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K-12 Civics Education

The events of January 6th, 2021 shocked the nation and put the importance of civics education at the forefront of discussion across the states. A lack of civic knowledge can lead to a decreased ability to fact-check sources, which can be dangerous in the era of misinformation and polarized sources. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics exam tests civics knowledge of students throughout the country. The 2018 eighth grade national score on that exam was below proficient, with scores remaining relatively stagnant for the past two decades.¹

Civics education in childhood and adolescent schooling is vital to growing responsible civic engagement. Teaching the functions of government, citizenship rights, and aspects of civil society can result in higher voter turnout rates, a more informed subscription to news and events, and volunteering. States that prioritize civics and Advanced Placement (AP) US Government in their curricula often observe rates of youth civic engagement that are higher than the national average.²

Nationwide, voter turnout for ages 18-29 remains the lowest among all eligible age groups.³ The increase in turnout for the past few elections does not necessarily prove a new standard. Providing required civics education for grade K-12 would better prepare responsible young citizens for when they become eligible to vote.

¹The National Assessment of Educational Progress, "NAEP Report Card: Civics," NAEP Report Card: Civics, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/civics/results/scores/>.

² Stephen Sawchuck, "How 3 States Are Digging in on Civics Education," *Education Week*, July 17, 2019, accessed March 12, 2021,

<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/how-3-states-are-digging-in-on-civics-education>.

³ United States Election Project, "Voter Turnout Demographics," accessed March 12, 2021, <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/demographics>.

Civics Education in Vermont

Already this year, a bill proposed requiring civics education for grades K-12, Senate Bill 17,⁴ has been introduced and passed the Senate in Vermont. There is no federal requirement for civics education, nor is there a firm legal requirement in Vermont.⁵

In a local approach to education, counties and school boards in Vermont have some flexibility in creating their curriculum. These must be aligned with state standards. Vermont currently uses C3 standards for social studies, which includes guidelines for civics education. C3 includes six goals to be reached by the end of grade 2, grade 5, grade 8, and grade 12.⁶

Vermont has a number of measures in place to enhance civics education, but most serve as general recommendations rather than formal instructions on how to approach and implement civics education. The Education Commission of the States recommends Vermont include global citizenship, including civics, in curriculum.⁷ The Vermont Education Quality Standard 2120.5 asks schools to provide annual learning opportunities for students to demonstrate proficiency in global citizenship. Again, this broad category of global citizenship appears in such documents. It includes civics, economics, geography, and so on – but does not provide specific guidelines within the civics recommendation.⁸ The Vermont Agency of Education states the importance of engaging students in civic practices.⁹ In 2006, The Vermont Council on Civics Education¹⁰ was created by the state legislature. The council assesses civics education throughout the state and makes recommendations to improve its status, as well as other related tasks.¹¹

The proposed bill, S.17, would provide more concrete guidelines for civic education in line with the C3 standards, and would make it a requirement in all Vermont public schools. The bill includes a proposed curriculum that covers more topics than the C3 standard currently recommends. This bill would also require public high school students to pass a civics course as a

⁴ The Vermont Senate, “S17: An Act Relating to the Requirement to Pass a Civics Course for High School Graduation,” (2021), accessed March 12, 2021, <https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2022/Docs/BILLS/S-0017/S-0017%20As%20Introduced.pdf>.

⁵ Kate Barcellos, “Bill proposes mandatory civics education in Vermont schools,” *Milton Independent*, Jan. 21, 2021, accessed March 12, 2021, https://www.miltonindependent.com/colchester/news/bill-proposes-mandatory-civics-education-in-vermont-schools/article_b86b6baf-f2e7-5bce-bcbc-455d2da2d5e2.html.

⁶ National Council for the Social Studies, “C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards,” accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/c3/c3-framework-for-social-studies-rev0617.pdf>.

⁷ Education Commission of the States, “Civics Education Policies: State Profile -- Vermont,” Individual State Profile, last modified Dec. 2016, accessed March 12, 2021, <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbstcprofancg?rep=CIP16ST&st=Vermont>.

⁸ State of Vermont Agency of Education, “Series 2000 -- Education Quality Standards,” last modified Dec. 16, 2016, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://education.vermont.gov/documents/state-board-rules-series-2000>.

⁹ State of Vermont Agency of Education, “Global Citizenship,” accessed March 12, 2021, <https://education.vermont.gov/student-learning/content-areas/global-citizenship>.

¹⁰ Sec. 26. 16. V.S.A. § 15.

¹¹ Snelling Center for Government, “Vermont Commission on Civics Education,” accessed March 12, 2021, <https://snellingcenter.org/vermont-commission-civics-education/>.

graduation requirement. If signed into law, S.17 would take effect on July 1, 2021 and would apply to students graduating high school in 2023 and thereafter.¹²

Policies in Other States

In 1818 Thomas Jefferson said that an objective of education was “to instruct the mass of our citizens in these, their rights, interests and duties, as ... citizens.”¹³ In the 1973 Supreme Court case *San Antonio School District vs Rodriguez*, the Court stated that an education system shall not “fail(s) to provide each child with an opportunity to acquire the basic minimal skills necessary for the enjoyment of the rights of speech and of full participation in the political process.”¹⁴ Numerous states have recognized the importance of civic engagement and knowledge. In 2018 alone, 31 states proposed 115 bills or resolutions addressing numerous issues related to civics education.¹⁵ States with highest rates of youth civic engagement tend to prioritize civics courses and AP U.S. government in their curricula.¹⁶ When addressing state civics education, multiple routes can be taken. Trends in state civic education legislation include a civics test requirement for graduation, funding allocated to civics education initiatives, developing civics curricula, and civics course requirements.¹⁶

The desire to standardize public education has been a trend in recent years, especially in regard to civic education. This has pushed many states to move toward teacher accountability and systemized decision making. Since standards vary from state to state, Political Scientist Wayne Journell emphasizes the crucial element of a teacher’s role in civics education.¹⁷ Journell studied the different ways in which certain states advocate for different types of citizenship in education. The states’ focus on certain types of citizenship can often be framed in a partisan or ideological imbalance. The first frame of citizenship discourse in public education he calls “civic republicanism.” This frame emphasizes a “national ethos” encouraging citizen cooperation, political participation, and patriotism. Civic republicanism is often resorted to in “times of national or international turmoil” by educators. Teaching the concept of “character education” is closely related to civic republicanism. Character education advocates viewing social studies “as a way to bridge the gap between polarizing cultures and beliefs” and the way morals create good people will therefore create good citizens. Political scientists have critiqued this civic education approach due to its tendency to create “unquestioning political loyalty and social alienation of minority groups.” Others object the creation of moral values in school and believe the personal moral compass should be created in the home.¹⁷ The second frame of citizenship Journell

¹² Lola Duffort, “A civics graduation requirement? Vermont already (kind of) has one,” *VT Digger*, Feb. 2, 2021, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://vtdigger.org/2021/02/02/a-civics-graduation-requirement-vermont-already-kind-of-has-one/>.

¹³ James Carpenter, “Thomas Jefferson and the Ideology of Democratic Schooling,” *Democracy & Education* 21, no. 2 (2013): 3, <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1084&context=home>.

¹⁴ *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S (1973).

¹⁵ Ben Erwin, “The State of Civics Education,” National Conference of State Legislatures Blog, accessed March 2, 2021, <https://www.ncsl.org/blog/2019/01/16/the-state-of-civics-education.aspx>.

¹⁶ Sarah Shapiro and Catherine Brown, “A Look at Civics Education in the United States,” *American Educator*, Summer 2018, accessed March 15, 2021, https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2018/shapiro_brown.

¹⁷ Wayne Journell, “Standardizing Citizenship: The Potential Influence of State Curriculum Standards on the Civic Development of Adolescents,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 43, no. 2 (2010): 351-58.

identifies is named “liberal citizenship.” “Liberal citizenship” focuses on “political deliberation, questioning of authority, and social diversification.” This view of citizenship encourages students to create their own views of morality and patriotism. The most common use of liberal citizenship is termed “deliberative democracy” that encourages public discourse on policy and controversy. Deliberation is encouraged to be used in times of conflict rather than the previously mentioned “unquestioned political loyalty.” Critics of liberal citizenship education claim that the over exposure to many viewpoints in discussions discourage civic action and may create a more divisive political society. Journell urges teachers in all states to understand the specific type of citizenship advocated in their state education system and compensate for the possible ideological sway the standard holds. Students must be exposed to different perspectives of citizenship to become well-rounded citizens who can contribute to democracy in a positive way.¹⁷

Danielle Allen is one of the leaders for the Educating for American Democracy initiative (EAD) that provides a “Roadmap for Excellence in History and Civics Education for All Learners.”¹⁸ This project was curated by over 300 scholars, educators, and practitioners that provide states and districts guidance in how to improve civics and history education.¹⁸ Allen says that there needs to be a “national will” to create more knowledgeable students in areas of civics and history, similar to recent STEM education initiatives.¹⁹ Stefanie Wagner who is the president of the National Council for Social Studies says that the EAD initiative will meet the long-standing need for a common guide document for teaching social studies in the United States. Executive committee member of the EAD program claims “for the civic fabric of the country, the situation couldn’t be more grave than it is now.” Discussing the recent Capitol attack and widespread election fraud claims, the former Iowa teacher stated, “[p]art of the reason we’re in the mess that we are in as a country is that we are so different in terms of what happens in states across the country in terms of teaching social studies.”¹⁹

Illinois

The Illinois legislature passed House Bill 4025 (Public Act 99-0434) in 2015 which requires a semester of high school civics.²⁰ This bill went into effect on July 1st, 2016 and applied to incoming freshmen in the 2016-2017 school year.²¹

Public Act 99-0434 states it “shall help young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens

¹⁸ The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, “Educating for American Democracy: A Roadmap to Transform K-12 Civics,” CIRCLE, last modified March 2, 2021, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/educating-american-democracy-roadmap-transform-k-12-civics>.

¹⁹ Joe Heim, “Massive Investment in Social Studies and Civics Education Proposed to Address Eroding Trust in Democratic Institutions,” *The Washington Post*, March 1, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/civics-social-studies-education-plan/2021/03/01/e245e34a-747f-11eb-9537-496158cc5fd9_story.html.

²⁰ Illinois General Assembly, “Public Act 099-0434,” accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/fulltext.asp?Name=099-0434>.

²¹ Civics Education Resource Site, “Illinois Civic Education Laws and Standards,” accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.illinoiscivics.org/2019/resources/illinois-civic-education-legislation>.

throughout their lives.”²² The bill demonstrates the expectations of the semester long course to include, “focus on government institutions, the discussion of current and controversial issues, service learning, and simulations of the democratic process.”²²

Recently, Illinois passed another bill by in 2019 focused on civics education for elementary school students. The bill amends the School Code and requires every public school to include in elementary grades of 6th, 7th, or 8th at least one semester of civics education. The act took effect July 1, 2020. Illinois legislators once again claim this requirement, “shall help young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens”.²³

Idaho

In 2020 the state of Idaho amended an existing civics education law to “provide that students may satisfy state civics and government standards through participation in a certain course and examination and to provide that the State Department of Education shall make available funding for certain civics education.”²⁴

Since the 2016-2017 school year, Idaho students are required to take the U.S Citizenship Test any time after seventh grade. This test can be taken as many times as necessary for the student to pass before high school graduation.²⁵

Idaho’s educational curricula integrates civics into every social studies class from kindergarten until the 12th grade. There is only a formal civics course offered at the high school level.²⁶

Tennessee

Tennessee has enacted a bill introduced in 2019 to create “The Governor’s Civics Seal” initiative. This seal is given to public schools and education agencies that show high quality civic education programs. The seal is given to schools and agencies by the Department of Education on the state report card. To earn the Governor’s Civics Seal, the school must follow these criteria:

- (1) Incorporate civic learning across a broad range of grades and academic subjects that build on the Tennessee academic standards, such as the civics lesson plans and the blue book lesson plans provided by the secretary of state;

²² Illinois General Assembly, “Public Act 099-0434,” accessed Feb. 15, 2021, <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/fulltext.asp?Name=099-0434>.

²³ State Net, “Public Act 101-0254,” accessed Feb. 15, 2021, https://custom.statenet.com/public/resources.cgi?id=ID:bill:IL2019000H2265&ciq=nsl5&client_md=f75c92ef95bf0604c34a38cfb0cab51&mode=current_text.

²⁴ Idaho Legislature, “Senate Bill 1238,” accessed Feb. 17, 2021, <https://legislature.idaho.gov/sessioninfo/2020/legislation/s1238/>.

²⁵ Idaho State Department of Education, “Civics Assessment,” accessed Feb. 17, 2021, <https://www.sde.idaho.gov/assessment/civics/>.

²⁶ Sarah Shapiro and Catherine Brown, “A Look at Civics Education in the United States.”

- (2) In accordance with § 49-6-1028, provide instruction regarding our nation's democratic principles and practices, the significant events and individuals responsible for the creation of our foundational documents, and the formation of the governments of the United States and the state of Tennessee using the federal and state foundational documents;
- (3) Provide professional development opportunities or student resources that facilitate civics education, such as civics education workshops offered by the secretary of state;
- (4) Provide opportunities for students to engage in real-world learning activities, including the secretary of state's student mock election and civics essay contest;
- (5) Have fully implemented a high-quality, project-based assessment in accordance with § 49-6-1028(e), if applicable; and
- (6) Be recognized as a civics all-star school in accordance with § 49-6-408, if applicable.²⁷

Following the passage of the bill, the Governor provided grants to Tennessee schools. “Governor’s Civics Seal mini-grants” were awarded to 20 rural and urban schools across Tennessee in the amount of \$5,000 to \$10,000 to push for higher quality civics education.²⁸

A policy solution that has gained momentum to improve civics is a standard that requires high school students to pass the U.S. citizenship exam before graduation. Only 17 states have adopted this standard, but Tennessee has implemented something similar.²⁹

Tennessee has adopted a civics test prerequisite to receive a high school diploma. The test must include twenty-nine questions on American government, at least sixteen questions on American history, and at least seven questions on integrated civics. At least seventy percent of the questions must be answered correctly in order to pass. The bill was passed and approved in May 2019.³⁰

²⁷ State Net, “House Bill NO. 944,” accessed Feb. 15, 2021, https://custom.statenet.com/public/resources.cgi?id=ID:bill:TN2019000H944&ciq=ncsl5&client_md=f2a9ae97b737ed6e1c68cbfabf173458&mode=current_text.

²⁸ Tennessee Department of Education, “Governor Lee Launches Governor’s Civics Seal and Mini-Grants,” last modified Oct. 14, 2019, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.tn.gov/education/news/2019/10/14/governor-lee-launches-governor-s-civics-seal-and-mini-grants.html>.

²⁹ Sarah Shapiro, Catherine Brown, “A Look at Civics Education in the United States.”

³⁰ State Net, “House Bill No. 1016,” accessed Feb. 15, 2021, https://custom.statenet.com/public/resources.cgi?id=ID:bill:TN2019000H1016&ciq=ncsl5&client_md=c1c8af97afce2b6acd732efbddd2981&mode=current_text.

Recommendations from Experts

The topic of civics education has been highly discussed among political science experts. In order to grow a more informed and empowered electorate, political scientists recommend certain changes be made to current civics curriculums.

A common theme in the discussion of civics education reform is the importance of designing a curriculum that empowers political participation from a young age. There is currently a large civic empowerment gap, particularly in lower income schools, that start with a low-quality education in civics.³¹ Empowering political participation would begin with instruction on empowering civic narratives throughout history and highlighting examples that share similarities with students' lived experiences. Teachers can also begin to empower political participation in the classroom by creating active learning environments. This can be done by providing students the opportunity to engage in meaningful civic practices in the classroom, including mock trials, group collaboration, debates, school elections, and discussion of important, contemporary issues. Students should be provided the opportunity to not just learn about civics but participate in it.³²

It may sound obvious but improving civics education needs to involve teaching teachers how to better teach civics. A study done in 2013 examined four different instructional methods employed by civics teachers, and explored which methods were most effective in preparing students for responsible democratic citizenship. The researchers found that fostering an open classroom climate where students input is encouraged is the most effective way to increase political knowledge. To create an open classroom environment, teachers should encourage student participation by allowing them to freely express their personal opinions and make up their own minds when presented with new information.³³ Along with improving political knowledge, open classroom environments also improve students' appreciation of opposing views and increases their acceptance of conflict. In students of all socio-economic statuses, open classroom environments correlate with increased likelihood that students see themselves as informed voters and active citizens.³⁴

A program called YES (Youth Engaged in Service) Prep Public Schools is a public charter network in Houston that works with low-income students and includes service learning in its civics curriculum. Students in the program work to complete high impact service projects in their communities and are also required to complete an ethics course in their senior year. Including community service requirements in the civics curriculum works to get students out into their local communities and begin to teach them how to be active participants in politics. Teachers in the YES Prep program were more confident more often than traditional public or private school

³¹ Meira Levinson, "The Civic Empowerment Gap: Defining the Problem and Locating Solutions" in *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth* (2010), 331-361.

³² Meira Levinson, "The Civic Empowerment Gap: Defining the Problem and Locating Solutions" in *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth* (2010), 331-361..

³³ Allison Martens, Jason Gainous, "Civic Education and Democratic Capacity: How Do Teachers Teach and What Works?" *Social Science Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (2013): 956-76.

³⁴ David Campbell, "Voice in the Classroom: How an Open Classroom Climate Fosters Political Engagement among Adolescents," *Political Behavior* 30, no. 4 (2008): 437-54.

teachers that their students learned “to be tolerant of people and groups who are different from themselves,” “to understand concepts such as federalism, separation of powers, and checks and balances,” and “to develop habits of community service such as volunteering and raising money for causes,” according to 2010 American Enterprise Institute Program on American Citizenship survey.³⁵

An example of students learning to act as informed and activated citizens comes from the students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas, following the tragic mass shooting that occurred at their high school. After the shooting, the students began to lobby for gun reform. They utilized their constitutional rights and learned how to petition the government and work with officials. It should not take a tragedy for students to learn how to interact with their government and make their representatives respond to their concerns. Starting in the civics classroom, students should get practice seeking effective action. Political scientists recommend that students have practice identifying a problem in their school or community that is important to them, as well as education on the competencies required for civic success, so they can work towards progress or change on the local level. It is important for students to learn that everyday Americans can influence government policy through proper action.³⁶ The process of participating in government will also instill in students other important lessons of democratic citizenship, such as respect for fellow citizens of diverse backgrounds and political viewpoints.

Teachers are burdened with a difficult role of teaching about politics while trying not to offend anyone, but it is important that students gain a real idea of the divided partisan nature of government, so they do not enter the world and quickly become disillusioned by the reality of the system. In order to achieve this, some political scientists recommend “desanitizing” civics education and teaching about government in a more realistic way. A desanitized civics curriculum would need to teach students talk about differences in productive ways, and explain the idea that conflict is not always a bad thing, but an essential part of the political process.³⁷ This curriculum would teach how divided the public is on most major issues and engage students in debates and discussion of social issues. It would also teach about the more negative aspects of politics, such as the slowness of change making, in order to paint a more accurate picture of the world students will be entering. It is also important to teach students about the differences between the political parties and stress the importance of choosing a party that aligns with your values. The education on political parties should also highlight the partisan nature of politics and teach students how party-based voting allows them to express policy preference.³⁸

Finally, political scientists argue that it is important to teach students how to get accurate information on politics. This would include stressing the value of reading news accounts (as opposed to relying on television or video-based news), teaching them how to find reliable

³⁵ Robert Maranto, “In Service of Citizenship: YES Prep Public Schools and Civic Education,” 2017 <http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/-in-service-of-citizenship-civic>.

³⁶ Bob Graham, Randi Weingarten, “The Power of Active Citizenship: A Renewed Focus on Teaching Civics Education,” *American Educator* 42, no. 2 (Jul, 2018): 4-8.

³⁷ John Hibbin, Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, “Civics is Not enough: Teaching Barbarics is K-12,” *Political Science & Politics* 29, no. 1 (March, 1996): 57.

³⁸ Anthony Gierzynski, *Saving American Elections: A Diagnosis and Prescription for a Healthier Democracy*, (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2011).

sources, and how to evaluate political claims. To have an electorate that is capable of making wise decisions, citizens must know how to separate fact from opinion, and how to gather and weigh evidence.³⁹

The official release of the Educating for American Democracy Roadmap and Report previously discussed in this report was on March 2nd, 2021. The project was released after 17 months of work from over 300 contributors. The map is spread across four separated grade bands (K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12). Comparing the C3 Framework that Vermont currently holds, the EAD Roadmap is “meant to compliment, not compete with, the C3 Framework.” The Educating for American Democracy website, <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/>, provides instructions on how to navigate the roadmap along with a free download to the roadmap itself.⁴⁰

This report was completed on March 15, 2021, by Maya Berger, Marjorie Brown, and Erin Tevnan under the supervision of VLRS Director, Professor Anthony “Jack” Gierzynski.

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Disclaimer: The material contained in the report does not reflect the official policy of the University of Vermont.

³⁹ Gierzynski, *Saving American Elections*.

⁴⁰ Educating for American Democracy, “Learn to Read the Roadmap,” accessed March. 9, 2021, <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/the-roadmap/>.