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The Civics Education Initiative of 2015

Maria Millard

This legislative session has seen a flurry of bills related to civic education. Most of these bills have grown out of the efforts of the [Civics Education Initiative](#), a project of the Joe Foss Institute. The goal of this initiative is to have all states establish the requirement that students pass a 100-question test on basic history and civic facts to graduate from high school.

The civics test promoted by the Civics Education Initiative is the United States Citizenship Civics Test, the same test that immigrants must pass in order to become U.S. citizens. As more states consider such legislation, fundamental questions about civic education are brought to the forefront. Should civic education mostly be concerned with factual knowledge, or should it be equally concerned with civic skills and dispositions? Ultimately, these assessments send a strong message about what is valued in civic education.

Ensuring all students are taught basic civics and learn to be ready for active, engaged citizenship is a goal that both sides of the aisle can agree upon. The means to that goal is hotly debated.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Thirty-three states include civics in state assessments.

Civics Education Initiative legislation was introduced in 19 states in 2015.

As of June 1, 2015, legislation has passed in five states and has been defeated in five states.

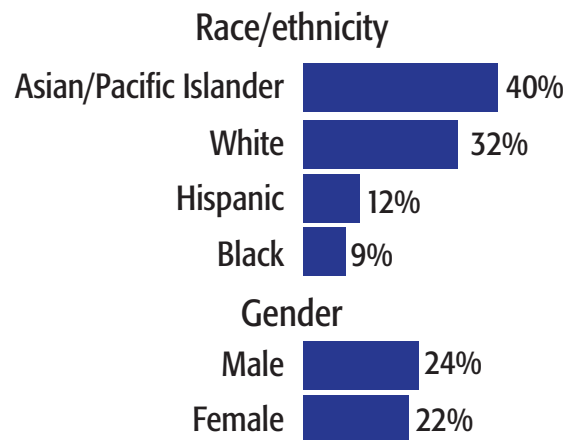
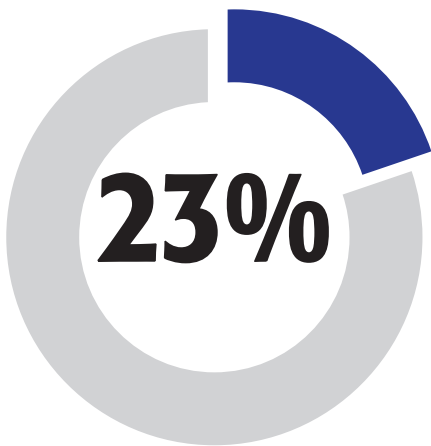


Context

The Civics Education Initiative is affiliated with the [Joe Foss Institute](#), a non-profit organization directed by Frank Riggs, a politician from California and Arizona. The institute was established “to promote an appreciation for America’s freedoms, public service, patriotism and integrity.” The initiative is driven by a goal to ensure all students are taught basic civics and learn to be ready for active, engaged citizenship. While the goal is one that both sides of the aisle can agree upon, the means to that goal is hotly debated.

NAEP Civics Performance in the United States, 2014

Twenty-three percent of students performed at or above the *Proficient* level in 2014

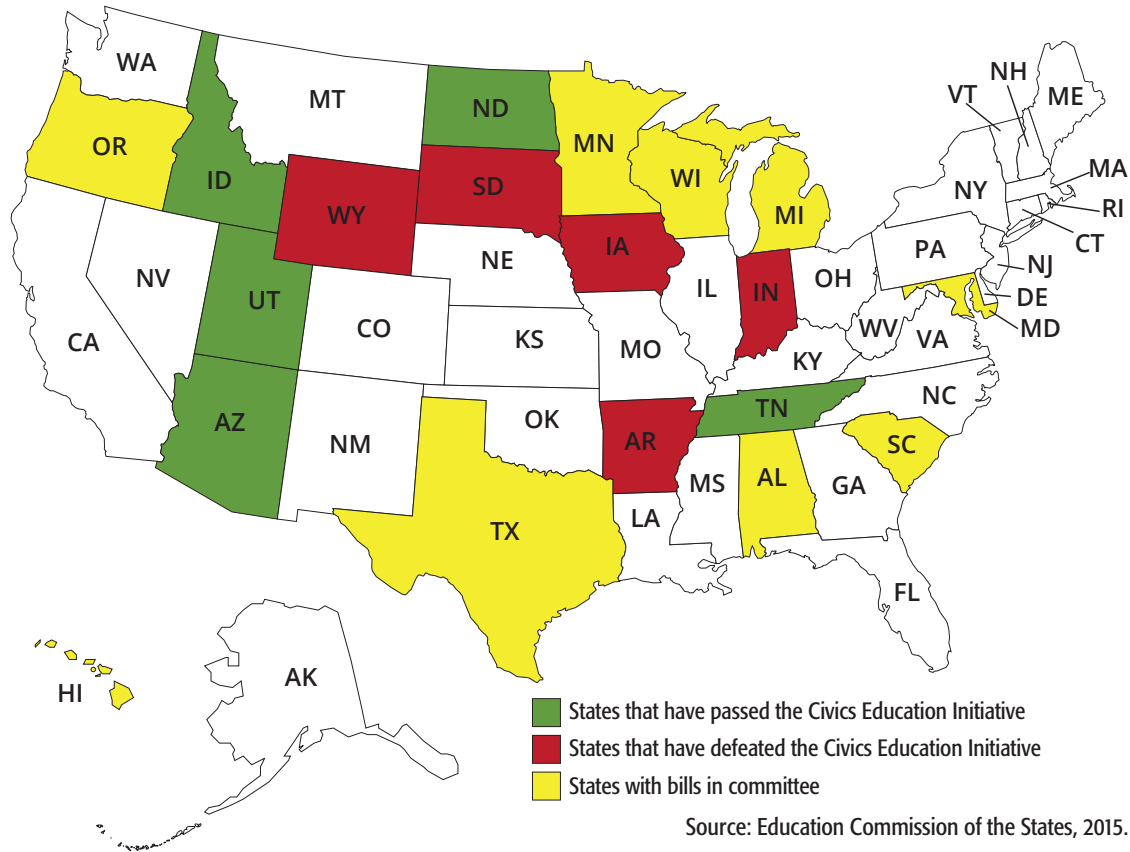


Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Civics Assessment show that only 23 percent of America’s 8th-graders are “proficient” in their civic learning. Overall, these scores have been stagnant for nearly 20 years. Although several student subgroups have made gains, the results continue to indicate inequality in civic education outcomes.¹

The debate

- ◆ The Civics Education Initiative argues that the assessment it supports – the U.S. Citizenship Test – is a first step “to ensure all students are taught basic civics about how our government works, and who we are as a nation ... things every student must learn to be ready for active, engaged citizenship.” Like most people engaged in the debate, supporters of the bill are discouraged by how few people understand the history and workings of the U.S. government. They believe that the assessment will help instill the responsibilities of citizenship and foster greater civic participation.²
- ◆ Opponents contend that this test is not the answer to increasing civic engagement. They fear it may backfire and result in a scale-back of meaningful civic engagement because of the assumption that the test will adequately prepare students for civic life.³ Peter Levine at Tufts University’s Tisch College argues that we must start by inspiring, engaging and challenging students rather than forcing them to memorize a set of disconnected facts. In doing so, they will be more likely to stay interested in the subject as adults.⁴

Civics Education Initiative 2015 Legislative Action



Civics Education Initiative 2015 legislative recap

The status of legislation is accurate as of June 1, 2015.

Five states have passed the Civics Education Initiative:

- ◆ **Arizona H.B. 2064:** Signed by the governor on Jan. 15, 2015.
- ◆ **Idaho S.B. 1071:** Signed by the governor on April 9, 2015.
- ◆ **North Dakota H.B. 1087:** Signed by the governor on Jan. 30, 2015.
- ◆ **Tennessee H.B. 0010:** Signed by the governor on May 20, 2015.
- ◆ **Utah S.B. 0060:** Signed by the governor on March 30, 2015.

Five states have defeated the Civics Education Initiative:

- ◆ **Arkansas S.B. 878:** Defeated twice in committee on March 19 and again on March 26.
- ◆ **Iowa H.F. 175:** Defeated in committee on Feb. 17, 2015.
- ◆ **Indiana S.B. 0269:** Defeated in committee on Feb. 24, 2015.
- ◆ **South Dakota S.B. 164:** Withdrawn at the request of prime sponsor.*
- ◆ **Wyoming H.B. 0196:** Defeated in committee on March 4, 2015.

* South Dakota adopted [Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 6](#) on March 4, 2015. The resolution requires students to finish a U.S. government class for high school graduation. The test is not required.

Nine states with bills in committee:

- ◆ **Alabama S.B. 161**: Referred to Senate Education Committee on March 5, 2015.
- ◆ **Hawaii H.B. 1122**: Referred to House Education Committee on Feb. 2, 2015.
- ◆ **Maryland H.B. 1200** and **S.B. 806**: Referred to House Rules and Executive Nominations Committee on Feb. 25, 2015.
- ◆ **Michigan H.B. 4136**: Referred to House Education Committee on March 4, 2015.
- ◆ **Minnesota H.F. 1497**: Referred to House Education Innovation Policy Committee on March 10, 2015; **S.F. 1674**: Referred to Senate Education Committee on March 12, 2015.
- ◆ **Oregon H.B. 2977**: Referred to House Education Committee on March 11, 2015.
- ◆ **South Carolina H.B. 3539**: Referred to House Education Committee on Feb. 25, 2015. Passed house. Sent to Senate Education Committee on April 23, 2015.
- ◆ **Texas H.B. 1139**: Referred to House Education Committee on March 2, 2015.
- ◆ **Wisconsin A.B. 194**: Referred to the House Committee on State Affairs and Government Operations on May 4, 2015.

Other State Civic Assessments

While 33 states already require some testing in social studies or civic education, the Civics Education Initiative is different because it attaches consequences for high school graduation for students' performance on an assessment already designed for another purpose. While the citizenship test may be one way to hold students accountable, here are two other approaches out of many currently being used:

Florida H.B. 105 (2010)

Florida's law initially required middle school students to take a course in civics and then pass a state-designed test in civics in order to be promoted to high school. Now, the test counts as 30 percent of the student's total grade in the course, which must be passed to advance to high school.

Tennessee S.B. 2066 (2012)

In Tennessee, accountability for student performance in civics is project-based. Tennessee is the first state to take this step for civics. It moves students away from pencil-and-paper standardized tests and toward developing portfolios on hands-on projects that, ideally, engage the students in meaningful, real-world situations. Students will be assessed at least once in grades 4 through 8 and at least once again in high school, grades 9 through 12.

The call for increased accountability for civic education is driven by an ideal that most can agree on – an engaged and informed citizenry is a critical component of our democracy; schools play a critical role in creating such a citizenry. While this ideal is widely accepted, the subjects of substantial debate are how schools should go about preparing students for civic life and how we hold schools and students accountable for civic education. The Civics Education Initiative has helped open the door for a number of conversations on these critical issues.

Other legislative actions this session:

Illinois H.B. 4025 (2015)

This innovative legislation comes from a public-private partnership. It requires every public high school to include a separate course in civics in its curriculum to help students acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives. A \$3 million private grant from the McCormick Foundation will cover the costs of these courses along with professional development. The bill has passed both chambers and awaits the governor's signature.

New Mexico H.B. 249 (2015)

Legislation would give 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in school board elections. The bill aims to expand the pool of voters to improve historically low turnouts in school elections. Additionally, it would allow more high school students to have a voice in the body of government that affects them most. The bill did not pass.

RELATED ECS RESOURCES

- ◆ *State Civic Education Policy Framework*: <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/16/12/11612.pdf>
- ◆ *Florida and Tennessee: Accountability in Civic Education*: <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/11/96/11196.pdf>
- ◆ *Guidebook: Six Proven Practices for Effective Civic Learning*: <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/10/48/11048.pdf>

ENDNOTES

- 1 National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: 2014 U.S. History, Geography, and Civics at Grade 8* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Education Statistics, 2015), <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/main2014/pdf/2015112c.pdf> (accessed May 2015).
- 2 Civics Education Initiative, *100 Facts Every High School Student Should Know* (Scottsdale, Ariz.: Civics Education Initiative, 2015), <http://civicseducationinitiative.com> (accessed May 20, 2015).
- 3 Lisa Guilfoile, *Civics Initiative Legislation Update: Taking a Pulse* (Denver: Education Commission of the States 2015) <http://www.everystudentcitizen.org/2015/03/civics-initiative-legislative-update-taking-a-pulse/> (accessed May 20, 2015).
- 4 Peter Levine, "Good Citizenship Transcends a Test: Opposing View," *USA Today*, Feb. 8, 2015.

Author

Maria Millard is a policy analyst with Education Commission of the States. She felt most civically engaged her junior year at the Chewonki Semester in Maine, an experiential learning program where academics are linked to sustainable living practices. She and her classmates collected eggs at the school farm, chopped wood, explored cranberry bogs and patched cabin roofs, among other community projects. Contact Maria at mmillard@ecs.org or (303) 299.3620.

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