
Recent Civic Education Policy Changes

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In a recent report entitled "*All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement*," the Commission on Youth Voting & Civic Knowledge concluded that civic education is a shared responsibility of schools and other institutions.¹ Data suggests, however, that more work is required to provide all young people with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to participate fully in the civic life of their communities.

When looking for ways to improve civic education in public k-12 schools, state policymakers typically consider two main interventions: new courses or new tests. CIRCLE's analysis of data collected in 2012 suggests that, in general, the testing and course mandates in force at that time did not affect what students had studied or learned.² However, tests and courses can be designed in many ways, and three states have recently undertaken novel approaches that have promise:

1. *High Stakes Standardized Testing*

Florida requires every student to pass a middle school course that is assessed with a state-designed standardized civics exam and requires that the test scores factor into the course grade.³

2. *An "Action Civics" Course Mandate without Assessment*

Hawaii requires a high school course called "Participation in Democracy." Students must understand the US government and other civics topics and "demonstrate the role of a citizen in civic action by selecting a problem, gathering information, proposing a solution, creating an action plan, and showing evidence of implementation." Within the broad mandate of the standards, teachers are able to choose pedagogical approaches, curricula, materials, assignments, and assessments.⁴ This course was required in 2006, and a proposed revision in 2011 would have made it optional. That proposal was defeated.

3. An Alternative Assessment

Tennessee has opted to require every student to conduct a civics project for the purpose of assessing the students' skills. The law "requires each local educational agency (LEA) to implement a project-based assessment in civics at least once in grades 4-8 and at least once in grades 9-12."⁵

In this study, we do not investigate the ultimate outcomes of these three states' reforms. It is too early to know their effects on students, and states do not collect consistent civics data that would allow us to make accurate comparisons. Instead, we look at the rationales and perceived advantages and drawbacks of each strategy, with special attention to the challenges that confront the agencies and districts charged with implementing them. The goal is to inform other states' policymakers and advocates as they consider alternative strategies for strengthening civics.

In a companion document, also supported by the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, we describe how and why the legislation passed in each state, based on the perspectives and experiences of individuals involved in passing and implementing these initiatives. As an introduction, this fact sheet provides an overview of each policy with basic information about it.

1. FLORIDA'S HIGH-STAKES TEST

In July of 2010, the "Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act" took effect. The Act took more than ten years to pass and had bipartisan support. As its name suggests, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor championed the bill, which also received valuable support from former U.S. Representative Lou Frey (R-FL) and former Florida Governor and U.S. Senator Bob Graham (D). The goal of the policy was to encourage civic education at all grade levels by incorporating civic content into the K-12 language arts curriculum and administering a statewide end-of-course assessment in middle school. The bill was driven by the theory that if people know how government works, they are more likely to participate.

What were the existing civic education policies prior to this policy passing?

Florida high school students had been required to take three credits in social studies as follows: one credit in United States history; one credit in world history; one-half credit in economics, which included financial literacy; and one-half credit in United States government. Florida middle school students were required to successfully complete three middle school or higher courses in social studies, one semester of which had to include the study of state and federal government and civics education, in order to be promoted to high school.⁶

What does the policy call for?

The Act was designed to improve civic education at all grade levels by:

- 1) Requiring that the reading portion of the language arts curriculum include civics education content for all grade levels.
- 2) Mandating that middle school students successfully complete a civics education course in order to be promoted to high school. In 2013, the FL Senate passed a bill dropping the "must pass" mandate.⁷

- 3) Requiring the administration of an end-of-course assessment in civics at the middle school level. Requiring that each student's performance on this statewide, standardized assessment constitute 30 percent of the student's final course grade (beginning in 2013).⁸
- 4) Specifying certain content that must be covered in the mandatory course.

Is money appropriated?

There is no specific funding outlined in the Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act.⁹ However, through a separate appropriations bill, the 2010 Florida Legislature provided initial funding to the Lou Frey Institute at the University of Central Florida, in partnership with the Florida Joint Center for Citizenship, for professional development that would help teachers implement the Act.¹⁰¹¹

Are accountability processes outlined in the policy?

The original bill required that students earn a passing score on the Civics End of Course (EOC) Assessment in order to successfully complete the civics education course and be promoted from the middle school grades.¹² However, in 2013 the FL legislature changed the accountability requirement so that the middle school Civics EOC Assessment would account for 30% of the student's final grade.¹³

What advantages of this approach were identified by proponents?

1. Statewide testing provides an incentive for schools to place more time and resources on the teaching of civics. Civics has been a required part of the FL statewide curricula since at least 2006, it did not receive as much time and attention as other subjects such as math and reading.¹⁴
2. By requiring that K-12 language arts classes include civics content, students will increase their civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions.¹⁵
3. Increasing civic learning in Florida would consequently strengthen civic health in Florida.¹⁶

What drawbacks were identified by opponents?

1. Testing civics as part of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) would be too costly. (The final version of the bill mandated including civics in the end-of-year testing.)¹⁷
2. Results from the civics end-of-course assessment would count for too much of a student's grade. The original proposal called for students' scores to pass the Civics EOC Assessment in order to be promoted to the next grade level.¹⁸
3. Standardized testing places additional demands on teachers and would take time away from other learning opportunities.

Who promoted the reform?

Major players who pushed for legislation in Florida include: former U.S. Senator Bob Graham, former U.S. Congressman Lou Frey, Dr. Doug Dobson and the Lou Frey Institute, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, and State Representative Charles McBurney. This collaboration between

elected officials, policy groups, and educators was a major influence that helped the legislation pass.

2. HAWAII'S ACTION-ORIENTED COURSE

Since 2006, Hawaii has required a high school-level course called "Participation in Democracy." State standards describe the objectives and content of the course.¹⁹ Of particular interest, the standards include a "civic action component." Students are expected to "demonstrate the role of a citizen in civic action by selecting a problem, gathering information, proposing a solution, creating an action plan, and showing evidence of implementation." This objective is broadly consistent with Dimension Four of the National Council for the Social Studies new framework for state social studies standards, "Taking Informed Action."²⁰ It also exemplifies a general approach to civic education called "Action Civics."²¹

In 2011, Hawaii's Board of Education proposed a revision to graduation policy 4540 that would reduce the number of required social studies credits from four to three – which would make the "Participation in a Democracy" course no longer mandatory.²² Preserve Our Social Studies Education (Aloha POSSE), a coalition of individual and organizational supporters, was at the forefront of the fight against the revision of the policy, which had been in place since 2006.²³

What were the existing civic education policies prior to this policy passing?

Participation in Democracy (PID) has been a required course for Hawaii students since 2006.²⁴ Completion of four social studies credits in high school, including Participation in Democracy and Modern History of Hawaii, is required for graduation.²⁵

What does the policy call for?

Hawaii's Board Policy 4540, which took effect in the 2011-2012 school year, outlines graduation requirements for eighth graders. The Board of Education policy proposal sought to reduce social studies credits from 4.0 to 3.0. Ultimately, the Board of Education voted against the revision of the policy, upholding the 4.0 credit requirement and maintaining Participation in Democracy as a required course.²⁶ The class includes analysis of the foundations of U.S. democracy, as well as a component that has students execute a plan for civic action.²⁷

Is money appropriated?

No state funding is assigned for the Participation in Democracy course.

Are accountability processes outlined in the policy?

Teachers assess their own students' work. The policy specifies that "students who demonstrate proficiency in the State Standards ... in the required courses or proficiency based equivalents shall receive a Hawaii High School Diploma. Proficiency shall be determined in accordance with established Department of Education procedures."²⁸ The proficiency standards are aligned with career and college readiness standards outlined by the Hawaii Department of Education.²⁹

What advantages of this approach were identified by proponents?

1. Provides students with the opportunity to learn “the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary to contribute positively and compete in a global society, and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” through civic action.³⁰
2. Helps develop young people’s voice and promotes youth action that benefits local communities.
3. Promotes and activates the civic purpose of public schools.

What drawbacks were identified by opponents?

1. More required courses means students have less opportunity to choose electives.³¹
2. The emphasis on social studies in state graduation requirements does not align with national policies, such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, that focus on math and reading.

Another potential concern could be the lack of a valid and reliable measure of what students learn, but we did not hear that criticism in our Hawaii interviews.

Who promoted the reform?

Major players who supported the original policy and pushed back against the revision that would have weakened it included a local advocacy group (Aloha POSSE - Preserve our Social Studies Education) made up of social studies teachers, parents, students, university faculty & staff, and community organizations and associations. This advocacy and collaboration, along with strategic support from Senator Les Ihara, Jr., helped preserve the Participation in a Democracy requirement.

3. TENNESSEE’S PROJECT-BASED ASSESSMENT

In 2012, the Tennessee Senate unanimously passed SB2066/HB 2114, which requires project-based civic assessments at the middle and high school levels. The bill defines “project-based” as “an approach that engages students in learning essential knowledge and skills through a student-influenced inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions, and carefully designed products and tasks.”³² The policy also mandates that the school districts engage outside entities, such as the Tennessee Center for Civic Learning and Engagement, to assist with professional development on the use of these project-based assessments.³³

What were the existing civic education policies prior to this policy passing?

Tennessee high school students are required to take three credits of social studies, including United States history (1 credit), economics (0.5 credit), civics (0.5 credit), and world history or geography (1 credit). Students in Tennessee are also required to take a social studies assessment, which incorporates civics topics such as the role of government, the constitution, and the rights & responsibilities of citizens. The assessment impacts students’ final grade, but only course completion is needed for graduation.³⁴

What does the policy call for?

SB2066/HB2114 “requires students to complete at least one classroom-based assessment in civics in grades four through eight and at least one in grades nine through twelve.”³⁵ Though the text of the policy stipulates the requirement would begin in the 2012-2013 school year, the full implementation is now slated to take place in the 2014-2015 school year. Each local education agency (LEA) is responsible for creating the project-based assessment, which will measure the civics learning objectives contained in the social studies curriculum, including topics related to public policy, the structure of federal, state, and local governments, and the Tennessee and United States Constitutions.

Is money appropriated?

Text of the policy stipulates: “the DOE will utilize the services of an outside entity to help with the teacher professional development, implementation and design. A contract will be developed between the state and an outside entity. The maximum liability of this contract cannot be reasonably determined, but is estimated to increase state expenditures in an amount that will exceed \$100,000 beginning in FY12-13. The contract will begin in the fiscal year (FY12-13) before implementation of the assessment so that preparations can be made for implementation.

The increase in local expenditures is unknown; however, it is assumed that a project-based assessment will be incorporated into current lesson plans in social studies and that results will be reported to the DOE without a significant increase in local expenditures.”³⁶

Are accountability processes outlined in the policy?

The text of the policy specifies that LEAs must “submit verification of implementation” to the Department of Education (DOE).³⁷

What advantages of this approach were identified by proponents?

1. “Project-based assessment moves away from testing memorization of facts and puts the focus on academic skills needed for engaging in social issues and governance.”³⁸
2. If tested, civics will be taught. “Assessment will encourage local schools to implement the curriculum and course of study that is necessary.”³⁹
3. Civic learning in schools will lead to future engagement by students.

What drawbacks were identified by opponents?

1. The project-based assessment will not be consistent across the state, because it will be developed separately by each school district/local education agency (LEA).⁴⁰
2. Development of the assessment was delayed so that it could reflect the National Council for the Social Studies, new College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework, which was released in 2013.

In other contexts, project-based assessments have been criticized for not being reliable measures of students' skills, but we did not hear that concern in our Tennessee interviews.

Who promoted the reform?

Major players who pushed for the legislation included: Brenda Ables, a Department of Education social studies staff member; Janis Kyser, lead organizer from the Center for Civic Education; State Representatives Mark Norris and Kevin Brooks; as well as Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who provided strategic support. These individuals and others engaged in multi-sector, long-term awareness-building that culminated in the successful policy change to implement a project-based civics assessment.

Conclusion

Mandatory tests and courses are two obvious choices for any state government or school district interested in strengthening civics education. Based on national data, the variation in the existing state tests and courses does not seem to affect what students know or learn, meaning that the state mandates in place around the year 2010 were not effective. However, courses and tests can be designed in many ways, and some of the recent innovations are ambitious and promising. Each has drawbacks as well as advantages, but all are worthy of consideration.

¹ Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement (Oct 2013). <<http://www.civicyouth.org/about-circle/commission-on-youth-voting-civic-knowledge/>>

² Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Peter Levine, "Policy Effects on Informed Political Engagement," American Behavioral Scientist (Published Online Before Print, 2013); Peter Levine, and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, "State Policies for Civic Education," in Mitchell McKinney and Ester Thorsen (eds.), Political Socialization in a Media Saturated WorldEd. Mitchell McKinney and Ester Thorsen. In press.

³ Florida House of Representatives. Civics Education. 2009-2010 reg. sess. CS/HB 105. Tallahassee: 2010.

⁴Hawaii Board of Education. High School Graduation Requirements and Commencement Policy. BOE Policy 4540. Honolulu: 2011.

⁵ Tennessee General Assembly. As enacted, requires LEAs to implement a project-based assessment in civics at least once in grades 4-8 and at least once in grades 9-12. 2011-2012 reg. sess. SB 2066/HB 2114. Nashville: 2012.

⁶FL Statute 1003.428; FL Statute 1003.4156.

⁷ Florida Senate. Career and Professional Education. 2012-2013 reg. sess. CS/CS/SB 1076. Tallahassee: 2013.

⁸FL Statute 1008.22 (3); http://www.fldoe.org/GR/Bill_Summary/2010/HB105.pdf

⁹ Florida House of Representatives. Civics Education. 2009-2010 reg. sess. CS/HB 105. Tallahassee: 2010.

¹⁰ Harvard Law Blog, "Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act: Summary Related Statutes, Questions and Answers." n.d..

¹¹ Aaron Deslatte,. "Budget Deal Dets \$308 Million in Tax Cuts." Orlandosentinel.com. 4 May 2011..

¹² Florida House of Representatives. Middle School Civics Education Assessment. 2009-2010 reg. sess. CS/SB 1096. Tallahassee: 2010.

¹³ FL Statute 1008.22 (3)

¹⁴, Leslie Postal, "More Civics Education Eeeded, Advocates Say." Orlandosentinel.com, 15 March 2010..

¹⁵ Doug Dobson, Personal Interview, 20 November 2013.

¹⁶ Postal.

¹⁷ Dobson.

¹⁸ Postal.

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- ²¹ Jessica Gingold, Building an Evidence-Based Practice of Action Civics: The Current State of Assessment and Recommendations for the Future (CIRCLE, Aug 2013). <http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/WP_78_Gingold.pdf>
- ²² "State requirements for high school graduation, in Carnegie Units: 2001." <http://nces.ed.gov/> National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.
- ²³ Gail A. Tamaribuchi, Amy A. Perruso, and Melissa W.L. Seu Beavers, Position Paper Regarding Board Policy 4540: Proposal to Reduce The Number of Social Studies Credits Required For High School Graduation From 4 Credits To 3, July 2011.. <http://files.disappearednews.com/docs/20110721_Aloha_POSSE_Position_Paper_Re_Board_Policy_4540.pdf>
- ²⁴ Advertiser Staff. "What High School Student Should Know in Social Studies,." Honoluluadvertiser.com. Feb 18, 2014.
- ²⁵ CIRCLE , "State Civic Education Policies" (2012) Microsoft Excel file. <<http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/CIRCLE-Bechtel-State-Civic-Education-Final-Oct-19-Update.xlsx>>
- ²⁶ Hawaii Board of Education. High School Graduation Requirements and Commencement Policy. BOE Policy 4540. Honolulu: 2011.
- ²⁷ Advertiser Staff.
- ²⁸ Hawaii Board of Education. High School Graduation Requirements and Commencement Policy. BOE Policy 4540. Honolulu: 2011.
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- ³⁰ Mara Miller, "No Real Reason to Let Social Studies and Civics Fall Down," Hawaiiindependent.net, Aug 8 2011.
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- ³³ Tennessee General Assembly. As enacted, requires LEAs to implement a project-based assessment in civics at least once in grades 4-8 and at least once in grades 9-12. 2011-2012 reg. sess. SB 2066/HB 2114. Nashville: 2012..
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⁴⁰ Janis Kyser, "Tennessee Center for Civic Learning and Engagement, Bringing Civic Learning to Life in Tennessee Classrooms." <<http://www.mccormickfoundation.org/document.doc?id=116>>