

**Favorable Testimony before the Maryland General Assembly, Ways & Means Committee  
HB 1157  
Education—Maryland High School Diploma—Civics Test Requirement**

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Public officials from both sides of the ideological divide agree: K-12 civics instruction in the U.S. is desperately in need of improvement. In 2012, then-Education Secretary Arne Duncan wrote that “unfortunately, civic learning and democratic engagement are add-ons rather than essential parts of the core academic mission in too many schools and on too many college campuses today.”<sup>1</sup>

Things have not improved.

According to the 1776 Commission created under President Donald Trump’s administration, “Education in civics, history, and literature holds the central place in the well-being of both students and communities,” but, “[in] most social studies and civics classes, serious study of the principles of equality and liberty has vanished.”<sup>2</sup>

As I explained in my testimony last year, the Center for American Progress, a self-described progressive organization, writes that civic knowledge today is “at an all-time low.”<sup>3</sup> The nation’s largest teacher union calls civics the “forgotten purpose” of education in district schools.<sup>4</sup>

National comparisons of student achievement provide evidence for these claims—and evidence of a gap between students from different backgrounds. Just one out of every four students overall demonstrates that they understand the most important civics concepts included on a national test administered by the U.S. Department of Education, but only 10 percent of black students and 13 percent of Hispanic students score at this level.<sup>5</sup>

In 2020, the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s civics knowledge survey found that approximately one-quarter of Americans could not name a single branch of our government. While a larger share of respondents could name all three branches (51 percent) in 2020 than in

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<sup>1</sup>Arne Duncan, et al, “Advancing Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy: A Road Map and Call to Action,” U.S. Department of Education, January 2012, <https://www.ed.gov/sites/default/files/road-map-call-to-action.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup>The President’s Advisory 1776 Commission, “1776 Report,” The White House, January 2021, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Presidents-Advisory-1776-Commission-Final-Report.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup>Sarah Shapiro and Catherine Brown, “The State of Civics Education,” Center for American Progress, February 21, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2018/02/21/446857/state-civics-education/>.

<sup>4</sup>Amanda Litvinov, “Forgotten Purpose: Civics Education in Public Schools,” National Education Association, NEAToday, March 16, 2017, <http://neatoday.org/2017/03/16/civics-education-public-schools/>.

<sup>5</sup>National Center for Education Statistics, “NAEP Report Card: Civics 2018,” <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/civics/results/achievement/>.

2019, the share of those surveyed who could not name any First Amendment rights was double the same figure from 2017 (the most recent year this question had been included in the survey).<sup>6</sup>

As my written testimony explained last year, to reverse these trends and prepare students for whatever his or her choice may be after high school—college, career, or any number of other possible experiences—educators at every level should have evidence of a student’s competencies.

The questions contained in the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services test review basic facts about the operations of our constitutional republic and test students’ knowledge of critical events in American history. As of 2018, *Education Week* reported that 17 states require students to answer questions from this test before a student graduates from high school, including Maryland’s neighbor to the north, Pennsylvania.<sup>7</sup>

While a passing score on this test does not guarantee that a student is prepared to be a fully-participating member of society, no score on any test can offer such assurances.

However, if a student does not know why the Declaration of Independence is important (a question from the test), how can they understand the basic ideas on which our freedoms, such as speech and assembly, rest. Or if a student doesn’t understand the Civil Rights movement’s purpose and most significant leaders (also on the test), then they will not be able to interpret intellectual theories today that criticize this movement and its achievements.<sup>8</sup>

Students and adults alike must be civically literate to know how to preserve the freedoms we cherish. Such statesmanship and rigorous dialogue on issues that lie at the heart of the American experience are in short supply. In order to foster more of this behavior, students must understand the important events and institutions that shape our government and culture and generate the topics and headlines that media inundate us with today. Without a basic knowledge of the facts that constitute these events and institutions, the dialogue about and shared understanding of the American Dream will be lost.

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<sup>6</sup>Annenberg Public Policy Center, “Amid Pandemic and Protests, Civics Survey Finds Americans Know More of Their Rights,” Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, September 14, 2020, <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/pandemic-protests-2020-civics-survey-americans-know-much-more-about-their-rights/>.

<sup>7</sup>Brenda Iasevoli, “Another State to Require Testing in Civics,” *Education Week*, June 8, 2018, [https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2018/06/another\\_state\\_to\\_require\\_testing.html](https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2018/06/another_state_to_require_testing.html).

<sup>8</sup>Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York City: New York University Press, 2001), p. 3; Derrick Bell, “Who’s Afraid of Critical Race Theory,” *University of Illinois Law Review*, Vol. 1995, p. 900.