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COMMUNITIES

Think civics is lost? Ask these middle schoolers at the Civics Bee

Ryan Owens Guest columnist

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This month, some of Florida's most promising civic thinkers will take the stage in Tallahassee — and most of them are not yet old enough to drive.

On June 30, [the Institute for Governance and Civics](#) (IGC) at Florida State University will host the Florida Statewide Finals of the National Civics Bee, bringing together middle school students from communities across the state.

You are invited to watch. The Civics Bee is a nonpartisan competition for sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, hosted in partnership with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation and chambers of commerce across Florida, with Kinder Morgan serving as the presenting sponsor.

Modeled on the spelling and geography bees many of us grew up with, this contest asks for more than simple recall. Florida's finalists have already written essays that identify a real problem in their community and propose a solution.

This year, topics range from public transportation to bike safety — concrete problems these students see in their own neighborhoods. On stage, they will answer civics questions and defend those ideas before a panel of judges.

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It's not just what these students know, but how they carry themselves. They focus

on problems rather than on blaming people. They make their arguments on the merits. They listen as carefully as they debate. These are middle schoolers who confront questions that stump plenty of adults, while doing it with both seriousness and good humor. Those are the habits that make for effective citizens and responsible leaders.

This matters more than it might seem, and our own research shows why. Last year, the IGC polled 2,414 Americans about their willingness to engage with people who hold opposing political views.

Among those who could not answer a single civics question correctly, nearly four in 10 said they would refuse to sell to someone of the opposite party. Among those who answered all four civics questions correctly, fewer than one in ten said the same. The pattern held across buying, selling, and even marriage into the family. And throughout, younger Americans were consistently the least tolerant.

Civic knowledge makes a real difference. Younger Americans' reluctance to engage across the aisle is genuinely troubling. But the intolerance we worry about is not fixed. It appears to respond to civic knowledge. And the earlier we build that knowledge, the better.

That is the promise of a competition like this one. We are not handing these students our conclusions; we are giving them the knowledge to understand how their government works and the intellectual tools to reach their own independent conclusions.

In the long run, that is how Florida sustains a healthy civic climate. The state winner of the competition will go on to Washington, D.C., this fall to compete for a national title and a \$100,000 529 college-savings education award. But every finalist already leaves with a sense of purpose and the confidence that comes from being taken seriously.

So come see it for yourself. The finals begin at 4 p.m. on Tuesday, June 30, at the

Augustus B. Turnbull III Florida State Conference Center on West Pensacola Street. Mark Harrison, Florida's 2026 Teacher of the Year, will emcee. The event is free and open to the public, and you can register to attend through the [IGC website](#).

If you are looking for a reason to be optimistic, you will find it among these middle schoolers making the case for a better Florida. Our next civic generation is being built right now, and a good deal of that work is happening in Florida's middle schools.

Ryan Owens is the director of the Institute for Governance and Civics (IGC) and a professor of political science at Florida State University. For more information on the IGC, visit igc.fsu.edu.

If you go

What: 2026 Florida Statewide Finals of the National Civics Bee hosted by Florida State University's Institute for Governance and Civics

When: 4 p.m. Tuesday, June 30

Where: Augustus B. Turnbull III Florida State Conference Center

Register: visit igc.fsu.edu