



Educators, Policies Attempt to Increase Civic Education in States

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Across the states, educators and policymakers are leading a growing movement to increase and improve civic education in public schools, colleges and universities.

Surveys in recent years suggest that the public's faith in government has steadily declined, said Richard Greene, a senior fellow with The Council of State Governments, during a CSG eCademy webcast, "Creating Trust in Government Through Civics Education." One solution, he said, is to take steps to ensure that Americans are informed about how governments work and students receive education beyond the basic elements of the federal government. Other eCademy speakers discussed efforts currently underway in schools and states to increase civic education.

"It's hard to trust a government you don't understand," Greene said. "Unfortunately, civic education has taken a backseat in public schools and universities alike."

Dick Simpson, a professor of political science at the University of Illinois at Chicago, said schools and colleges are not educating about democracy on a significant scale.

"All of this started because there was a perceived problem of youth participation," Simpson said. "In most elections, particularly nonpresidential elections, the turnout has been low. Students have often voted at only 20 percent."

For decades, Simpson said, the only civic education required in Illinois was a constitution test. However, more civic education is now required because of recent legislation.

“Civic learning is vitally important...to the future of our country,” said Ted McConnell, executive director of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. “Self-government requires far more than voting in elections every four years. It requires citizens who are informed and thoughtful, who participate in their communities, are involved in the political process, and possess moral and civic virtues.”

But civic education has been in decline for the past four or five decades, he said. In the 1950s, some people started expressing concern that American students were behind in math and science.

“You can really date it to Sputnik, when the Soviets sent up that small basketball into space and our leaders began panicking in the 50s that our schools weren’t keeping up,” McConnell said.

Since 1998, barely a quarter of K-12 students have demonstrated a proficiency in civics on National Assessment of Educational Progress tests, which McConnell called the most reliable national measure of how students perform in civics.

“There are large gaps between student attainment between various population groups,” he said. “If you’re a student in a wealthy, suburban school, you’re going to get a pretty good amount of civic learning—not so if you’re in an inner-city school, a rural school, or a school facing testing pressure for not doing well in other subjects.”

Civic education prepares students for civil, productive discourse, skills also needed for success in college and the workplace, McConnell said.

Elements of an effective, well-rounded civic education include discussion of current events, service learning, extracurricular activities outside the classroom, school governments that involve student participation and simulations of the democratic process, he said.

“We are particularly excited about two aspects of ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act),” McConnell said, referring to the federal education reauthorization legislation passed in December 2015. The Student Support and Academic Enrichment grant in Title IV, sometimes called the Well-Rounded Education program, “allows states to empower school districts to concentrate on subjects that have previously been neglected.”

McConnell said state education departments have made plans to tell the U.S. Department of Education how they will expend the money.

In addition, McConnell said, “For the first time since 2012, there will be federal-level support funding for innovation in civics and American history. That’s part of the new ESSA law, and it reaffirms once again that civics, history, geography, economics, the social studies are one of the four core essential subjects for education—very important.”

“We urge all states to make sure high-quality civic learning is part of their student support and academic achievement grants,” he said.

At many colleges and universities, civic education is not driven by state policy, but there are some exceptions, said Andrew Seligsohn, president of Campus Compact, a national coalition of colleges and universities that promotes campus-based civic engagement.

Massachusetts identified in recent years a set of civic learning outcomes expected for graduates of all public colleges in the state. An action plan for the program includes incorporating civic learning into campus strategic plans; facilitating and supporting campus work in civic learning through conferences, meetings and funding for campus projects; developing new ways to measure and report student civic learning outcomes; and collaborating with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to develop a cross-sector plan for civic learning from kindergarten through college.

“Unfortunately, Massachusetts this year reduced funding to support this effort,” Seligsohn said. “So there is less support for campuses and, to a great extent, they’re kind of on their own again, trying to figure out how to do this. So it’s great policy; obviously it needs support to be effective in the long run.”

In Illinois, recent legislation requires that schools teach civic engagement in at least one course in every public high school.

“It’s not that we don’t know what should be done,” said Simpson of the University of Illinois at Chicago. “We can outline what should be done but there has been neither the requirement that we do it nor the money to allow us to do it.”

The full webcast is available online in the CSG Knowledge Center at <http://knowledgecenter.csg.org/kc/content/creating-trust-government-through-civics-education>.