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COMPANION REPORT 50-State Comparison: Civic Education

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Understanding the current state policy environment for civic learning and engagement is a key contribution to fulfilling the mission of education; strengthening our democratic republic, as well as supporting academic

NCLCE reviews the status of civic education policies in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia (D.C.) in order to understand trends, content and policy issues in civic learning across the country. This companion report to the updated **50-State Comparison: Civic Education Policies** provides an overview of state legislation related to civic education.

While states may vary in their approach to civic learning and citizenship education, they all tend to address civics policies in statute, assessments, accountability, and curriculum and standards. The following sections highlight key findings in each of these areas.

STATES VARY CONSIDERABLY IN THE POLICY DEVICE AND MANNER IN WHICH THEY ADDRESS CIVIC EDUCATION IN STATUTE, ADMINISTRATIVE CODE, AND CURRICULUM AND STANDARDS FRAMEWORKS.

achievement and 21st Century workforce skills. The National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement (NCLCE), a center within Education Commission of the States, supports state education leaders in fostering civic learning and engagement for all students. Periodically,

More than half of the states require some form of civic education assessment.

The majority of states do not include civics, social studies or citizenship in their education accountability systems.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY:

Analysis in this report stems from an update to Education Commission of the States' 50-State Comparison: Civic Education Policies. The 50-State Comparison contains seven individual data points highlighting key aspects of state law and policy related to civic education. This update includes a review of state law, administrative code and, in some cases, state standards and curriculum guides for all 50 states plus D.C. This data provides a strong basis for evaluating the current state of civic and citizenship education in the United States.

State Statute

While every state addresses civic education in some way, 47 states and D.C. address civic education in statute generated through legislative action. However, laws vary considerably from state to state in the degree to which statutes mandate civic learning goals, curriculum and assessment. Civic learning and engagement policies are typically incorporated into social studies or character education statutes.

Some states have significant directives on civic and character education in state law, while others prefer to establish minimum guidelines and allow local school districts to develop and implement coursework and assessments.

In its most robust form, state statute establishes educational goals and skills related to civic learning and engagement, requirements for coursework subjects and content, assessment and accountability systems, and instructional pedagogies.

States including **Rhode Island** and **Tennessee** establish the purpose and goals of civic and citizenship education in state law. **Pennsylvania** not only specifies that students learn “their solemn duty and obligation to exercise intelligently their voting privilege and to understand the advantages of the American republican form of government as compared with other forms of government,”¹ but further specifies required courses and areas of study within civic education. The scope of civic learning commonly includes federal and state institutions and structures, historical documents such as the Constitution and Bill of Rights, principles of democracy, rule of law, elections and voting, rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and flag etiquette.

On the other end of the spectrum, state statutes may establish only a basic course requirement or recommendation and allow school districts to develop specific guidelines. **Hawaii** and **D.C.** statutes establish a minimum requirement that social studies be offered as a course of study. **Vermont** specifies a minimum course of study that includes citizenship, history, and Vermont and United States government. Similarly, **South Carolina** requires one year of instruction on the United States Constitution. **Virginia** requires local school boards to establish character education aligned with state board curriculum guidelines.

Assessments

A majority of states have mandated assessments in civics. In a smaller number of states, these assessments are tied to high-stakes accountability systems or graduation requirements. Thirty-seven states require assessments in civics, many as a part of state annual summative assessments and, in some states, as a condition of graduation. A review of the new database on state civics assessments reveals two distinct trends.

Most states require schools to administer assessments in social studies and/or civics, typically taking the form of an end-of-course exam.

States may require assessments to be administered annually or states may specify grade levels at which mandatory testing will occur. For example, **Oregon** statute includes history, geography, economics and civics in their assessment system, while Tennessee requires students to demonstrate “understanding and relevance of public policy, the structure of federal, state and local governments and both the Tennessee and United States’ constitutions.”² **Texas** requires civic testing only for eighth graders, while states like **Delaware** and **Georgia** require testing at multiple, specified grade levels. **Kansas** gives the state board of education discretion to determine three

grade levels at which social studies assessments will be administered. A limited number of states mandate or allow for non-tested assessments, such as portfolio or project-based assessments.

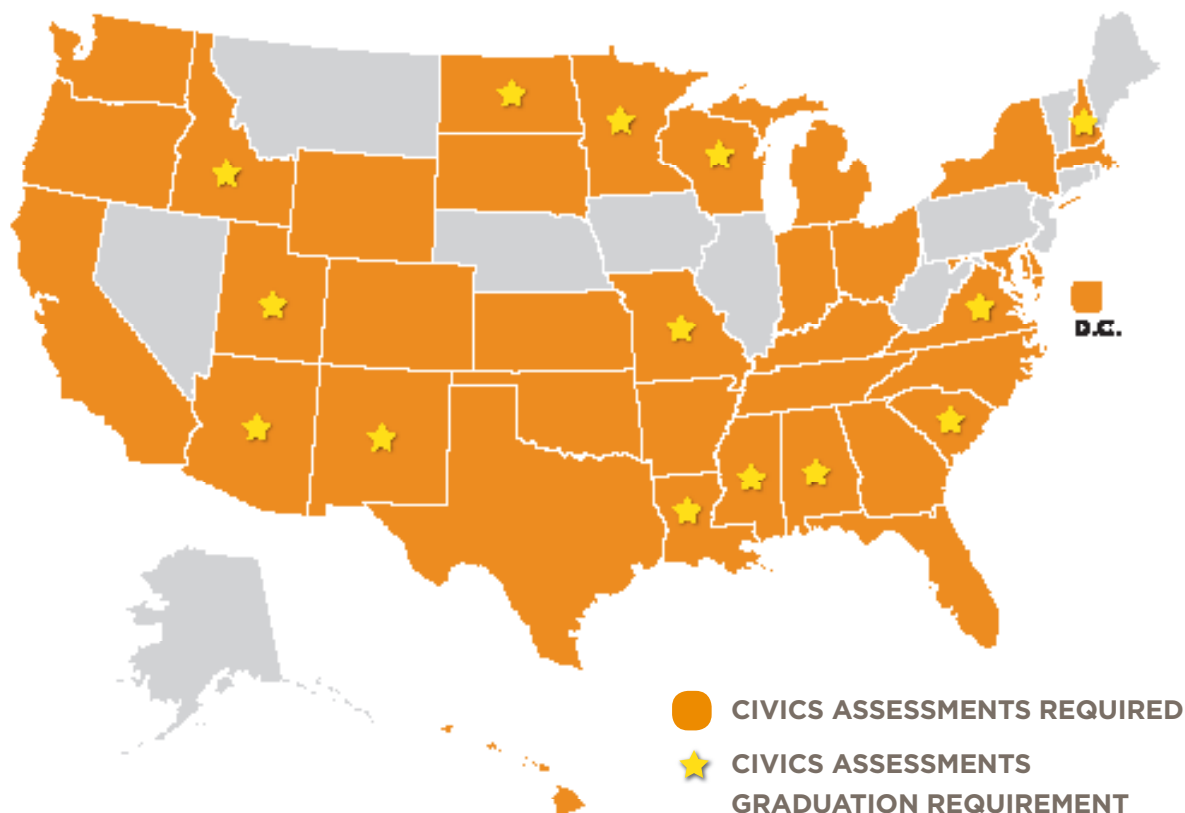
Fifteen states go further, making demonstrated proficiency on a social studies or civics test a condition of graduation from high school.

In the last two years, 12 states passed laws requiring successful passage of a civics test with questions drawn from the United States Immigration and Naturalization Test in order to receive a high school diploma. A recently published report from Education Commission of the States, [The Civic Education Initiative 2015 – 2016](#), provides detailed information about this policy trend. **Alabama**, **Mississippi** and **New Mexico** have maintained previously established test requirements for high school graduation.

GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

All **50 states plus the District of Columbia** have civics requirements for high school graduation. State requirements vary from minimal (two units of social studies in **Montana**) to specific (social studies that include citizenship education, history, social sciences and more in **Iowa**). While some states require students to fulfill a combination of United States government, history and economics, some states include goals related to helping students understand the dynamics of government and the student's responsibility for respecting, participating and contributing to those dynamics.

State Civic Assessments



Accountability

About half of the states with social studies or civics assessment requirements use the results for reporting purposes. Data indicates that 17 states include civics and social studies in their accountability systems. States typically include the results of civics assessments in school and district report cards, but there are variations in the type of assessment data reported. Iowa requires districts to report the percentage of high school graduates who complete a core program of three or more years of social studies, while **Ohio** district and school report cards include social studies test passage rates.

Social studies and civics proficiency measures may be a factor in district and school accountability, rather than being directly reported.

For example, **Louisiana** incorporates social studies assessment results in calculating school and district performance scores, along with other academic results and factors, such as attendance. Similarly, **Massachusetts** uses assessments in history and social studies as one metric in evaluating district and school performance.

Additionally, some states limit incorporating civics and social studies into accountability measures to specific grade levels.

For example, Iowa frames accountability measures around district performance and includes social studies metrics in that system by tracking the percentage of high school students completing a core program that includes social studies. Likewise, **Michigan** includes social studies in accountability for any school that educates students in ninth through 12 grade.

While state accountability systems may include measures of social studies or civics proficiency, data will be limited by the grade levels at which the state requires such assessments to be administered. Since only half of the states with assessment requirements incorporate these data into state accountability systems, the database demonstrates that in many states these tests do not serve a broader purpose.

Standards and Curriculum

States demonstrate a number of different practices when it comes to academic standards and curriculum.

Every state includes social studies in their academic standards in some form. Forty-eight of these states include civics specific language as a strand in their standards, meaning civics is a requirement for multiple grade levels.

Standards commonly call for students to demonstrate understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, responsible and effective civic participation, democratic beliefs and principles, political and legal processes, appreciation for diversity and commitment to the common good. In some cases, standards outline an active civic learning role for students. Hawaii standards include “demonstrating the role of a citizen in civic action by selecting a problem, gathering information, proposing a solution, creating an action plan, and showing evidence of implementation.”

A total of **20 states** provide curriculum frameworks to support instruction in the area of civics and government.

Some states provide detailed curriculum guides to support instruction, while others are more limited in their support. For instance, **California** provides one of the most robust civics curriculums, while on the other end of the spectrum, some states rely on third party organizations to provide teacher resources, such as the North Dakota Studies Project or the Minnesota Center for Social Studies Education. Instructional support often takes the form of outlining instructional strategies and providing lesson plans, unit outlines, as well as content samples and resources.

A significant influence on new state social studies and civics standards and curriculum is the 2013 *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards*.³ The C3 Framework, developed collaboratively by representatives from state education agencies, education stakeholder organizations and the National Council for the Social Studies, is centered on an inquiry arc as students develop questions, apply disciplinary concepts, evaluate sources and evidence, communicate conclusions and take informed action.

Concluding Thoughts and Policy Considerations

A 50-State review of state social studies and civic education policies allows identification of trends, distinctions and outliers. Civic education and government studies in K-12 education across the United States represent a diverse collection of practices, goals and governance approaches. The **50-State Comparison** may assist states in developing an understanding of policy practices to ensure students are prepared to participate as respectful and responsible citizens.

Further, surveying the range and scope of civic education policies points the way towards opportunity. As the nation begins to transition both in the education sphere as a result of ESSA and in the political sphere as a result of the 2016 election, policymakers may want to consider several important ideas when addressing civic and character education in the future:

- Capitalizing on assessment flexibility to consider more authentic and innovative learning assessments options to determine student progress in civic education and citizenship.
- Using opportunities to make measures of civic learning and engagement a part of education accountability and to ensure that accountability reporting provides meaningful and accessible information to parents and the public.
- Recognizing the important role citizenship and character education play in social and emotional development, 21st Century skills such as collaboration, communication and problem solving, workforce and career exploration, and post-secondary aspirations.
- Reporting on factors beyond academic testing results. Civic learning may drive alternative indicators and provide metrics for tracking this type of learning in a meaningful way.

Endnotes

1. 24 P. S. § 16-1605
2. Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-1028
3. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography and History (Silver Springs, MD: NCSS, 2013). <http://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/c3/C3-Framework-for-Social-Studies.pdf>

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