

POWER OF THE QUESTION

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Five Questions State Boards Should Ask about Civics Education Reform

By Jay Barth

Efforts to better educate students about the workings of the government and how to be an effective, engaged citizen have declined sharply over the past generation.¹ For many years, students have graduated high school knowing less than preceding generations about how democratic institutions work and how they can effect social change. In recent months, COVID-19 hit subjects that fall outside English language arts and mathematics the hardest. Civics education has thus been further marginalized during an election season, when students typically have opportunities to put theory into action by engaging in local electoral events and practicing civil debate in an era of intense polarization.

For seven years, I was a member of the Arkansas State Board of Education. Before and during my state board term, I taught and researched American politics in a college setting and coordinated civic engagement activities for my students. Because I had dedicated most of my life to aiding students in determining how their skills and talents could play a role in social and political change, I left the state board disappointed that I was not able to spend more time tackling the reform of civics education in Arkansas.

1 WHY IS A RENEWED COMMITMENT TO CIVICS EDUCATION NECESSARY?

Public education in the United States was born out of deep awareness that in a representative democracy everyone needed to be prepared for the duties of citizenship. As Virginian Thomas Jefferson, the first major advocate for public investment in basic education, put it: “Educate and inform the whole mass of the people.... They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.”² As is the case in Arkansas, state constitutions across the country are often grounded in a commitment to free public education and in the notion that “intelligence and virtue [are] the safeguards of liberty and the bulwark of a free and good government.”³ It is time for all those who seek to safeguard liberty and a “free and good government”

to rededicate themselves to educating all students to be thoughtful, engaged citizens.

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, with its focus on student performance in math and language arts, less time in K-12 classrooms has been dedicated to civics material. Fewer than one in three schools offers a stand-alone civics course. Instead, civics is submerged in a stew of “social studies” material.⁴ According to a 2018 *Education Week* national survey of school leaders on the topic, only 25 percent said that at least one-fourth of social science curriculum was dedicated to civics.⁵

For those states that do require a civics course, most are offered for only one semester; just nine states require a full-year civics course.⁶ Particularly in schools with low scores on state summative tests, social science education is increasingly merged with literacy training in the middle grades. That is, students are reading social science content, but the real focus is on honing literacy skills rather than engaging in deep analysis of social scientific thinking, much less civics work.

This dilution of civics content has an impact on students’ civics knowledge. According to the latest gauge of performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), less than one-fourth of the nation’s 8th and 12th graders are proficient in civics.⁷

Because the students in schools challenged by low scores on assessments tend to be lower income and disproportionately black and brown, such patterns in where civics is and is not taught create significant equity concerns for the American educational system. Recent NAEP scores on civics for 8th graders bear this out: They show glaring, persistent gaps by race, ethnicity, and class (as gauged by eligibility for the National School Lunch Program).⁸

While my experience is more anecdotal, during my years as a professor of American politics I observed a growing chasm between the “haves” and “have nots” regarding civics knowledge: Some students arrived at college showing a real depth of thinking about issues of government, but many more lacked even a superficial understanding of its core tenets.

On a more hopeful note, states with the highest rates of youth civic engagement have both a civics course requirement at the secondary level and higher than average scores on the AP U.S. government exam.⁹

In recent years, approximately half the states have taken a step forward in civics education by embracing the College, Career, and Civic

Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. These C3 standards mark a noticeable ratcheting up in the quality of required civic knowledge as well as the thoughtful application of that knowledge beyond the classroom through an inquiry-based educational strategy (not unlike the Next Generation Science Standards, which many states adopted at about the same time). While the frameworks are good, what is rarer is a commitment to the professional development that would activate a fulsome embrace of the standards by teachers in C3 states.

Unquestionably, there are fantastic, creative teachers of civics in schools across the United States. But if state education leaders are to transform the teaching of civics for all children, they must be more systematic, as only a few states have.¹⁰

2 WHAT ARE THE CORE ELEMENTS OF VIBRANT CIVICS EDUCATION?

Civics knowledge—that is, a thorough understanding of the history of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, a comparative understanding of global political institutions, the modes of participation, and the “rules of the game” regarding voting at the state and federal levels—is vitally important for students to gain in the classroom. Most states emphasize these elements in their civics standards.

But civics cannot be taught in a vacuum. Civics knowledge must be brought to life through engagement in student’s communities, where they can see the connection between the theory and the practice of democracy and consciously reflect on their own skills and talents in the civic arena. Only through road testing the tools of democracy in civic engagement activities can students understand the challenges of being a citizen in a diverse—and, indeed, a polarized—America. Unsurprisingly, there is a significant correlation between students who say they find civics courses interesting and their NAEP assessments in the subject.¹¹

Massachusetts established a requirement in 2018 that middle and high school students complete at least one “action civics” project in which they work to respond to a challenge facing their community. This initiative is exciting because it underscores the critical role of experiential learning in building students’ comprehensive understanding of civics. While Maryland and the District of Columbia have required community service hours along with civics courses for graduation, the Massachusetts project goes beyond that by requiring groups of students at two stages of their academic development to research problems facing their community and to develop projects to tackle them.¹² Working with peers on such projects has tremendous promise to activate civic dispositions that would not naturally result from even the most vibrant classroom learning about the Bill of Rights. When such groups are diverse in their composition, such exercises have potential power to promote the kind of social capital that has particularly positive effects on democracy.¹³

3 WHEN SHOULD CIVICS BE TAUGHT?

Formal civics education has historically been rooted in the early high school years, which is simultaneously too late and too early.

Civics knowledge and civic engagement skills should be introduced in the earliest days in the classroom, as is the case with mathematics or literacy skills. And the later in students’ high school careers that formal civics coursework takes place, the greater their ability to connect that content to real-world citizenship activities, such as voting, thus enhancing its relevance in their lives.

Starting with kindergarten and continuing through 12th grade, **Idaho’s** civics standards focus on bringing civics education into all its schools. Long before a required high school civics course, kindergarten students are expected to “identify personal traits, such as courage, honesty, and responsibility” that might be expected of citizens and civic leaders while in third grade students gain knowledge about the ways that local government officials gain their offices. This early work prepares students for deeper work in civics during high school and, most important, prepares them to move from the high school classroom into their civic lives as voters and full-fledged citizens.¹⁴

Other states have scaffolded civics learning through required coursework at different stages of students’ school experience. The first state to move in this direction was **Florida**. With a 2010 law named after Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, the state added a required middle-school civics course. Moreover, the Florida course does require an assessment that makes up a significant portion of a student’s course grade. This middle school experience focuses heavily on civics knowledge. When the assessment was first implemented in the 2013–14 school year, student performance faltered, but over time student scores have improved markedly.¹⁵

More recently, **Illinois**, which historically had some of the weakest civics standards in the country, established a new required high school course and built upon its progress through a required middle school course in the 2020–21 school year.¹⁶

4 WHAT ROLE SHOULD TESTS PLAY IN ELEVATING CIVICS EDUCATION?

One of the more intense debates over civics education reform involves whether or not civics should become a tested subject and, if it is tested, what form those assessments should take. On the one hand, assessed subjects receive more “air time” in classrooms. On the other hand, aspects of civics learning—the skills of effective citizenship and the dispositions of healthy citizenship—are quite difficult to effectively assess.¹⁷ Thus an embrace of assessment may actually lead to less innovative civics coursework and activities.

As of 2016, 37 states included some form of civics assessment in their state assessment scheme.¹⁸ However, these assessments are rarely part of the state accountability systems used to “grade” school quality. In some states, the exam is a graduation requirement for individual students.

Some of these assessments attempt to move beyond knowledge of civics facts to evaluate students’ ability to make use of that knowledge. For example, **Tennessee** employs a “project-based assessment” in two grade bands (grades 4–8 and grades 9–12). In

these tests, the goal is for students “to demonstrate understanding and relevance of public policy, the structure of federal, state and local governments and both the Tennessee and the United States constitutions.” But because of the difficulty in meeting validity and reliability expectations for exams given to all students, this approach is relatively rare.

The most debated approach has been the move toward using items from the U.S. citizenship exam as a standardized test. Advocates’ efforts to promote model legislation requiring such tests have sought to attach “high stakes” for students. But this limited set of test questions would necessitate dedicated time to drilling students to memorize answers rather than encouraging deep thinking about the functioning of government and how students can become better citizens.

That said, there is evidence that even such “high-stakes” civics exams focused on civic facts can boost student learning, as measured by NAEP exam results and survey data. When such exams are required for graduation, they create an incentive for student learning about civics. The biggest beneficiaries of such learning are youth with less previous knowledge of the American system, particularly those from immigrant families. Preparation for this required test may offset a lack of exposure about American democracy in students’ homes.¹⁹

5 WHAT PARTNERSHIPS ARE ESSENTIAL TO STATES’ CIVICS EDUCATION REFORM?

For civics education reform to be successfully implemented, there must be infrastructure—either inside or outside the state education bureaucracy—dedicated to developing high-quality educational materials and providing innovative teacher training in civics. The work of developing and implementing innovative civics education reform does not happen on the cheap. Based on examination of those states where significant change has occurred, it is clear that outside foundations, higher education programs, and advocacy groups have been vital partners in the reform work.

The early exemplar of this type of impactful partnership was in Florida, where the Lou Frey Institute at the University of Central Florida has as one of its missions “to help strengthen the civic education capacity of Florida’s K-12 education system.” In 2009, before the 2010 civics law was passed, the Frey Institute had begun to develop model civics lesson plans for teachers. Soon thereafter, as the law went into effect, the state began providing grants to the institute to coordinate the state’s professional development efforts for teachers of civics. Since then, the institute’s role in civics reform efforts in the state has only grown.²⁰

The Robert R. McCormick Foundation played a similar role in Illinois’s successful reform efforts. The public charity, now a foundation, has advocated at the Chicago Board of Education, state legislature, and Illinois State Board of Education for reforms. The McCormick Foundation’s promise of committing resources for professional development for teachers was key to the state’s establishment of a high school course requirement as well as the later middle school course requirement. Florida’s Lou Frey Institute has been a crucial partner in the

curriculum and professional development work in Illinois.

A very different model arose in **Nebraska**. There, Civic Nebraska—a statewide civic engagement group—supplements civic education coursework across that state through a series of high-quality out-of-school learning programs centered on different aspects of applying civics learning. This vibrant set of afterschool programs brings the theory of the classroom to life in communities.

In addition to these state-level supports for civics education reform, it is vital to recognize and reward innovative work in civics education across the nation. That is why NASBE, in partnership with the Frank Islam Institute for 21st Century Citizenship, recognized innovative work by four middle school civics teachers in 2019. Because of the importance of students’ engagement in gaining civics knowledge, skills, and dispositions before high school, recognizing teachers working in these earlier grades is of particular value as state boards carry out civics reform at the state level and as schools and teachers take on this work class by class.

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NOTES

1 "Data: Most States Require History, But Not Civics," *Education Week*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/data-most-states-require-history-but-not.html>.

2 "From Thomas Jefferson to Uriah Forrest, with Enclosure, 31 December 1787," Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-12-02-0490>.

3 Arkansas Constitution of 1874, Article 14, Section 1.

4 "Most States Require History, But Not Civics."

5 Holly Kurtz, "Civics Education in K-12 Schools: Results of a National Survey" (Bethesda, MD: Education Week Research Center, 2018).

6 Sarah Shapiro and Catherine Brown, "A Look at Civics Education in the United States," *American Educator* (Summer 2018).

7 For grade 8, the latest iteration of the NAEP civics assessment was in 2018; for 12th grade, it was last administered in 2010. National Assessment of Educational Progress, "Civics," webpage, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/civics/>.

8 "NAEP Report Card: Civics," web page (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2018), <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/civics/results/groups/>.

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10 Stephen Sawchuk, "How 3 States Are Digging In on Civics Education," *Education Week*, July 17, 2019.

11 U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Educational Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), various years, 1998–2014 Civics Assessments.

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