

Testimony to the Senate Committee on Education

Hearing on Civics Education

June 5th, 2019

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The Current Status of Civic Education

We are living in a time of heightened concern about the state of U.S. politics and democracy as recent events across the country have focused attention on the increasing polarization and divisiveness of our politics. The successful practice of democracy requires us all to be well-informed, with the habits and mindset required to maintain a free and self-governing society. To accomplish that, the knowledge of our system of government, our rights and responsibilities, and how to participate at the local, regional, and national levels must be learned by each generation.

Horace Mann, the father of American public education, stated “however well informed in matters of general science or history... they must, if citizens of a Republic, understand something of the true nature and functions of the government under which they live. That anyone who is to participate in the government of a country... should receive no instruction respecting the nature and functions of the government he is afterwards to administer, is a political solecism.” Students must be able to discuss, debate, consider multiple perspectives, resolve conflict, compromise, and communicate about controversial public issues. They must gain an understanding of the value of considering the common good over their own self-interest, and the recognition that, as citizens, our role is to provide both the direction for, and the check on, our government.

In fact, one of the original purposes for which public education was created was to establish this foundation for civic participation in our citizens as students. However, the increasing emphasis on basic literacy and STEM education over the years has put that mission at risk, as public funding for and time spent on teacher professional development and student programs in civics has dramatically declined. A Center on Education Policy survey found that, nationwide, 71% of districts reported cutting back time on other subjects to make more space for reading and math instruction.¹ Here in Oregon, while we have defined a set of academic content standards for civics, there is currently no civics or government requirement for high school graduation, and the social sciences graduation requirement can be fulfilled by any number of courses, none of which must relate to history, government, or civics. Further, there is no clear mechanism for accountability or consistency with regard to how or whether the standards are being implemented.

Impact of High-Quality Civic Education on Student Outcomes

So, what result has this lack of civic education over the years brought about? Since 1975 the U.S. has experienced a steep decline in student understanding, with 77% of students scoring below “proficient” on the last national civics assessment test (2014). Less than 50% of eighth-graders knew the purpose of the Bill of Rights, and only 1 in 10 had age-appropriate knowledge of our government’s system of checks and balances. Even more dramatic achievement gaps are evident across racial groups as 91% of Black students and 88% of Hispanic students scored below proficiency.²

Conversely, clear evidence exists that high-quality civics education has a positive impact on student participation in and knowledge of our democratic society. A study in Chicago schools showed that the availability of classroom civic learning opportunities was correlated with a high level of commitment to future civic participation among high school students.³ Moreover, students who participate in high-quality civic education are more likely to form political opinions and be informed voters by age 18,⁴ and those who have been taught about elections and voting are 40% more likely to go out and vote.⁵ Other benefits of high-quality civic education include an increase in civic equality, building of 21st century skills, improvement of school climate, and lower drop-out rates.⁶

What a High-Quality Civic Education Program Looks Like

While establishing clear civics and government proficiency requirements is a step in the right direction for increasing student civic engagement and knowledge, it is only the beginning. In order to have the most impact, civic education must be of high quality. Critical characteristics of high-quality civic education include:^{7 8}

- Adherence to clear instructional standards covering government, history, law, and democracy;
- Integration throughout all grade levels;
- Equitable administration;
- Experiential and inquiry-based curriculum;
- Community involvement; and
- Highly qualified teachers, consistently and continuously supported by quality professional learning and development.

Experiential and inquiry-based approaches are critical as “students cannot be expected to be civically engaged simply by reading. They can only learn how to be civically engaged by *being* civically engaged.”⁹ Rather than simply memorizing and spitting back facts and dates, these approaches require students to actually think and act as participants in their community, as they will be required to do as fully-engaged citizens. For example, service-learning projects linked to the curriculum require students to apply the academic knowledge they have gained to find viable solutions to real community needs. Participation in school governance requires students to practice their newly-acquired civic skills to effectively make their voices heard and collaborate with others to take action and drive change that is important to them.

Simulations of democratic processes, such as mock trials and mock elections, require students to “try on” the roles that they will be asked to take as adults. Active discussion and debate of current local, national, and international issues require students to thoughtfully investigate and critically analyze information sources in order to engage in informed and civil discourse on controversial topics.

An additional aspect of high-quality civics education that contributes to long-term student civic participation is building in opportunities to engage with civic role models. The chance to observe and directly interact with members of the community from a range of backgrounds including government, business, legal/judicial, education, and others helps to provide students with a sense that they have a place in the society, and that they have both the right to be taken seriously and the responsibility to participate.

Strong teacher support is vital to the successful delivery of these types of educational experiences. Ongoing professional development must be prioritized to allow civics educators to continually gain more experience and stay current on the knowledge in their subject area. The National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement states that, “[w]e cannot expect teachers to deliver high-quality results without investing in their growth and development.”¹⁰ Additionally, teachers need to build and maintain strong connections with colleagues to share best practices, collaborate on new approaches, and provide support in carrying out high-quality programs which may take more preparation and study. Research shows that high-quality teacher development does result in the positive civic engagement outcomes desired.¹¹ The James Madison Legacy Project provided professional development to cohorts of middle and high school teachers nationwide from 2015-18, with a total of more than 2,000 educators participating. A study of the program completed by researchers at Georgetown University found that:

- Knowledge scores increased significantly vs. control groups:
 - Teachers’ increased 6.0 points (+13.6%) vs. a slight drop for the control group;
 - Middle school students rose 5.4 points, nearly double the control group; and
 - High school students’ rose 3.7 points vs. 2.2 for the control group.

- Perhaps most importantly, students reported an increased sense of civic responsibility:
 - 69% of middle and 73% of high school students reported they pay more attention to what is going on in government and politics;
 - 62% of middle and 77% of high school students felt they are more prepared to become involved in their community; and
 - Over 90% of students believed it was important to vote.

High-Quality Civic Education Program Examples

While it is clear that delivery of high-quality civic education programs requires intentional design and focus to achieve the success factors described, there are many programs being implemented throughout the country that meet the criteria. Examples currently being used by Oregon schools in grade levels from 5-12 include:

Project Citizen – a civic action program in which students work together to conduct research in their community on issues they care about, identify alternative solutions, weigh the pros and cons, and finally propose a policy with an action plan. Students prepare and deliver a presentation outlining their policy recommendation to members of the community, often to school boards and city councils, or to legislators at the annual statewide showcase event. In 2018, the work of students at Sunset HS led the Beaverton City Council to rescind a proposal to prohibit car camping and enact the students' proposal to provide a safe overnight parking lot for people who needed to sleep in their cars.

Youth Summit Townhalls – a forum that enables students to constructively engage on controversial topics as they take assigned roles that allow them to learn about points of view different from their own, and to argue their positions persuasively to a simulated government body. Recent topics in Oregon schools have included immigration, gun control, and water rights.

We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution – combines a classroom curriculum with simulated congressional hearings to help students explore the Constitution and the Bill of Rights in a historical and contemporary context. Students interact with members of the community as coaches while preparing and as judges while delivering their simulated testimony. Oregon teams consistently place at the highest levels nationally in the high school competition version of this program.

There are a range of other student programs being implemented around the country that provide the high-quality experiences needed as well. These include Mock Trial, Model United Nations, Democracy Schools, Mikva Project Soapbox, Facing History & Ourselves, speech and debate teams, and Street Law.

Conclusion

Effective, high-quality civics education is critical to the future of our democracy. Our failure to make this a priority in our schools in recent years has resulted in an under-informed electorate, many of whom do not understand how their government works, and recognize neither their role nor their responsibility in shaping the direction of their communities, state, and nation. Many people have developed an “us vs. them” mentality with respect to our government and institutions. What they don’t realize is that there is no “them” – in a democracy, there is only “us”. It is incumbent upon each of us to participate and help to shape the society in which we want to live. Without a strong educational foundation that allows our students to experience how they can and should take part, we will be increasingly challenged to maintain the effectiveness and promise of our democratic institutions.

¹ *Center on Education Policy, From the Capital to the Classroom: Year Four of the No Child Left Behind Act.* Washington, D.C.: Center on Education Policy, 2006.

² *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)*, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014.

³ *Developing Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning Opportunities of Students' Commitment to Civic Participation*, American Educational Research Journal, Vol. 45, No. 3, pp738-766, September 2008.

⁴ *Teens and Elections*, Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), Tufts University, 2016.

⁵ *Commission on Teenage Voting and Civic Knowledge*, Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), Tufts University, 2015.

⁶ *Six Proven Practices for Effective Civic Learning*, National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement, January 2014.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *High Quality Civic Education: What is It and Who Gets It?* Social Education, Vol. 72(1), 2008.

⁹ *Six Proven Practices for Effective Civic Learning*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *James Madison Legacy Project Independent Evaluation*, Georgetown University, 2018.