoughts as well as my three U.S. Government classes. The idea of writing a letter originated in my A2 class, the class in which some of the those mentioned in the article are members. Students in my other classes also wanted to write replies.
All of those who signed the letters are my students with the exception of two students who signed the A2 letter, Crystal DeWulf and Carmen Bauer. They are in Sean Marmion's Advanced Placement U.S. Government class. Both young women were at the meeting.
Thank you.

Mac McDonald
North Scott High School
200 S. 1st St., Eldridge
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Editor:
Sarah Hayden’s lack of knowledge forces biased title upon North Scott students:
On Friday, Sept. 19, it was brought to our U.S. Government class’ attention that an objectionable and rather subjective article was written about the scholarship and “local government awareness” of the North Scott student body.

We, as North Scott students, are required to attend one of our local city council meetings or school board meetings in order to pass our required United States Government class. When approximately five students went to a McCausland City Council meeting, the students were asked a few questions by the McCausland city officials. Some of these questions were, “What is the name of the governor of Iowa?” and “Who is our lieutenant governor?” and a few students out of the five did not know the answer.
Yes, we agree that we should know the name of our governor, but to be called dumb and embarrassing in front of the entire community was rather upsetting. Ms. Hayden took the knowledge of five students and formed a rash opinion about the youth of America, but even worse the youth of North Scott.
It was really frustrating to know that we were written about in such a manner, but it was even more frustrating when she blamed our “lack of knowledge” on our parents.
She claimed that the reason behind this unawareness was lack of communication between the parent and the child. Ms Hayden feels as if students should go home to their nice family dinners and discuss things like ISIS, beheadings taking place in the Middle East, Ebola, and the name of our governor. Does she know that some parents work three jobs and are never home? Does she know if

relationships between the parent and the child are even close enough to discuss political manners? Does she know if parents do or do not have these conversations with their children? That is right. She does not know. She based her entire article on the knowledge of five kids who attended one particular meeting. So as the word got around our junior class, Carmen Bauer, who attended this city council meeting, confessed something even more appalling. “I did too know the name of our governor! I was able to answer all of their questions, except for the name of our lieutenant governor, Kim Reynolds.”
Carmen was upset. She felt as if Ms. Hayden disregarded her answers and automatically wrote this biased article. Justin Boer, another junior who attended the McCausland City Council meeting, also stated, “I was not prepared to be put on the spot in front of the city representatives.” He added, “I was very unsettled.” We understand that *The North Scott Press* is always in search for something to write about, but we wanted to make it clear that the junior class of North Scott refuses to wear the title that Sarah Hayden put on us, which is, “Dumb Americans.”
Sincerely,
*Allison Stutting
Crystal DeWulf
Dexter Hamann
Tyler Dau*
*Justin Boer
Carmen Bauer
Kristin Wheeler
Lexi McDonald*

*Matthew Rheingans
Ashley Henriksen
Bethany Donahue
Soraya Thorndyke
Clayton Guffey*
*Ashley Clark
Nicole Butlett
Rylee Claussen
Grant Fahrenkrog*
* * *
Editor:
Regarding Sarah Hayden’s article, “Dumb Americans” printed in *The North Scott Press*, there are several points that our B4 Government class would like to address.
We were offended and insulted because Ms. Hayden classified the entire North Scott High School based on her interaction with a few students. The students who received the assignment have only had a few classes of government prior to the McCausland City Council meeting and therefore would not have the opportunity to learn all aspects of Iowa’s government.
We have just begun the school year and this is our first year taking a U.S. government class so we have been focusing on the origins of government. The logic behind the mayor’s question about the lieutenant governor of Iowa has the same effect of the students asking the mayor what the significance of the Magna Carta is and how it develops the U.S. Constitution.
The reason North Scott government stu-

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Students are not dumb, but they are not engaged – and that's worse!

By Erin Gentz
In some ways, I guess I can sympathize with McCausland Mayor Buzz Koehn’s dismay at high school kids not being able to name the governor of Iowa. This summer, I was in St. Louis, and I heard an adult confidently state that he was entirely sure Tennessee Williams was a baseball player. At which point, I nearly walked straight into a lamppost.
Mayor Koehn, to his credit, reacted much better than I. He thought he lobbed a softball, but when he saw that the students attending his meeting didn't know the answer to his seemingly simple question, he apparently tried to help them. Gave them hints. There's no evidence to suggest that he somehow belittled them in any way. He asked a question he reasonably assumed high school-aged kids should be able to answer. Suggesting that he did anything resembling “bullying” somehow manages to be an insult to both victims of bullying and actual bullies. There is nothing wrong with trying to hold these students to a higher standard.
Kudos to the student who finally did answer, but I'm pretty sure there shouldn't have been any kind of protracted attempt at a response. I understand that the North Scott students and parents are a bit embarrassed about being called out on not knowing the name of the governor of Iowa. But to be honest, they should be. There’s nothing wrong with having a shame-based reaction if you take steps to correct the behavior that caused it. So: I think it might be time for some Real Talk with The Kids.

Knowing Terry Branstad isn't exactly the kind of thing you should brag about, but you also shouldn't advertise that you don't know. The earth revolves around the sun; two plus two equals four; Terry Branstad is governor of Iowa; get your tires rotated every other oil change – that's all information you should have floating around in the back of your head. It's probably going to come up at some point.
And I don't understand how you can't be aware of something like that. This is an election year. I know young people watch TV. I guarantee anytime you watch Monday Night Football or Pretty Little Liars or whatever you are watching these days – the majority of the commercial time right about now is going to



Erin Gentz

be dedicated to political ads. The only way you could not know is if you're just actively not paying attention.
Guys, I don't think you're dumb or ignorant or any one of a million other negative things that could be said about the Youth of America today. But I know some of you just aren't paying attention. And this stuff matters. It matters to you whether you realize it or not. Do you have any idea how much effort it takes in this day and age to be that disengaged? You have so much information right at your fingertips; choosing to be uninformed is irresponsible and frankly tragic.
Even though a lot of you aren't old enough to vote, the decisions that Branstad and others make affect you very much. Do you like being able to use the Internet anytime you want? Do you have a job? Do you want to go to college? Do you think you might need to take out some student loans? Do you want to go into the military? Do you want to take advantage of many of the fine public services that local, state and federal government departments have to offer? You know, public schools, roads, your drinking water? Do you like eating safe meat and driving safe cars? Do you want to get married, have kids, own a house, and retire someday? Do you pay taxes? Do you think there’s a switch that’s magically going to flip the first time you step into a voting booth that suddenly makes you realize that this is all relevant?
It's not like it's hard to get engaged about things like this either. There's no need to get a subscription to *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Economist* and the *Journal of Public Affairs* and keep abreast of the latest Pew Research studies. You don't need to start Tivo-ing "The McLaughlin Group" and "Meet the Press."
You've all got Chromebooks, yes? I'm pretty sure that Chromebooks will let you use Google. And if you have Google, you can go to Google News. So, maybe spend a few minutes there each day and read some stories that don't involve a Kardashian. On Twitter? Maybe follow a few news sites. *The New York Times*, Associated Press, a couple of the local sites. There's loads of news on Twitter.
So many of you are yearning to be seen as adults – maybe try forming some adult opinions. Then, other adults might start to see you as a peer and give you the respect and consideration you so desire. Choose to be engaged and you will no longer be seen as a child. Stop letting the grown-ups in your life make excuses for your shortcomings and start familiarizing yourselves with the notion of

having a worldview. Just because some topics are unpleasant doesn't mean you shouldn't at least discuss them or be aware. Because I do not want you to go to college without knowing ISIS and ISIL are the same thing.
If you get to be an adult and you wield your lack of knowledge like it's a badge of honor, then you are ignorant. If you’re going to choose willful ignorance, then you aren't worthy of being taken seriously.
So start choosing to know things. Now. The rest of the world isn’t going to wait around. Become engaged or get left behind. Those are your only options. (I'll give the students a pass on not knowing Kim Reynolds. Given the number of joint appearances she makes with the governor and the lack of personal autonomy she seems to demand, I suppose one could be forgiven for half-watching a commercial and assuming she's his wife or something.)
I get that some of this isn’t your fault. Because of No Child Left Behind and these nebulous “standards” you have to meet, your teachers probably don’t have as much time as they like to talk about current events in class. And they probably don’t have a lot of opportunities to impress upon you why you should care about these things. The North Scott School District isn’t going to get more state and federal funding if every single one of you knows that Bill Northey is the Iowa Secretary of Agriculture. But that places a lot of the burden on you and your parents as to how to prepare for the real world. And while that’s a lot of responsibility, it’s something you should take seriously.
Still, as a young person, you shouldn’t feel that not knowing Terry Branstad somehow diminishes or impacts your intelligence. I’m sure you’re all talented in other ways. Trivia is folly if you can’t connect it to a larger idea.
Any person can parrot information. But knowing Terry Branstad’s name isn’t helpful if you don’t know what he does. He doesn’t exist in a vacuum. If you're unsure what the governor does, then Terry Branstad is just A Guy With A Mustache Who Does A Thing In Des Moines. So learn about his job. Learn about the legislative process. Care about acquiring this information. Ask questions, ask loads of questions to anyone you think might be able to answer. Ask questions about everything. If you happen to see a political ad and you think the claims therein seem absurd, do some fact-checking. Revel in intellectual curiosity. It really is the most terrific fun.
You all have been given a tremendous op-

portunity to channel your anger into something positive and meaningful. You can change the conversation and the perception that has been thrust upon you.
As you start making connections to the larger ideas, the rest of the things will fall into place. It becomes easier to remember. Understand the big picture, and you can advance conversations and ideas and opinions. And then people will stop acting like you’re dumb. I'm not asking you to be perfect. I'm just asking you to be better. And I fully believe you are capable.

Real Talk aside, I hope the fun isn’t over for Mayor Koehn. I hope he still does his pop quiz, but I’m not sure he’ll be able to use that particular question anymore. And anyway, there really wasn’t any incentive for the students to answer the question. He was still going to sign their attendance sheets. But I think there’s still an opportunity for Koehn and other mayors and council members in the area to engage the students who come to these meetings. Maybe take some time to meet with them after the meeting. Make introductions. Ask the students what they thought about the meeting – if they thought something was especially interesting, or if they have any questions about what happened. Above all, make it clear that you’re glad they came and that you hope they learned something. Make it more than just an assignment.
Or, if you feel the students do need a test of their procedural knowledge, maybe ask a broader question. Like, how does a bill become a law? Where do budgetary bills originate in Congress? When was the Constitution of the United States ratified? What document immediately preceded the Constitution as the rules of governance for the United States? How many representatives does Iowa send to the U.S. House of Representatives? How is that number determined? How does the Iowa Caucus work? How does it differ from a primary?
Engage young people in a real way about the political process. In fact, engage them in a real way about everything as early as possible. Math, science, literature, all of it. When they understand how the world relates to them, then maybe they’ll realize they’re supposed to care about what happens. And then they’ll answer your questions, loudly and proudly, the first time they’re asked.
Erin Gentz is a 2001 graduate of North Scott High School and a graduate of Simpson College. She is employed at The North Scott Press.