



# EDUCATION TRENDS



TUNE IN.  
Explore emerging education developments.

## The Civics Education Initiative 2015-2016

HUNTER RAILEY, Author  
JAN BRENNAN, Contributor

The Civics Education Initiative is a project of the Joe Foss Institute, an organization dedicated to shaping “young Americans for civic engagement as voters and informed members of their community.” The initiative, which launched in 2015, has three goals:

1. To ensure students graduate with the tools they need to become informed and engaged citizens.
2. To put civic education back in classrooms across the country.
3. To serve as the first step in expanding civic awareness and learning for students.

The Civics Education Initiative advocates that states require high school students to take and pass the United States Citizenship Civics Test to graduate. The 100-question test draws from basic history and civic

facts included in the test administered by the U. S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), which all applicants for U.S. citizenship must pass to become a legal citizen. The initiative is premised upon the assumption that “if it is tested, it is taught.”

This Education Trends report covers 2015-2016 legislative actions pertaining to the Civics Education Initiative and documents the continued impact of the initiative, which runs through Sept. 17, 2017 – the 230th anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution. Policymakers’ interest in the Civic Education Initiative demonstrates increasing recognition that the value of education extends beyond college and career readiness to include preparation for citizenship and democratic participation.

An **increasing number** of states are demonstrating legislative interest in enforcing a **civic knowledge high school graduation requirement**.

Research shows that a **lack of civic knowledge** contributes to increases in **social polarization, ideological sorting** and **distrust** or **hostility** toward opposing views.

Not all states use the **Civics Education Initiative model**. States use a **variety of assessments** to measure students’ civic learning.



This legislative update provides background information on the value of civic education, the current status of state legislation with respect to the Civic Education Initiative, and a brief overview of state assessment options for measuring student outcomes in civic education.

## Civic Learning in the United States

The need for improvement in civic knowledge in the U.S. has become increasingly apparent. A survey conducted in 2016 by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center shows that American adults know surprisingly little about the U.S. government, with the majority of respondents unable to answer basic factual questions.<sup>1</sup> For example, according to the survey, only 26 percent of adults were able to correctly identify all three branches of the U.S. government, while more (31 percent) could not name even one.<sup>2</sup>

Recent thinking on civic learning underscores the need for civic skills and dispositions, in addition to civic knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Civic skills allow youth to identify, analyze and address real civic issues, as well as understand different points of view and connect democratic principles to life experiences. Civic dispositions refer to developing a sense of responsibility for the rights and welfare of others and the personal efficacy that individuals can make a difference through civic engagement. Analysis shows a decline in key measures of civic disposition and skill and indicates larger issues that extend beyond schools and students.<sup>4</sup>

Research shows a variety of negative effects arise when the general public lacks basic knowledge about their government and how it works. Low levels of civic knowledge are a barrier to overcoming misperceptions about government, and in some cases, have been shown to contribute to the spread of such misperceptions.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, research has shown that over the past two decades, the general public has increasingly adopted partisan mindsets as a core part of personal identity. This has led to large portions of the public sorting into ideologically similar groups.<sup>6</sup>

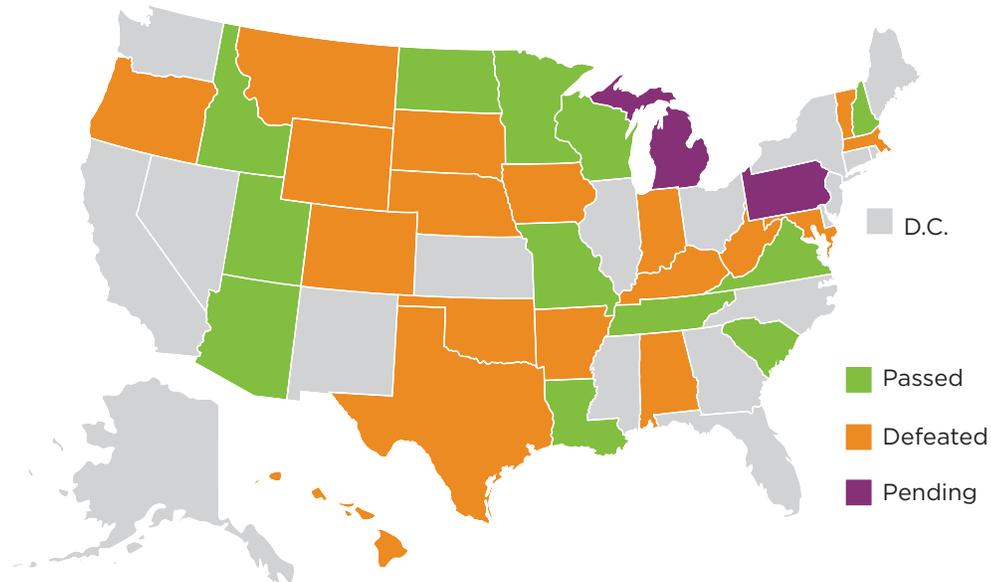
These dynamics combine to create a context in which members of the general public are inherently distrustful of those holding views different from their own. In recent years, anger and fear of opposing views has driven civic engagement in the political sphere, rather than a desire for engagement in civil discourse.<sup>7</sup> The Pew Research Center confirms this trend. A 2016 survey shows Americans hold extremely unfavorable views – for the first time since the poll began in 1992 – of opposing party supporters.<sup>8</sup>

Despite problematic trends in civic learning outcomes and political attitudes, research demonstrates that enhancing student understanding of civic life acts as a buffer against polarizing trends and promotes a more inclusive civic environment.<sup>9</sup> Legislative activity in multiple states that requires high school students to have basic civic knowledge acknowledges the need for this type of education.



# Civics Education Initiative 2015-2016 Legislative Recap

In 2015, Arizona became the first state to pass the Civics Education Initiative by requiring high school students to pass a civics test based on the United States Immigration and Naturalization exam questions to graduate.<sup>10</sup> Twelve states have added the citizenship test requirement.



The following status of legislation is accurate as of Sept. 1, 2016:

*Four States passed the Civics Education Initiative in 2016:*

- **Minnesota H.F. 1497:** Attached to budget and signed by governor on June 1, 2016.<sup>1</sup>
- **Missouri H.B. 1646:** Signed by governor on June 22, 2016.
- **New Hampshire S.B. 157:** Signed by governor on March 21, 2016. Testing requirements can be met through locally developed assessments that include a mix of federal, state and local facts. Additionally, the state allows districts to provide a certificate for students passing the test.
- **Virginia H.B. 36:** House and Senate agree to governor’s recommendations on April 20, 2016.

Eight states passed the Civics Education Initiative in 2015:

- **Arizona H.B. 2064:** Signed by the governor on Jan. 15, 2015.
- **Idaho S.B. 1071:** Signed by the governor on April 9, 2015.
- **Louisiana S.B. 283:** Signed by governor on July 1, 2015.
- **North Dakota H.B. 1087:** Signed by the governor on Jan. 30, 2015.
- **South Carolina S. 437:** Signed by governor on June 3, 2015.

<sup>1</sup> Attached to HF2749, Article 25, Sections 3-4



- **Tennessee** *H.B. 0010*: Signed by the governor on May 20, 2015.
- **Utah** *S.B. 0060*: Signed by the governor on March 30, 2015.
- **Wisconsin** *S.B. 21*: Signed by governor on July 13, 2015.<sup>ii</sup>

*Two states with bills in committee:*

- **Michigan** *H.B. 4136*: Referred to Senate Committee on Education on June 1, 2016.
- **Pennsylvania** *H.B. 1858*: Re-referred to House Education Committee on June 28, 2016.

*Eighteen States failed to pass Civic Education Initiative legislation in 2015-2016:*

- **Alabama** *S.B. 89*: Indefinitely postponed 2016.  
*S.B. 161*: Died in committee 2015.
- **Arkansas** *S.B. 878*: Died in committee 2015.
- **Colorado** *S.B. 148*: Failed on third reading 2016.
- **Hawaii** *H.B. 1122*: Carried over to 2016 session and died.
- **Indiana** *S.B. 0269*: Defeated in committee 2015.
- **Iowa** *H.F. 175*: Died in committee 2015.
- **Kentucky** *S.B. 192*: Died in committee 2016.
- **Maryland** *H.B. 0324*: Died after introduction 2016.  
*H.B. 1200* and *S.B. 806*: Died in committee in 2015 session.
- **Massachusetts** *H. 3224*: Attached to a study order in 2016.
- **Montana** *H.B. 520*: Died after introduction in 2015.
- **Nebraska** *L.B. 868*: Indefinitely postponed 2016.
- **Oklahoma** *H.B. 2860*: Died in committee 2016.
- **Oregon** *H.B. 2977*: Died in committee 2015.
- **South Dakota** *S.B. 164*: Withdrawn at the request of prime sponsor 2015.
- **Texas** *H.B. 1139*: Died in committee 2015.
- **Vermont** *H. 637*: Died in committee 2016.
- **West Virginia** *S.B. 669*: Died in committee 2016.
- **Wyoming** *H.B. 0196*: Died in committee 2015.

<sup>ii</sup>Civics test included in biennial budget during the amending process. Language is found in Section 3266R, 118.33(1m)(a)1.

## Civics Education Initiative Variations

Several states have adopted the Civics Education Initiative, but with some variation.

Tennessee's version of the Civics Education Initiative establishes a graduation requirement that high school students take a 25- to 50-question civics test drawn from the citizenship exam, but the bill does not require that a student pass the test to graduate. A distinction in the bill is that Tennessee incentivizes civic education through the "United States civics all-star school" designation, which recognizes schools in which all members of the graduating class pass the required test.

New Hampshire customized the graduation requirement, calling for passage of a locally developed government and civics competency assessment, rather than specifying that questions be drawn only from the USCIS citizenship test. The state allows questions about government structures, history and leaders of New Hampshire to be included in the exam. New Hampshire also incorporates a recognition incentive, in this case, directed at individual students who pass the test. The state authorizes school districts to issue civic competency certificates to students who pass the exam.

South Dakota did not adopt the Civics Education Initiative test requirement, but inspired by the initiative, adopted Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 6 on March 4, 2015. The resolution requires students to successfully complete a U.S. government class that includes the content from the USCIS citizenship test for high school graduation.

## State Assessment Variations

The Civics Education Initiative is not the only way states attempt to engage students in civic learning. Some states have adopted alternative methods to test students' civic knowledge. Variations include:

**Civics Tests in Accountability Measures** - In the 2014-2015 school year, Florida implemented a high stakes testing requirement for civics. The Florida Department of Education created the civics end-of-course state assessment, along with assessments in science and math. Building on recent developments in civic education, the assessment addresses civic knowledge, skills and dispositions. Student performance on the end-of-course civics test makes up 30 percent of the student's final course grade and results are included in a school's accountability indicators.<sup>11</sup>

**Government Assessments** - While some states adopt assessments that deal with civic life more broadly, Maryland has framed its assessment around the narrower topic of government. The state requires students to meet the twin expectations of a demonstrated understanding of the structure and function of government and politics in the U.S., and also evaluate how government maintains "a balance between protecting rights and maintaining order."<sup>12</sup>

**Project-Based Assessments** - Washington requires students to complete project-based assessments in order to determine students' levels of civic knowledge. Developed by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the assessments are "multi-stepped tasks or projects aligned to specific state standards, which target skills and knowledge necessary for engaged, informed citizenship."<sup>13</sup> According to the state, the project-based assessments address the conceptual nature of social studies and require students to develop the practical skill necessary to be an engaged citizen.<sup>14</sup>

## Endnotes

1. "Americans' knowledge of the branches of government is declining," Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2016. <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-knowledge-of-the-branches-of-government-is-declining/>
2. Ibid.
3. "Civic Competencies," Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2016, <http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/educators/civic-competencies>.
4. Richard J. Coley and Andrew Sum, "Fault Lines in Our Democracy: Civic Knowledge, Voting Behavior, and Civic Engagement in the United States," (Princeton: Educational Testing Services, 2012), [http://www.ets.org/s/research/19386/rsc/pdf/18719\\_fault\\_lines\\_report.pdf](http://www.ets.org/s/research/19386/rsc/pdf/18719_fault_lines_report.pdf).
5. Brendan Nyhan & Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* (2010): 32.
6. Lilliana Mason, "A Cross-Cutting Calm: How Social Sorting Drives Affective Polarization," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (2016): 80.
7. Pew Research Center, *Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016: Highly negative views of the opposing party – and its members*, (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2016), <http://www.people-press.org/files/2016/06/06-22-16-Partisanship-and-animosity-release.pdf>.
8. Ibid.
9. Debbie Van Camp and Stacey-Ann Baugh, "Encouraging Civic Knowledge and Engagement: Exploring Current Events through a Psychological Lens," *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (2016): 16(2).; Joseph E. Kahne and Susan E. Spote, "Developing Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning Opportunities on Students' Commitment to Civic Participation," *American Educational Research Journal* (2008): 45(3).
10. Arizona Department of Education, "Civics Test and Administration Manual," (Phoenix: Arizona Department of Education, 2015), [https://www.azed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/civics-test-administration-manual\\_final.pdf](https://www.azed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/civics-test-administration-manual_final.pdf).
11. Fla. Stat. § 1008.22(3)(c)(2)(b); Fla. Stat. §1008.34(3)(c)(1)
12. Maryland Department of Education, "Civics Standards," (Baltimore: Maryland Department of Education, 2016), <http://mdk12.msde.maryland.gov/instruction/hsvsc/government/standard1.html>
13. Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, "OSPI-Developed Social Studies Assessments," (Olympia: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2012), <http://www.k12.wa.us/socialStudies/WhatAreCBAs.aspx>; Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, "Washington Social Studies Standards," (Olympia: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2013), <http://www.k12.wa.us/SocialStudies/pubdocs/SocialStudiesStandards.pdf>.
14. Ibid.

## AUTHORS

*Hunter Railey is a policy researcher with Education Commission of the States. He has his master's degree in comparative politics from the American University and his bachelor's in political science from the University of Denver. In his spare time, Hunter can be found running or cycling on the trails around Denver. Contact Hunter at [hrailey@ecs.org](mailto:hrailey@ecs.org) or 303.299.3698.*

*Jan Brennan is a project leader with Education Commission of the States' National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement, supporting the development and success of programs that prepare students for full participation in democratic life. Outside of the office, Jan plays bass, runs agility courses with Chase the Dog and putters in the yard with her partner Michael. Contact Jan at [jbrennan@ecs.org](mailto:jbrennan@ecs.org) or 303.299.3661.*

© 2016 by the Education Commission of the States. All rights reserved. Education Commission of the States encourages its readers to share our information with others. To request permission to reprint or excerpt some of our material, please contact us at (303) 299.3609 or email [askinner@ecs.org](mailto:askinner@ecs.org).

Education Commission of the States | 700 Broadway Suite 810 Denver, CO 80203

