

2019-20

LEGISLATOR'S GUIDE to the Issues

Civic Education

The Issue

Informed and involved citizens are critical to the survival of any democratic society. Texas' own Constitution gives "the preservation of the liberties and rights of the people" as the very reason for providing for public education in the state.

One of the [objectives stated in the Texas Education Code](#) is that "Educators will prepare students to be thoughtful, active citizens who have an appreciation for the basic values of our state and national heritage and who can understand and productively function in a free enterprise society." To these ends, the state of Texas has written civic education into its curriculum standards, the [Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills \(TEKS\)](#).

Sadly, these good intentions appear to be faltering in execution. In 2016, only [26% of Americans could name the three branches of American government](#)—down from 38% five years before. Nearly a third could not name even a single branch.

Worse, free speech and debate—the cornerstone of democracy—are under attack. Polling reveals that 61% of American college students find that their [school prevents some students and faculty from openly declaring their views](#) because others might deem them "offensive."

Most frightening of all: 20% of respondents in a national survey of [college students said that using violence to silence a controversial speaker is acceptable](#). One-fifth of the nation's best and brightest students have emerged from high school not only ignorant of the importance of free speech but willing to support its violent suppression.

Texas does require an End-of-Course Assessment in U.S. History for high school graduation, but civics is not its focus. If the Texas education system is indeed to produce informed citizens, Texas should ensure that its students are instructed in the basic facts of American history and government. The United States requires specific knowledge of anyone applying to become a United States citizen. Though natural-born citizens do not need to defend their citizenship, it only stands to reason that our nation should attempt to impart the same basic knowledge to them.

Fortunately, there is a simple way to incorporate this basic civic education into Texas classrooms. The [United States citizenship test](#) is available to the public at no charge. Study kits and videos are also available.

Seventeen states already require their students to take a civics test based on the United States citizenship test. Eight states have made a passing score on this test a requirement for high school graduation.

Texas should also reinforce knowledge of our history and civics structure in college. The Legislature has already stated that every student in a state university must take at least two American history courses to fulfill general education requirements. However, there is no distinction regarding the types of courses that meet this requirement. The statute should clarify that these history courses

must be survey courses, and both must be American history courses.

These reforms would ensure that civic education is given its proper role within Texas education. With basic civic knowledge covered and tested in high school, and subsequently reinforced in college, the state will set up its students—and its democracy—for continued success.

The Facts

- In 2016, only a quarter of Americans could name the three branches of American government. Nearly a third could not name even a single branch.
- Half of American college students believe it is acceptable to shout down a speaker they consider controversial, and one-fifth believe it is acceptable to use violence to silence a controversial speaker.
- The Legislature has set civic education as a priority for Texas schools, but testing of civic education is minimal.
- Seventeen states require their students to take a civics test based on the U.S. citizenship test. Eight require passage for high school graduation.

Recommendations

- Incorporate the concepts assessed on the USCIS citizenship test into the Texas state curriculum and ensure all Texas students are assessed on those concepts and demonstrate proficiency as a requirement for high school graduation.
- Clarify that history courses to fulfill college general education requirements must be survey courses, and both must be United States history courses.

Resources

["A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge,"](#) Thomas Jefferson (1778).

["Americans' Knowledge of the Branches of Government Is Declining,"](#) Annenberg Public Policy Center (2016).

["Free Expression on Campus: What College Students Think About First Amendment Issues,"](#) Knight Foundation (2018).

["Views Among College Students Regarding the First Amendment: Results From a New Survey,"](#) John Villasenor, Brookings Institution (Sept. 18, 2017).

["Study Materials for the Civics Test,"](#) U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (Accessed June 2018).

["Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies,"](#) Texas Education Agency (Accessed June 2018).

[Texas Education Code, Chapter 4, "Public Education Mission, Objectives, and Goals,"](#) (Accessed June 2018).

[Civics \(History and Government\) Questions for the Naturalization Test,](#) U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2017).