



# EDUCATION TRENDS



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## The Civics Education Initiative 2015-17

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The Civics Education Initiative is a project of the Joe Foss Institute, a nonprofit dedicated to shaping “young Americans for civic engagement as voters and informed members of their community.”<sup>1</sup> The three-year initiative, which launched in September 2015 and concludes in September 2017, has three goals:

1. To ensure students graduate with the tools they need to become informed and engaged citizens.
2. To put civic education back in classrooms across the country.
3. To serve as the first step in expanding civic awareness and learning for students.<sup>2</sup>

Through the Civics Education Initiative, the Joe Foss Institute advocates for state adoption of a requirement that students must pass a civics test as a condition of high school graduation. Specifically, the Joe Foss Institute encourages states to require a civics test with questions drawn from the 100 basic federal historical and civic

facts included in the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) naturalization civics test, which immigrants must pass to become legal U.S. citizens. The initiative is premised upon the assumption that “if it is tested, it is taught.”<sup>3</sup>

**In eight states, students must receive a passing score on the civics test to receive a high school diploma.**

This final report on the Civics Education Initiative provides an update on state adoption of the initiative and looks at how states customized the initiative for their own purposes. In the final section of this report, opportunities are identified for policymakers to build on civic education policy efforts, such as the Civics Education Initiative, to further strengthen civic learning and effective participation in civic life.

Seventeen states passed the Civics Education Initiative requiring students to take a civics test with questions drawn from the USCIS naturalization civics test.

Policymakers can build on civic literacy efforts with policies that strengthen civic skills and dispositions, and lay the groundwork for young people to be active, engaged citizens.

## The Impact of Civic Education

Ample evidence documents the poor state of American civic literacy. Low levels of student proficiency on national K-12 student civics tests,<sup>4</sup> college graduate survey results<sup>5</sup> and the inability of most adults to identify basic civics facts<sup>6</sup> suggest that, taken as a whole, the nation's current civic education efforts are insufficient. Reports of declining levels of Americans' civic knowledge have spurred a resurgence of state civic education efforts, such as the Civics Education Initiative.

The Civics Education Initiative is focused on improving students' knowledge of historical documents, events and notable individuals, as well as the structures and processes of government and the U.S. legal system. Research supports the notion that high-quality civic learning opportunities in schools strengthen students' civic learning outcomes. Classroom-based civics courses can boost students' civic knowledge and encourage long-term civic participation, including voting.<sup>7</sup>

Current best practices for high-quality civic learning, however, emphasize the development of a broader set of civic learning outcomes that includes skills and dispositions in addition to civic knowledge.<sup>8</sup> To advance the long-term responsibilities of citizenship in students, policymakers may consider complementing efforts focused on civic knowledge with those that seek to build students' civic skills and dispositions through engaged, experiential learning approaches.

Beyond civic learning outcomes, civic education efforts can support schools' broader academic, economic and social goals. As students acquire an understanding of history and government, and as they engage in discussions of real-world issues and events, they gain experience in respectful dialogue and build 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies related to collaborative problem-solving, communication and teamwork. Ninety percent of teachers in a Pew Research Center survey reported that applied learning resulted in "significant student improvement in 12 key skill areas: leadership, media literacy, collaboration, flexibility, adaptability, responsibility, creativity, problem solving, critical thinking, communication, innovation and initiative."<sup>9</sup>

## CIVIC COMPETENCIES

For youth to prepare for and commit to citizenship and participation in civic life, they must have proficiency in core civic content knowledge. Knowledge alone is not enough, however. The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools identifies four categories of civic competencies, which include civic knowledge, as well as the skills and dispositions needed to critically analyze and apply civic knowledge to social problems and to act effectively on issues.<sup>10</sup> Development of these four competencies, in combination, is necessary to prepare students fully for active and engaged citizenship.

**Civic Content Knowledge** includes key periods, movements, documents, individuals, structures and principles of American constitutional democracy and legal systems. It also includes knowledge of mechanisms for public input and policy change.

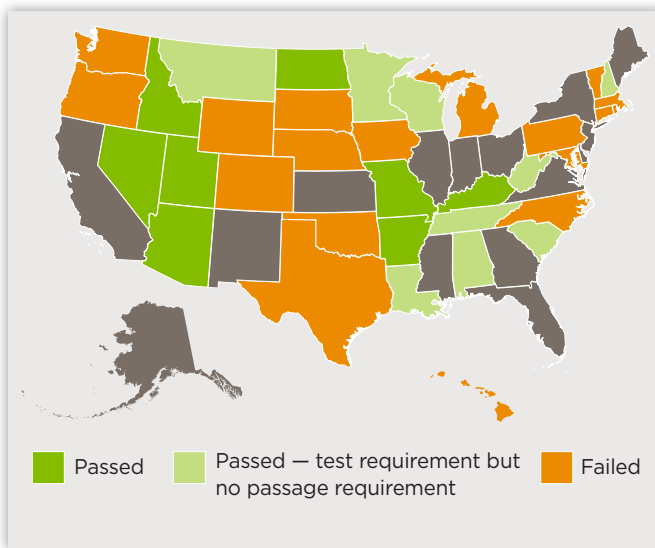
**Intellectual Civic Skills** allow students to critically describe, explain and analyze political and social issues, to express their own views and actively listen to opposing views. Intellectual civic skills are increasingly receiving attention and include media literacy and ensuring that youth can distinguish facts from falsehoods.

**Participatory Civic Skills** support the capacity for collective dialogue, planning and action, and include skills in coalition-building, public dialogue and communication, and participation in a wide range of civic activities including petitions, elections, public meetings and protests.

**Civic Dispositions** are the values and behaviors that underpin civic participation, such as tolerance, appreciation of diversity, civility and concern for the common good. A commitment to civic participation and sense of self-efficacy to effect change characterize civic dispositions.

## Civics Education Initiative 2015-2017 Legislative Recap

In 2015, **Arizona** became the first state to pass the Civics Education Initiative by requiring high school students to pass a civics test with questions drawn from the USCIS naturalization civics test to graduate.<sup>11</sup> A total of 17 states adopted the citizenship test requirement in 2015-17.



\*As of Sept. 1, 2017.

The initiative was considered and failed in **Alabama, Arkansas** and **Montana** in 2015, and **Alabama, Kentucky** and **West Virginia** in 2016, but was subsequently passed in five states in the 2017 legislative session.

## 18 FAILED TO PASS INTRODUCED CIVICS EDUCATION INITIATIVE LEGISLATION IN 2015-17

These states include:

- Colorado (2016)
- Connecticut (2017)
- Hawaii (2016)
- Iowa (2015)
- Maryland (2015, 2016)
- Massachusetts (2016)
- Michigan (2017)
- Nebraska (2016)
- North Carolina (2017)
- Oklahoma (2016)
- Oregon (2015)
- Pennsylvania (2017)
- Rhode Island (2017)
- South Dakota (2015)
- Texas (2015)
- Vermont (2016)
- Washington (2017)
- Wyoming (2015)

Defeat of the legislation primarily reflects a rejection of additional mandated high-stakes testing and concerns over the adequacy of the proposed test to ensure robust civic learning.<sup>12</sup> The USCIS naturalization civic test was not designed as a high school civic literacy exam and involves memorizing 100 civic facts, which heightened anxieties that the requirement could drive teaching to the test and set low expectations for development of students' civic competencies.<sup>13</sup>



State	Legislation	Passed	Effective	Test Requirement	Passage Standard	Graduation Requirement	Test Parameters	Accountability
Alabama	<a href="#">SB 32</a>	2017	2018-2019 school year	100 questions from the citizenship test.	60 of 100.	No.	Test administered as part of the required government course. Test may be repeated as needed for passage. Exemption for IEP and special education students over 18. Test requirement may be waived by the chief school administrator for "good cause," which specifically includes having taken and failed the civics test two times and otherwise having a passing grade in the course in government.	Noted on student transcript.
Arizona	<a href="#">H.B. 2064</a>	2015	2016-2017 school year	100 questions from the citizenship test.	60 of 100.	Yes.	Test may be repeated as needed for passage.	Noted on student transcript.
Arkansas	<a href="#">H.B. 1539</a>	2017	2018-2019 school year	100 questions from the citizenship test.	60 of 100.	Yes.	Test may be repeated as needed for passage. Exemption for IEP, corrections schools and adults seeking a GED.	
Idaho	<a href="#">S.B. 1071</a>	2015	2016-2017 school year	100 questions from the citizenship test.	70 of 100. <sup>1</sup>	Yes.	Test may be taken in whole or in part and may be repeated as needed for passage.	
Kentucky	<a href="#">S.B. 159</a>	2017	July, 2018	100 questions from the citizenship test.	60 of 100.	Yes.	Test may be repeated as needed for passage. A student who has passed a similar exam within the previous five years is exempted from the test requirement. <a href="#">Civics Test information.</a>	
Louisiana	<a href="#">S.B. 283</a>	2015	2016-2017 school year	Unit of study and test of 100 questions from the citizenship test.		No.		
Minnesota	<a href="#">H.F. 1497</a>	2016	2017-2018 school year	Learning Law and Democracy Foundation annually selects 50 questions drawn from the 100 questions on the citizenship test.	30 of 50. <sup>2</sup>	No.	Test administered as part of the social studies curriculum. Test may be taken in whole or in part, beginning in 7th grade, and may be repeated as needed for passage. May be administered in languages other than English. IEP alternative.	Noted on student transcript by school or district. Total number of students taking the test and the pass percentage included on School Performance Reports.
Missouri	<a href="#">H.B. 1646</a>	2016	2017	Questions similar to the 100 questions from the citizenship test.	Not specified.	Yes.	Test can be administered in conjunction with other civics & history tests, may be administered online. IEP exemption.	Districts may recognize students who participate in Constitution Project of the MO Supreme Court.
Montana	<a href="#">S.B. 242</a>	2017	July, 2017	100 questions from the citizenship test.	70 of 100.	No.	Test is encouraged, but not required. Test may be repeated as needed for passage. IEP waiver.	Superintendent of Public Instruction is encouraged to annually recognize high schools where all seniors pass the test as United States civics all-star schools.



State	Legislation	Passed	Effective	Test Requirement	Passage Standard	Graduation Requirement	Test Parameters	Accountability
Nevada	<a href="#">S.B. 322</a>	2017		At least 50 questions drawn from the 100 questions on the citizenship test.	Not specified.	Yes.	Exemptions for some English learners and IEP. Waivers for a maximum of 10 percent of each class may be granted by the principal to students that have completed all other requirements for graduation and show "good cause" for a waiver.	Annual report of aggregate test results provided to the board of trustees of the school district.
New Hampshire	<a href="#">S.B. 157</a>	2016	2017	Locally developed competency assessment of U.S. government and civics.	Passing grade.	No.	Test administered as part of the required high school course. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services test may be used to satisfy the requirement.	Student eligible for certificate issued by the school district.
North Dakota	<a href="#">H.B. 1087</a>	2015	2016-2017 school year	100 questions from the citizenship test.	70 of 100. <sup>1</sup>	Yes.	Test may be taken in whole or in part, beginning in 7th grade, and may be repeated as needed for passage. IEP exemption.	
South Carolina	<a href="#">S. 437</a>	2015	2016-2017 school year	100 questions from the citizenship test.	No established score.	No.	IEP exemption.	Schools report results annually to the South Carolina Oversight Committee for inclusion in the School Report Card. School districts may recognize students who receive a passing grade.
Tennessee	<a href="#">H.B. 0010</a>	2015	2016	LEA prepares the test with 25 - 50 questions drawn from the 100.	70%.	No.	Test may be taken in whole or in part and may be repeated as needed for passage. IEP exemption.	If all seniors pass the test, the school is recognized in that year as a "United States civics all-star school" on DOE website.
Utah	<a href="#">S.B. 0060</a>	2015	2016	Basics civics test including 50 of the 100 questions from the citizenship test.	35 of 50.	Yes.	IEP alternative.	
West Virginia	<a href="#">H.B. 3080</a>	2017	2018-2019 school year	100 questions from the citizenship test or "substantially similar" test.	Not specified.	No.	Additional components of the bill specify the civics course of instruction, mandates opportunity for eligible students to register to vote and establishes Celebrate Freedom Week.	Aggregate test results may be reported to the county board members and curriculum director.
Wisconsin	<a href="#">S.B. 21</a>	2015	2016-2017 school year	100 questions from the citizenship test.	60 of 100.	No. <sup>3</sup>	Test may be repeated as needed for passage. Test may be administered in the language of choice.	

<sup>1</sup> Idaho and North Dakota test passage rate is 60% in the first year of implementation (2016-2017), increasing to 70% in subsequent years.

<sup>2</sup> Bill requires passage of the test, but further clarification on bill passage rates and the graduation requirement are found in the Statute.

<sup>3</sup> Idaho and North Dakota test passage rate is 60% in the first year of implementation (2016-2017), increasing to 70% in subsequent years. [A.B. 952](#), also passed in the 2015 legislative session, repeals the graduation requirement from the Act.

### State Variations of the Civics Education Initiative

In state education policy, one size does not fit all. This principle holds true for the Civics Education Initiative. Several states customized the initiative to better address state needs.

### Modified Graduation Requirement

Alabama, **Louisiana**, **Minnesota**, Montana, **New Hampshire**, **South Carolina**, **Tennessee**, West Virginia and **Wisconsin** passed the component of the initiative requiring students to take a test with questions drawn from the USCIS naturalization civics test, but did not make graduation contingent on passage of the test.

### Alternative Test or Assessment

**Missouri** and West Virginia allow questions to be drawn directly from the USCIS naturalization civics test, or for similar questions to be included. New Hampshire calls for the passage of a locally developed government and civics competency assessment that may include a broader range of questions addressing state government structures, history and leaders.

### Additional Provisions

Several states include additional provisions in their initiative legislation.

- New Hampshire created a recognition for individual students by authorizing school districts to issue civic competency certificates to students who pass the required exam.
- Tennessee and Montana created a school recognition program that annually designates high schools in which all seniors pass the required citizenship test as United States Civics All-Star Schools.
- West Virginia addressed course requirements, high school voter registration and the creation of a Celebrate Freedom Week.
  - ➔ Prior to eighth grade, students must receive one year of instruction in West Virginia history. By 12th grade, students must take a U.S. history course, which

includes lessons in civics education, the Constitution of the United States of America and West Virginia government.

- ➔ Every eligible high school student shall be given the opportunity to register to vote.
- ➔ The week of Sept. 11 is established as Celebrate Freedom Week, during which social studies instruction will highlight the sacrifices made for freedom in the founding of the U.S., and the values on which the U.S. was founded.

## CIVICS EDUCATION INITIATIVE INSPIRED

During 2015-17, several states that did not adopt the Civics Education Initiative did pursue policies on civic education.

- Several states created entities to consider improvements to civic education, rather than immediately consider the passage of the Civics Education Initiative.
  - ➔ **Alaska** established the Alaska Legislative Task Force on Civics Education to explore civic education opportunities and make recommendations.<sup>14</sup> A key outcome of the task force is their [April 2017 Final Report](#).<sup>15</sup>
  - ➔ The **Kansas** State Board of Education authorized the creation of the Civic Advocacy Network and award for the 2017-18 school year, recognizing high schools which provide outstanding civic learning and engagement opportunities.<sup>16</sup>
  - ➔ **North Carolina** created a Joint Legislative Committee on Civics and Economics Education tasked with making recommendations to improve civic and economics literacy, and specifically to recommend whether to mandate administration of the USCIS naturalization civics test.

- **Georgia, Ohio, New Hampshire** and **Virginia** are among states that adopted more robust civics standards or curriculum that specifically includes content and concepts from the USCIS naturalization civics test. Georgia will also include U.S. history and economics in the Georgia Milestone end-of-course assessments.<sup>17</sup>
- **Michigan, South Dakota** and **Virginia** passed requirements that students successfully complete a U.S. government course that specifically includes content from the USCIS naturalization civics test. The course grade reflects proficiency in the material, but the states do not require administration or passage of the test itself.<sup>18</sup>
- **Indiana** created a U.S. history or U.S. government assessment as part of the Indiana Learning Evaluation Assessment Readiness Network. The state board is directed to develop a U.S. government course final exam including specific content. Student proficiency rates on the statewide assessment must be reported to the state board.

### Lessons Learned

Over the course of three years, the Civics Education Initiative succeeded in elevating the issue of civic education generally and in encouraging states to adopt civic education test requirements. Education Commission of the States identified several challenges and trends that states with continued interest in adding assessment requirements should be aware of:

- The testing opt-out movement has been a concern, particularly in **Utah**, which was among the first cohort of adopting states in 2015. Utah's school testing opt-out policy applies to any state or federally mandated assessment, but the state board of education clarified that if parents opt their student out of the required civics test, the student will not be eligible to receive a diploma.<sup>19</sup> While the overall opt-out rate in the state

is 3 percent, of particular concern are 20 Utah schools — eight of which are online or virtual schools — with parental test opt-out rates of more than 20 percent. Policymakers should consider the dynamics between opt-out trends and policies prior to establishing a mandated civics test.<sup>20</sup>

- Notification issues cropped up in Arizona, where a small number of charter students were not aware of the graduation requirement.<sup>21</sup> In most states, the test requirement applies to all graduating students, including those attending private, charter and virtual schools or who are homeschooled, as well as those seeking a high school equivalency exam, which presents some notification challenges. States need to create clear processes to identify those impacted by the graduation requirement and provide adequate notice of the test requirement, study materials and test administration schedules.
- Some states that were later adopters of the Civics Education Initiative created greater flexibility with the civics exam questions. Missouri and West Virginia allow questions similar to, but not drawn directly from, the USCIS naturalization civics test and **Idaho** and **New Hampshire** allow additional questions related to state history and government.

### Beyond the Civics Test

The first states began implementing the Civics Education Initiative test in the 2016-17 school year. Initial reports indicate extremely high passage rates, with no more than a handful of students failing to pass the test after repeated attempts.<sup>22</sup> For some, this indicates that the 100 questions in the USCIS naturalization civics test set too low a bar for civic proficiency. Others note that, while the test is not very rigorous, establishing a high-stakes assessment for civics still sends an important message about preparing for citizenship as a core responsibility of the American public education system.

Most agree that the USCIS naturalization civics test requirement is only one tool among many that state policymakers may use to strengthen civic education and

better prepare students for active participation in civic life. Research demonstrates that when students are provided with both traditional instruction and opportunities for engaged and applied learning experiences, they best acquire content knowledge, as well as the skills and dispositions that cultivate civic participation.<sup>23</sup> As such, policymakers looking beyond the Civics Education Initiative may look to the following areas to improve civic education policies:

- **Skills and Disposition:** In addition to content knowledge, civic education encompasses civic skills and civic dispositions. A growing number of studies show that civic and citizenship education programs positively influence student attitudes towards social trust and produce more democratically-minded young people with better problem-solving skills and a greater likelihood to voluntarily engage with their communities.<sup>24</sup> Future policies may seek to improve school climate as one method for supporting civic skills and dispositions.<sup>25</sup>
- **Content Rich Curriculum:** The Civics Education Initiative is a positive step for creating incentives for focused civic education instruction. Content rich curriculum, however, are needed to provide students with a substantive lens to complement skills and dispositions. Multi-disciplinary curricula that include civics, economics, geography and history provide students with the necessary content to engage with social and physical environments.<sup>26</sup>
- **Teacher Training and Professional Development:** The teacher workforce must be adequately equipped to provide students with instruction that is both rich in substance and that engages students in active, applied learning. Providing professional development and training in the use of proven civic learning strategies, such as service-learning and discussion of current issues, provides the necessary background for success.<sup>27</sup>

State policymakers, regardless of whether their state adopted the Civics Education Initiative test, have many

opportunities to strengthen civic education through these best practices.

### Policy Considerations

Policymakers can draw from evidence-based best practices regarding civic learning and engagement policies across the states.

## RATE YOUR STATE

Analyzing current state policies and the identification of strategic opportunities are good starting points for states hoping to improve civic education policies. The [State Civic Education Policy Gap Analysis Tool](#) is a flexible resource for use by states, school districts, higher education institutions and community groups to examine civic education policies. Education Commission of the States' [State Civic Education Policy Framework](#) provides additional guidance, and Education Commission of the States' staff can fulfill requests for customized information, meeting facilitation, presentations, testimony and counsel.

### Assessment

While the citizenship test is one option for assessing civic literacy, some states mandate more robust evaluations that assess civic skills and dispositions in addition to civic knowledge.

Alternative assessment practices include: [Florida](#) administers an [end-of-course civics assessment](#), which has academic consequences, counting as 30 percent of the student's grade in the mandated civic course.<sup>28</sup>

[Tennessee](#) uses a project-based civics assessment, developed and implemented by school districts. Student projects identify solutions to standards-based issues, reinforcing hands-on applied instructional practices.

### Accountability Systems

For assessment data to be most impactful, it must be



included in school and district accountability systems. Education Commission of the States' [50-State Comparison of state accountability systems](#) shows that, as of December 2016, only 17 states included civics or social studies.

Some states including civics into accountability systems include:

Ohio district and school report cards include social studies test passage rates.

Louisiana includes social studies assessments as one factor in calculating district and school performance scores.

#### ■ Proven Practices for Civic Learning

In addition to classroom instruction in civic knowledge, engaged, interactive and applied teaching and learning strategies have been shown to increase the effectiveness of civiceducation. These proven practices

include incorporating the discussion of current issues and events, applied service-learning, extracurricular civics activities, student participation in school governance, and participation in real and simulated democratic processes. Education Commission of the States' [Guidebook: Six Practices for Effective Civic Learning](#) offers policy and program examples of these evidence-based best practices.

State examples include:

[Nebraska](#) supports engaged learning through civics standards, which include “active participation in the improvement of a citizen’s community, state, country and world, and the values and practice of civil discourse between opposing interests.”

The [Missouri](#) State Board of Education encourages school districts to implement service-learning, which engages students in exploring and addressing real-world issues.

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