

**Favorable Testimony before the Maryland General Assembly, Ways & Means Committee  
HB 284  
Education- Maryland High School Diploma – Civics Test Requirement**

Jonathan Butcher, Senior Policy Analyst, The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Ave NE, Washington DC 20002-4999  
Jonathan.Butcher@heritage.org

Civic knowledge among K-12 students in the U.S. is in a deplorable state. And this statement is empirically true, according to our best measures of academic achievement, but as an idea, this sentiment is shared by individuals and groups on both sides of current ideological debates.

Twenty years ago, a survey conducted by the National Constitution Center found that more American teens could name the Three Stooges than the three branches of our federal government.<sup>1</sup> More teenagers knew that Leonardo DiCaprio starred in *Titanic* than could name the Vice President.

Things have not improved. Writing last year for the Hoover Institute, a free market-oriented research institution based at Stanford University, David Davenport said, “By almost any measure, the quality of civic education in America has become a national crisis.”<sup>2</sup> The former Pepperdine University president also said, “I can think of no higher priority, and no greater contributor to a better functioning of our republic, than to greatly strengthen American civic education.”

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>

The widely-held belief that neither children nor adults know enough about what it means to live in and contribute to a constitutional republic is validated in the Nation’s Report Card. Last administered by the U.S. Department of Education in 2014, the civics assessment found that 77 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders scored at or below only a “basic” level, an indicator that means, generally, students are not performing as expected for their grade level.<sup>5</sup> Sadly, overall, more than 1 in 4 students scores below the basic level.

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<sup>1</sup>National Constitution Center, “More Teens Can Name Three Stooges Than Can Name Three Branches of Government,” Press Release, September 2, 1998, <https://constitutioncenter.org/media/files/survey-1999-stooges.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup>David Davenport, “The Civic Education Crisis,” Hoover Institute, April 5, 2019, <https://www.hoover.org/research/civic-education-crisis>.

<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>U.S. Department of Education, Nation’s Report Card, 2014 Civics Assessment, [https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/hgc\\_2014/#civics/achievement](https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/hgc_2014/#civics/achievement).

In 2019, the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s civics knowledge survey found that just a quarter of U.S. adults could name one branch of government.<sup>6</sup> As I wrote with my Heritage Foundation colleague Dr. Lindsey Burke last year, this survey “found that more than one in five respondents could not name any branch of the U.S. government,” which combined with the 25 percent that can only name one branch means that “nearly half of adults cannot even begin to explain how our government operates.”<sup>7</sup>

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. Colleges should have more information about a student’s knowledge prior to entry. These institutions are pivotal in shaping young adults to be functioning members of civil society and can use the test results to create experiences in and outside of the classroom to make students’ civic knowledge and understanding both broader and deeper.

Likewise, if students in your local high school demonstrate they do not know how many senators are members of the U.S. Senate, for example, or why some states have more representatives in the U.S. House of Representatives, then the teachers and other educators should be prepared to change their instruction.

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. According to *Education Week*, 17 states now require students to answer questions from this test before a student graduates from high school, including Maryland’s neighbor to the north, Pennsylvania.<sup>8</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 who our president was during the Great Depression (another item on the USCIS test), then how could they understand the *New York Times* headline from November 2008 which read “The New Deal Didn’t Always Work, Either”<sup>9</sup> Or if a student doesn’t understand the timeline of the Civil Rights movement, then how could they read a *Wall Street Journal* piece entitled, “How Jazz Helped Hasten the Civil Rights Movement”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, “Americans’ Civics Knowledge Increases But Still Has a Long Way to Go,” September 12, 2019, <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-civics-knowledge-increases-2019-survey/>.

<sup>7</sup>Lindsey Burke and Jonathan Butcher, “The Great Society and Opportunity Lost,” *National Review*, October 26, 2019, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/10/the-great-society-and-opportunity-lost/>.

<sup>8</sup>Brenda Iasevoli, “Another State to Require Testing in Civics,” *Education Week*, June 8, 2020, [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>9</sup>Tyler Cowen, “The New Deal Didn’t Always Work, Either,” *New York Times*, November 21, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/23/business/23view.html>.

<sup>10</sup>Nat Hentoff, “How Jazz Helped Hasten the Civil-Rights Movement,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2009, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123197292128083217>.

If a student does not understand whom each U.S. Senator represents, then he or she would struggle to understand the impeachment process, the very issue that has been the focus of nightly news—or around-the-clock coverage on CNN and Fox News—in recent months.

Robert George, whose titles include McCormick Professor Jurisprudence at Princeton and Trustee of The Heritage Foundation, has written that, “The reform and renewal of civic education in our nation is a noble cause.”<sup>11</sup> Young men and women, George says, “value historical knowledge not merely for its own sake but because they want to be good citizens.” In recent years, George has modeled good citizenship and elevated the nature of public debate by speaking and writing widely with Harvard Professor Cornel West—an intellectual with different views on any number of political or philosophical questions but who has a shared commitment to civil discourse.

Ultimately, the George-West partnership is an example of intellectuals who could have succumbed to ideological polarization but chose instead to pursue truth, recognizing that honest discussion is vital to maintaining our form of government and a civil society. In 2017, the pair wrote a joint statement that says in order for men and women to govern themselves, we must be prepared to engage in debates that are informed and rigorous about the issues that matter most to us.

The statement reads, “The pursuit of knowledge and the maintenance of a free and democratic society require the cultivation and practice of the virtues of intellectual humility, openness of mind, and, above all, love of truth.”<sup>12</sup> The “ethos” of “our willingness to listen and respectfully engage with those with whom we disagree...protects us against dogmatism and groupthink, both of which are toxic to the health of academic communities and to the functioning of democracies.”

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 have a thorough understanding of 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, such understanding—and the ensuing dialogue about and shared understanding of the American Dream—will disappear.

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<sup>11</sup>Robert George, “What Colleges Forget to Teach,” *City Journal*, Winter 2006, <https://www.city-journal.org/html/what-colleges-forget-teach-12914.html>.

<sup>12</sup>James Madison Program, “Truth Seeking, Democracy, and Freedom of Thought and Expression – A Statement by Robert P. George and Cornel West,” March 14, 2017, <https://jmp.princeton.edu/statement>.