

# Testimony to the House Education Committee Hearing on SB1513

February 12, 2018

by Marilyn Cover  
Executive Director, Classroom Law Project

*The Civics Component of the U.S. Naturalization Test does “not reliably measure civics knowledge.” –  
Paula Winke, Michigan State University*

**Classroom Law Project urges a NO vote on SB1513.**

## **I. Who We Are**

Classroom Law Project is non-profit organization of individuals, educators, lawyers and civic leaders building strong communities by teaching students to become active citizens. We are a clearing house for Civic Education throughout the state of Oregon, and we run events throughout the year including the Oregon Civics Conference, the We the People Constitutional Competition, and High School Mock Trial.

## **II. SB1513 Adds an Unreliable Test as a Graduation Requirement**

This bill requires students to achieve a minimum of 60% correct answers on the U.S. Citizenship Immigration Services Test in order to receive an Oregon high school diploma.

In a 2011 study<sup>1</sup> of the U.S. Naturalization Test, researchers found that 70% of the questions were missed as frequently by citizens as noncitizens. This raised the question of whether or not the “fundamentals of the history and the principles of the government of the U.S.” -- the underlying construct that the test should measure -- are addressed by the test questions. The majority of the test items do not function differently for citizens or noncitizens, undermining the validity of the test and its purpose. In short, the questions do not tap into real civic knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Paula Winke (2011): Investigating the Reliability of the Civics Component of the U.S. Naturalization Test, *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 8:4, 318-341

Of the 100 questions that may be asked in a U.S. Citizenship test, none assess the test-taker's ability to logically think through a democratic problem, consider issues from multiple perspectives, or even understand how constitutional issues affect every day Americans. Instead, all that is needed to pass this test is rote memorization of random American history topics and mechanical workings of constitutional ideas.

A high-stakes test, such as the one SB1513 proposes, should be provably **reliable**, and this test is not. Reliability for a test means that, as the Michigan State researchers note, the test's "scores are consistent and as free from measurement error as possible." Such a high-stakes test must also be **valid**. That is, the decision made based on the score (*i.e.*, whether an Oregon high school student can graduate) is *meaningful, appropriate, and useful*.

Indeed, students need civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be informed and active members of their community and our democracy. Democratic participants need to know how government works, how government actors and groups interact with each other, and how to participate at the local, regional and national level. They should be able to discuss, debate, consider multiple perspectives, resolve conflict, compromise, and communicate about controversial public issues through voting and other engagement activities.

People with a meaningful civic education understand the value of considering the common good over their own self interests. They understand the issues of fair treatment and the need for change. They realize citizens are the check on government, but to do this they need knowledge, skills and a disposition to speak up.

Instead, this test asks merely, for example, how many Amendments are in the Constitution, what Susan B. Anthony was known for, to name two rights in the Declaration of Independence, or to name one of the two longest rivers in the U.S. These questions do not help students understand the responsibility of government or participation in 2018, and come nowhere near to teaching students how to decide what to do with the serious issues of our time and how to hold government accountable.

This test measures no true civic qualities or skills. It cannot reliably determine whether a person is ready or able to civically participate in a democracy, nor can it guarantee that a person who passes it will do so.

### **III. This Test will Lower Civics Standards in Oregon**

Oregon already has a solid set of Civics Standards that Social Studies teachers around the state both comply with and expand upon for their students. The U.S. Citizenship test not only does not meet the standards already in place but, if it were enacted as a graduation requirement, would significantly **lower** the standards.

Oregon Civics Standards currently require students to:

- Examine the relationship between government and citizens to distinguish and evaluate the ways that civic participation occurs in local, state, tribal, national, and global communities.
- Engage in informed and respectful deliberation of local, state, tribal, national, and global issues.
- Analyze the structure and functions of political parties, interest groups, and the mass media and their effect on the political beliefs and behaviors of citizens.
- Evaluate the contributions of early governments to the development of modern United States government.
- Evaluate the various functions and processes of governments and their impact on societies and citizens, comparing and contrasting various government designs to evaluate how they serve their citizens.
- Identify defining documents and speeches of United States government and the specific purpose and significance of each.
- Examine the pluralistic realities of society (e.g., race, poverty, gender, and age), recognizing issues of equity, and evaluating need for change.

Not one question in the U.S. Citizenship test meets any of these standards. In addition, the Social Studies standards developed for Oregon students declare that “Social Studies Teaching and Learning are Powerful” when they are:

- Meaningful;
- Integrative;
- Value-Based;
- Challenging; and
- Active.

Producing knowledgeable participants in democracy is more complicated than answering 60 questions correctly on a test that meets none of our current state standards.

If enacted, the end product of SB1513, like any high-stakes test, is that classrooms will begin bending towards teaching to the test instead of teaching the important skills of deliberation, civil dialogue on current controversial political issues, and civic participation.

Preparing students for this test will take time away from dynamic civic instruction. Soon the only Social Studies standard will be trying to help students pass this pedagogically unreliable and invalid test so they can graduate.

#### **IV. Valid Assessment Matters**

Educators already understand that measuring learning is a difficult task. Legislatures around the country have been trying hold schools accountable for learning assessment for decades. Research and best practice now shows us that what matters in measuring a contemporary education is the

ability to meet desired outcomes in knowledge, skills, understanding along with what is known as “long-term transfer.” According to education expert and researcher Jay McTighe, a long-term transfer goal is what “we want students to be able to do with their learning in the long term.”

Setting the U.S. Citizenship test as a graduation requirement for Oregon high school students means that we would be removing the opportunity for valid and meaningful assessment of civic learning. Just being able to teach what is easily tested or graded does not equal a quality education. That is why we work hard in in this state to set meaningful standards for our teachers and students. It is why there is ongoing debate about the meaningfulness, validity of measurement, and requirement of high-stakes tests. Those conversations should continue.

Instituting SB1513 would not only eliminate those conversations for civics education, it would reduce our students to working only to pass an assessment that will not measure their knowledge, skills, understanding, and most definitely not their long-term transfer ability.

## **V. Promoting this Test as a Graduation Requirement Excludes thousands of Oregon Students**

By the mere action of requiring Oregon students to pass the U.S. Citizenship test in order to graduate from high school, we will create a hostile learning environment for thousands of Oregon young people. Many of our students who would be required to take such a test are not citizens of the U.S. and even the name of the test excludes them and implies a lack of right to learn in our schools. Indeed, even passing this test will not earn them actual citizenship, and so it is a requirement with a bitter result even if they perform excellently. As educators in Oregon, we strive to create as inclusive a learning environment as possible, making education and opportunity as accessible as attainable for all of the young people in our state. Requiring this specific test as a threshold for high school graduation will make our education system on its face discriminatory and exclusionary: not a reputation Oregon wants for itself.

## **VI. Conclusion**

A high school diploma is too important a milestone to add a requirement of memorizing the answers to a worthless test.

We know from research and practice that “what is tested is taught.” Schools around the state have had to devote more resources and attention to the subject areas that contain high-stakes tests for students and other areas of a well-rounded education for Oregon students have been left behind. We don’t want to see this happen to civics education in our state. Making this test a requirement for graduation will create a hostile learning environment for our students and effectively remove any chance for a quality high school civics education in Oregon.