

Should Students Have to Pass a Civics Test to Graduate?

Before becoming citizens of the United States, applicants are required to pass a civics test assessing their knowledge of American history, government, and law (see “Could You Pass the Citizenship Test?,” p. 12). Now there’s a growing movement to make high school students pass a version of the citizenship test before they can graduate. At least 14 states already require it, and another seven are considering bills to do so. Two educators square off about whether passing a civics test should be a high school graduation requirement.



Fourteen states require students to pass a civics test to graduate.

YES Former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor once said, “The practice of democracy is not passed down through the gene pool. It must be taught and learned by each new generation.”

Justice O’Connor understood how important it was for our schools to teach civics—the basics of how our democracy works—so young people will be ready and able to actively participate in our system of government. To encourage schools to teach this critical material and to ensure that students have mastered it, we must require high school students to pass a test showing their mastery of civics before they graduate.

In the past few decades, the focus in American high schools has been on other subject areas, with high-stakes testing dominating time and taking resources away from civic education. The effect has been a shocking lack of understanding about how our government works. The 2019 Annenberg Public Policy Center survey found that fewer than

40 percent of Americans could name all three branches of the federal government, and 22 percent couldn’t name a single one. Justice O’Connor called this lack of basic knowledge about civics “a quiet crisis,” and we must address it.

The misinformation and misunderstanding that are currently plaguing American society are rooted in a broad lack of civics knowledge. Leaving students and teachers without adequate support, instructional time, and guidance about civics can hinder their ability to confront fraught and controversial topics.

The unfortunate reality is that unless there is a way to assess civic education, it will continue to be ignored in schools.

States can help solve this problem by enacting legislation requiring students to pass a civics exam to graduate from high school. The logical exam to require is the one the federal government already gives to immigrants seeking to become U.S. citizens. •

—ELIZABETH EVANS

Civics Education Program Director, Arizona State University

In recent decades, the focus in schools has shifted away from teaching civics.

Civics education should be about much more than memorizing facts.

NO The 100 questions on the U.S. citizenship test can easily be answered by rote memorization that requires minimal thinking and does little to prepare young people for thoughtful civic and political engagement—one of the primary aims of civic education.

For example, one question on the test asks how many times the U.S. Constitution has been amended. It’s pretty easy to memorize the number 27—in fact, too easy for a time when democracy in the United States is at risk.

High-quality civic education must include developing complex understanding and learning about contemporary political and constitutional issues for which there are multiple and often competing answers. And it involves learning how to deliberate in a civil manner with people who disagree with us and, ideally, maintaining friendships across open disagreements. Even a perfect score on the citizenship exam wouldn’t help with either goal.

Some may ask, if it’s so easy to memorize the answers to 100 questions, what’s the harm? Can’t students build

the skills necessary for competent and thoughtful civic and political participation by memorizing 100 answers, learning the more challenging knowledge, and building the skills? It sounds logical, but actually, it’s unlikely because many teachers feel pressure to tailor their teaching to match high-stakes tests. If you can’t graduate from high school without passing such a test, the stakes are very high indeed. The risk is that teaching to the test will crowd out the much more important—and much more challenging—aspects of civic education.

We should not waste students’ time requiring them to memorize a list of 100 pieces of information. Instead, we should ensure that all students receive a high-quality civic education that will help them learn more difficult knowledge, build more complex understandings, and develop the skills that will make them want to participate politically and civically in the first place. •

—DIANA HESS, Dean, School of Education
University of Wisconsin-Madison

CARLOS CHAVEZ/LOS ANGELES TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES