

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 3, 2016

8:02 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Wes Keller, Chair
Representative Liz Vazquez, Vice Chair
Representative Jim Colver
Representative Paul Seaton
Representative David Talerico
Representative Harriet Drummond
Representative Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Lora Reinbold

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

CS FOR SENATE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 1(EDC)
Relating to a legislative task force on civics education.

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SCR 1

SHORT TITLE: CIVICS EDUCATION TASK FORCE

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) STEVENS

01/21/15	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/21/15	(S)	EDC, FIN
02/26/15	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BUTROVICH 205
02/26/15	(S)	Heard & Held
02/26/15	(S)	MINUTE (EDC)
03/12/15	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BUTROVICH 205
03/12/15	(S)	Moved CSSCR 1(EDC) Out of Committee
03/12/15	(S)	MINUTE (EDC)
03/16/15	(S)	EDC RPT CS 4DP SAME TITLE
03/16/15	(S)	DP: DUNLEAVY, STEVENS, HUGGINS, GARDNER
03/25/15	(S)	FIN AT 2:00 PM SENATE FINANCE 532

03/25/15	(S)	CLEAN AIR ACT PLAN
04/09/15	(S)	FIN AT 1:30 PM SENATE FINANCE 532
04/09/15	(S)	Moved CS SCR 1(EDC) Out of Committee
04/09/15	(S)	MINUTE (FIN)
04/10/15	(S)	FIN RPT CS (EDC) 5DP 2NR
04/10/15	(S)	DP: KELLY, MACKINNON, BISHOP, DUNLEAVY, HOFFMAN
04/10/15	(S)	NR: MICCICHE, OLSON
04/13/15	(S)	TRANSMITTED TO (H)
04/13/15	(S)	VERSION: CSSCR 1(EDC)
04/13/15	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
04/13/15	(H)	EDC, FIN
02/03/16	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM CAPITOL 106

WITNESS REGISTER

SENATOR GARY STEVENS
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced SCR 1, as prime sponsor.

TIM LAMPKIN, Staff
Senator Gary Stevens
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented SCR 1, and responded to questions.

DR. LUCIAN SPATARO JR., PhD, Chair
Educational Initiatives
Joe Foss Institute
Phoenix, Arizona

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SCR 1.

DR. MICHAEL POLIAKOFF, Vice President of Policy
American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA)
Washington, D.C.

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SCR 1.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:02:08 AM](#)

CHAIR WES KELLER called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Representatives Keller, Seaton, Vazquez, Colver, Drummond, and Talerico were present at the call

to order. Representative Kreiss-Tomkins arrived as the meeting was in progress.

SCR 1-CIVICS EDUCATION TASK FORCE

8:02:39 AM

CHAIR KELLER announced that the only order of business would be CS FOR SENATE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 1(EDC), Relating to a legislative task force on civics education.

8:03:14 AM

SENATOR GARY STEVENS, Alaska State Legislature, introduced SCR 1, and began with a scenario from historic times, 1787, when the U.S. Constitution and other formative documents, were being written to create the republic we know today. He pointed out that keeping the republic was not assigned to the president, delegated to congress, or directed to the courts, but rather placed in the hands of every person for which the republic was formed. The qualities for keeping the republic, as an individual, must be passed down by parents and through the schools, which are often considered the guardians of democracy. Civics education ensures that each generation will understand and be ready to participate as a member of the republic. He emphasized the need for an engaging curriculum, which could include: U.S. history, current events, and simulations of government functions. Civic education is not currently receiving the attention which it deserves, he opined. The recent National Assessment of Educational Process (NAEP) scores indicate that only one-third of students are proficient in the knowledge of civics; two-thirds are deficient. Preparation for citizenship is one of the foundational principles in the American education system. Along with the importance for preparing students for college and careers, it is also important to prepare them for citizenship. He listed a number of benefits that have been shown as a result of civics education, which includes the probability that a person is more likely to engage in public debate, take an interest in government issues, and register to vote. Without civics, an understanding of each individual's responsibility, and the process, for keeping the republic strong, and democracy in action, is lacking. The proposed resolution is a pathway to remedy the situation.

8:07:48 AM

TIM LAMPKIN, Staff, Senator Gary Stevens, Alaska State Legislature, offered to provide members with a quiz.

CHAIR KELLER established that the quiz mentioned is the one immigrants, who are aspiring to become U.S. citizens, are required to pass.

[8:09:00 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE VAZQUEZ asked for the Senator's background in education.

SENATOR STEVENS reported that he holds a PhD, and, among other experiences, taught history and humanities at the college level for 25 years.

[8:09:44 AM](#)

MR. LAMPKIN reviewed the 12 members that would comprise the task force to be assembled, as established in the resolution, page 2, lines 23-31, and page 3, lines 1-9. The work would be accomplished over the interim and be reported to the legislature in 2017.

[8:11:51 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON asked whether there is intention to coordinate the task force meetings within the same time frame as the regular or a special session of the legislature, to minimize per diem costs.

MR. LAMPKIN responded that frugality would dictate that course, but it has not been decided.

SENATOR STEVENS acknowledged the benefit of coordinating the time frame for meetings.

[8:12:49 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE VAZQUEZ asked for the rationale of having a judge seated on the task force.

MR. LAMPKIN answered that the seat would be in keeping with the spirit of representing the three branches of the government on the task force; executive, legislative, and judicial branches would all be seated.

8:13:28 AM

CHAIR KELLER pointed out that he has sponsored similar legislation to establish a civics curriculum in the schools. The resolution being proposed differs from the bill, however, it would be good to see a melding of the issues into one piece of legislation. Additionally, he reported having recently visited a civics class in the Matanuska-Susitna School District and found it enlightening. The current event topics were well presented and the students were engaged, but the historical aspects of the founding documents had not been covered; a determination he was able to make by posing a few questions to the students.

8:17:30 AM

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON read from page 1, line 6, noting that a single course in civics is not the goal, as it calls for a broad based approach beginning in preschool and extending into college. He asked what class requirement structure the task force might consider.

SENATOR STEVENS said it's difficult to make a civics class a requirement, but aspects could be incorporated into any class. He reported that, in Boston, private industry was approached to support the public school effort, with good result. The task force is not expected to create curriculum or mandate specific requirements and assessments. The intent is to bring parties together to focus on the topic and consider possibilities.

8:20:52 AM

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON paraphrased from page 1, line 16, and page 2 lines 1-2, which read:

WHEREAS the state can help ensure that schools provide civil service opportunities for all students through the standards what schools set and the assessments and accountability measures the state chooses;

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON asked for clarity as to how the WHEREAS is to be implemented.

SENATOR STEVENS responded that the intent is to have the task force explore the issue, without creating mandates.

MR. LAMPKIN added that the specified language was crafted to provide latitude for incorporating civics activities into existing curriculum.

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON opined that clarifying the language would be helpful. Responding to Chair Keller, he added that the focus of the task force is unclear, and the mention of standards in the WHEREAS could be interpreted as a need to rewrite standards for inclusion of civics curriculum. The job of the task force would not be to write standards, but rather to explore means to enhance what exists, he surmised.

[8:23:30 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND turned to page 2, line 8, to paraphrase the language, which read:

(1) analyzing the current state of civics education in the state;

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND reported that an Anchorage School Board memorandum, dated March, 2011, indicating a plan for development of civics education. It mentions integrating civics into the elementary curriculum of the core subjects and the arts. It appears that school districts, certainly the Anchorage School District (ASD), are already addressing the issue and statewide coordination may be the next step, she opined.

[8:24:40 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE COLVER asked whether Senator Stevens expects to be seated on the task force, or his staff, to take the lead and chair the committee.

SENATOR STEVENS expressed interest in being appointed.

CHAIR KELLER opened public testimony.

[8:26:19 AM](#)

DR. LUCIAN SPATARO JR., PhD, Chair, Educational Initiatives, Joe Foss Institute, testified on SCR1, paraphrasing from a prepared statement, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Mark Twain once said, "Citizenship is what makes a republic." Ask 10 adults what citizenship means to

them and you'll probably get 10 different answers. Ask 10 kids the same question and chances are you'll get a shrug of the shoulders. Of course this won't be the case for all youth, but numerous studies have shown that a vast majority of America's K-12 students lack the basic understanding of how our country was founded, how it is governed and what it means to be a citizen in our democratic system. One of the primary purposes of establishing public schools, as envisioned by Thomas Jefferson two hundred years ago, was to inculcate in our youth the civic virtues that would sustain our fledgling Republic. American leaders, from Jefferson to Roosevelt, knew that informing and engaging the next generation of Americans on basic civics was vital to the survival of our republic. Unfortunately, 227 years after the signing of the Constitution, few American students understand basic facts about our government, its creation, or how it works.

Former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor has termed this situation "the quiet crisis" in education, but I really believe it is the quiet crisis in America. I'm talking, of course, about the crisis in civics education. Our young people today face a crisis of knowledge and understanding of our Republic and the liberties granted in the Founding Documents. This civics education gap is a casualty of our hyper-focus on reading, math, science and technology.

The Civics Education Initiative is a simple concept. It requires high school students, as a condition for graduation, to pass a test on the 100 basic facts of U.S. history and civics taken from the United States Citizenship Civics Test - the test all new U.S. citizens must pass (91% of immigrants pass on their first attempt). The goal is to pass legislation in all 50 states by September 17, 2017, the 230th anniversary of the U.S. Constitution/

The Civics Education Initiative is a first step to ensure all students are taught basic civics about how our government works and who we are as a nation; facts every student should know to be ready for active, engaged citizenship.

The Civics Education Initiative was created in 2014 by the Joe Foss Institute, a non-profit, nonpartisan organization focused on closing the civics education gap and preparing America's youth for civic engagement.

The Joe Foss Institute is the enduring vision and legacy of the late Joe Foss, WWII Marine Corps flying ace and Congressional Medal of Honor recipient, who founded JFI in 2001 with his wife, Didi Foss. Since then, JFI has served nearly 2 million students nationally through its programs, including the Veterans Inspiring Patriotism (VIP) program which recruits and trains veterans to make classroom presentations in elementary and secondary schools and deliver educational materials including the U.S. flag and copies of the Declaration of Independence, Constitution and Bill of Rights.

Prior to becoming an American citizen, immigrants must pass a test on basic facts of United States history and government. Over 91% of new immigrants pass the test on their first attempt. Unfortunately, the level of knowledge among everyday Americans and our native-born high school students is far lower. According to a survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, only 36% of Americans could name all three branches of government. Worse yet, only 38% could successfully identify which party controlled the U.S. Senate or House of Representatives.

Nine states passed the Civics Education Initiative in 2015 (AZ, ND, SD, UT, ID, TN, SC, LA, and WI). There are 26 additional states considering legislation for 2016.

We've surveyed Republicans, Democrats and Independents from across the country. Americans across the political spectrum overwhelmingly support measurable civics education in our schools. Over 70% of the public would vote YES on an initiative requiring high school students to pass the same civics exam that all immigrants must pass to become US citizens in order to graduate. Additionally, over 65% of voters, left, right and independent, said they were more likely to support legislators who supported such a proposal.

Do we really have a civics education problem? Absolutely, a number of studies and surveys confirm Americans (and young people specifically) are not proficient in the basics of U.S. civics, history and geography covered on the U.S. Customs and Immigrations Services (USCIS) citizenship civics exam.

What percentage of American high school students do you think can identify the presidents on a penny or a nickel? A recent study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that only 14 percent of high school seniors can identify Thomas Jefferson as the author of the Declaration of Independence. It doesn't get better. Only 9 percent of 4th grades can identify a picture of Abraham Lincoln and list two reasons why he was important.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 24 percent of U.S. high school students are proficient in civics, and studies by the Annenberg Public Policy Center show that a third of U.S. citizens can't name even one branch of our federal government.

Isn't this already covered by existing state standards? The Civics Education Initiative is not intended to introduce new academic standards. Its purpose is to elevate these basic facts about our republic as the floor – not the ceiling – of what we believe students should know about how our government works and who we are as a nation. The Civics Education Initiative isn't just another standardized test. Working to learn the most basic, foundational facts about our nation and being exposed to the same test all new immigrants must take to become U.S. citizens is intended to be a learning experience. This is the civics equivalent of knowing your multiplication tables.

The concept would allow individual districts, schools and teachers to cover these basic facts and administer the test in a way they deem adequate and constructive. The test itself can be folded into existing curriculum and classroom activities so as to reduce the impact on class time. For example, it could be administered as a pre-test activity at the start of a course or the

questions could be split up across different courses and units across several grade levels.

There is an online testing portal created expressly for the Civics Education Initiative, as well as a variety of free study guides. Regardless of exactly how each school implements the Civics Education Initiative, it clearly would be a very different experience than the standardized testing model in which students are pulled out of class.

This test will put undue pressure on school districts and our students. That is certainly not the intent and it is a highly doubtful outcome. The legislation was specifically designed to provide districts, schools, teachers and students with maximum flexibility to make the Civics Education Initiative a meaningful and achievable goal for everyone.

Nearly 92% of new immigrants applying for citizenship pass this test on their first attempt. I would hope our students could do as well or better. Those that don't pass the first time can try as many times as they need and, again, the questions and study aides are already widely available and free online.

The initiative also promotes local control and maximum flexibility for individual school districts. In North Dakota for example, the law passed by CEI allowed for local school districts to determine how best to implement the test, rather than relying on a method mandated by the state.

The initiative is not intended to be a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, it establishes a baseline of knowledge to ensure that high school students know at least as much about the fundamentals of U.S. government and law as foreign-born citizens. It is not a panacea or a silver bullet, but is meant to be a first step in the rebirth of civic education.

But isn't this test just rote memorization? We need our students to be thinking critically and analyzing why American Government is set up this way, not just reciting dates and facts.

If students are to analyze and think critically about civics and government, they need to first understand the basic facts about American government. Before kids learn to read they need to know the alphabet. How much will the test cost to implement?

By using this well-established test and study materials that are already easily available online, as well as the online test portal provided by the Joe Foss Institute, several states that have passed this into law have estimated no fiscal impact. By promoting local control and maximum flexibility for individual school districts, costs are eliminated. Several states are allowing local school districts to determine how best to implement the test. By simply avoiding state-mandated reporting requirements the vast majority of costs associated with taking and passing the test are eliminated.

Do we really need a test for civics?

The old adage in education is, "If it is tested it is taught." That means this subject matter needs to be on a test that counts. Today, a test that counts is one that is tied to either graduation or performance for funding in the schools.

For any educators on the committee, I have a question for you. What is the most asked question by your students during a lecture? "Is this going to be on the test?" If you say YES, they all lean forward, take notes, and are engaged. On the other hand, if you say NO, the entire class leans back and you can see them relax and drift off. As this applies to civics and our country, we want our students leaning forward and engaged.

What about students with special needs?

Most states that have adopted the test allow for exemptions if deemed appropriate by a student's IEP team.

Informing and engaging the next generation of Americans on basic civics is vital to the survival of our Republic. The people who favor this initiative have widely differing political beliefs, but one thing

we all share is the belief that it is important for all Americans to know about the first principles of our Constitutional government.

We believe our children should not only be expected to have a basic understanding of the principles upon which our nation was founded, they deserve to be armed with that information in their adult lives as they vote for representatives who will make critical decisions about the future of our nation, our state and our local communities. The Civics Education Initiative is an important first step to ensure every student is equipped with that knowledge.

Help us put civics back on the front burner where it belongs so our students graduate as actively engaged and responsible citizens. Help us put civics on a test that matters. On behalf of our American veterans who have made great sacrifices to preserve the many freedoms we all enjoy, I ask that you join us in support of this legislation to ensure that all high school students learn these important facts about our government, our nation, our values and responsibilities in order to promote active citizenship.

[8:38:34 AM](#)

DR. MICHAEL POLIAKOFF, Vice President of Policy, American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), paraphrased from a prepared statement, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) since its founding in 1995 has been deeply committed to the imperative of a citizenry that understands America's free institutions and their history. We believe that just as a quality education includes requirements for mathematics, science, and expository writing, it must also have firm requirements for knowledge and understanding of our institutions of government.

Civic education must be based on civic knowledge, an understanding of America's institutions of government and how they developed. I would like to clarify this point: civic engagement projects can build a

wholesome sense of community responsibility, but they must never substitute for the civic empowerment that comes from understanding our process of government. The proposed legislation properly starts with a call to assess the state of civic education. I suggest that no student should leave high school without a strong foundation in United States history, including how the institutions of government developed. No student should leave college, especially a publicly funded university without a mature, collegiate grasp of American history and the successes - and failures - of our free institutions. This is essential preparation for informed citizenship. Our Founders were keenly aware that the lifespan of liberty is unlikely to be long without well-informed, participating citizens. Thomas Jefferson and his fellow Commissioners were prescriptive in the 1818 plan for the University of Virginia: "To form the statesmen, legislators and judges ... to expound the principles and structure of government."

I believe you all have electronic copies of our recent report, A Crisis in Civic Education. I am sorry to report that the results of our 2015 Constitution Day survey of civic knowledge only confirm that findings I shared with the Senate Committee last year. I want to compliment Dr. Spataro, too, for the excellent work that the Joe Foss Institute has done to raise the nation's consciousness about the threat to our free institutions that the plague of civic ignorance presents.

The findings of our most recent survey, like its predecessors, which you can find on ACTA's website and like the data you can find on the website of the Joe Foss Institute, do not bespeak an informed electorate. The results would be funny, were they not terrifying. (Slide 4). These are college graduates who mistake Judith Sheindlin (AKA Judge Judy) for a member of the Supreme Court - and John Kerry, for that matter.

ACTA has administered surveys since 1999. These are not "College Bowl" or "Trivial Pursuit" questions: voters who do not even know the term lengths of the representatives they elect are unlikely to be making well-informed decisions. (That is an understatement, of course.)

They are effectively disempowered as citizens, and our system of education must be held accountable for that failure.

What is the remedy? Again the proposed legislation properly looks toward best practices in other states. I will focus on higher education, it is always best for the governing boards of colleges and universities to keep their own houses in order and institute firm requirements for civic knowledge. But the legislature can make its will known through resolution or statute: Georgia, Nevada, and Texas have legislation for public universities that requires all students to take coursework or pass examinations in United States history and government. And looking toward K-12, Arizona, Idaho, Louisiana, North Dakota, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, and Wisconsin have passed laws mandating that students pass examinations showing civic literacy. Alaska does well to consider the practices of states that require coursework based on knowledge and understanding of the primary documents of American and state government and to consider similar standards for public higher education.

To repeated: community service projects are part of an important ethic characteristic of our nation. They are a key part of religious and civic associations. Schools and colleges are the unique and essential place for teaching and learning about America's history and government, and this legislation properly looks towards schools. No other institution will reliably fill the gap left by weak educational standards.

It is my hope that the initiative of SCR 1 will lead to a new requirements K-12 and collegiate that will turn back the dangerous tide of historical and civic illiteracy now so prevalent. I admire the important initiative the Alaska State Legislature has undertaken.

[8:46:28 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON acknowledged that the witness calls for implementing a required curriculum and required class hours.

The proposed resolution doesn't call for that type of action, and he asked if the witness supports SCR 1.

DR. POLIAKOFF responded that every institution has general education requirements, which might be used for incorporating civics lessons, and opined it is a question of will more than cost. He pointed out that NAEP testing has not administered civics exams since 2014.

SENATOR STEVENS offered that the task force will be assembled without restrictions placed on the outcome, and required course work may result, as an identified need.

CHAIR KELLER mentioned federal law that redirects curriculum development to the district level.

CHAIR KELLER closed public testimony.

[8:51:03 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE VAZQUEZ reviewed contents of the committee packet that indicates a shocking lack of understanding for government operations and civics in general, and read from several to underscore the statistical findings. She pointed out how unique the balance of the U.S. government is among other countries, many under martial law, and opined that ignorance of civics, coupled with a lack of appreciation, may result in a loss of freedoms.

[8:56:24 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SEATON clarified that some of the points made in the presentation related to historical illiteracy events versus civics. Only 34 percent surveyed identified George Washington as a general at York Town, and he questioned whether historical facts or civic workings are the thrust for the task force to study. He asked if history, as well as governmental workings and civic involvement are to be considered "all one piece," to be addressed by the task force.

SENATOR STEVENS said extracting history from civics is a difficult undertaking given the integral aspects, and it may not be possible. The task force will be without constraint for how to approach the topic, and input will be welcomed from any school that is already teaching civics.

MR. LAMPKIN opined that the knowledge of history relates to understanding civics, as learning the alphabet is inherent to reading.

[9:00:32 AM](#)

CHAIR KELLER referred to page 2, lines 23-30, to review the make-up of the task force appointments, and asked about the interest in having a seat for a member of the National Education Association (NEA) member.

MR. LAMPKIN reported that the appointment was suggested by the other body as a representative for the teachers.

CHAIR KELLER said he would like to see the NEA requirement removed.

SENATOR STEVENS offered that twelve may not be enough members, and additional seats could be added; there is no concern for the number of seats.

REPRESENTATIVE COLVER echoed Chair Keller's sentiment for seating a union member, and named the American Federation of Teachers as another organization to consider.

CHAIR KELLER clarified his interest in broadening the scope of the task force, which may be accomplished through adding seats.

[9:05:10 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:05 a.m.