

LEGISLATIVE TASK FORCE ON CIVICS EDUCATION

INDIVIDUAL COMMENTS FROM TASK FORCE MEMBERS

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Response from anecdotal evidence tells us something is wrong, but honestly we don't have a lot of data on what this really means. Or even if there is something wrong. We have a feeling, from watching Comedians interviewing people on the street, but before we move strongly ahead, we need to make sure we are not wasting resources, among these being time, on the part of educators, students and families by steaming forward without a real problem.

To do that, I think we need to move back to a question I originally proposed weeks ago, which is...what do we mean by civics education? And that really means... what do we want? What outcomes? Do we really want just that students can correctly answer 6 questions out of 10 on a naturalization exam? Or do we want them actively engaged in the process of their nation? Or is there something else we want? While we have listened to a lot of expertise, I'm not sure we have come to a conclusion yet on either of these questions.

I also think that a survey might give us a picture of what is happening in different districts, but I don't know that it directs us to any action if we do not know how what they are doing is successful if we have not yet identified what is "success." I have a few observations:

First. I think we need to find an Alaskan Solution to an Alaskan Problem. While civics knowledge may be an issue nationally, I don't think we can develop a single solution for a problem which has multiple causes. I think we would be remiss if we just adopted a one prong solution and walked away thinking our job is done. Also, what works in California will not work here. Nor North Dakota. Or anyplace else. We live here knowing Alaska is Unique. Especially in its diversity. What will work in Bethel will not in Barrow. What works in Anchorage will not work in Skagway. This means that whatever decision we make MUST include some element of local control and input. Top down educational initiatives have always become the "flavor of the month" until they are proven wastes of time and money and then we move on to the next one.

Second. We need to identify things we are already doing well. I think this task force has seen a LOT of positive practices in Alaska. What I'm hearing from the different districts tells me that we are already doing a great deal in civics education. In fact, I'm convinced that the "problem" we are perceiving may be just that, largely perception, and not reality. By which I mean, the problem may not be a problem of information delivery, but may instead be related to any number of other issues which assault students: poverty, hunger, language proficiency, literacy, special education needs, substance abuse. The list goes on.

Programs like HOBY, Close Up, Youth Court, etc are great and are all over the state. We've heard from districts doing outstanding civics activities. I think we need to listen hard to what is being done and be very careful that whatever we implement doesn't throw the baby out with the bathwater. If we implement something that steals time from one of these great programs, we are not serving civics learning at all. We need to discover what the real problem is, and address that.

With respect to those who are considering adopting a test, I'd point out that the Joe Voss Institute, which is the source of the Civics Education Initiative and is trying to mandate the Naturalization Test is seeing only limited success nationally for the very reasons we've discussed here. Only 14 states have adopted the test as is. Many more have turned it down. For most states, they've found the test actually doesn't test what we really want as outcomes. The test only looks at federal information, it tests at the lowest level of

cognition and there is every indication that this information is lost over time. So in regards to assessment, we want to make sure we are properly assessing what we really want as outcomes.

As Superintendent McDonald said... we are already assessing students in every class they take. Assessment isn't the issue. Something else must be. I'm actually more interested in how other states have turned the Voss initiative upside down, and while they might consider the test, they are using it in different ways. I think we all agree that we want students to know the three branches of government, but I can assure you it is being taught, so there must be another reason besides simply memorizing the information that it is not sticking. I would submit it is context and use.

To that end, requiring a stand-alone class or a test will not fix the problem. Instead we need to make opportunities for students to engage in the community and actually USE the information they are getting in the classrooms. If you don't use it, you lose it. Mr. Keller gave a perfect example when he said he really didn't tie the classroom learning he had received to reality until he got involved in government.

To that end, I would propose the following: That we make a resolution to recommend all local districts adopt the following practices in their social studies departments with special focus on 2-6. And that they adopt some form of assessment, of their choosing, to measure the civics knowledge of students prior to graduation.

SIX PROVEN PRACTICES FOR EFFECTIVE CIVIC LEARNING

<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/10/48/11048.pdf>

1. Classroom Instruction: Schools should provide instruction in civics & government, history, economics, geography, law, and democracy. Formal instruction in these subjects increases civic knowledge and increases young people's tendency to engage in civic and political activities over the long term. However, schools should avoid teaching only rote facts about dry procedures, which is unlikely to benefit students and may actually alienate them from civic engagement.
2. Discussion of Current Events and Controversial Issues: Schools should incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events in to the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives. When students have an opportunity to discuss current issues in a classroom setting, they tend to have a greater interest in civic life and politics as well as improved critical thinking and communication skills.
3. Service-Learning: Schools should design and implement programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.
4. Extracurricular Activities: Schools should offer opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities outside of the classroom. Studies show that students who participate in extracurricular activities in school remain more civically engaged then those who did not, even decades later.
5. School Governance: Schools should encourage meaningful student participation in school governance. Giving students more opportunities to participate in the management of their classrooms and schools builds their civic skills and attitudes.
6. Simulations of Democratic Processes: Schools should encourage students to participate in simulations of democratic processes and procedures. Evidence shows that simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberation and democracy, leads to heightened civic/political knowledge and interest.