



Alaska
Legislative Task Force
On
Civics Education

DRAFT

PRELIMINARY REPORT

FEBRUARY 3, 2017
ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

“WELL, DOCTOR, WHAT HAVE WE GOT—A REPUBLIC OR A MONARCHY?”
“A REPUBLIC, IF YOU CAN KEEP IT.”

The above response is attributed to BENJAMIN FRANKLIN—at the close of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, when queried as he left Independence Hall on the final day of deliberation, in the notes of Dr. James McHenry, one of Maryland’s delegates to the Convention.

Executive Summary

The apparent political disinterest of young people in 21st century America poses a major political problem that threatens the future of the United States. If students in our education system, whom are appropriately and undeniably the ones holding the future of our republic in their hands, continue to behave apathetically, even disdainfully, about public life, volunteerism, politics, and our system of government, the nation will continue to erode. We could be facing the slow death of our republic, suffocated by inaction and indifference to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” as memorialized by this country’s Founding Fathers in the United States Declaration of Independence.

It is a duty of the American public education system and, ultimately, all adult citizens, to pass on the skills, knowledge and virtues necessary for younger generations to take up the torch and carry our country into the future. It is difficult, however, to find consensus on what and how such skills, knowledge and virtues should be taught.

There was a time when a teacher would casually introduce a public policy topic in the classroom, any issue of the day ranging from war to recycling, homelessness to gun control, and find students launching into a heated discussion amongst themselves, while the teacher had only to play referee. Students were constantly aware of politics around the country and also had an inherent sensitivity as to when they needed to act.

It seems we have lost something along the way. People are not voting. They are not involved. Barely half of qualified voters in Alaska actually vote. Students appear to be leaving our schools without an understanding or appreciation of what it means to be a citizen or to have civics duties.

Everyone seems to agree there is a systemic problem, but clearly identifying that problem remains elusive. Some school districts appear to be doing well with civics education, while others evidently are not. Many wish to offer prescriptive solutions without knowing whether the medicine will remedy the ailment. In any event this is an important conversation. If we

want government to be of the people, by the people, and for the people, than we have to address this challenge honestly, in partnership with educators and policy makers across the state and country.

The Alaska Legislature recognized a need to try to find a reasonable way to solve this problem by establishing a task force and offering some possible solutions. A major goal was seen in the form of reinvigorating our schools to engage students with their communities, with local leaders, service organizations, and gain more awareness of the public policy making process.

As was aptly put by Dr. Michael Johnson, Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, it comes to the same set of questions, and corresponding tools, as with any subject we ask of and apply to our students every day:

- 1) What do we want students to know and do? – effective standards;
- 2) How will we teach students those things? – effective instruction and curriculum;
- 3) How will we know if students have learned it? – effective assessments;
- 4) What will we do if they don't learn it? – effective interventions;
- 5) What will do if they already know it? – effective enrichment.

The Alaska Legislative Task Force therefore submits the following recommendations to help improve civics education and civics engagement in Alaska:

In this section, “Education Leaders” refers to The Alaska State Board of Education & Early Development (BOE), The Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (DEED), the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB), the Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA), the University of Alaska (UnivAK), and less formally, Principals, Teachers, and Students in Alaska, when appropriate and feasible.

TFCE REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The BOE should include in its Annual Report to the Alaska State Legislature, under AS 14.07.168, a detailed summary of the state of civics education and civics engagement among schools and students in Alaska. The report should include:
 - a. BOE recommendations for improving civics education and engagement in the state; and
 - b. Others efforts made to accomplish the goals and recommendations set forth in this report;

The reporting components of this section may sunset after a time of satisfactory improvement in civics education and engagement is consistently demonstrated in Alaska;

2. Education Leaders should launch a statewide effort to examine and adopt improved content standards, including specifically those for government and citizenship, and corresponding grade level expectations.
3. Education Leaders should write and make easily accessible a state civics curriculum for educators to have as an option for meeting state standards in civics.
4. Education Leaders should develop a state-sanctioned, stand alone optional course of study in civics education with focus on, but not limited to, the history of the United States, the U.S. Constitution, the Rule of Law, Citizenship, and Civic Duty.
5. Education Leaders should partner with existing non-profit service organizations that offer programs or best practices in civics education and civics engagement, such as those described in this report, to improve communication, awareness, accessibility, and delivery of such programs;
6. The Alaska State Legislature should establish a law requiring students in grades 7-12 to at least once take the civics portion of the naturalization test used by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services under 8 U.S.C. 1446(b), or a similar assessment developed, adopted, and administered by Education Leaders;
7. Education Leaders should recognize and honor teachers who demonstrate outstanding leadership and effectiveness in delivering and promoting civics education and civics engagement in Alaska.
8. Education Leaders should develop a system of portfolios, endorsements or commendations for inclusion on student transcripts, report cards, or diplomas, recognizing and honoring students who have excelled in civics education or civics engagement during their secondary educational career.
9. Education leaders should partner and collaborate to consider establishing new, or modifying existing, programs in Alaska that would qualify as a “Presidential Academy,” a “Congressional Academy,” as defined by ESSA, summer camps, a “School of Democracy,” or other endeavors to qualify for “Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants” available through ESSA, or other funding sources and programs promoting civics education and engagement.
10. Education Leaders and the Office of the Lt. Governor (LTGOV) should partner to identify and assign a person or persons to be responsible for the development and maintenance of a statewide clearinghouse or repository of civics education-related resources and curricula, to fulfill the following needs:
 - a. to increase awareness of current civics classroom resources and programs to educators;

- b. serve as a liaison for connecting civics or service organizations to educators;
- c. monitor and warehouse modern best practices in civics education and civics engagement programs;
- d. make current civics curriculum resources freely and easily accessible to educators and researchers throughout Alaska via the internet or other means;
- e. identify and connect educators with opportunities for professional teacher training and development in civics education and civics engagement programs;
- f. identify, foster, or secure funding sources for supporting civics education, curricula, programs, or training opportunities for educators and students; and
- g. play a leading role in the fulfillment of the recommendations contained in this report, and other findings as may arise, for the overall improvement of civics education delivery and engagement in Alaska.

FUNDING RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO THIS REPORT:

1. The Legislature should establish a fund called the “Civics Education & Engagement Fund,” (CEEF) comprised of monies received from federal, state, or other sources, for the purpose of supporting civics education and civics engagement in the state;
2. Initially capitalize and annually appropriate to the CEEF funds equal to 0.1% of the total amount appropriated as state aid to public schools as described in AS 14.17;
3. Money appropriated to the CEEF should be expended:
 - a. In a manner consistent with supporting the statewide coordination and maintenance of a civics education clearinghouse or repository; and
 - b. disbursed in an equitably proportionate manner consistent with school districts’ defined basic need for public school funding, as calculated in AS 14.17, for the express purpose of promoting civics classroom education and student-community engagement.
4. Education Leaders should partner with non-profit and service organizations, such as the Rasmussen Foundation, to identify and secure federal funding relating but not limited to grants that may be available through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), or other sources.