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What Your State Is Doing To Beef Up Civics Education

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EMILY CARDINALI



Deborah Lee/NPR

Fake news. Record-low voting turnout. Frequent and false claims from elected officials. Vitriol in many corners of political debate.

These are symptoms we hear of all the time that our democracy is not so healthy.

And those factors might be why many states are turning to the traditional — and obvious — place where people learn how government is supposed to work: schools. More than half of the states in their last legislative sessions — 27 to be exact — have considered bills or other proposals to expand the teaching of civics.

"The electorate is largely ignorant, and there is an overall deficit of civic learning," said Charles Quigley, the executive director of the Center for Civic Education, a nonprofit group that advocates for civics learning. The political climate at the state, local and national levels, and the steady drumbeat of negative news, "has people wondering, 'How the hell could this have happened?' "

In their efforts to create informed, educated citizens, some states have invested in teacher training and increased curriculum standards for civics at the elementary through high school levels. Among the most common proposals have been more attention to media literacy and closer study of the Constitution, Bill of Rights and state founding documents.

For example, the Washington state legislature in March established a stand-alone class for all high school students, expanded training for teachers and incorporated lessons about federal, state, local and tribal governments into the K-12 curriculum.

"It's important to start teaching about civics in kindergarten to have basic ideas of justice and service," Quigley says. Teaching students to explore questions like: "Why do we have rules and laws? Why do we have positions of authority?"



NPR ED

Can Teaching Civics Save Democracy?

Believe it or not, he said, younger kids can easily grasp these concepts.

Some states want to make sure college students understand them, too.

Florida's State Board of Education recently approved a civic literacy component for students at public universities. They can take civics or test out of the requirement, but are required to know, at least: the basic principles of the U.S. government and how those principles are applied, landmark Supreme Court decisions and the country's founding documents.

In Missouri, a similar law requiring college students to score at least 70 percent on a version of the U.S. naturalization test — the test immigrants take to become a citizen — was signed by the governor earlier this month.

(To see how you'd score on that exam, here are some questions.)

Sample Questions Based On The U.S. Naturalization Exam

How many amendments does the Constitution have?

10

18

27

35

Next

Notes: These questions were created based off the naturalization test administered by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Source: [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services](#)

Credit: [Emily Cardinali and Vanessa Qian/NPR](#)

That test also requires students to know basic things as well, such as: How many amendments does the Constitution have? Who is the vice president? What document is the supreme law of the land? (Answers: 27, Mike Pence, the Constitution.)

Recently, 14 states considered bills to incorporate content from the naturalization test. Four states — Nevada, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania and Washington — adopted those bills into law.

Twenty-three states already had requirements related to that test: Some require passing an exam based on it to graduate from high school; others loop it into a half-credit civics requirement. And much of the impetus for that legislation came from an organization formed in 2014 called the Civics Education Initiative.

Arizona was the first state to pass the draft legislation written by the initiative, in 2015. The initiative's staff of six is now working on the remaining 23 states.

Schools are often laser-focused on preparing students for standardized tests in math, science and reading, says Lucian Spataro, a former college professor who is now the director of the Civics Education Initiative, part of the nonpartisan Joe Foss Institute.

That, he explains, can push subjects like civics to the back burner.

"We're looking for a level playing field so all the disciplines are equally represented," he said. "I'm a STEM professor. But I'm a STEM professor pushing civics."



MICHEL MARTIN, GOING THERE

Going There: Civics 101 - What Does It Mean To Be A Good Citizen?

Separate from the initiatives at the state level, there is a nationwide standardized test that gauges how much kids know about U.S. government and politics. Scores are low and have been since the test was first given in 1998.

In 2014, just 22 percent of eighth-graders scored "proficient" on the civics part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, commonly called the "Nation's Report Card." The test is graded based on achievement rather than on a pass-fail basis. That same year, 26 percent scored "below basic."

If students are "proficient," they can probably explain the purpose of government, recognize the importance of the rule of law, and understand the separation of power among branches of the government. At the "basic" level, students should be able to identify the fundamental principles of American democracy and the documents that make up that foundation, plus they should understand the different rights and responsibilities U.S. citizens have.

"Below basic" means they likely couldn't explain any of that, but there are no defined standards for that score category.

Performance on that national civics test also varies by student race and family income, according to research from the Brookings Institution.

"People are not born knowing how you navigate political systems in a democracy and how you advocate for yourself," said Jon Valant, an education policy fellow at Brookings who is one of the authors of the report.

If students — who eventually grow into adults — learn how these systems work, they have a better chance of using them to drive much needed change in their communities.

"If it is historically underrepresented groups that are not getting the same level of instruction on what it takes to navigate those types of systems," Valant explains, "then it's very likely we'll keep seeing some of the same patterns we've seen so far."

Correction

July 22, 2018

A previous version of this story featured a graphic that stated Colorado and Indiana required students to take a naturalization exam to graduate from high school. In fact, neither state has that requirement. The graphic has been temporarily removed while we work to update it.

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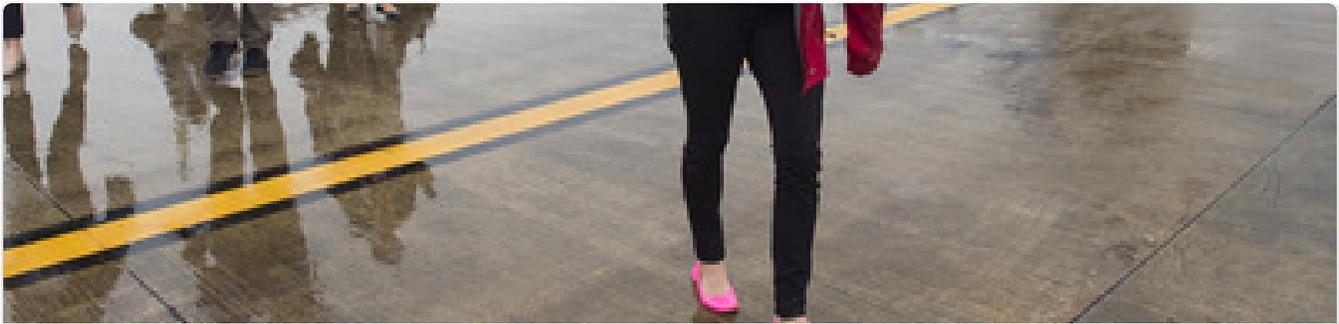
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