



**Healthy States
National Task Force**
THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

Civic Health Subcommittee

State Leader Policy Brief
Civics Education



About This Brief

The Council of State Governments (CSG) Healthy States National Task Force State Leader Policy Briefs are informational resources for state leaders to improve understanding of policy issues and empower policy conversations. Included in each brief are introductions to the policy problem, a survey of state policy options and analysis and

recommendations for state leaders. The policy options presented in this guide are not endorsement of a particular policy by CSG or members of the Healthy States National Task Force, but rather are intended to assist state leaders in their assessment within their specific state contexts.



The Need for Civic Education

Civic education — defined in this instance as knowledge of the history, principles and foundations of American government as well as the development of civic attitudes and behavior — is crucial to the long-term civic health of states. Such education serves as the basis for an understanding of shared heritage and political culture, inducing a sense of the importance of electoral participation and community engagement.

Particularly in the last 20 years, [involvement with community organizations](#)¹ and political parties has declined while the exchange of ideas and promotion of political activism across a variety of social media platforms has flourished. Meanwhile, Americans' level of civic knowledge and engagement has remained stagnant. According to the National Center for Education Statistics National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) Report Card for civics (2010), "levels of civic knowledge in the U.S. have remained unchanged or even declined over the past century."²

The stagnation of American civic engagement is multifaceted and cannot be attributed to one source. Increasing political polarization and sensationalist media coverage can spur individual recession from civic life. At the institutional level, the federal government invests five cents per student for civics instruction, but \$54 per student for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM).

As states seek to reinvigorate civic knowledge, policymakers may consider implementing incremental changes to how civics education is conducted in schools. No other social institution is as ubiquitous within American communities as U.S. schools. Schools also provide Americans with a rich environment for civic learning, engagement and growth. As such, evidence suggests a connection between civic education and civic engagement. According to a 2011 report titled, "[Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools](#),"³ students who receive high-quality education are more likely to "understand public issues, view political engagement as a means of addressing communal challenges, and participate in civic activities."⁴

Among the policy changes state policymakers may consider are **strengthening course requirements and assessments, reforming education standards and curriculum and enhancing accountability.**

State Options for Enhancing Civic Education in U.S. Schools

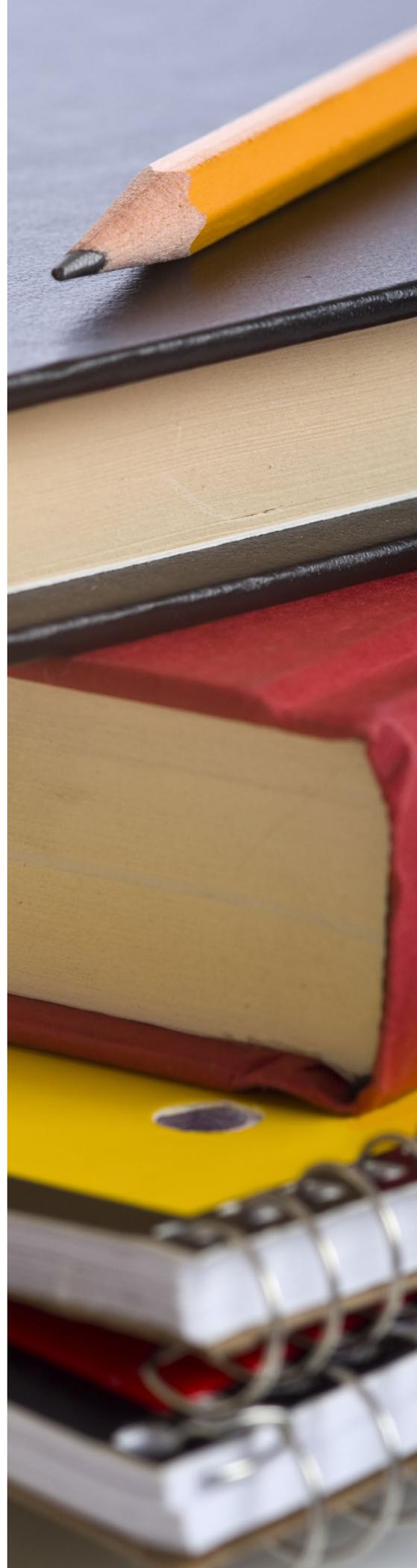
Policy Option | Strengthen Civics Course Requirements and Assessments

1. **Increase K-12 course requirements in civics to facilitate an in-depth understanding of institutional and policy concepts and facilitate the development of critical civic skills.**

According to a 2012 [report](#) from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), all 50 states require some form of civics and government instruction as part of social studies requirements in K-12 schools.⁵ However, these requirements vary significantly by state and often are minimal, especially at the high school level. Policymakers could increase the minimum number of civic education credits a student must earn and/or increase the number of semesters of civic education in which students must enroll in order to graduate. This would enable students to receive sustained and systematic instruction pertaining to topics such as law and government in addition to how economics, history, literature and philosophy shape civic life.

2. **Institute civics assessments tied to accountability systems and high school graduation requirements.**

Most states have mandated assessments in civics, however, they are not often tied to accountability systems or graduation requirements. According a 2016 [report](#) from the Education Commission of the States, there are 37 states that require schools to administer an assessment in social studies and/or civics.⁶ Only 15 of these states require students to demonstrate proficiency in this subject area as a condition of graduation. Instituting civics assessments as requirements for graduation can ensure students receive a baseline knowledge of common civics topics and are developing the skills necessary to become civically engaged members of society.



State Examples

Increased K-12 civics course requirements and the inclusion of civics assessments as a requirement of high school graduation is not without precedent in the states. State leaders can turn to policymakers in other states to better understand what requirements are being considered and how they are being codified.

- In 2015, **Illinois** enacted [Public Act 099-0434](#) to require a one semester civics course for high school students. This is intended to prepare students with the skills, knowledge and motivation to be civic actors.
- In **Indiana**, each public and nonpublic high school is required to provide a course that is not less than one year of school work and covers the historical, political, civic, sociological, economic and philosophical aspects of the constitutions of Indiana and the United States ([511 IAC 6-7-6.1.b](#), [IC 20-30-5-2](#), [IC 20-30-5-4](#)).
- In 2016, **Minnesota** enacted House File 1497 requiring students to demonstrate their knowledge of civics as a condition of receiving a high school diploma.
- **New Hampshire** enacted Senate Bill 157 in March 2016. This bill requires students in high school to take and pass a government and civics competency assessment as a component of history and government curricula.

Additional Considerations for State Leaders

A primary consideration for state policymakers is whether quality civics education actually has an impact. A preliminary scan of the research on this topic found that a well-designed civics education program can increase an individual's ability to think through the policy information presented to them. In one experimental evaluation of a local civics curriculum, researchers found positive effects on students' ability to interpret evidence, understand what leads people to make choices and analyze cause and effect in historical cases.⁷ Other studies have shown that quality civic education can increase the likelihood of a student volunteering and engaging in community issues, increase civic action among students and develop efficacy (an individual's belief they can work within public institutions to inspire change), among other traits.⁸

Civic learning is a multidisciplinary field that incorporates knowledge from law, government, economics and philosophy, among others. In many states, these subjects have explicit, pre-existing requirements and assessments. States should consider increasing requirements for civics education and implementing explicit assessments for civic learning sufficient to facilitate the development of civic knowledge and skills. Within this approach, states also may consider the different ways in which civics concepts can be further incorporated into other subjects and their required assessments.

In recent years, educators have been calling for fewer assessments, not more. Developing assessments are expensive and time-consuming undertakings, especially in subjects such as civics that incorporate several different domains of knowledge and skills. Policymakers should consider how to create effective assessments without generating a significantly greater burden on administrators, teachers and students.



Policy Option | Reform Civics Education Standards and Curriculum

1. **Focus civics standards and curriculum reform on providing students with instruction that accounts for new ways in which Americans engage in civic life and fosters the development of civic skills.**

Preparing youth to become civically engaged members of today's society will require educators to rethink the structure of civics instruction and curriculum. In the digital age, younger generations have become more politically and socially active on social media platforms, exchanging ideas and promoting volunteerism and political activism online. This form of engagement differs greatly from the "direct" involvement of past generations where participation in traditional entities like political parties and community organizations was more common.

Instructional strategies have evolved in recent years. Teachers now use different tools and approaches to foster engaged and effective learning. In any given classroom setting, traditional lecture is now accompanied by group discussion and activities, targeted instruction and experiential and service-learning. According to [CivXNow](#), a project of iCivics, these strategies have proven effective, with service-learning considered especially important for the development of civic skills; and it has been shown to increase student engagement and civic skills.⁹

2. **Draw upon existing curriculum frameworks developed by researchers and practitioners to either reform or craft new civics curricula and standards for K-12 schools.**

Curriculum reform is a multi-step process that [poses significant challenges](#) to administrators.¹⁰ However, drawing from existing, evidence-based curriculum frameworks to either reform or generate new frameworks can save states valuable time and money. The "[College, Career and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework for Social Studies State Standards](#)," a recently developed and widely respected civics framework, stands as an example of the tools already available to policymakers. The C3 Framework was published in 2013 and seeks to inform the revision of state social studies standards and strengthen practitioners' social studies programs. The framework helps students build critical thinking, problem solving and participatory skills to become engaged citizens.¹¹

Policymakers can turn to existing curriculum frameworks in other states to glean insight and information necessary for reforming civic education in their local context. According to the Education Commission of the States, there are only 20 states that provide such curriculum frameworks to support civics and government instruction. These curricula differ in level of detail and support offered.¹²

State Examples

- **Delaware House Bill 175** (2021) allows one excused absence per school year for students grades 6 through 12 to attend civic engagements such as visits to the United States Capitol, Legislative Hall and sites of political and cultural significance; or participation in a rally, march, protest or walkout.
- Among the most detailed of state frameworks is that utilized in **California**. In 2016, California implemented the **California History-Social Science Framework** intended to prepare students for informed, skilled, and engaged participation in civic life. C3 principles have been incorporated into this framework in addition to state learning standards.¹³ States that also have adopted C3 principles include **Arkansas**, **Connecticut** and **Iowa**, among others.

Additional Considerations for State Leaders

Each state defines and seeks to influence civics education differently; therefore, there is no one-size-fits all approach to reforming state civics curricula. Relevant policymaking bodies in the states, such as state boards of education or state education commissions(ers), should consider critically assessing the current content and structure of civics education in their state. Concepts of civic participation and engagement also should be gauged to better understand how to instill desired skills and knowledge through school curricula, textbooks and experiential learning.

Policymakers can look to other states for guidance in these areas, however, the importance of diversity of thought and practice must not be overlooked. The diversity of state historical experiences and current populations requires sensitivity to local contexts in the establishment of instructional material to be covered. Furthermore, existing mechanisms such as the C3 framework can act as useful tools to shape and reform civics standards and curriculum. Policymakers should not, however, rely entirely on these frameworks to shape reforms given that doing so can also stifle diversity of thought and practice.

Lastly, regardless of the current political climate, state policymakers should avoid actions that limit K-12 instruction on controversial topics in the classroom. The discussion of controversial current and historical events is fundamental to democracy. In addition, a form of government that relies on civil debate over difficult issues gives students the experience needed for effective political discourse and civic engagement.¹⁴



Policy Option | Enhance Civics Education Accountability through Tracking and Reporting

1. Include social studies and/or civics assessment results in larger accountability systems for K-12 schools.

The U.S. education system is characterized by assessment mechanisms to deliver accountability-based instruction in K-12 schools. However, states currently employ few meaningful assessments and other accountability systems to gauge civic learning outcomes both across jurisdictions and over time. According to the Education Commission of the States, about half of the states with social studies or civics assessment requirements use the results for reporting purposes.¹⁵ Data from the commission also indicates only 17 states include civics in their accountability systems.¹⁶ Incorporating social studies and/or civics assessment results in larger school accountability systems would allow for student progress to be tracked and future curriculum reforms to be instructed by analyses of this data.

2. Require civic learning plans from every Local Education Agency (LEA). States can aggregate these plans to allow for comparisons and assessments of progress.

Understanding the impact of reforms and how they contribute to district plans for meeting important benchmarks is critical to continuous improvement. In other words, assessments must feed into larger tracking and reporting mechanisms to facilitate meaningful change. States can require civic learning plans from each Local Education Agency.¹⁷ With the creation of civic learning plans by each LEA, learning targets and student achievement can be aggregated and tracked across the state, facilitating comparisons and assessment of progress. Indicators also can be disaggregated by demographic groups to improve equity in civics instruction.¹⁸

State Examples

The 17 states that include civics in their accountability systems are examples for policymakers seeking to enhance tracking and reporting of students' civic skills and knowledge. Each of these states vary in the type of data reported and whether such data is disaggregated by grade level.

- **Iowa** requires school districts to report the percentage of high school graduates who complete a core program of three or more years in social studies. In contrast, **Louisiana** requires social studies assessment results to be included in



calculations of school and district performance scores. Similar accountability structures exist in **Massachusetts**, however assessment results in history also are included in performance calculations.

- **Tennessee** was among the first to [leverage LEAs to track and assess student knowledge in civics](#). Beginning with the 2012-13 school year, all LEAs have been required to administer a project-based civics assessment. The assessments must be developed by the LEA and designed to measure the civic learning objectives contained in the state's social studies curriculum.¹⁹
- The [Democracy Schools program in Illinois](#) rewards excellence and encourages continuous improvement.²⁰
- **California Assembly Bill 24** (2019) established a student recognition program for excellence in civic education. The State Seal of Civic Engagement is now awarded to students who have demonstrated excellence in civics education and participation and an understanding of the United States Constitution, the California Constitution and the democratic system of government.

Additional Considerations for State Leaders

The ability to track and evaluate student development of civic knowledge and skills is affected by the timing of the civics assessment administration. As such, definitive conclusions from such assessments are dependent on the number of times students' civic knowledge and skills are evaluated throughout their K-12 education.

The ability for schools and Local Education Agencies to design and administer assessments that gauge students' development of civic skills and their understanding of civics concepts is resource dependent. Enhancing reporting and tracking of student success in this subject will bear significant costs up front. State leaders need to pragmatically assess the costs of these efforts and appropriate sufficient funding.

Endnotes

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¹⁵ Railey, H., & Brennan, J. (2016). *50-State Comparison: Civic Education*. Retrieved from https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Companion_Report_-_50-State_Comparison_-_Civic_Education.pdf

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ **Local Education Agencies** are a public board of education or other public authority that maintains administrative control of public elementary schools in a city, county, township, school district or other subdivision of a state.

¹⁸ CivXNow - A Project of iCivics. (2021). (rep.). CivXNow State Policy Menu. Retrieved October 25, 2021, from <https://civxnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CivXNow-State-Policy-Menu-September-2021-FINAL.pdf>

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