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ESSA: Mapping opportunities for civic education

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The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) builds upon recent state efforts to reinvigorate the commitment of education to prepare students, not just for college and career, but also for citizenship and full participation in democratic life. This report outlines how ESSA strengthens opportunities for states to expand and support civic learning and engagement.

ESSA STRENGTHENS OPPORTUNITIES FOR STATES TO EXPAND AND SUPPORT CIVIC LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT AS PART OF A WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION.

Civic education opportunities in ESSA include a **well-rounded education, ESSA equitable education, accountability, assessment, teacher licensure and development, and student support and academic enrichment** provisions.

What is Civic Education?

Civic education includes “knowledge of the history, principles and foundations of our American democracy, and the ability to participate in civic and democratic processes.” Students demonstrate civic learning and engagement when they “address public problems individually and collaboratively and when they maintain, strengthen and improve communities and societies.” Civic education thus includes both the study of government and how people participate in governing society, as well as the students’ preparation for active citizenship. The content of civic education encompasses government, U.S. and world history, geography, law, economics and American culture.

- National Council for the Social Studies¹

Educators now use the phrase “civic learning and engagement” more frequently when referencing how active civic projects, high-engagement pedagogies and integrated approaches, in addition to traditional civics, government and history courses, support students’ civic literacy.

Civic learning and engagement achieves ESSA goals by supporting **improved academic performance, college and career readiness skills**, and increasing a broad range of **school quality** and **student success** indicators.



This report builds on previously released ESSA reports by Education Commission of the States. For more information see:

- [ESSA: Quick guides on top issues](#)
- [ESSA's Well-Rounded Education](#)
- [ESSA Thinkers Meeting Insights: Process is key to developing state plans](#)
- [ESSA: Mapping opportunities for the arts](#)
- [Collaborative Stakeholder Engagement](#)

Passed in December 2015, ESSA replaces the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) as the primary federal legislation that guides K-12 education and encourages a broader commitment to a well-rounded education. Civics is among many subjects that struggle against the narrowing of the educational curriculum emphasizing English language arts and literacy, math and science proficiencies. ESSA expands the curriculum and encourages states to meet the unique needs of their student population by including civics and government, history, economics and geography

instruction as part of 17 subjects that make up a well-rounded education. Proponents will find civic education opportunities in the overarching commitment of ESSA to a well-rounded education, as well as specifics of ESSA equitable education, accountability, assessment, teacher licensure and development, and student support and academic enrichment provisions.

ESSA and civics first connect through the state's vision for education. An insight from [the ESSA Thinkers Meeting](#) report is that state leaders should begin by considering the purpose of education in their state to guide them through the ESSA planning process.² State leaders who wish to bolster civic education may want to ensure that their state's vision reflects the historic civic mission of America's universal public education system: to develop in young people the knowledge, skills and dispositions to be active and informed citizens.³ Establishing preparation for citizenship as a co-equal purpose of education, together with preparation for college and careers, could help to facilitate the alignment of civic education programs and strategies in state and district ESSA plans.

Varied and distinct strategies in every state can create dynamic ESSA planning and implementation processes. At the time of this report, the new administration and U.S. Department of Education staff are also reviewing and revising ESSA regulations. Please subscribe to [updates from Education Commission of the States](#) for more information about ESSA developments.

A Well-Rounded Education

ESSA includes a well-rounded education as a fundamental element, referenced more than 20 times and included in most titles in the act. Through the well-rounded education language, ESSA encourages states to moderate the narrow focus on English language arts, math and science driven by NCLB and re-establish a broader range of educational experiences and enriched curriculum that will better support college, career and civic readiness.

ESSA identifies civics and government, history, geography and economics as components of a well-rounded education. By acknowledging the importance of civic education, ESSA offers education leaders the opportunity to restore the historic responsibility of education to prepare students for citizenship.⁴ In a joint report, the American Youth Policy

Forum and Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development note, "America's recent preoccupation with raising academic performance has all but overpowered a task of equally vital importance: Educating our young people to become engaged members of their communities, not just as wage earners and taxpayers, but as citizens—people who participate in the civic life of their communities."⁵

ESSA Funding ESSA authorizes but does not appropriate funding to support its titles. The funding amounts contained in ESSA constitute recommendations. At the time of this report, funding amounts for ESSA are not yet determined, but will be based on congressional appropriations and the federal education budget.



An Equitable, High-Quality and Well-Rounded Education

(Found in Title I, Part A)

ESSA Title I aims to “provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps.” Under Title I, every state education agency (SEA) must file a state plan to receive block grant funding. The state plan must outline state standards, assessment and accountability systems, and state support for educational equity. Each local education agency (LEA) or district must submit a plan to the SEA that describes (1) strategies for identifying and addressing academic achievement gaps and (2) how the district will provide a well-rounded education for its students.

Stakeholder Input - ESSA requires that state plans be developed with the timely and meaningful input of stakeholder groups, including the governor, state legislators, state board of education, principals, teachers and parents. This provides proponents of civic education opportunities to participate in public input processes to ensure civics is among the opportunities considered in ESSA development.

Why Include Civic Education in ESSA Plans?

Fortifying civic learning and engagement as part of a well-rounded education advances multiple measures of school quality and student success. Although research shows that student engagement in school is the non-cognitive factor that most directly correlates with academic achievement, 45 percent of students report that they are not engaged.⁷ High-quality, engaged civic learning has the capacity to build relevance and engagement for students, reduce absenteeism and dropout rates, and support academic success. Many of the skills students learn through active civic learning - critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, communication, innovation and creativity - also play a critical role in college and career success.⁸

In a statement about ESSA’s well-rounded education provision, the U.S. Department of Education noted “Research shows that students - particularly historically underserved students - engage more deeply in learning when they are exposed to a variety of topics and can better connect what

they are learning in the classroom with the world outside the school house.”⁹ This call to connect learning to public and community issues aligns well with the historic civic mission of education to produce a well-rounded citizen who can draw connections between democratic concepts and the real-world civic issues of their community and who recognizes their civic responsibility to participate and contribute.¹⁰ ESSA’s call for states to provide a well-rounded education provides a platform for this vision of a well-rounded citizen as a product of state education policy.

Parent and Family Engagement - Another aspect of Title I that supports the inclusion of civic learning and engagement in ESSA plans focuses on parent and family engagement. SEAs can capitalize on high-engagement civic learning approaches, including service learning and community service, in which students collaborate with parents, family and community members to identify and address community issues. Parents and community members also play an important role in supporting effective civic learning practices, such as simulations of democratic processes, from mock elections to model legislature activities.

Use of Title I, Part A funding to advance civic learning for low-income and minority students can benefit SEAs and LEAs, given the current inequities documented in civic learning and engagement opportunities for low-income students.¹¹ States may consider incorporating high-quality civic learning opportunities into ESSA-mandated support and improvement plans. Civic learning and engagement benefits include a successful strategy for addressing low summative assessment performance, graduation rates and sub-group achievement gaps that trigger state-required improvement plans.

Civics and State Accountability

(Found in Title I, Part A)

Indicators of School Quality and Student Success - ESSA requires states include five indicators of school quality and/or student success in their accountability plans. In addition to indicators related to assessments, proficiency growth and graduation rates, states must include at least one non-



academic indicator in their state accountability systems. ESSA suggests possible measures, such as rates of chronic absenteeism, graduation rates, school climate, access to advanced coursework and student engagement.¹²

Since ESSA includes civics and government, history, geography and economics in a well-rounded education, states and districts may describe the role of civic education programs in providing an equitable and high-quality education and closing educational achievement gaps. There is an opportunity to highlight the link between civic education and both academic and non-academic indicators. States could also adopt direct measures of civic education as non-academic indicators, such as the number of civics and government courses, the percentage of students completing civics courses or participation in experiential civic learning.

Why Include Civic Education in ESSA Accountability?

Ample evidence suggests that increased levels of student engagement associated with high-quality civic learning and engagement activities can contribute to improvements in both academic and non-academic measures. Documented benefits of civic learning include:

- Supports academic success for all students.¹³
- Contributes to the reduction of academic achievement gaps for at-risk student populations.¹⁴
- Fosters civic knowledge, skills and dispositions, preparing students for informed, effective participation in our democracy.¹⁵
- Builds 21st century college and career readiness skills, including media literacy, collaboration and communication, critical thinking and problem-solving.¹⁶
- Lowers dropout rates and improves students' chances of staying in school by making learning relevant and engaging.¹⁷
- Improves school climate as young people learn respectful dialogue, teamwork and appreciation of diversity.¹⁸
- Strengthens the engagement and relationships of schools and students with parents, families, civic leaders and organizations, and community partners.¹⁹

The ability of civic learning and engagement to improve measures of academic success, at-risk student achievement gaps, college and career readiness, and a broad range of school-quality and student-success indicators demonstrates the value of civic learning as part of a well-rounded education and its potential contribution to state ESSA planning and implementation.

Civics and State Assessments

(Found in Title I, Part B)

As with NCLB, ESSA assessment requirements are specific to math, science, and English language arts and literacy. While no ESSA requirement exists for assessments in social studies, civics or government, ESSA still allows states to assess these subjects.

SEAs may recommend or require that districts conduct learning assessments under ESSA, including assessments of civic education. They may also recommend the content of the assessment, the grade level when assessment should take place, assessment measures and tools, and criteria for local development or selection of a civics assessment. States may also consider following ESSA guidance by facilitating the exchange of information regarding districts that administer a civics assessment, which assessment a district uses, results and experiences.

Civics Standards and Assessments - Title I funds may be used to develop standards and assessments in any discipline, including social studies and civics. Every state includes social studies in their academic standards in some form. Forty-eight states include civics specific language as a strand in their standards.²⁰ Policymakers may consider using ESSA funds to revise and improve these civic education standards and assessments.

Why Include Civic Education in ESSA Standards and Assessments Efforts?

Standards - Education Commission of the States' **50-States Comparison: Civic Education Policy** provides current

policies on **state civic education standards** and **state civic education curriculum frameworks**. Most states require completion of one civics course in high school.

This single course requirement contrasts with course requirements in the 1960s, when three required courses in civics and government were common and civics was woven throughout the K-12 curriculum.²¹ Today, almost two-thirds of teachers report that they do not cover civic education related subjects on a regular basis.²² Reduced state civic education standards and requirements also mean that the course typically focuses on one effective practice of civic learning – knowledge of historical documents, events and facts – but does not incorporate other high-quality learning practices that build the full range of civic competencies.

Civic competencies

Civic competencies include:

- *Content knowledge* of historical ideas, documents, events and movements, key individuals and democratic and legal processes.
- *Civic intellectual skills*, such as critical thinking, media literacy and the ability to connect democratic concepts to real-world civic issues.
- *Civic participatory skills*, including respectful dialogue among multiple perspectives, public communication, understanding electoral and non-electoral processes and taking informed action.
- *Civic dispositions*, such as tolerance and respect, concern for the common good, personal efficacy and a commitment to community civic engagement.²³

The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress civics assessment reveals the impact of reduced civic learning, with two-thirds of students scoring below proficient. Surveys report that less than half of eighth graders know the purpose of the Bill of Rights and only one in 10 have age-appropriate knowledge of the system of checks and balances between the branches of American government. Low-income and minority students, the student population that is the primary focus of ESSA funding, scored significantly lower than their counterparts, reinforcing the persistent achievement gap.²⁴

Long-term, low civic literacy undermines democratic institutions and participation. Studies show less awareness and interest in current issues, with only 37 percent of adults responding that it is very important to keep informed about public issues,²⁵ and relatively low voter participation – the U.S. ranks 27th in voter turnout among industrialized countries.²⁶ Millennials have the lowest citizenship measures. In 2016, just 16 percent of millennials said they trust government and political institutions.²⁷ The Council of State Governments puts it succinctly, “People generally don’t trust what they don’t understand,” adding “Without civic fundamentals, the youth of today may not vote or run for public office tomorrow, and the future participation of citizens in American’s grand democratic experiment is at risk.”²⁸

Research-based civic education practices also drive revisions in civic education standards. Several states used the **College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards** as a guide.²⁹ The C3 Framework incorporates more innovative civic learning strategies, centered around an inquiry arc as students develop questions, apply disciplinary concepts, evaluate sources and evidence, communicate conclusions and take informed action. Some states also incorporate **six proven practices for effective civic learning**,³⁰ including service-learning linked to classroom content, experiential and project-based learning, participation in models and simulations of democratic processes, and guided classroom discussion of current issues and events.

Assessments - Education Commission of the States **50-States Comparison: Civic Education Policies** also provides current policies on **state high school civics graduation requirements** and **state civics assessments**. Thirty-seven states have mandated assessments in civics, often administered as part of state annual summative assessments. Fifteen states require a student to pass a social studies or civics test to graduate from high school.

ESSA allows for increased accountability for civic learning outcomes by funding assessment development or revision. This may contribute to the trend of new state civics assessments. In the 2015 and 2016 legislative sessions, 13 states passed Civics Education Initiative legislation requiring



passage of a civics test for high school graduation. This test includes questions also found on the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services test, which immigrants must pass to obtain U.S. citizenship. **The Civics Education Initiative 2015 – 2016** report provides detailed information about this policy trend.

Some states also institute more innovative civic assessments that better gauge student civic competencies. For example, Tennessee requires all school districts to implement project-based civics assessments at least once in middle school and once in high school. Hawaii focuses on demonstration of civic competencies. Ninth graders attending school in Hawaii must demonstrate, “the role of a citizen in civic action by selecting a problem, gathering information, proposing a solution, creating an action plan, and showing evidence of implementation.”³¹

Civics Testing and Opt-Out - In considering state-mandated civics tests, states should be cognizant of a new ESSA provision, the Rule of Construction on Parent Rights, which strengthens the authority of states to set policies allowing parents to opt their students out of assessments. SEAs and LEAs should consider the interaction between state assessment opt-out policies and state-mandated testing requirements and may want to explore innovative non-tested options, such as portfolios or project-based demonstrations, for establishing civic proficiency.

Teacher Preparation and Development

(Found in Title II)

ESSA Title II outlines formula grants to states and LEAs to attract, prepare, support and retain effective teachers serving low-income and minority students. In defining effective teachers, ESSA eliminates a previous NCLB requirement that teachers demonstrate knowledge in the subject(s) they teach, instead focusing on whether Title I teachers meet state certification and licensure requirements. ESSA

requires that states ensure teachers of low-income and minority students are not disproportionately inexperienced or out-of-field teachers.

Due to ESSA reporting requirements that state and local accountability report cards must include disaggregated data on professional qualifications of teachers, including teachers who are teaching out-of-subject, the overall level of social studies, civics and government teacher qualifications and inequities in teacher qualifications will have increased visibility. Districts must also provide the professional qualifications of a child’s teachers to their parents upon request.

American History and Civics Education - Subpart 3 of Title II, Part B provides a general authorization for civic education to improve the “quality of American history, civics and government education,”³² and specifies that students be educated about the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights. States, educational institutions, nonprofit and for-profit entities are eligible to receive grants under two competitive grant programs.

ESSA authorizes the Presidential and Congressional Academies Program. The U.S. Department of Education explains, “The program supports the establishment of Presidential Academies for Teachers of American History and Civics that offer workshops for both veteran and new teachers of American history and civics to strengthen their knowledge and preparation for teaching these subjects. The program also supports establishment of Congressional Academies for Students of American History and Civics for high school students to develop a broader and deeper understanding of these subjects.”³³ The Academies program received funding in FY 2016. No appropriation has yet been made for 2017.

In addition to the Academies program, Title II authorizes National Civic Education Activities competitive grants to promote evidence-based strategies and innovation in civic learning. The grants support American history, civics and government, economics and geography instruction, particularly for the benefit of low-income and minority



students and underserved populations. Grant support could be directed to a broad range of instruction, programs, activities, pedagogical strategies and professional development.

Why Include Civic Education in Teacher Quality Efforts?

States, districts and collaborative partnerships may take advantage of competitive civic education grants to support innovative student programs and activities, as well as professional development and high-engagement learning pedagogies.

States and districts may increasingly need opportunities for civic learning professional development, as ESSA's elimination of the demonstrated knowledge requirement could accelerate an existing issue of teacher qualification in social studies, civic education and government courses. Many of these teachers have content responsibilities across multiple fields and lack the same level of content training as teachers in other core subjects. For example, the U.S. Department of Education found in one study that over 95 percent of middle school geography and government/civics teachers had no major in that teaching assignment area and over 78 percent were not certified in that subject.³⁴ There is also an inadequate quality and quantity of professional development for civic educators.³⁵

Current research demonstrates that low-income students typically receive inferior civic learning opportunities. Urban schools with low-income, diverse students provide fewer and lower-quality civic opportunities³⁶ and affluent white students are twice as likely as those of average socioeconomic status to study the legislative process or participate in service activities and 150 percent more likely to do in-class debates³⁷ - the very sorts of activities that most effectively boost civic learning and benefits.³⁸

States and districts can use Title II grants to strengthen teacher licensure requirements, boost professional development for social studies, civics and government teachers and infuse more effective, engaged pedagogical practices in schools. States may consider a requirement for teachers to have pre-licensure training in civics and government or to develop and implement high-quality

professional development that better prepares teachers to support high-quality civic education. ESSA also funds educator development grants for non-traditional preparation programs that may be a strong match for civic educators to expand their experience and use of high-engagement pedagogical practices, such as service-learning, that strengthen effective civic learning and engagement.

Student Support and Academic Enrichment

(Found in Title IV)

ESSA replaces NCLB Title IV programs with the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant Program (SSAEG) allocated to well-rounded educational opportunities, safe and healthy students and effective use of technology. States and districts must spend a minimum of 20 percent of LEA Title IV-A allocations on well-rounded educational opportunities, with another 20 percent invested in healthy students and at least some investment in technology. ESSA allows funds to be used for programs that advance multiple SSAEG goals. \$1.6 billion is authorized for SSAEG grants.

Why Include Civic Education in SSAEG Efforts?

ESSA encourages states to include civics and government, history, geography and economics as part of a well-rounded education. As outlined above, the role for civic education in state plans is compelling, based on the demonstrated ability of civic learning and engagement to support standards-based academic achievement and reduce achievement gaps while also strengthening civic learning outcomes. In particular, programs that use proven, high-engagement civic education pedagogical strategies, such as service learning, experiential and problem-based learning, and guided classroom discussion of current issues and events, are strong candidates for SSAEG plans.

By consolidating several targeted NCLB grants into a single, flexible grant program, ESSA also offers states and districts the opportunity to develop innovative cross-disciplinary



programs to provide a well-rounded education. States and districts can readily integrate civics content and engagement pedagogies into healthy student and technology programs, as well as across the curriculum. Civics integration ranges from the inclusion of civic content in reading programs to the use of service-learning in STEM courses. For example, students might identify and work collaboratively with parents and community organizations to address an environmental health issue in their neighborhood and use technology to research and take measurements. With such an approach, young people master standards-based academic science content, build technology skills and develop real-world civic

competencies, while making substantive improvements to student health and safety.

Integrated civics content and engaged pedagogies are also a strong match for SSAEG funding for out-of-school opportunities, including after-school and summer programs. Extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools and communities is a proven practice for effective civic learning.³⁹ Young people can apply their knowledge skills and dispositions to address genuine community issues through participation in after-school and summer civic activities.

District Needs Assessments

States can help to make sure that ESSA state plans include enhanced civic education as a key component, by ensuring that Title I required district needs assessments include civic learning and engagement outcomes. Under ESSA, all districts that receive grants of more than \$30,000 annually must conduct a needs assessment every three years to inform how they can best meet SSAEG goals of well-rounded educational opportunities, safe and healthy students and effective use of technology. By including indicators of civic learning and related impacts, such as student engagement and school climate, SEAs and LEAs can ensure they fully address ESSA student support and academic enrichment goals for their student population.

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