



Education Commission  
of the States

# The Progress of Education Reform 2004

## Citizenship Education

Vol. 5, No. 2, May 2004

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### *Trends Show Need for Stronger Citizenship Education*

For a democracy to succeed, each generation of young people must be prepared to take their place as active, thoughtful citizens. To help accomplish this task, experts believe schools must provide all students with a comprehensive citizenship education.

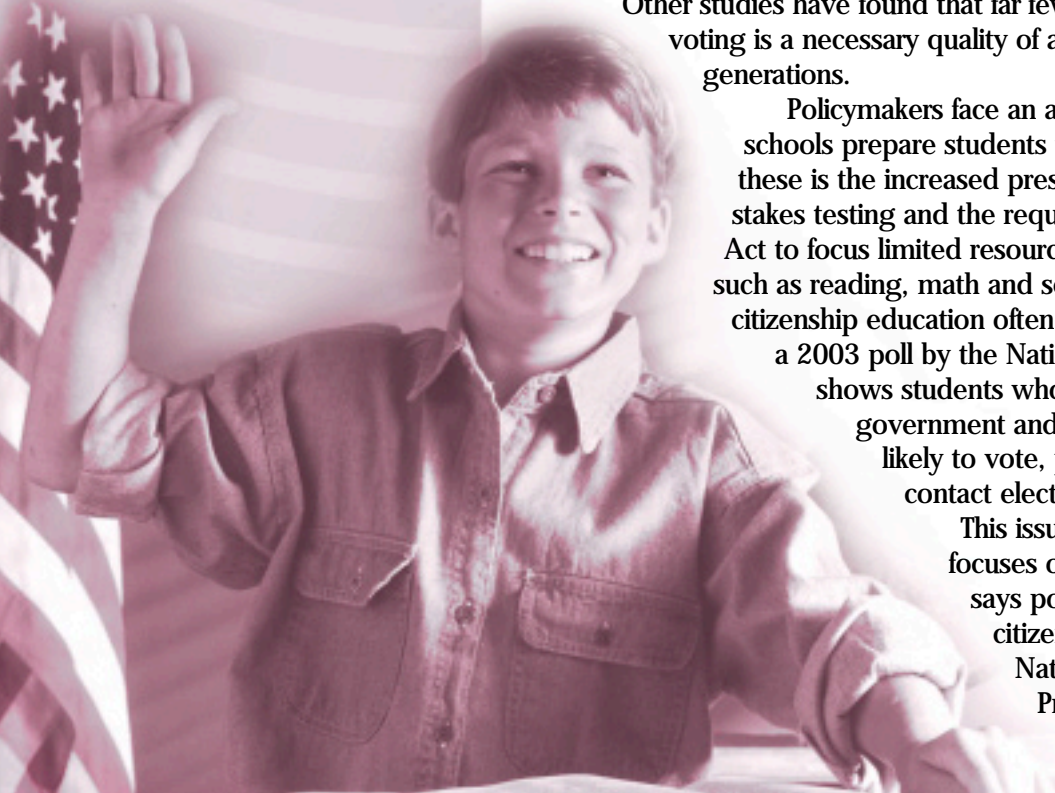
Citizenship education encompasses a wide range of skills and abilities. Obviously, it includes the acquisition of civic *knowledge* regarding such issues as the history and workings of government, the Constitution, and the rights and responsibilities of citizens. But it also includes the development of key *skills* such as problem solving, debating and writing about controversial issues. And it helps students develop the *attitudes* or dispositions necessary for productive citizenship, including a belief in liberty, equality, personal responsibility, honesty and a sense that one's actions can make a difference in society.

Are students leaving school with the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to be productive citizens? Recent studies point to some disturbing trends. In nationwide assessments, only one-quarter of high school seniors scored high enough to reach a level considered proficient in civic knowledge and skills.

Other studies have found that far fewer of today's young people believe voting is a necessary quality of a good citizen compared to previous generations.

Policymakers face an array of challenges in improving how schools prepare students to be active citizens. Not the least of these is the increased pressure schools are facing from high-stakes testing and the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act to focus limited resources on improving performance in areas such as reading, math and science. Under such pressure, citizenship education often is pushed aside, in spite of the fact that a 2003 poll by the National Conference of State Legislatures shows students who are exposed to coursework on government and civics are two to three times more likely to vote, pay attention to government and contact elected officials on issues.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* focuses on what some of the latest research says policymakers can do to improve citizenship education, as well as what the National Assessment of Educational Progress has found about nationwide student civics achievement.

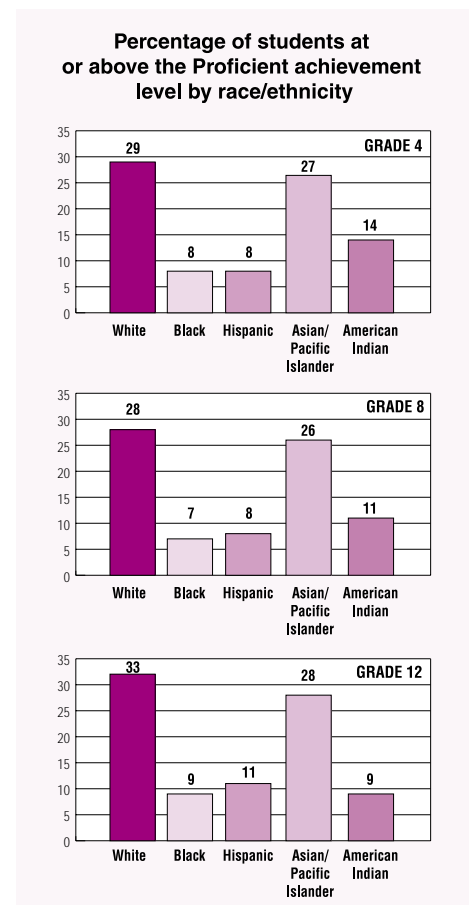
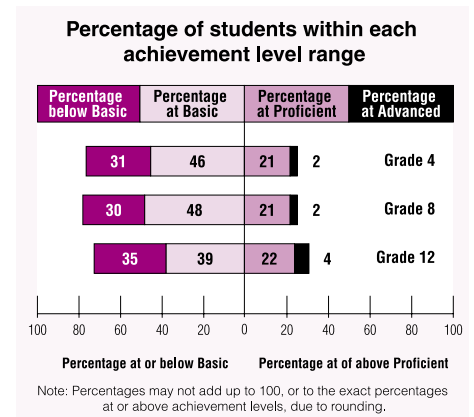


**National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 1998 Civics Report Card for the Nation** (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/civics/newresults.asp>)

NAEP's civics assessments take place less frequently than testing in subjects such as reading and math. The most recent civics NAEP – given in 1998 to approximately 22,000 students across the nation in grades 4, 8 and 12 – was the first since 1988. The next civics NAEP is scheduled for 2006.

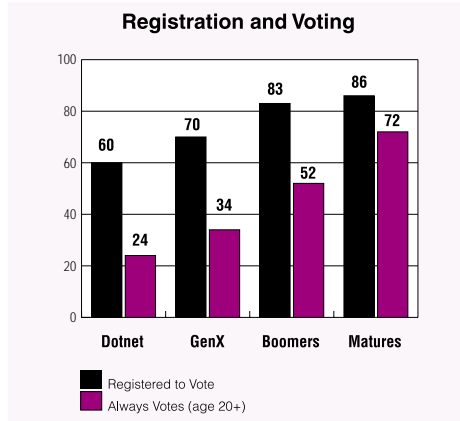
Key findings from the 1998 civics NAEP include the following:

- Only 23% of 4th graders, 23% of 8th graders and 26% of 12th graders scored at or above “Proficient” – the level all students are expected to reach. Roughly one-third of all students did not reach a “Basic” level of achievement.
- At each grade, much higher percentages of white students were at or above the Proficient level than black, Hispanic or American Indian students. Comparable percentages of males and females reached or exceeded the Proficient level.
- In all three grades, students who said they discuss their school studies (in any subject) at home at least once or twice a week had higher civics scores than those who did so less frequently.
- In both 4th and 8th grades, students who accessed the Internet in class at least once or twice a month had higher scores than those who rarely did so.
- Students who did volunteer work had higher average scores than those who did none in the previous year.



### ***The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait***

(The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2002, [http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/youth\\_index.htm](http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/youth_index.htm))



responsibilities of citizenship. The report also finds a “downward generational spiral” in electoral participation between DotNets, GenXers (26 to 37 years old), Baby Boomers (38-56 years) and “matures” (57 and older). (See figure at left.)

On the positive side, the report notes that younger generations regularly volunteer at rates similar to those of older generations. Younger generations also appear more likely to use consumer activism as a vehicle for expressing their political and policy views, and more than one-third have boycotted the purchase of specific products.

Other key findings include the following:

- Students who have been taught skills in debating and letter writing are much more likely to be involved in civic activities both inside and outside school. Only 51% of high school students, however, have taken part in a debate, and only 38% are required to write letters to someone they do not know.
- Student civic engagement increases when schools facilitate or mandate student volunteer work. Also, students who are encouraged to talk about their volunteer work in class are much more likely to continue volunteering.
- Simply being involved in high school organizations does not lead to greater civic engagement after graduation, but involvement in political groups does. High school graduates who participated in political organizations vote more frequently, are more attentive to news and volunteer regularly at twice the rate of their peers.

A National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) poll found the 64% of DotNets who report taking a high school course on civics or government are:

- Much more likely to believe in the importance of voting
- More likely to see themselves as personally responsible for improving society
- Two to three times more likely to vote, pay attention to government and to contact elected officials on issues.

**Source: *Citizenship – A Challenge for All Generations*, NCSL, 2003,**  
<http://www.ncsl.org/public/trust/citizenship.pdf>

### **For additional information on citizenship education, see the following Web sites:**

ECS Issue Site on Citizenship Education  
<http://www.ecs.org/CitizenshipCharacterEducation>

Center for Civic Education  
<http://www.civiced.org/index.php>

Character Education Partnership  
<http://www.character.org>

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement)  
<http://www.civicyouth.org/>

International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study  
<http://wam.umd.edu/~iea>

NAEP Civics Web Site  
<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/civics>

National Alliance for Civic Education  
<http://www.cived.net>

National Council for the Social Studies  
<http://www.socialstudies.org>



**Citizenship Education**



***The Civic Mission of Schools*** (Carnegie Corporation and The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2003,  
<http://www.civicmissionofschoools.org/>)

Written by a distinguished group of more than 50 scholars and practitioners, this report summarizes the evidence in favor of civic education in K-12 schools. With regard to educating students, the report finds research supports several recommendations:

- ***Study a wide range of topics*** – Students perform better on tests of civic skills and knowledge if they have studied a range of relevant subjects, such as the Constitution, U.S. history, the structure of government and elections, and the legal system.
- ***Use interactive lessons*** – Students who participate in active debates that make connections to current issues have a greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communication skills, and are more likely to say they will vote and volunteer as adults.
- ***Service-learning is an effective tool*** – Students should be provided with the opportunity to apply what they learn through the performance of community service *that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction*. Known as “service-learning,” this approach can be more effective at instilling civic skills and values among students than volunteering that is unconnected to the school’s curriculum. The report finds that a majority of schools do not currently link community service programs to the curriculum.
- ***Encourage student participation in school governance*** – Research suggests that giving students more opportunities to help manage their own classrooms and schools builds civic skills and attitudes.
- ***Extracurricular activities are valuable*** – Long-term studies of Americans show that, even over several decades, those who participated in high school extracurricular activities remain more civically engaged than those who do not participate. More research is needed to determine which specific activities have the most impact on civic values.
- ***Simulations show promise*** – Empirical evidence indicates simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberations and diplomacy can lead to students becoming more informed and interested in politics and government.

The report recommends policymakers use the above recommendations to identify, showcase and reward schools that have exemplary citizenship education programs. It also calls for the NAEP civics assessment to be offered every three years, with separate representative samples taken in each of the states.

In addition, the report challenges policymakers to reexamine their existing social studies and civic education standards to ensure they reflect what research shows are the most promising citizenship education strategies. For help in this task, policymakers should draw on the comprehensive national standards developed by organizations such as the Center for Civic Education (CEE) and the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS).

The ECS National Center for Learning and Citizenship (NCLC) incorporated these national standards into its recent paper, *Developing Citizenship Competencies from Kindergarten Through Grade 12: A Background Paper for Policymakers and Educators*. This paper is designed to help policymakers and education leaders incorporate civic knowledge, skills and attitudes into policies that support effective citizenship education from the early elementary grades through high school.

<http://www.ecs.org/nclc/competenciespaper>

CEE's National Standards for Civics and Government

<http://www.civiced.org/stds.html>

NCSS' National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

<http://www.ncss.org/standards/stitle.html>



Citizenship Education

***Educating Democracy: State Standards To Ensure a Civic Core,***  
(The Albert Shanker Institute, Paul Gagnon, 2003,  
<http://www.shankerinstitute.org/Downloads/gagnon/contents.html>)

To become effective citizens, students must master more than just the fundamentals of civics, such as the principles and workings of government and individual rights and duties, says *Educating Democracy*. Instead, students also need extensive exposure to history and other social studies to understand how democratic institutions came into being and what forces influenced them over time.

To see how good a job states are doing in providing students with such exposure, the report examines state academic standards for secondary history/social studies. National findings are provided along with extensive, individual state-by-state reviews. The key national findings are:

- Of the 48 states with statewide standards, not one has developed a document that has both a clear focus on civic/political education and is teachable in the limited time teachers have with their students.
- Because the content in existing standards can rarely be properly covered in the limited time available to teachers, neither student nor teacher performance can be adequately measured by current standardized tests.
- Flawed testing based on flawed standards threatens to discredit any movement toward the development of common, national standards. Identifying a teachable number of priorities that are widely agreed upon across states and districts is needed, especially in the area of social studies.

To make necessary changes to state standards, the report recommends that veteran teachers and scholars be entrusted to decide upon the core social studies/history curriculum and the tests that go with them. Changes to state standards should suggest an orderly sequence of K-12 courses that are required of all students, regardless of whether they are on a college “track” or not.

#### **How Do States Address Citizenship Education?**

- Forty-one states require a course or credit requirement in government or civics for high school graduation.
- Only five of those forty-one states require students to pass an exit exam to graduate (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, New Mexico and New York).
- Assessment and accountability systems remain a primary focus of state education reform efforts, but less than half of state systems address civics.

***Source: State Citizenship Education Policies, ECS StateNote, 2003,***  
<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/48/84/4884.doc>

### **ECS’ National Center for Learning and Citizenship (NCLC)**

NCLC provides a variety of information about citizenship education and service-learning. Resources include case studies highlighting successful K-12 citizenship education programs; information on current state policies; and recommended strategies for state, district and school leaders to help districts support and sustain citizenship education.

<http://www.ecs.org/nclc>

NCLC also allows users to view or create their own reports from a Web-based database of state citizenship education policies.

<http://www.ecs.org/CitizenshipEducationDatabase>

A policy brief to guide users through the key findings contained in the database also is available.

<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/48/94/4894.pdf>

*Developing Citizenship Competencies from Kindergarten Through Grade 12: A Background Paper for Policymakers and Educators*

<http://www.ecs.org/nclc/competenciespaper>



**Citizenship Education**

***Citizenship and Education in Twenty-eight Countries, 2001, and Strengthening Democracy in the Americas through Civic Education***

(International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement [IEA],  
<http://www.wam.umd.edu/~iea/>)

These reports present results from an investigation of the civic knowledge, skills and attitudes of 140,000 young people from Pacific Rim and European countries. Key findings include:

- U.S. 9th graders ranked 10th out of 28 countries in their conceptual understanding of democracy, although they performed very well when asked to demonstrate hands-on skills in interpreting political communication.
- Many students do not have a good understanding of concepts such as representative government or the role of trade-offs and compromise in political decisionmaking.
- Civic knowledge is important in motivating basic types of participation such as voting. Enhancing young people's level of active civic engagement, however, requires more than factual or conceptual knowledge alone.
- Ninth graders in the United States who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who do not plan to continue their education are less likely to expect to vote than students from more advantaged backgrounds.
- Explicit curricular attention to the importance of elections and a participatory atmosphere in the classroom, are especially useful in building civic knowledge, skills and dispositions.

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