Florida and Tennessee: Different Approaches to Civics Accountability

DENVER – In a national first, students in Florida and Tennessee this year began taking civics assessments that carry consequences for themselves and their schools.

The Education Commission of the States today released the first in a series of reports that will examine state initiatives related to civic education. Already, all 50 states and the District of Columbia include civics, citizenship education or social studies in their academic standards and 33 states include those topics in their statewide assessments.

Florida and Tennessee, however, are the first states to approve legislation that factors student performance on civics exams in the calculations for state school ratings.

In Florida, civics is treated like any other academic subject – end-of-course exams count for 30 percent of a student’s final course grade. And in Tennessee, the required exam is a first-of-its-kind in civics – a hands-on, project-based assessment designed to be a more in-depth test of student knowledge.

Results of the civics test will be included in the calculations that determine whether schools in Florida receive an A through F; in Tennessee, the results will help decide whether schools are categorized as a “reward,” “priority” or “focus” school.

“By holding schools accountable for students’ civic learning, Florida and Tennessee are putting civics on equal footing with other subjects already included in these states’ accountability systems” said Paul Baumann, director of the National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement. “By choosing very different paths to get to civics accountability, these states are also offering a chance for leaders from other states to study two of the many possible accountability structures in action.”

NCLCE, an institute within ECS, defines civic education as efforts to prepare students for effective, principled citizenship. Civic education can include instruction in history and government, civics lessons on the rights and duties of citizens in a democracy, discussion of current events, service learning, mock trials and elections, character education and other approaches.

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The Education Commission of the States was created by states, for states, in 1965. We track policy, translate research, provide unbiased advice and create opportunities for state policymakers to learn from one another.

The National Center on Learning and Civic Education, an institute within ECS, seeks to support state policymakers in establishing civic learning and engagement programs for pre-K through postsecondary students.