Policy Backgrounder: The State of Civics Education in the US
September 27, 2023

Insights for What’s Ahead:

Since 2004, Congress has designated September 17 as Constitution Day and Citizenship Day; all schools that receive federal funding must observe the day through programming for students. The measure was motivated by growing concern over the decline in civic knowledge and engagement in each new generation—a decline that continues today. Similarly, CED’s new Solutions Brief, The 2024 Election: Rebuilding Trust, highlights the importance of civics education: “Civic illiteracy not only diminishes trust in government and heightens polarization, but it threatens the economy as well; an informed and active citizenry makes for a strong economy and a strong workforce. Business has an important role to play as communities search for best practices in educating and engaging the younger generation in civic life.” Concrete action needs to be taken:

- At the high school level, 13 states do not have civics course requirements and only 7 states require a full year of civics or government.
- One in six US adults are unable to name a branch of government and only 1 in 20 adults could name the five rights protected by the first amendment, according to an annual Civics Knowledge Survey conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania in 2023.
- Fewer than one quarter of US eighth-graders performed at or above proficiency level on the recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam in civics. While nearly half of the students assessed reported taking a class in 8th grade mainly focused on civics, only 29 percent had teachers whose primary responsibility was teaching civics and/or US government.
- Legislative leaders have sought to boost civic education through several measures in recent years. Sixteen states passed laws to support civic education at the K–12 level in the past two years. And in 2022, Congress increased support for K–12 civics education to $23 million from $7.75 million through the end-of-year omnibus appropriations bill.

Civics Engagement, Education, and Democracy

A More Perfect Union

The current state of civics education and knowledge in the US is troubling. The health of the nation’s democracy relies upon the engagement of American citizens and trust in democratic institutions. National security also depends on an informed, knowledgeable citizenry. Limited knowledge, misinformation, and discontent fuel divisiveness and the conditions of today’s polarized political climate. A renewed focus on civics education could foster a new generation of highly engaged Americans, produce a more informed electorate, diminish extreme perceptions and opposition, and bridge the political divide.

A significant number of leaders and elected officials have championed greater investments nationwide on civics education. In March 2021, the Educating for American Democracy initiative, led by academic researchers and education leaders from across the US, released a report and roadmap to bolster civics education in America. The initiative set the ambitious goal for 60 million students to have access to high-quality civics learning opportunities, 100,000 schools to be “civic ready” with learning plans and resources to engage students, and 1 million teachers to receive the recommended professional development to
instruct students within one decade, by 2030. The roadmap was endorsed by more than 100 organizations and six former US Secretaries of Education.

There has also been an uptick in legislative efforts on both the federal and local levels to expand civics education. Several bills have been introduced in Congress in recent years to boost civics education; in the December 2022 omnibus appropriations bill, $23 million was appropriated for K-12 civics education, a significant increase from the previous $7.75 million funding level. Across states, within the last two years, 17 laws have passed to expand civics education. Some legislative efforts to prioritize civics education have faced political opposition and allegations of advancing “divisive subjects.” However, bipartisan advocacy persists, and a recent public poll sponsored by the advocacy and resource group iCivics (founded by former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor in 2009), revealed support for civics education from 80 percent of voters across political parties.

One exciting initiative expanding across the nation is the National Civics Bee. The annual competition, launched in 2022, provides a platform for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders to demonstrate civics knowledge and compete for cash prizes. Nineteen states have hosted competitions to date, with new states joining each year. The competition is a fun, engaging opportunity to spotlight civics and drive interest in the subject nationally by leveraging a beloved forum—a Bee competition.

Surveys on Civic Engagement

A variety of surveys, reports, and assessments have all documented the consequences of a diminished focus on civics education. Since 2006, the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania has conducted a Civics Knowledge Survey to assess the public’s understanding of the US Constitution. Findings throughout the years have revealed the limited understanding of government and constitutional rights among the American people. The survey has traditionally been conducted by telephone but was administered exclusively online in 2023 with protective measures to reduce opportunities for respondents to search the internet for answers. In a previous trial, online respondents demonstrated higher levels of knowledge than phone respondents; therefore, the latest survey results present a more encouraging picture of civic knowledge in the US.

Still, knowledge gaps remain evident particularly in regard to Constitutional rights and the branches of the country’s government. Fewer than half of US adults could name the three branches of government in the 2022 telephone administered survey. Although the percentage increased to 66 percent in the 2023 online survey, one in six respondents could not name any branch and only 1 in 20 adults could name all five First Amendment rights.

According to researchers, correct responses to the civics knowledge questions are closely associated with a respondent’s past participation in a high school civics class, showing the importance of increasing civics education in schools. In the 2023 survey, nearly 6 in 10 respondents reported a civics course in high school, similar to the response in previous years. A survey conducted prior to the pandemic estimated that only one in three Americans could pass the US Citizenship Test. Researchers presented questions from the US Citizenship Test in multiple choice format to a random sample of American citizens. Only 13 percent of survey respondents knew when the US Constitution was ratified, and only 28 percent knew which states were part of the nation’s 13 original states. Although 40 percent of participants identified American history as their favorite subject as a student, the majority incorrectly identified basic historical events. Findings revealed a gap in knowledge by age as well. Survey participants aged 65 and older scored the best, while only 19 percent of respondents under the age of 45 passed the exam.

Civic Health

The National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) has framed the state of civic engagement in the US as a matter of “civic health.” In a report on America’s Civic Health, NCoC notes stagnation in civics education since the 1990s, a decline in the percent of Americans who read a newspaper daily, diminished trust in news media, low confidence in all branches of government, and reduced rates of volunteerism across the country. The report also draws a correlation between the decline in civic engagement and the rise in social isolation. According to the report, the number of one-person households has increased by more than 114 percent since 1960. Americans are less social with neighbors, interact less with coworkers (a
trend also rising with the increase in remote work), and are less likely to have friends or relatives they feel are reliable.

The report identifies several indicators for civic health, including connecting to civic and religious groups; trusting other people; connecting to others through family and friends; giving and volunteering; staying informed; understanding civics and politics; participating in politics; trusting and feeling connected to major institutions; and expressing political views. Communities that lack these engagement opportunities are designated as “civic deserts” by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Education, which found that nearly 60 percent of rural youth, 30 percent of urban youth, and 32 percent of suburban youth live in areas without meaningful civic engagement opportunities.

Many experts and advocates call for the K-12 school system to place a higher priority on civics education, which some assert has been pushed aside to focus on STEM education or high-stakes subjects including reading and math. Seven states do not require civics courses in high school, and 20 lack the requirement in middle school. Only 7 of the 38 states that require a civics course in high school mandates a year-long focus and only 27 states assess civics, with most using the US Naturalization Test as a measure.

Inconsistent priorities around civics education across the country offer a partial explanation for the latest results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in civics. US eighth graders assessed in 2022 scored lower than students in 2018, the previous assessment year; however, prior to this decline, scores had been stagnant since 1998 when the first civics assessment was administered. Overall, only 22 percent of eighth-grade students scored at the level of proficient on the civics exam. Fewer than half were able to answer a question about the electoral college correctly, and only 5 percent of test takers were able to respond correctly to a world affairs question regarding war-provoking tensions between two countries.

**Conclusion**

Over the past few decades, many national, state, and community leaders have voiced concerns over the decline in civics education and engagement opportunities for youth. In more recent years, several strategies have emerged to reset and retune the course of civics, particularly at the K-12 education level. Such initiatives, whether national or local, are the lifeblood of our government “of the people, by the people, for the people.” The future of our democracy—the world’s oldest democracy—depends on it.
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