

Committee Hearing Talking Points – Civics Education Initiative

Lucian Spataro Jr., Ph.D.

Opening Remarks and Quotations

Mark Twain once said, “Citizenship is what makes a republic.” Ask 10 adults what citizenship means to them and you’ll probably get 10 different answers. Ask 10 kids the same question and chances are you’ll get a shrug of the shoulders. Of course this won’t be the case for all youth, but numerous studies have shown that a vast majority of America’s K-12 students lack the basic understanding of how our country was founded, how it is governed and what it means to be a citizen in our democratic system.

One of the primary purposes of establishing public schools, as envisioned by Thomas Jefferson two hundred years ago, was to inculcate in our youth the civic virtues that would sustain our fledgling Republic.

American leaders, from Jefferson to Roosevelt, knew that informing and engaging the next generation of Americans on basic civics was vital to the survival of our republic. Unfortunately, 227 years after the signing of the Constitution, few American students understand basic facts about our government, its creation, or how it works.

Former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor has termed this situation “the quiet crisis” in education, but I really believe it is the quiet crisis in America. I’m talking, of course, about the crisis in civics education. Our young people today face a crisis of knowledge and understanding of our Republic and the liberties granted in the Founding Documents. This civics education gap is a casualty of our hyper-focus on reading, math, science and technology.

What is the Civics Education Initiative?

- The Civics Education Initiative is a simple concept. It requires high school students, as a condition for graduation, to pass a test on the 100 basic facts of U.S. history and civics taken from the United States Citizenship Civics Test – the test all new U.S. citizens must pass (91% of immigrants pass on their first attempt).

The goal is to pass legislation in all 50 states by September 17, 2017, the 230th anniversary of the U.S. Constitution

The Civics Education Initiative is a first step to ensure all students are taught basic civics about how our government works and who we are as a nation; facts every student should know to be ready for active, engaged citizenship.

Who is behind this?

The Civics Education Initiative was created in 2014 by the Joe Foss Institute, a non-profit, nonpartisan organization focused on closing the civics education gap and preparing America’s youth for civic engagement.

The Joe Foss Institute is the enduring vision and legacy of the late Joe Foss, WWII Marine Corps flying ace and Congressional Medal of Honor recipient, who founded JFI in 2001 with his wife, Didi Foss. Since then, JFI has served nearly 2 million students nationally through its programs, including the Veterans Inspiring Patriotism (VIP) program which recruits and trains veterans to make classroom presentations in elementary and secondary schools and deliver educational materials including the U.S. flag and copies of the Declaration of Independence, Constitution and Bill of Rights.

About the Initiative

Prior to becoming an American citizen, immigrants must pass a test on basic facts of United States history and government. Over 91% of new immigrants pass the test on their first attempt.

Unfortunately, the level of knowledge among everyday Americans and our native-born high school students is far lower. According to a survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, only 36% of Americans could name all three branches of government. Worse yet, only 38% could successfully identify which party controlled the U.S. Senate or House of Representatives.

What other states have passed this initiative?

Nine states passed the Civics Education Initiative in 2015 (AZ, ND, SD, UT, ID, TN, SC, LA, and WI). There are 26 additional states considering legislation for 2016. (Map included on CEI handout)

Public Support

We've surveyed Republicans, Democrats and Independents from across the country. Americans across the political spectrum overwhelmingly support measurable civics education in our schools. Over 70% of the public would vote YES on an initiative requiring high school students to pass the same civics exam that all immigrants must pass to become US citizens in order to graduate.

Additionally, over 65% of voters, left, right and independent, said they were more likely to support legislators who supported such a proposal.

Do we really have a civics education problem?

Absolutely, a number of studies and surveys confirm Americans (and young people specifically) are not proficient in the basics of U.S. civics, history and geography covered on the U.S. Customs and Immigrations Services (USCIS) citizenship civics exam.

What percentage of American high school students do you think can identify the presidents on a penny or a nickel? A recent study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that only 14 percent of high school seniors can identify Thomas Jefferson as the author of the Declaration of Independence. It doesn't get better. Only 9 percent of 4th grades can identify a picture of Abraham Lincoln and list two reasons why he was important

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 24 percent of U.S. high school students are proficient in civics, and studies by the Annenberg Public Policy Center show that a third of U.S. citizens can't name even one branch of our federal government.

Isn't this already covered by existing state standards?

The Civics Education Initiative is not intended to introduce new academic standards. Its purpose is to elevate these basic facts about our republic as the floor—not the ceiling—of what we believe students should know about how our government works and who we are as a nation.

The Civics Education Initiative isn't just another test standardized test. Working to learn the most basic, foundational facts about our nation and being exposed to the same test all new immigrants must take to become U.S. citizens is intended to be a *learning experience*. This is the civics equivalent of knowing your multiplication tables.

The concept would allow individual districts, schools and teachers to cover these basic facts and administer the test in a way they deem adequate and constructive. The test itself can be folded into existing curriculum and classroom activities so as to reduce the impact on class time. For example, it could be administered as a pre-test activity at the start of a course or the questions could be split up across different courses and units across several grade levels.

There is an online testing portal created expressly for the Civics Education Initiative, as well as a variety of free study guides. Regardless of exactly how each school implements the Civics Education Initiative, it clearly would be a very different experience than the standardized testing model in which students are pulled out of class.

This test will put undue pressure on school districts and our students.

That is certainly not the intent and it is a highly doubtful outcome. The legislation was specifically designed to provide districts, schools, teachers and students with maximum flexibility to make the Civics Education Initiative a meaningful and achievable goal for everyone.

Nearly 92% of new immigrants applying for citizenship pass this test on their first attempt. I would hope our students could do as well or better. Those that don't pass the first time can try as many times as they need and, again, the questions and study aides are already widely available and free online.

The initiative also promotes local control and maximum flexibility for individual school districts. In North Dakota for example, the law passed by CEI allowed for local school districts to determine how best to implement the test, rather than relying on a method mandated by the state.

The initiative is not intended to be a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, it establishes a baseline of knowledge to ensure that high school students know at least as much about the fundamentals of U.S.

government and law as foreign-born citizen. It is not a panacea or a silver bullet, but is meant to be a first step in the rebirth of civic education.

But isn't this test just rote memorization? We need our students to be thinking critically and analyzing why American Government is set up this way, not just reciting dates and facts.

If students are to analyze and think critically about civics and government, they need to first understand the basic facts about American government. Before kids learn to read they need to know the alphabet.

How much will the test cost to implement?

By using this well-established test and study materials that are already easily available online, as well as the online test portal provided by the Joe Foss Institute, several states that have passed this into law have estimated no fiscal impact. By promoting local control and maximum flexibility for individual school districts, costs are eliminated. Several states are allowing local school districts to determine how best to implement the test. By simply avoiding state-mandated reporting requirements the vast majority of costs associated with taking and passing the test are eliminated.

Do we really need a test for civics?

The old adage in education is, "If it is tested it is taught." That means this subject matter needs to be on a test that counts. Today, a test that counts is one that is tied to either graduation or performance for funding in the schools.

For any educators on the committee, I have a question for you. What is the most asked question by your students during a lecture? "Is this going to be on the test?" If you say YES, they all lean forward, take notes, and are engaged. On the other hand, if you say NO, the entire class leans back and you can see them relax and drift off. As this applies to civics and our country, we want our students leaning forward and engaged.

What about students with special needs?

Most states that have adopted the test allow for exemptions if deemed appropriate by a student's IEP team.

Closing

Informing and engaging the next generation of Americans on basic civics is vital to the survival of our Republic. The people who favor this initiative have widely differing political beliefs, but one thing we all share is the belief that it is important for all Americans to know about the first principles of our Constitutional government.

We believe our children should not only be expected to have a basic understanding of the principles upon which our nation was founded, they *deserve* to be armed with that information in their adult lives as they vote for representatives who will make critical decisions about the future of our nation, our state and our

local communities. The Civics Education Initiative is an important first step to ensure every student is equipped with that knowledge.

Help us put civics back on the front burner where it belongs so our students graduate as actively engaged and responsible citizens. Help us put civics on a test that matters. On behalf of our American veterans who have made great sacrifices to preserve the many freedoms we all enjoy, I ask that you join us in support of this legislation to ensure that all high school students learn these important facts about our government, our nation, our values and responsibilities in order to promote active citizenship.