



## CIRCLE

The Center for Information & Research on  
Civic Learning & Engagement

### Civics Curriculum and Civic Skills: Recent Evidence

By Melissa K. Comber, Research Assistant<sup>1</sup>  
November 2003

In order for citizens to be capable of fully engaging in civic and political life, they must possess a minimum of civic skills. Civic skills include personal communication skills, knowledge of political systems, and the ability to critically think about civic and political life.<sup>2</sup> Numerous civic skills have been identified theoretically, but only a few have been measured empirically.

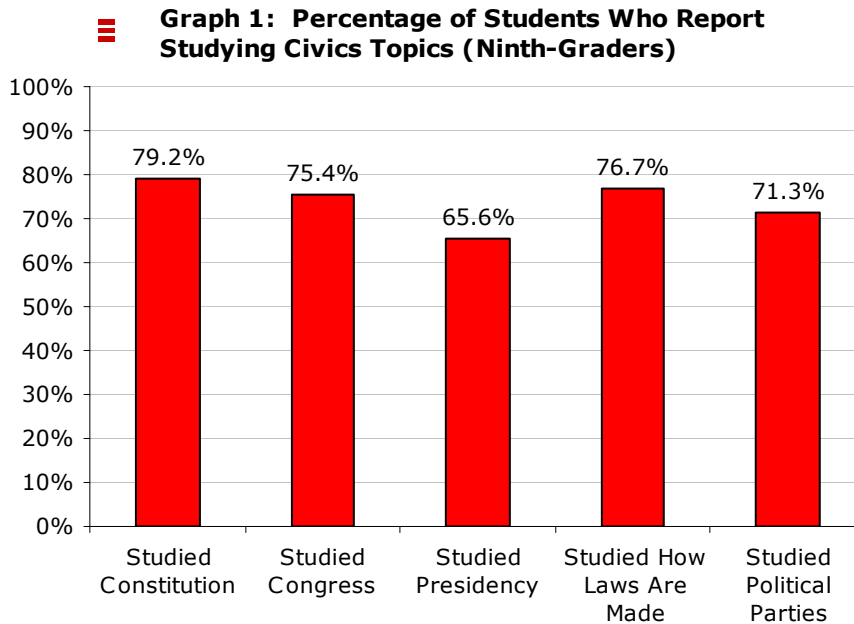
Recent debate has occurred over whether civics education classes in schools actually increase students' civic skills and civic knowledge.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Patrick emphasizes including civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions as necessary components of any citizenship education curriculum.<sup>4</sup>

Recent studies of civics curriculum have produced evidence that civics education positively affects civic knowledge, skills and engagement. Niemi and Junn's<sup>5</sup> 1998 study using the National Assessment of Educational Progress survey provided evidence of a positive relationship between civics education and increased civic and political knowledge. Civic knowledge can be similar to civic skills (the subject of this fact sheet). Also, Torney-Purta shows evidence from the IEA Civic Education Study of increased civic knowledge and engagement among students who study civics-related topics in school.<sup>6</sup> A new report from the National Conference of State Legislatures suggests that civics education results in increased civic knowledge and engagement and citizenship-oriented attitudes.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, important program evaluations have been done detailing the positive effects of specific civics curricula on political engagement and knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

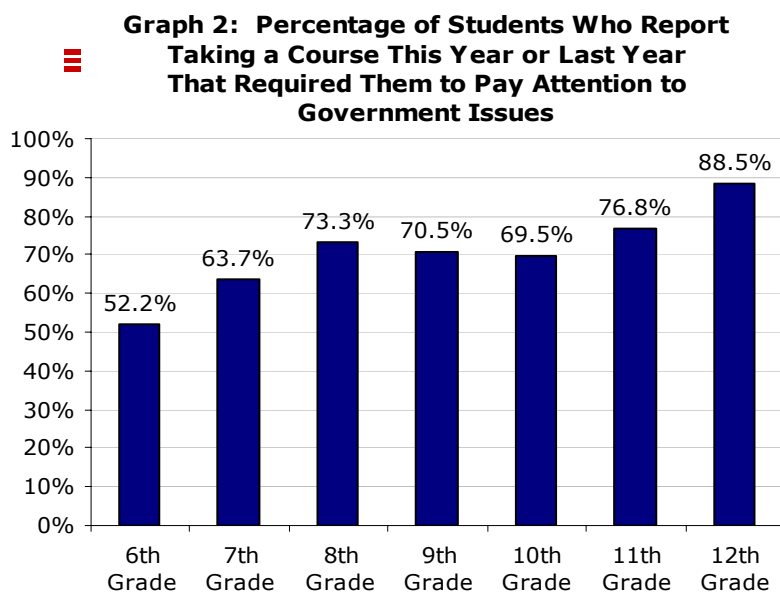
This fact sheet presents recent evidence that is relevant to this debate. In general, young people who report having taken civics or government courses in school also report that they possess more civic skills than students who have not studied civics. This relationship does not prove that classes *affect* skills. However, it is suggestive evidence, especially in connection with other studies and data sources that indicate positive effects from civics classes.

## What Students Study

This fact sheet uses data from two large recent surveys – the IEA CivEd survey and the NHES survey<sup>9</sup> – that ask students about their recent civics curriculum. A large proportion of students receive some government instruction, most in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Niemi and Junn (1998) report that 92% of students have taken at least a half-year of American government or civics course-work in high school.<sup>10</sup> Graphs 1 and 2 detail the percentage of students who report taking civics classes in the IEA CivEd and NHES surveys.



Source: IEA Civic Education Study, U.S. students, 1999



Source: National Household Education Surveys, Youth, 1999.

Also of note, according to the NHES survey, between 70% and 77% of 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> graders attended a school that had a student government or council, while between 87% and 90% of 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders attended a school that had a student government or council.

### ***Measurement Issues***

There are two problems with correctly measuring the impact of civic education curricula and programs on civic skills. First, both data sources used in this fact sheet depend largely on students' self-reporting their own skill levels and their own participation in civic education. Self-reports can be unreliable.<sup>11</sup> Second, participation in civics courses and curricula is not assigned randomly, but might be a function of school quality or student choices. For example, schools of higher academic quality may be more likely to have student governments and councils and to offer upper-level government and civics classes; their students would also obtain better civic skills. For these reasons, these surveys do not show with certainty that civics education has a causal effect in improving civic skills.

### ***The Relationship Between Classes and Skills***

Those students who reported having studied civics also reported higher levels of civic skills. For example:

- Students who have studied Congress, the Presidency, or political systems and voting reported greater confidence in their ability to understand political issues.
- Students who reported studying topics such as Congress and how laws are made answered slightly more political interpretation questions correctly than students who did not report studying these topics.
- Students who reported learning about aspects of American government, especially Congress, were more likely than other students to expect to write letters to a newspaper about social or political concerns as adults.
- Students who have had courses requiring them to pay attention to government, politics, or national issues within the past two years were slightly more confident that they could write letters to government officials about an issue that concerns them.
- Except for 11<sup>th</sup> graders, students who have had courses requiring them to pay attention to government, politics, or national issues within the past two years were slightly more confident that they could make a statement at a public meeting.
- Students who have studied Congress, the Presidency, how laws are made or voting and political parties were more likely than other students to agree that they have something to say regarding social or political issues when part of a discussion.
- Students who reported studying Congress, political parties and voting and how laws are made were more likely to participate in student councils than students who have

not studied these subjects.

- For every grade except 12<sup>th</sup> grade, students who have studied Congress, the Presidency, how laws are made or voting and political parties were more likely to have worked with student government.
- Students who reported studying the Constitution, Congress, political parties and voting and how laws are made were more likely to read newspaper articles "often" or "sometimes".
- Overall, the percentage of students stating that they read the newspaper "almost daily" or "at least once a week" was greater in the older grades. Once again, students who have studied Congress, the Presidency, how laws are made or voting and political parties read the national news more often than other students.
- Students who have studied Congress, the Presidency, how laws are made or voting and political parties watched or listened to national news more often than other students.
- Overall, the percentage of students who have participated in a debate was greater in the higher grades. Students who have studied Congress, the Presidency, how laws are made or voting and political parties were more likely to have participated in such a debate or discussion.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I sincerely thank Mark Hugo Lopez, Research Director and Peter Levine, Deputy Director for extensive assistance on previous drafts of this fact sheet. I also thank Judith Torney-Purta for guidance and suggestions on later drafts of this fact sheet. All errors in fact or interpretation are my own.

<sup>2</sup> See *Voice and Equality, Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* by Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry Brady, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995. See also "Service Learning and Democratic Citizenship" by Richard Battistoni, *Theory Into Practice*, 36 (3) pp. 150-156.

<sup>3</sup> See especially *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn* by Richard Niemi and Jane Junn, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> See "Defining, Delivering and Defending a Common Education for Citizenship in a Democracy", by John J. Patrick, May 2002, paper presented at the Summit on Civic Learning in Teacher Preparation, Boston, MA.

<sup>5</sup> See note 3 above.

<sup>6</sup> See "The School's Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in Twenty-Eight Countries", by Judith Torney-Purta, *Applied Developmental Science*, 6 (4) pp. 203-212, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> See the report "Citizenship; A Challenge for All Generations", September 2003, by Karl Kurtz, Alan Rosenthal and Cliff Zukin, National Conference of State Legislatures. The report can be found at <http://www.ncsl.org/>. CIRCLE's analysis of the NCSL survey data shows that these patterns diminish by about one-third in magnitude, but do not disappear, when one controls for the other factors measured in the poll.

<sup>8</sup> See "The Civic Mission of Schools", 2003, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement and Carnegie Corporation of New York. The report is available at <http://www.civicyouth.org/research/areas/civicmissionofschools.htm>. Also see "The Civic Bonding of School and Family: How Kids Voting Students Enliven the Domestic Sphere" by Michael McDevitt, Spiro Kioussis, Xu Wu, Maru Losch and Travis Ripley, July 2003, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement Working Paper 7. The paper is available at [http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/working\\_papers.htm](http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/working_papers.htm).

<sup>9</sup> See the *IEA Civic Education Study* (from the National Center for Education Statistics). In 1999 the U.S. team from the IEA CivEd collected data from 2,811 9<sup>th</sup> graders who were drawn from a nationally representative sample of schools in the U.S. (numbering 124). See "Citizenship and Education in Twenty-Eight Countries: Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age Fourteen," by Judith Torney-Purta et al, 2001, International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), Amsterdam and "What Democracy Means to Ninth Graders," by Stephane Baldi et al, 2001, U.S. Department of Education. Both reports and the instrument can be found at <http://www.wam.umd.edu/~iea/>. Only the U.S. data was used in this fact sheet. Also see the *National Household Education Survey of 1999: Civic Involvement; Youth Interview*, by the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. The survey was conducted by telephone of households in the United States. More information is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nhes/index.asp>.

<sup>10</sup> See note 3 above, especially Table 4.1.

<sup>11</sup> The IEA CivEd survey included measures of cognitive skills that were not self-reported. See the reports cited in Note 9 for more information.