

## **America’s Civic Learning crisis: Preparation for informed and engaged citizenship is the co-equal goal of education: A Fact Sheet.**

- Recognizing that individuals do not automatically become responsible participating citizens but must be educated for citizenship, the founders of our universal system of free public education made education for citizenship a core part of the mission of public education, equal to workplace preparation. This determination to educate young Americans about their rights and responsibilities as citizens is known as the civic mission of schools.
- Each state’s constitution or public education establishment statutes and codes acknowledge the civic mission of schools.
- Americans profess that the civic mission of schools is an essential—if not *the* essential—purpose of education. Over the course of 33 years of Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polling on American attitudes on education, Americans have overwhelmingly concurred with the statement that “educating young people for responsible citizenship” should be the primary goal of our schools. Their conviction that the school’s central mission is educating young people for citizenship has not wavered over time, and it is consistent whether or not respondents have children in school and whether or not their children are in public or private school. (Annual Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools)
- In a 2004 poll 91% of adults responded that they were more likely to support policymakers who support strengthening civic education in the schools. (“Citizenship: A Challenge for All Generations,” available at [www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org), ‘Trust for Representative Democracy’)
- Civic education helps form the attitudes of students in ways employers report seeking in their employees. Students who experience high quality civic learning are more tolerant of others, more willing to listen to differing points of view and take greater responsibility for their actions and to improve their communities. (Study conducted by Dr. Judith Torney-Purta for the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools released October 2009, contact [ted@ncss.org](mailto:ted@ncss.org) for study details or visit [www.civicmissionofschools.org](http://www.civicmissionofschools.org) )

### **The decline of civic learning in American schools**

- In recent years, civic learning has been increasingly pushed aside. Until the 1960s, three courses in civics and government were common in American high schools, and two of them (“civics” and “problems of democracy”) explored the role of citizens and encouraged students to discuss current issues. Today those courses are very rare. What remains is a course on “American government” that usually spends little time on how people can – and why they should – participate as citizens. (Survey of state and district policies from

Education Commission of the States, National Center for Learning and Citizenship,  
[www.ecs.org/ecsmain.asp?page=/html/ProjectsPartners/nclc/nclc\\_main.htm](http://www.ecs.org/ecsmain.asp?page=/html/ProjectsPartners/nclc/nclc_main.htm))

- This remaining course is usually offered in the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade, which is both too little and too late. And, it completely misses the large number of students who drop out before their senior year and who are arguably in the greatest need of understanding their rights and responsibilities as citizens. (See above, NCLC @ ECS state and district policies database)
- In the elementary grades civic learning used to be woven through the curriculum. Today, slightly more than a third of teachers report covering civic education related subjects on a regular basis. (“Civics 2006: the Nation’s Report Card,” National Assessment of Educational Progress, administered by the National Assessment Governing Board)
- Two-thirds of students scored below "proficient" on the last national civics assessment administered in 2006, and 72% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders surveyed could not identify the historical purpose of the Declaration of Independence. These results are the same as the results of the last National Assessment in Civics conducted in 1998. (“Civics 2006: the Nation’s Report Card,” National Assessment of Educational Progress, administered by the National Assessment Governing Board)
- Although every state has adopted Standards of Learning in civics and government or Standards that address civic education in other subjects, a 2003 study by the Albert Shanker Institute found that the majority of what passes for state standards in the subject are overly broad, concentrate too much on the historical aspects of civic learning rather than the relevance of citizenship and civic participation to students lives, and are unrealistic to cover in the amount of time a teacher is allowed to spend on the subject. (“Educating Democracy: State Standards to Ensure a Civic Core,” by Paul Gagnon)
- As of 2010, only 21 states include civic learning in their state assessment / accountability systems, generally as part of an overall social studies assessment, including history, geography, state history and economics. These tests concentrate on factual knowledge that can be measured on a ‘true / false fill in the bubble’ test format, rather than determining if the student knows why and how a citizen should be engaged. (NCLC @ ECS state policies database)
- In far too many schools, civics courses are taught through a teacher dominated lecture format rather than a student centered research and inquiry approach that makes the subject more interesting and engaging to the student. (IEA Civic Education Study, Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2004, Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald & Schulz, 2001)
- In a 2005 study of school district policies and practice, the New Jersey Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools found that only 39% of districts had a required course in civic education. The same survey found that just 35% of districts offered in-service training opportunities for teachers in civic learning.

- In a 2007 survey of Tennessee Schools 69% of schools report that their school district does not have a required civics course; 75% of schools report that their district does not offer any elective courses in civics and just 24% report providing professional development for civics teachers. (Arizona, New Jersey and Tennessee surveys available by contacting ted@ncss.org)
- In a 2006 study of Arizona school districts, the Arizona Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools found that 53% of teachers had never been given in-service professional development in civic learning. The same survey found that 64% of responding districts were just somewhat satisfied that their civic education programs were creating informed active and engaged citizens; only 17% of districts reported being highly satisfied that their programs were having the desired result. (Both Arizona & New Jersey surveys available by contacting ted@ncss.org )

### **If it isn't tested, it isn't taught**

Arguably, one of the greatest factors undermining high quality civic education in schools today are the requirements of state assessments and the Federal 'No Child Left Behind' Act (NCLB) which largely ignore the civic mission of schools in favor of concentrating on Math and Reading:

- In a 2006 study by the Center for Education Policy (CEP) of 299 representative school districts in all fifty states, 71% of the surveyed districts reported they have reduced instructional time in at least one other subject to make more time for reading and math. In some districts struggling to meet the requirements of the NCLB Act, they have had to double the amount of time allotted for reading and math, sometimes cutting out other subjects all together, far too often cutting out civic learning and the social studies.
- Within state accountability / assessment systems, only 21 states provide for testing in the social studies that includes civic education related test items.

**The view from the classroom...what front-line civics teachers report: *Social studies teachers believe their subject area is not viewed as a top priority—and testing is partly to blame.***

In September 2010, the American Enterprise Institute released a study of front-line civics/social studies teachers on their classroom practice and problems they encounter in teaching high quality civic learning:

- Forty-five percent say their school district treats social studies as “an absolutely essential subject area,” while 43 percent say it is considered “important but not essential.”
- More than four in ten (45 percent) say the social studies curriculum at their high school has been deemphasized as a result of NCLB, though 39 percent say it is “holding its own.”

- Seven in ten (70 percent) say social studies classes are a lower priority because of pressure to show progress on statewide math and language arts tests.
- Social studies teachers want to hop on the testing bandwagon: 93 percent say “social studies should be part of every state’s set of standards and testing.”

**Students do not have equal access to quality civic-learning opportunities:**

- High school students attending higher-SES schools, those who are college-bound, and students who are white get more high quality civic-learning opportunities than low-income students, those who are not going to college, and students of color. (Kahne, J. and Middaugh, E., 2008).
- College-bound young people (about half the young population) are much more civically involved than their non-college-bound peers. Rates of voting and volunteering are at least twice as high for those who attend college (CIRCLE, 2009).
- Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native students scored significantly lower than white students in national assessments. While these groups made some gains since the 1998 NAEP assessment in civics, the 2006 NAEP results still showed significant achievement gaps as compared to white students for each of these groups at the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades.(NAEP, Civics, 2006)
- On the latest international assessment of civic knowledge, American students as a whole performed slightly above average, but the gaps between the most informed and least informed were among the worst in the world (IEA Civic Education Study).

**Federal level support for civic learning is far below support for other subjects:**

While most education funding is provided by states and local districts, the Federal government plays an important role in providing funding for innovation and research.

- Current federal funding for civic education is far below other academic subjects. The federal government spends \$25.63 per US K-12 student for reading; \$19.45 for science, technology and math; \$2.44 for history; and only about \$0.50 on civic education. (U.S. Department of Education data).

*A note on nomenclature: the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools uses the term Civic Learning to convey the necessary elements of effective civic education. These elements include classroom instruction in civics & government, history, economics, law and geography; service learning linked to classroom learning; experiential learning; learning through participation in models and simulations of democratic processes; guided classroom discussion of current issues and events, and meaningful participation in school governance.*

For more information please visit [www.civicmissionofschools.org](http://www.civicmissionofschools.org) or contact Ted McConnell, Executive Director of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools at [ted@ncss.org](mailto:ted@ncss.org)