

National Citizenship Curriculum

By Chester E. Finn Jr.

June 2020

Key Points

- Conservatives should support a national citizenship curriculum to ensure that all students are taught basic civics, such as how the government works and who we are as a nation.
- The curriculum should be comprised of the vital concepts all students must learn to be ready for active, engaged citizenship; the 100-question US civics naturalization test is a good start.
- The federal government should not impose this curriculum on anyone, but it could incentivize its adoption with funds for states, districts, and individual schools that adopt the curriculum.

It's time for conservatives to suppress their allergic reaction to "national curriculum" long enough to encourage developing and deploying a national "citizenship" course.

You can exhale. I'm nowhere close to suggesting that the federal government should impose such a course on anyone, though I'd be fine with federal incentive dollars for states, districts, and individual (charter and private) schools that will adopt it. Nor am I saying that government employees should develop the course—and that's in part because they've already supplied the basic framework for it: the excellent 100-question civics (and history) test¹ that's part of the naturalization process for newcomers to the United States.

As you surely know, would-be citizens must complete a multistep process² that includes answering—in person and orally; they're not multiple choice—10 questions selected from 100.

Please eyeball the questions yourself. While a handful strike me as only marginally important, in the main I'd say that if you know and can explain the answers to these 100 questions—which range across civics, American government, US history, a bit

of geography, and even major holidays and symbols—you're ready to become a citizen (provided, of course, that you also meet the other requirements).

Yet we know from the revealing 2018 Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation survey that fewer than one in three³ adult Americans could pass such a test. And the National Assessment of Educational Progress has recently reminded us that eighth graders' knowledge of civics (and US history and geography) remains dismal.⁴

Plans, task forces, road maps, and studies abound today for addressing the civics-ignorance problem that surrounds us, but so far nothing has worked.

The (conservative) Joe Foss Institute took a constructive step when its Civics Education Initiative urged states to require students to take and pass the citizenship test to graduate from high school. The institute describes this as "a first step to ensure all students are taught basic civics about how our government works, and who we are as a nation." It declares—correctly, in my view—that these are "concepts every student must learn to be ready for active, engaged citizenship."⁵

According to the institute, that ambitious venture has gained some good traction, with more than 30 states adopting some sort of civics proficiency requirement. However, it's not clear which, if any, of those states are actually using the 100-question US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) civics and history test, much less how they're evaluating student responses.

Regardless, while the initiative is indeed a worthy first step, adopting a civics proficiency requirement is not the same as preparing young people with the knowledge they need to pass it. What's needed—and to my knowledge not yet available anywhere—is a full-fledged curriculum by which schools and teachers can impart that knowledge in an orderly, systematic way. Federal officials already provide practice tests and some useful prep materials⁶ for wannabe citizens, all of which could easily feed into a proper curriculum for school use.

So, why not create one and make it available to everyone? We could make it free, via open sourcing, both in hard copy and online, which is clearly needed more than ever during the virus crisis when schools aren't even meeting. It should incorporate readings (original source materials), scope and sequence, lesson plans for teachers, sources for deeper learning, team projects, interim assessments, and more.

Why not, for that matter, create two or three such curricula, so there's one for middle schools, a more in-depth version for high schools, and maybe a simpler one for fourth or fifth grade. After all, everyone needs to learn this material in more than one way and more than once.

The elements of such a curriculum are all around us. At the advanced level, the College Board's Advanced Placement frameworks for US government and politics and US history are first-rate. Wonderful materials already exist, mostly for free, not just from USCIS but also from such worthy nonprofits as the Bill of Rights Institute, the Core Knowledge Foundation, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, iCivics, and the National Constitution Center.

An inevitable criticism of this idea will be that the citizenship test focuses primarily on knowledge and doesn't do much for the "skills," "dispositions," and "deeper learning" that many in civics education and social studies regard (with good reason) as

equally important. Knowledge alone sometimes is derided as "simple memorization." So, maybe the national curriculum I'm suggesting should state upfront that it's about essential knowledge—and encourage others to augment it with the rest of what they believe is important for kids to learn in this realm.

Another likely criticism will be that the citizenship test emphasizes what might be termed America's "main story" and doesn't sufficiently highlight the "diversity" and "injustice" issues that are also part of the country's saga, which some contemporary educators (and politicians) prefer to dwell on. Again, the national curriculum should be candid about this: It will impart a raft of necessary information for American citizens but doesn't purport to encompass the whole story. It's more like the "vital core," the knowledge we should all possess no matter who we are, where we come from, or how different we are.

Whoever assembles the curriculum will have to navigate those shoals and more. So who should be entrusted with this delicate but profoundly important project? A team, obviously, one that will need practicing K-12 educators who know how a usable school curriculum looks and how to present it well. It will need experts to ensure that errors don't creep in and techies to ensure that it works online. It will need clever diggers to ferret out the materials and wise folks—with differing political views—to keep it balanced and lend it legitimacy. That creating such a curriculum should be a conservative priority doesn't mean progressives should shun the product. (They will undoubtedly want to augment it a bit more.)

Optimally, private philanthropy should pay for its creation, perhaps another combination of the Charles Koch Foundation and Hewlett Foundation—it's happened before—and maybe also the civic-minded Walton Family Foundation and Carnegie Corporation. Instead of anointing one group to construct it, maybe they should invite proposals, perhaps even make a dozen seed grants, and ultimately pick a winner, conceivably more than one. If one curriculum tied to the citizenship test is good, several would be better. All are national in that they're open to the entire country, and the "end of course" exam already exists. It's up to states and localities whether to require its use. But I predict that plenty will.

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Notes

1. US Citizenship and Immigration Services, "Civics (History and Government) Questions for the Naturalization Test," January 2019, <https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/USCIS/Office%20of%20Citizenship/Citizenship%20Resource%20Center%20Site/Publications/100q.pdf>.
2. US Citizenship and Immigration Services, "Learn About Naturalization," <https://www.uscis.gov/citizenship/learners/learn-about-naturalization>.
3. Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, "National Survey Finds Just 1 in 3 Americans Would Pass Citizenship Test," October 3, 2018, <https://woodrow.org/news/national-survey-finds-just-1-in-3-americans-would-pass-citizenship-test/>.
4. Nation's Report Card, "See How Eighth-Grade Students Performed in Civics," <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/civics/2018/>.
5. Civics Education Initiative, "Civics Education Initiative, 100 Facts Every High School Student Should Know," <http://civicseducationinitiative.org/>.
6. CitizenPath, "How to Prepare for the U.S. Citizenship Test and Interview," <https://citizenpath.com/us-citizenship-test-interview-preparation/#civics>.

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