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In the early 1900s, schools across Nebraska would hold a special flag ceremony to honor the end of the War. Every April 9, in remembering those who had served and died, students would write themes, give speeches, draw pictures, hold plays, sing songs, and participate in a flag ceremony in tribute to Appomattox Day, the end of the Civil War.

Times change. Memories fade. The last veteran of the Civil War died in the 1950s. The celebration of Appomattox Day had died decades before that. It was no longer thought to be relevant.

The day the First World War ended in November 1918 became a new holiday and the occasion to celebrate, and learn about, the values of patriotism and service. Nov. 11, Armistice Day, became the new national holiday. Teachers were expected to incorporate that holiday into their teaching materials and lessons on Americanism and civics, just as they had for Appomattox Day.

World War II ended with the surrender of Japan on Sept. 2, 1945. No special day was established to honor the end of World War II until Kansas began the move to change the name of Armistice Day to (All) Veterans Day in the 1950s.

Times had changed again, but the same values of peace, patriotism and service continued to be themes of teaching around Veterans Day.

Decoration Day

In addition to Appomattox Day on April 9, there was Decoration Day on the last Monday of May. This was also a time for teachers to incorporate lessons about the values of America at a time when students would see parades, hear speeches, and decorate the graves of those who served.

Decoration Day became Memorial Day in 1967. What had started as a day to decorate the graves of veterans had changed into a day to decorate all graves and has now become more of a day to simply have a picnic or a cookout than a day to renew or revisit ideas of peace or Americanism.

Narrowing Curriculum

In many schools, celebrations around these days of remembrance have become rare and related lessons or teaching about these days and their associated values are virtually non-existent.

This is not a charge against teachers or their school districts. Those teachers who continue teaching these lessons do so in the face of the federal law, No Child Left Behind, that has changed the scope of teaching in America.

Schools have come to understand a simple fact about that law: if it isn't on the test, don't waste time teaching it. When the narrowing of a curriculum that in many schools has resulted in teachers not teaching cursive writing (it isn't on the test), we probably should not expect taking time to honor historic American values that are much harder to teach...and to test. Times have changed.

What is the Future?

My father was a World War II veteran. At my father's funeral, his cousin Harvey, also a veteran and part of the American Legion honor guard, presented the folded flag to me with the words "...on behalf of a grateful nation..."

Everyone who watched that ceremony had the advantage of years of school lessons about the values of citizenship and service. They understood the value of service for freedom. The lessons of war—and of peace—are important values that have traditionally been taught in America's schools. These lessons and traditions take time.

If our schools face demands that narrow or eliminate the time to teach and celebrate these values for our students, it is time we should all be concerned about the result for our communities and our nation.

If we don't have the time to teach about Veterans Day and those who risked—or gave—their lives to allow us to have free public schools, is there a future for either freedom or our schools?