

## **Vermont Legislative Research Service**

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### **K-12 Civics Education**

The events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 shocked the nation and put the importance of civics education at the forefront of discussion across the states. A lack of civic knowledge can lead to a decreased ability to fact-

## Civics Education in Vermont

Already this year, a bill proposed requiring civics education for grades K-12, Senate Bill 17,<sup>4</sup> has been introduced and passed the Senate in Vermont. There is no federal requirement for civics education, nor is there a firm legal requirement in Vermont.<sup>5</sup>

In a local approach to education, counties and school boards in Vermont have some flexibility in creating their curriculum. These must be aligned with state standards. Vermont currently uses C3 standards for social studies, which includes guidelines for civics education. C3 includes six goals to be reached by the end of grade 2, grade 5, grade 8, and grade 12.<sup>6</sup>

Vermont has a number of measures in place to enhance civics education, but most serve as general recommendations rather than formal instructions on how to approach and implement civics education. The Education Commission of the States recommends Vermont include global citizenship, including civics, in curriculum.<sup>7</sup> The Vermont Education Quality Standard 2120.5 asks schools to provide annual learning opportunities for students to demonstrate proficiency in global citizenship. Again, this broad category of global citizenship appears in such documents. It includes civics, economics, geography, and so on – but does not provide specific guidelines within the civics recommendation.<sup>8</sup> The Vermont Agency of Education states the importance of engaging students in civic practices.<sup>9</sup> In 2006, The Vermont Council on Civics Education<sup>10</sup> was created by the state legislature. The council assesses civics education throughout the state and makes recommendations to improve its status, as well as other related tasks.<sup>11</sup>

The proposed bill, S.17, would provide more concrete guidelines for civic education in line with the C3 standards, and would make it a requirement in all Vermont public schools. The bill includes a proposed curriculum that covers more topics than the C3 standard currently recommends. This bill would also require public high school students to pass a civics course as a

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<sup>4</sup> The Vermont Senate, “S17: An Act Relating to the Requirement to Pass a Civics Course for High School Graduation,” (2021), accessed March 12, 2021, <https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2022/Docs/BILLS/S-0017/S-0017%20As%20Introduced.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Kate Barcellos, “Bill proposes mandatory civics education in Vermont schools,” *Milton Independent*, Jan. 21, 2021, accessed March 12, 2021, [https://www.miltonindependent.com/colchester/news/bill-proposes-mandatory-civics-education-in-vermont-schools/article\\_b86b6baf-f2e7-5bce-bcbc-40401253205d71rgaB 9.96 Tw 0.3t4.2 \(2\).757 rg2 271.2 1588 311](https://www.miltonindependent.com/colchester/news/bill-proposes-mandatory-civics-education-in-vermont-schools/article_b86b6baf-f2e7-5bce-bcbc-40401253205d71rgaB 9.96 Tw 0.3t4.2 (2).757 rg2 271.2 1588 311)

graduation requirement. If signed into law, S.17 would take effect on July 1, 2021 and would apply to students graduating high school in 2023 and thereafter.<sup>12</sup>

### Policies in Other States

In 1818 Thomas Jefferson said that an objective of education was “to instruct the mass of our citizens in these, their rights, interests and duties, as ... citizens.”<sup>13</sup> In the 1973 Supreme Court case *San Antonio School District vs Rodriguez*, the Court stated that an education system shall not “fail(s) to provide each child with an opportunity to acquire the basic minimal skills necessary for the enjoyment of the rights of speech and of full participation in the political process.”<sup>14</sup> Numerous states have recognized the importance of civic engagement and knowledge. In 2018 alone, 31 states proposed 115 bills or resolutions addressing numerous issues related to civics education.<sup>15</sup> States with highest rates of youth civic engagement tend to prioritize civics courses and AP U.S. government in their curricula.<sup>16</sup> When addressing state civics education, multiple routes can be taken. Trends in state civic education legislation include a civics test requirement for graduation, funding allocated to civics education initiatives, developing civics curricula, and civics course requirements.<sup>16</sup>

The desire to standardize public education has been a trend in recent years, especially in regard to civic education. This has pushed many states to move toward teacher accountability and systemized decision making. Since standards vary from state to state, Political Scientist Wayne Journell emphasizes the crucial element of a teacher’s role in civics education.<sup>17</sup> Journell studied the different ways in which certain states advocate for different types of citizenship in education. The states’ focus on certain types of citizenship can often be framed in a partisan or ideological imbalance. The first frame of citizenship discourse in public education he calls “civic republicanism.” This frame emphasizes a “national ethos” encouraging citizen cooperation, political participation, and patriotism. Civic republicanism is often resorted to in “times of national or international turmoil” by educators. Teaching the concept of “character education” is closely related to civic republicanism. Character education advocates viewing social studies “as a way to bridge the gap between polarizing cultures and beliefs” and the way morals create good people will therefore create good citizens. Political scientists have critiqued this civic education approach due to its tendency to create “unquestioning political loyalty and social alienation of minority groups.” Others object the creation of moral values in school and believe the personal moral compass should be created in the home.<sup>17</sup> The second frame of citizenship Journell

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<sup>12</sup> Lola Duffort, “A civics graduation requirement? Vermont already (kind of) has one,” *VT Digger*, Feb. 2, 2021, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://vtdigger.org/2021/02/02/a-civics-graduation-requirement-vermont-already-kind-of-has-one/>.

<sup>13</sup> James Carpenter, “Thomas Jefferson and the Ideology of Democratic Schooling,” *Democracy & Education* 21, no. 2 (2013): 3, <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1084&context=home>.

<sup>14</sup> *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S (1973).

<sup>15</sup> Ben Erwin, “The State of Civics Education,” National Conference of State Legislatures Blog, accessed March 2, 2021, <https://www.ncsl.org/blog/2019/01/16/the-state-of-civics-education.aspx>.

<sup>16</sup>

identifies is named “liberal citizenship.” “Liberal citizenship” focuses on “political deliberation, questioning of authority, and social diversification.” This view of citizenship encourages students to create their own views of morality and patriotism. The most common use of liberal citizenship is termed “deliberative democracy” that encourages public discourse on policy and controversy. Deliberation is encouraged to be used in times of conflict rather than the previously mentioned “unquestioned political loyalty.” Critics of liberal citizenship education claim that the over exposure to many viewpoints in discussions discourage civic action and may create a more divisive political society. Journell urges teachers in all states to understand the specific type of citizenship advocated in their state education system and compensate for the possible ideological sway the standard holds. Students must be exposed to different perspectives of citizenship to become well-rounded citizens who can contribute to democracy in a positive way.<sup>17</sup>

Danielle Allen is one of the leaders for the Educating for American Democracy initiative (EAD) that provides a “Roadmap for Excellence in History and Civics Education for All Learners.”<sup>18</sup> This project was curated by over 300 scholars, educators, and practitioners that provide states and districts guidance in how to improve civics and history education.<sup>18</sup> Allen says that there needs to be a “national will” to create more knowledgeable students in areas of civics and history, similar to recent STEM education initiatives.<sup>19</sup> Stefanie Wagner who is the president of the National Council for Social Studies says that the EAD initiative will meet the long-standing need for a common guide document for teaching social studies in the United States. Executive committee member of the EAD program claims “for the civic fabric of the country, the situation couldn’t be more grave than it is now.” Discussing the recent



- (2) In accordance with § 49-6-1028, provide instruction regarding our nation's democratic principles and practices, the significant events and individuals responsible for the creation of our foundational documents, and the formation of the governments of the United States and the state of Tennessee using the federal and state foundational documents;
- (3) Provide professional development opportunities or student resources that facilitate civics education, such as civics education workshops offered by the secretary of state;
- (4) Provide opportunities for students to engage in real-world learning activities, including the secretary of state's student mock election and civics essay contest;
- (5) Have fully implemented a high-quality, project-based assessment in accordance with § 49-6-1028(e), if applicable; and
- (6) Be recognized as a civics all-star school in accordance with § 49-6-408, if applicable.<sup>27</sup>

Following the passage of the bill, the Governor provided grants to Tennessee schools. “Governor’s Civics Seal mini-grants” were awarded to 20 rural and urban schools across Tennessee in the amount of \$5,000 to \$10,000 to push for higher quality civics education.<sup>28</sup>

A policy solution that has gained momentum to improve civics is a standard that requires high school students to pass the U.S. citizenship exam before graduation. Only 17 states have adopted this standard, but Tennessee has implemented something similar.<sup>29</sup>

Tennessee has adopted a civics test prerequisite to receive a high school diploma. The test must include twenty-nine questions on American government, at least sixteen questions on American history, and at least seven questions on integrated civics. At least seventy percent of the questions must be answered correctly in order to pass. The bill was passed and approved in May 2019.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> State Net, “House Bill NO. 944,” accessed Feb. 15, 2021, [https://custom.statenet.com/public/resources.cgi?id=ID:bill:TN2019000H944&ciq=ncsl5&client\\_md=f2a9ae97b737ed6e1c68cbfabf173458&mode=current\\_text](https://custom.statenet.com/public/resources.cgi?id=ID:bill:TN2019000H944&ciq=ncsl5&client_md=f2a9ae97b737ed6e1c68cbfabf173458&mode=current_text).

<sup>28</sup> Tennessee Department of Education, “Governor Lee Launches Governor’s Civics Seal and Mini-Grants,” last modified Oct. 14, 2019, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.tn.gov/education/news/2019/10/14/governor-lee-launches-governor-s-civics-seal-and-mini-grants.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Sarah Shapiro, Catherine Brown, “A Look at Civics Education in the United States.”

<sup>30</sup> State Net, “House Bill No. 1016,” accessed Feb. 15, 2021, [https://custom.statenet.com/public/resources.cgi?id=ID:bill:TN2019000H1016&ciq=ncsl5&client\\_md=c1c8af97afce2b6acd732efbddd2981&mode=current\\_text](https://custom.statenet.com/public/resources.cgi?id=ID:bill:TN2019000H1016&ciq=ncsl5&client_md=c1c8af97afce2b6acd732efbddd2981&mode=current_text).

## **Recommendations from Experts**

The topic of civics education has been highly discussed among political science experts. In order to grow a more informed and empowered



teachers that their students learned “to be tolerant of people and groups who are different from themselves,” “to understand concepts such as federalism, separation of powers, and checks and balances,” and “to develop habits of community service such as volunteering and raising money for causes,”



sources, and how to evaluate political claims. To have an electorate that is capable of making wise decisions, citizens must know how to separate fact from opinion, and how to gather and weigh evidence.<sup>39</sup>

The official release of the Educating for American Democracy Roadmap and Report previously discussed in this report was on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021. The project was released after 17 months of work from over 300 contributors. The map is spread across four separated grade bands (K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12). Comparing the C3 Framework that Vermont currently holds, the EAD Roadmap is “meant to compliment, not compete with, the C3 Framework.” The Educating for American Democracy website, <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/>, provides instructions on how to navigate the roadmap along with a free download to the roadmap itself.<sup>40</sup>

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This report was completed on March 15, 2021, by Maya Berger, Marjorie Brown, and Erin Tevnan under the supervision of VLRS Director, Professor Anthony “Jack” Gierzynski.

Contact: Professor Anthony “Jack” Gierzynski, 534 Old Mill, The University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405, phone 802-656-7973, email [agierzyn@uvm.edu](mailto:agierzyn@uvm.edu).

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