

Alaska Legislative Task Force on Civics Education  
“Q&A in Civics Teaching, Training, and Program Opportunities”

Greg Huff – November 21, 2016

**1. Please describe your background and experience as an educator.**

I’ve had many wonderful opportunities and experiences as an educator. It began teaching fellow 7<sup>th</sup> graders the skills of coin and bottle collecting. This included how to find the items, how to determine the value and how to trade or sell. Coaching youth soccer solidified my understanding that I love to learn, explore new concepts and share what I’ve learned.

Below is a list of job experiences I’ve had which illustrates my compassion for learning and the broad range of experience to assist in the developing a quality Civic course for Alaskan students.

- a. Labor Economist, Alaska Department of Labor for 8 years: delivered dozens of presentations to teachers and students concerning the state of the Alaskan Economy and wrote articles in a monthly journal among other written reports.
- b. Masters in Teaching: taught Social Studies subjects for 24 years, primarily Economics, US Government including AP US Government. Also relevant to Civics I’ve taught US History, World Religions, World History and Sociology.
- c. Taught at Chugiak High, Benny Benson and Services High School. Each school gave me many insights to various student behaviors, learning skills, technology and parent involvement.
- d. Student government advisor at Chugiak and Service High School for a total of 12 years.
- e. Took students from Benny Benson to Washington DC with the We the People Program for 5 years.
- f. Social Department Chair at Service H.S. During restructuring of Social Studies curriculum and class sequencing.
- g. Member of many curriculum development committees throughout my 24 years at ASD.
- h. Taught many classes and workshops at ASD and MSBSD cross training and professional development classes in Social Studies.
- i. Adjunct Professor College of Education at Department at UAA (2 years).
- j. Program Director: Alaska Council for Economics: Taught dozens of classes and workshops for teachers on how to include Economic and Financial education into their curriculum and updated the knowledge of the subject. (2.5 years)
- k. Substitute taught in many K-8 classrooms since retirement providing with me with first-hand knowledge of the curriculum.

**2. In your opinion, what role does the Arts and Humanities play in preparing our next generation of citizens?**

Of key importance!

However, there has been a decades long downward trend of in the teaching of Arts and Humanities in schools, which, in my opinion has been due to the increased focus on STEM education.

I believe it's important to have knowledgeable scientists, technologist, engineers and mathematicians, but without Civics education students understanding of citizenship duties and rights lack. This lack of Civic knowledge likely decreases American unity and increases political and social strife.

Without the arts, societies are sterile. Throughout history the Arts have been an indicator of the strength and creativity of a society.

**3. Can you please describe the top extra-curricular opportunities provided students that help prepare students to be a more educated and prepared citizen?**

There are many extra-curricular opportunities for teachers to help prepare students becoming knowledgeable and active citizens. I've utilized all of the opportunities listed below.

- a. United Nations Forum
- b. Volunteerism
- c. Youth Court
- d. Debate Teams
- e. Student Government
- f. We the People Program
- g. Close up Program
- h. State government hearings (attendance and watching [www.360north.org](http://www.360north.org) programing)
- i. C-Span programing and lesson plans
- j. Visit local assembly or governing body meeting
- k. Many internet sites: including PolitiFact.com, FactCheck.org, KidsVotingusa.org, ProCon.org and Realclerpolitics.com

- 4. How important is it for the teachers, schools, and districts to build relationships with non-profit organizations and community members who are willing to support civics education and opportunities for youth? Please explain.**
- a. As the Program Director for Council of Economics I experienced firsthand the need for strong relationships with school districts, particularly in providing expertise for professional development programs.
  - b. Throughout my years as a teacher, non-profits provided areas of expertise, and materials that were not available in the district.
  - c. Nonprofits help support professional development events and opportunities for students to get first hand experiences from many volunteers.
- 5. Do you feel our education system is failing our students in terms of preparing them with civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions? Please explain.**
- a. Yes, throughout my experience of teaching US Government classes I believed the curriculum focused too much on teaching the detailed structure and history of the Federal System. I believe more focus should be shifted towards the history, structure and methods/tools to be involved in state and local government, native corporations or tribal councils. As Tip O'Neill once said "all government is local"  
(Tip O'Neill)
  - b. Students are lacking information in most US Government classes on how they can influence actions and laws in Alaska or their own communities that are fair and developed with cooperation and inclusion.
- 6. In your opinion, what is the greatest weakness in the educational system that could be addressed by our State that would make the largest impact on preparing our next generation of citizens?**
- a. Not enough focus on Civics and Social Studies in elementary curriculum and in middle and high school social studies courses that include government components, including the Alaska Studies curriculum are weak on teaching the rights, responsibilities, and duties of a citizen and the parts of government that address citizenship, the functions and powers of different branches of government and how citizens access them.
  - b. Not enough focus on State and Local government structure, power and politics.
    - i. Understanding US history and impacts to the economy.
    - ii. Options to solve the budget gap.
  - c. Lack of knowledge between the relationship of Alaska and the Federal Governments.

**7. Is there a curriculum, or program(s) in your opinion that clearly engages students and provides them the foundation and preparation needed to be a better citizen?**

There are several available, but need to be vetted by school districts for what fits best for their clients. I've included several links in the appendix.

**8. One of the items being discussed is adding a requirement that all Alaskan students must pass the Immigration and Naturalization test in order to graduate from a school in our State. In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of requiring this of all students in order to graduate?**

Yes it's a good goal for students to memorize those 100 items, but I'm not a strong advocate a test for graduation. But I do believe all students should take a pre and post -test in their civics course. The results should be monitored by school districts with schools responsible for improvement.

I used the immigration test in my government classes as part of student's final grade. Students took the immigration test the first or second day of class. The questions were also added to the final. They received additional points by the degree they improved from their pre-test score. There was significant improvement each year.

However there are little, if any, higher reasoning questions in the immigration test that would challenge student's higher levels of Blooms Taxonomy of the topics.

**9. Would you as an exceptional social studies educator endorse such a plan?**

Only partly, as mentioned above the Immigration Test lacks higher level of thinking questions, but it's a good start for strengthening the students understanding of the history, structure and powers of the Federal Government.

For me to support a plan it would also need to include strategies to increase students understanding of real life applications of how government works- Federal, State and local governments.

Students should know how laws, statutes, regulations can assist or hinder them in their personal goals.

In short, simple memorizing 100 items is not a solid goal. I would endorse the concept that the list of questions be inclusive as a portion a broader based Civics course and as a pre and post- test instrument. Bottom line- it should only be a portion of a strong Civics course.

I support a course that would increase civic and political understanding, action, techniques in confronting confirmation of information and teaching skills for civic discourse.

Although controversial issues are difficult to teach, due to the wide spectrum of personal beliefs and values of students and parents it's key that to teach skills in dealing with civic discourse.

**10. If you agree we could do better, please list in order of importance, from least to most important, your suggestions for strengthening civics in Alaska schools.**

- a. Redesign a Government course focused on Civics.
- b. Require a Civics oriented course for student graduation.
- c. Provide professional development for teacher preparation to teach the course.
- d. Civics course should include more State and Local and government issues, history, structure and powers of each entity. Also inclusive should be Issues important to students and their families.
- e. Develop online support for the courses.

## **Appendix A:**

### **Highly recommended Civic Websites**

<http://civicseducationinitiative.org/>

<http://civicseducationinitiative.org/alaska/>

<http://www.annenbergclassroom.org/page/best-civics-sites-for-teachers>

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iCivics: <https://www.icivics.org/>

<http://www.civiced.org/60-second-civics>

Citizen Advocacy Center <http://www.citizenadvocacycenter.org/civic-ed-lesson-plans.html>

<http://www.civiced.org/standards?page=912erica>

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/american-civics-parent>

[http://www.aei.org/publication/immigration-and-americas-broken-civics-education-system/?tfa\\_next=%2Fresponses%2Flast\\_success%26sid%3Dk8ga13stu0cqhmpmol7cfiekm6](http://www.aei.org/publication/immigration-and-americas-broken-civics-education-system/?tfa_next=%2Fresponses%2Flast_success%26sid%3Dk8ga13stu0cqhmpmol7cfiekm6)

<http://www.civiced.org/>

<http://www.citizenadvocacycenter.org/civic-ed-lesson-plans.html>

<https://www.amacad.org/content/publications/pubContent.aspx?d=1059>

[https://www.google.com/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&rlz=1C1CHFX\\_enUS591US593&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=civic%20definition](https://www.google.com/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&rlz=1C1CHFX_enUS591US593&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=civic%20definition)

<http://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/civics>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=98i8E\\_iYRz0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=98i8E_iYRz0)

<http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/ask-a-master-teacher/25062> (text book comparisons)

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Note: One approach to curriculum adoption is to use the leading experiential programs to create your own curriculum, rather than use a textbook as its centerpiece.