



Civic Education

Initiatives of Secretaries of State

Education Commission of the States

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Secretaries of state make impact, lasting impression in civics

By Brady Delander and Maria Millard

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"I believe that voting is the first act of building a community as well as building a country."

— John Ensign, former U.S. senator

While United States citizens are not compelled to cast a ballot in any given election, the act of voting is often referred to as a civic duty. By actively taking part in local, regional and national elections, the voter is fulfilling one aspect of what it means to be an active, engaged citizen.

Among the responsibilities of individual secretaries of state in this country, the oversight of elections within their respective states plays a large role. These chief election officers actively work to maximize registration of eligible voters and help educate the public in regard to general voter information. Many secretaries of state attempt to go further and have started initiatives focused on civic learning and engagement – efforts that are designed to continue even after they leave office.

For example, **Mississippi's** Promote the Vote campaign includes a statewide mock election, student competitions, a complete voter education curriculum and special events designed to recognize students and their teachers. The **Ohio** Founding Fathers is an online educational resource designed to educate viewers about the leaders of the past and the founding documents they helped create. And in **Oregon**, the Civics Tool Kit is curriculum developed by local professors, teachers and elections staff. Each of these efforts is an independent initiative of a secretary of state.

Key Takeaways

- Secretaries of state, though not typically involved in education policy, can play an important role in bolstering civic education in the states.
- Many secretaries of state provide civics resources and educational tools for teachers that are available at no cost, offering easy access to use in the classroom.
- These initiatives are not connected to a secretary of state's term, and the programs are designed to promote civic learning even after a secretary's time in office ends.



Curriculum or program

Idaho

In 2007, Secretary of State Ben Ysursa unveiled a citizenship education website, [Student and Teacher Resources and Services](#), which was designed to boost voting and civic participation by offering access to educational resources. Though largely targeted toward youth and teachers, the website offers benefits for voters or potential voters of any age, including registration procedures and lessons on the requirements associated with voting.

“The citizenship website can help instill an appreciation of the importance of the right to vote and we hope will become a practical resource for busy teachers committed to the importance of civic education,” Ysursa said.

Mississippi

One of the longer-running programs in the nation – and an example of an effort that lives beyond the term of its founder – [Promote the Vote](#) was started in 1996 by then-Secretary of State Eric Clark. Aligned with the Mississippi Social Studies Framework and developed in cooperation with the Mississippi Department of Education, the curriculum consists of voter education lesson plans and activities that are appropriate and unique to each grade level.

TIME Magazine and the National Student/Parent Mock Election recognized the program as among the best student voter education programs in the United States. “We feel like if they’ll cast a ballot in their local school, and participate in the electoral process, then eventually they will vote when they are 18 and older,” said current Secretary of State Delbert Hosemann.

Ohio

Secretary of State Jon Husted launched in 2013 two related initiatives that are designed to encourage civic participation among students. [Ohio Founding Fathers](#) and the related School Your Parents contest provide resources related to such leaders as Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin as well as historical documents including the U.S. and Ohio constitutions. School Your Parents is the more active piece of the initiative – a poster and video contest focused on voter participation.

One of the primary goals of the Ohio Founding Fathers initiative was to make learning about Ohio’s history fun, particularly for young people. “This is the kind of history lesson we hope kids will be receptive to, even during their hard-earned summer breaks,” Husted said.

Oregon

First started in 2012 by Secretary of State Kate Brown, the [Civics Tool Kit](#) serves as a beginners’ guide to civics as a whole with special attention paid to civics on the state level. The toolkit provides 10 lessons on subjects ranging from the history of voting in Oregon to the information necessary before a citizen registers to vote, and it’s designed to benefit everyone, not just students and teachers.

“Democracies can only be sustained by citizens who have the basic knowledge, skills and dispositions – I think our online Civic Toolkit can help,” said Brown.

Washington

The [College Civics program](#) differs from the above initiatives in that it focuses on the postsecondary level and actively engages in registering the state's college students to vote. Since former Secretary of State Sam Reed began the program in 2005, more than 60 college campuses across the state have signed on to participate. The program recruits campus liaisons, who are responsible for the registration drives, as well as the organization of on-campus civic education events.

"We want students to know how they can make a difference through voting and being civically engaged in their communities," current Washington Secretary of State Kim Wyman said.

Other efforts

A handful of states – **Connecticut, Kentucky, Maine** and **Rhode Island** – recognize the importance of civic knowledge through efforts such as issuing leadership awards or conducting studies to gauge levels of civic "health." Those efforts include:

- [Connecticut Civic Health Index](#): Secretary of State Denise Merrill teamed with state civics organizations to produce a study designed to "quantify how connected citizens feel to each other, discuss findings, identify areas of success and challenges and propose potential new ideas to engage citizens in their communities."
- [The Kentucky Outstanding Civic Education Leadership Award](#): Through this program started by Secretary of State Alison Lundergan Grimes, any P-16 teacher, school administrator, educational leader, legislator or community organization leader is eligible to win the award for "notable contributions toward promoting or implementing civic learning to prepare students to be engaged and responsible citizens."
- [Maine's Eighth Grade Citizenship Award Program](#): An annual program that honors the state's students "for their civic awareness, scholastic achievements and community service."
- Rhode Island's [Civic Leadership Awards](#): The annual awards, first handed out in 2008, are given to high school seniors who make outstanding contributions to their schools and hometowns. Awards include public service, leadership ability and academic achievement.

On the national level

The work of secretaries of state is not restricted to the local level. The National Association of Secretaries of State established a [Voter Participation Committee](#) to identify state strategies for increasing voter participation levels, provide a forum for members to share innovative practices on voter education and outreach, and serve as a clearinghouse for information on voter participation and civics education programs. Every current secretary of state is a member of the committee.

The efforts of these secretaries of state are more examples of how civic learning and engagement can be promoted and advanced in timely fashion without associated legislation. By educating the voters and potential voters, and by providing much-needed resources to teachers and administrators, secretaries of state can expand on the work of their offices by taking action in simple yet effective ways.

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About the series

This is the fifth in a series of reports examining state initiatives related to civic education. Previous reports highlight [states addressing civics with mandated task forces](#), explore [efforts in Florida and Tennessee to hold schools and students accountable for civics knowledge](#), detail [state civic initiatives that don't require legislation](#) and outline the [civic efforts of administrative officials](#).

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