

I'm a State Election Chief. We Need to Do Something About Civics Education



For many Americans, the first image that comes to mind when they hear the term “civics” is not the White House or a voting booth but rather an animated piece of paper singing on the steps of the U.S. Capitol. This cute little “Bill” telling a tuneful story of how draft legislation becomes a law may be the entire sum of what many students know about their civic life and our civic processes. It’s far from enough.

I’m Kentucky’s secretary of state; our civic processes are my bread and butter. Although I’m proud to have helped Kentucky enact historic election reform on my watch, that’s not enough: Students in my state and across the nation need more and better civic learning for our democracy to thrive.

We’ve just come through 34 senatorial and 36 gubernatorial elections. With the competition comes excitement, and that’s great. But we are also seeing a growing polarity within our governmental institutions and the electorate. That makes our willingness to participate in civic life and our capacity to do so more important than ever before, highlighting the need for robust civics education in schools.

Yet as of 2020, only 30 states required students to take at least a semester of a stand-alone civics course, and 11 had no requirements at all.

According to the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, which conducts an annual survey measuring American civic knowledge, fewer than half the adults in the United States can name all three branches of government, down 9 percentage points from last year and the first decline since 2016. Moreover, 1 out of every 4 respondents was unable to name any of the protections provided under the First Amendment.

Another analysis by the Annenberg Center revealed a positive association between answering civic questions correctly like those above and prior participation in at least one high school civics course.

Exposing young people to quality civic-learning curricula and opportunities—including opportunities for students to engage with their communities, peers, and local institutions—provides a myriad of personal benefits for students. Exposure to civic-learning opportunities increase students' understanding of economic and political processes, improves critical thinking, and strengthens the capacity for teamwork and collaboration—all skills needed to succeed in the 21st century.

Beyond the skills students acquire, civic learning promotes political participation since understanding and engagement are mutually reinforcing. Though the 2020 presidential election saw a spike in voter turnout at nearly 67 percent, we cannot rely on polarization to drive voter participation. We must embed our civic understanding and responsibilities into the fabric of our society.

Yet, around the country, Americans are participating less in organizations where they can come together and solve problems, build relationships, and experience community—places like arts and cultural organizations, community centers, and churches. These “civic deserts,” where citizens do not have consistent opportunities to engage in civic or political life, are growing more common in the United States. It is estimated that 60 percent of rural youth and 30 percent of urban and suburban Americans live in a civic desert. Declining participation and involvement with religious organizations and other institutions that have historically nurtured civic engagement further emphasize the need to invest in and expand these opportunities through what we know works—education.

Schools are our most effective vehicle for imparting civic habits and values. Compulsory education laws in the United States have preceded improved civic participation and social engagement across many metrics, including voter turnout and advocacy.

Insufficient investment in civic education undercuts one of the original purposes of establishing public education in the mid-1800s: to inform citizens and prepare them for the tasks of self-government. Without clear and targeted action, we will continue to grapple with growing disconnects from democratic institutions and norms and likely see widening political divisions that threaten our entire governing system.

With expanded resources, we can reimagine how we teach civics and explore new, innovative ways to assess students on their knowledge. We must ensure that students can learn about and engage with civics beyond just classroom learning by providing opportunities for nuanced discussions around current events, encouraging participation in service-learning programs, and emphasizing the importance of school governance and other democratic processes. We can also work to develop and systematize common social studies standards through state-led efforts to incorporate civic learning into state assessments and accountability measures.

Since 2018, Kentucky has required that all students pass a civics assessment in order to graduate with a regular diploma. Though a lifelong Republican, I have crossed party lines and worked with both Red Team and Blue Team to ensure that all Kentuckians have access to robust and high-quality civic-learning opportunities. Last year, I joined the executive committee of the nonpartisan Kentucky Civic Education Coalition. The coalition is launching a pilot program next school year that would provide students who pass a civics course of study with a gold seal on their diploma when they graduate, recognizing them as exceptionally informed citizens.

If we want to build an informed citizenry and robust political institutions while also ensuring our children engage deeper with their education, we must do more to improve civic education. As other venues for civic engagement continue to disappear, schools may serve as a beacon guiding the future of our democracy.