



Civic Education

State Task Forces

Education Commission of the States

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States Address Civics with Mandated Task Forces

By Brady Delander

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By coincidence or not, Massachusetts, Illinois and Virginia created civic education task forces not long after national test results showed a dismal understanding of the subject matter across all grade levels.

Results of the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress showed just 25 percent of all test-takers in grades 4, 8 and 12 demonstrated a “proficient” grasp of civic knowledge. While fourth-graders posted their highest civics scores since 1998, scores for older students were flat or declining.

Mandating the task forces via legislation underscores these states’ increased attention to civic education. The declared goals are similar – to analyze the condition of civic knowledge in schools and make recommendations for improvement. What follows the recommendations is to be determined.

Massachusetts, the first of the three states to enact the legislation, was also the first to present its findings; this brief will focus on the Commonwealth for that reason. Illinois will offer its results later this month and Virginia is in the beginning stages after being established this year.

When the Massachusetts Special Commission on Civic Engagement and Learning released its reports, state Sen. Richard Moore said, “Civic education is a critical component for the survival of our precious democracy. The current status of civic knowledge does not suggest such a priority, however.”

Key Takeaways

A number of states are using task forces to study potential improvements in civic education:

- **Massachusetts** became the first state to adopt a civic learning policy for public college campuses soon after a state commission issued recommendations.
- An **Illinois** task force completed its analysis and will issue findings by May 31.
- **Virginia** established a task force this year.
- **Alaska** and **Oregon** also have some form of civics task force.



Massachusetts issues recommendations

The Massachusetts commission was established in 2008 and revived in 2011 ([S.B. 222](#)). It took advantage of this second chance by producing a report in little more than a year. The legislation requires members to be appointed and to include legislative, administrative, education and special interest group leaders and officials. The original purpose outlined five areas of focus:

- Current status of civic education, from kindergarten to postsecondary.
- Investigation of opportunities available to students, such as programs that teach civic skills.
- Analysis of programs that promote civic learning and how those programs could be enhanced.
- Assessment of the implementation of history and social studies curricula, and recommendations for development of civic education frameworks.
- Opinion on the need to form a permanent entity to promote civic engagement.

The commission did not restrict its study to the status of civic education in the classroom alone, though kindergarten through 12th grade was emphasized. Instead, "[Renewing the Social Compact](#)" considered the impact of what it means to be an informed and engaged citizen in all walks of life. "In short, the commission's focus is on engagement in both civil life and the political life of one's communities — local, state, national and global," said Charles White, a commission board member and associate professor at Boston University.

The final 50-page report offered recommendations for elementary and secondary education, higher education and adult education. For K-12, the top recommendation is to require civic education in some form, noting efforts to strengthen knowledge of important subjects such as science and technology might be wasted without an engaged citizenry.

Citing the [Education Commission of the States' civics database](#), the report noted current policies in the Commonwealth. The findings were typical of what many other states have on the books – somewhat limited requirements. High school students in Massachusetts have to complete a civics class, though that course shares billing with American history. There's a connection between the two subjects, but condensing them into one class over a four-year period could indicate why only 25 percent of all students registered as at least "proficient" on the NAEP civics assessment.

The commission's report cited Massachusetts state standards and framework as among the best in the nation. In this case, *best* is a relative term. "Most knowledgeable experts agree the vast majority of state standards in this area are an overloaded laundry list of dates and facts to be memorized, rather than an exploration of the *how* and *why* of civic engagement," the report said.

It then asked the ultimate question, which is yet to be answered: "Is this enough? Is this adequate to meet the civic mission of Massachusetts' schools?"

What is Civic Education?

As defined by the National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement, civic education describes 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.

A glance at related efforts

Illinois

Similar to Massachusetts, the Illinois legislation (H.B. 2428) sought to gain an understanding of the status of civic education in the state, identify best practices and outline a process to “substantially increase” civic literacy and opportunities for young people to engage.

The measure to create the Civic Education Task Force turned political in the House, with all but one vote in favor coming from one party and all votes opposed from the other. Proponents of the task force pointed to low voter turnout as a real-world example for the need to boost civic engagement. Opponents cited an already packed school day and stressed the need for more vocational programs.

Approved by the governor in August 2013, the task force is scheduled to release its findings in the coming weeks. Currently, Illinois does not require schools to teach civics but does encourage its inclusion in districts’ social studies curricula.

Virginia

Virginia approved its Commission on Civics Education ([H.B. 364](#)) in March 2014. Goals include educating students on the “importance of citizen involvement in a constitutional republic” and generally promoting the study of state and local government. The commission will submit an annual report to the governor and the General Assembly in addition to a review of its analysis and recommendations.

Around the country

In 2007, the Alaska Legislature passed a resolution establishing the Citizens’ Advisory Task Force on Civics Education Policy. That same year, Oregon established a task force focused on both civics and financial education.

Looking Ahead

Aside from bringing attention to the state of civic education – and gaining a better understanding of where things stand and outlining steps to move forward – what is the purpose of mandated task forces? Are reports and recommendations issued only to end up on dusty shelves?

“I can tell you specifically what has happened in Massachusetts,” White said. “A number of bills have been submitted to the Legislature (SB 2027), which was reported favorably out of the Joint Education Committee and referred to the Senate Ways and Means Committee.” The Senate Ways and Means Committee has not yet acted on the bills (subsumed under S.B. 2027).

It will be interesting to see how Illinois reacts after its civic education task force releases its findings. In Massachusetts, the commission showed it had more value than the outward appearance of motion.

This is the second in a series of reports examining state initiatives related to civic education. Brady Delander is a researcher for the [National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement](#) at the Education Commission of the States. He can be reached at bdelander@ecs.org. Visit ECS at <http://www.ecs.org/>.