



Civics Education in Alaska: How Much are Schools Teaching, and How Much Do Alaskans Know?

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A healthy democracy depends on the participation of citizens, and that participation is learned behavior; it doesn't just happen. That means civic learning—educating students for democracy—needs to be on par with other academic subjects.

--Sandra Day O'Connor & Roy Romer
"Not By Math Alone" *The Washington Post*,
March 25, 2006



National Context:

The Civic Mission of Schools report

- The primary impetus for establishing public schools was to encouraging the development of civic skills and attitudes among young people.
- It remains crucial for the future health of our democracy that all young people, including those who have historically been marginalized, be knowledgeable, engaged in their communities and in politics, and committed to the public good.



National Context:

The Civic Mission of Schools report

Why schools? Because they are:

- the only institutions with the capacity and mandate to reach virtually every young person in the country;
- best equipped to address the cognitive aspects of good citizenship—civic and political knowledge and related skills such as critical thinking and deliberation;
- communities in which young people learn to interact, argue, and work together with others, an important foundation for future citizenship.



National Context

- *Learning Leads to Engagement.*

Youth 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. (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2003)



National Context

- ***Low Civics Proficiency.***

23% of 4th graders

23% of 8th graders

26% of 12th graders

scored at or above “proficient”
in civics

(NAEP, 1998)



National Context

- ***Social Studies Instruction Reduced in Majority of School Districts in Response to No Child Left Behind Act.***

71% of districts report reducing elementary school instructional time in at least one other subject to make more time for reading and math. (Center of Education Policy, 2006).



National Context

- ***Wide Disparities in Civic Knowledge Based on Home Resources.***

Large differences exist in civic knowledge between those U.S. students who come from homes with many literacy or educational resources and those who lack these resources.

(CIRCLE/IEA Civic Education Study, 2004)



Alaska Context

- ***No State Statute Recognizing Civics as a Key Mission of Schools; No State Required Civics Course.***

Alaska has only an administrative code stating that "(a) goal of the state public school system is to provide a working knowledge of...government and citizenship..." (04 AAC 04.030) (Education Commission of the States, April 2004)



Alaska Context

- ***No State Officer Dedicated to Advancing Civic Learning.***

The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development has no staff specifically dedicated to developing or supporting social studies, civic education or civic learning opportunities.

- ***No District-level Curriculum Directors for Civics.***

Only one school district in the state has a curriculum director dedicated to social studies generally and no school district has staff dedicated specifically to civics curricula and civic learning opportunities.



Alaska Context

- ***No Professional Organization for Social Studies Educators.***

Although Alaska has had a chapter of the national Council for the Social Studies in the past, which is currently attempting to revitalize, the organization has struggled to maintain a presence in the educational community and was for many years inactive.



Alaska Context

- ***No Formal Center for Law-Related Education [LRE].***

Alaska is one of only five states in the nation without a formal center for law-related education.

We are also the only state with no paid staff dedicated to law-related education in any organization.

(Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2003)



Alaska Context

- ***Alaska Teaching Justice Network***

Established via a two-year “revitalization” grant from Youth for Justice Program, part of the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Grant has now ended and the long-term viability of a broader civic learning network will depend on a wider base of support and stronger institutional partnerships.



The Alaska Civic Learning Assessment Project (ACLAP)

Grant from the national *Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools* (CCMS) to better understand the current state of K-12 civic learning in Alaska and to assess the civic knowledge and experiences of Alaska's youth.



The Alaska Civic Learning Assessment Project (ACLAP)

- Survey of Alaska School Districts
- Civics quiz
- Focus groups with youth and elders



Key Findings

- Most Alaskan students are exposed to civics in school.
- Time & resources for civics are limited.
- Lack of civic knowledge is widespread.
- Civics education is widely viewed as important.
- Support exists for more in-depth & challenging civic learning opportunities.

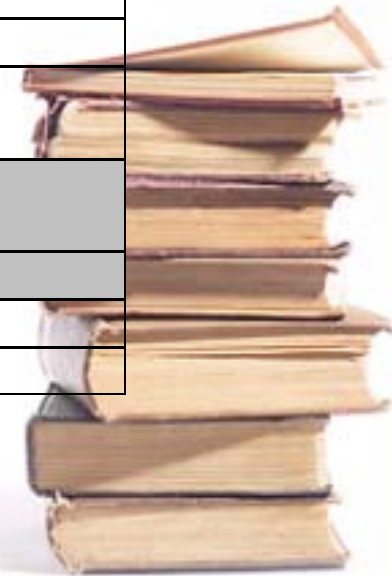


School District Survey Findings

HOW DOES YOUR DISTRICT OFFER CIVICS CURRICULUM?

General Civics		
	Secondary	Elem
Required and Elective	8	
Required only	17	
Elective only	3	
Civics in other courses	5	27
No civics	1	5
Alaska-Specific Civics		
Both Alaska-Specific Courses, and Included as parts of other courses	15	
Alaska Specific Courses only	7	
Included as parts of other courses only	4	19
No Alaska-specific material	6	11

N = 34



School District Survey Findings

IMPORTANCE OF CIVICS EDUCATION

	Highly important	Somewhat important	Not very important
How important do you think it is to educate our young people in civics?	87%	13%	0%
How important is it to have civics education in the core curriculum?	70%	27%	3%
How important is civics education to your school board?	50%	46%	4%
	Highly satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Not very satisfied
How satisfied are you that civics education opportunities in your district are creating informed, active, and engaged citizens?	20%	73%	7%

N = 34



School District Survey Findings

WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE BIGGEST OBSTACLES TO IMPROVING CIVICS EDUCATION IN YOUR DISTRICT?

	Percent "YES"
No funds	48%
No time	43%
Standards-based instruction	48%
Other social studies priorities	34%
Lack of [suitable] teachers or teacher support	16%
No student interest	14%
No administrative support	3%
Controversial topics	3%
Need better/more materials	3%
Need more parents to help with parenting / social skills.	3%
No Barriers	13%

N = 34



Civics Quiz Results

- 94% knew the age requirement to be U.S. President
- 94% knew the two countries nearest to Alaska
- Between 80-90% identified 18 as the correct voting age
- Between 80-90% knew the year Alaska became a state
- Most know some (but not all) of the requirements to serve on a jury



Civics Quiz Results

- Only three out of four (75%) knew that Alaska's governor is Frank Murkowski
- Fewer than half could name all three members of Alaska's Congressional delegation
- 17% could not name any member of Alaska's Congressional delegation



Civics Quiz Results

- 80-90% percent of respondents left each of the Alaska-specific questions blank
- Fewer than three-quarters recognized "PFD" as the permanent fund dividend
- Only 8% were able to identify "ICWA" as the Indian Child Welfare Act
- Only 3% were able to identify "ANILCA" as the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act



Civics Quiz Results

- Only half identified “BLM” as the Bureau of Land Management
- Only half recognized Jay Hammond as a former governor
- About one-third of respondents stated that they paid a state or local income tax
- 43% claimed to pay federal property taxes



Focus Groups

- **Elders**

- See only adults, not young people, participating in civic activities
- Feel that parents and elders need to set an example in being involved, and be role models for young people



Focus Groups

- **Middle school students**

- Feel they should learn more about current events in school
- Are concerned about general lack of knowledge of Alaska among peer group
- Want more education on civic issues in school, and more discussion about civic liberties
- Want this to start earlier, in upper elementary grades



Focus Groups

- **Alaska Native high school students**
 - Want a greater focus on Alaska's government, rights and constitution in their Alaska Studies course
 - Want more discussion and debate about political and civic issues in social studies classes, and less focus on learning via packets
 - Feel they should learn "everything" about the government, including both Native and non-Native issues, e.g., differences between Native and non-Native peoples' rights and legal standing



Ideas for change: Civic Learning Policy Roundtable

- More civics education in early grades
- Create a statewide civic education organization
- Recognize “civic schools of distinction”
- More teaching about Alaska Native issues, e.g., legal status, rights and governance



Ideas for change: Civic Learning Policy Roundtable

- Professional development for educators on:
 - how civic education content can support improved reading and writing outcomes
 - civic education content (e.g., We the People)
 - using local issues & knowledge to teach civics education



Americans are blessed to live in the world's oldest democracy, and this nation remains a beacon of liberty for the world. But for this or any democracy to work, it must rely on informed and engaged citizens—citizens who understand how their government and political system work as well as their own rights and responsibilities. In recent years, as civic learning has been pushed aside, society has neglected a fundamental purpose of American education, putting the health of our democracy at risk.

**--National Advisory Council, Campaign for
the Civic Mission of Schools, "Call to Action"
April 17, 2006**



Thank You!

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