



Embargoed: Hold for Release Until Wednesday, May 4, 2011, at 11 a.m. (EDT)
STATEMENT ON THE NATION'S REPORT CARD:
NAEP 2010 Civics

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The NAEP results today confirm an alarming and continuing trend that civics in America is in decline. These developments indicate that civic education is facing a real “civics recession” calling upon all of us to develop a national call to action. During the past decade or so, educational policy and practice appear to have focused more and more upon developing the “worker” at the expense of developing the “citizen.”

Particularly disturbing are NAEP results which show that only about three-quarters of our students at the fourth and eighth grades scored at the *Basic* or above levels of achievement, while less than two-thirds of our 12th graders did. Many of our high school seniors are already eligible to vote—or they very soon will be. We would expect them to be better prepared to exercise the rights and assume the responsibilities of American citizenship. Also disappointing is the finding that 4 percent of high school seniors ranked at the *Advanced* level—a level we would hope our future leaders would attain.

Because of time constraints, I will limit myself to commenting on just two aspects of the results of the 2010 NAEP that are of special concern: The persisting gap in racial/ethnic civic knowledge and the essential topics of study addressed and neglected in grades 4, 8, and 12.

Racial and Ethnic Knowledge Gaps Persist

The 2010 NAEP results indicate that there has been no change for the better in the score gaps between White and minority fourth graders since 2006. In 2010, White fourth graders scored 24 points higher on average than Black students and 27 points higher than Hispanic students. Those discouraging numbers are only part of the story. While just 13 percent of White fourth graders scored below the *Basic* level of achievement, 38 percent of Black students did and almost half (42 percent) of Hispanic students did.

Such disparity is unacceptable—and such disparity *should not* and *need not* be perpetuated in our schools. Current studies, however, reveal that civic learning opportunities now are inequitably distributed. One large study¹ of ninth-grade students found that African-American

¹ Kahne, J.; Crow, D.; Lee, NJ. “Pedagogies can promote politics: High school learning opportunities and political engagement.” A paper presented July 1, 2010 in a seminar of the Center for Adolescents at Stanford University.

students, Hispanic students, and those not planning to go to college received fewer of either content-centered or experience-centered civic learning opportunities than did White or college-bound students.

The irony is that an abundance of studies provide evidence not only that civic learning opportunities can work for all demographic groups and, what is more important, that they can have long-lasting and far-reaching effects.

A recent review of the influence of civic education found that:

- Formal civic education imparts an understanding of the government and how it works that aids people in developing a sense of competence that encourages participation.
- Political engagement requires people to believe in their own ability to influence actual political happenings. A sense of political efficacy does not come only from political knowledge but from other skills that are developed through successful civic education programs.
- People whose civic education experience includes innovative curriculum elements are more likely to develop habits of participation and a sense of civic duty that remain over a lifetime.²

A team of international university scholars who conducted their own inquiry into the importance of civic education concluded and reinforced what other researchers have found:

“Classroom opportunities with an explicitly civic dimension can develop students’ sense of civic [competence], social relatedness, and political and moral understandings.”³

Topics Addressed and Neglected in the Nation’s Classrooms

It is important to remind ourselves that the questions asked in NAEP assessments are neither trivial nor esoteric. They are carefully constructed to address three interrelated components of civic education: knowledge, intellectual and participatory skills, and civic dispositions. Civic dispositions are described as those public and private traits of character that contribute to the political efficacy of the individual, the healthy functioning of the political system, a sense of human dignity and worth, and the common good. Taken together, these components form the essential elements of civic education in the United States.

The 2010 NAEP results provide us some insight into how some of the essential components of civic education are being addressed in our nation’s classrooms. For example, in 2010 NAEP, fourth-grade teachers were asked to report the extent to which they emphasized these topics in their classroom: The foundations of democracy, and the roles of citizens in United States democracy.

Sadly, only slightly more than half of the responding fourth-grade teachers reported that they did *not* emphasize “at all” or “only to a small extent” either the foundations of democracy or the roles of citizens in United States democracy (56 percent and 55 percent respectively). That is

² Owen, D. “The Influence of Civic Education on Electoral Engagement and Voting.” A paper presented at APSA’s Teaching and Learning Conference, Albuquerque, New Mexico, February 11–13, 2011.

³ Przeworski, A. *Sustainable Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). 37.

lamentable for a number of reasons, including the reason that it ignores the finding of both national and international research.⁴

Studies of elementary school children show that rudimentary concepts of fairness, freedom, justice, and democracy exist among them. From grade two to grade eight their attitudes change from more personalized attitudes about government to more awareness of issues. By late elementary grades students exhibit a growing ability to take the perspectives of others and to consider community issues.

One of the major findings of the *Citizenship and Education in Twenty-Eight Countries* study was that 14-year-old students have an understanding of fundamental democratic values, but “depth of understanding is a problem.” Their knowledge of democratic values and institutions is superficial.⁵

Turning now to some NAEP findings from middle school, eighth-grade students were asked what topics they had learned about during the school year. While 82 percent of the eighth graders said they had studied the United States Constitution, only about three-fourths said they had studied the court system, or state and local government (78 percent and 75 percent respectively). Surprisingly, only 62 percent reported that they had studied the President and the cabinet. Forty percent learned about other countries’ governments. There was a very small gain in the number who learned about international organizations, such as the United Nations, but it only amounted to a rise from 29 percent of students in 2006 to 33 percent in 2010.

At 12th grade, students reported a surprising decline in study of the United States Constitution—both a decline from study in 2006 and different from the greater attention given to the Constitution as reported by eighth graders.

Even the study of elections and voting by seniors was sparse. That is surprising, because in many surveys youth have expressed a desire for more instruction in that area. They say that one of the reasons they don’t vote or participate in campaigns is that they don’t know enough.

One of the more disturbing findings about the knowledge of high school seniors is that less than half (47 percent) had studied other countries’ governments and a mere 43 percent had studied international organizations. Ignoring those topics is difficult to defend in an era in which our country is ever-more deeply involved in the world—politically, economically, militarily, and in humanitarian efforts. The 2010 NAEP results make it clear that we need to be more attentive to the topics that are addressed in our classrooms and that they are addressed in such a way that all students acquire the knowledge, develop the skills, and display the dispositions that will enable them to function effectively as democratic citizens.

Conclusion

We are all familiar with the anecdote about the woman who asked Benjamin Franklin as he left the Constitutional Convention what kind of government he and the other framers had created. He replied, “A republic, if you can keep it.” I think that there is little question that over the past

⁴ See Torney-Purta, J. and Vermeer, S. *Developing Citizenship Competencies from Kindergarten Through Grade 12: A Background Paper for Policymakers and Educators*. Denver: The Education Commission of the States, 2004. 11 and 23.

⁵ Torney-Purta J., Lehmann, R., Oswald, H., and Schulz. W. *Citizenship and Education in Twenty Eight Countries: Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age Fourteen*. (Executive Summary): Amsterdam, the Netherlands: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) 2001. 5. The United States was one of the countries included in this study.

200 and some odd years we have not only kept the Republic, but in many ways we have improved it. Think of the rights those of us in this room would have had about 150 years ago: more than half of us would not have had the right to vote, or run for public office, or serve on juries; none of us would be protected from unfair and unreasonable actions of state and local government under the due process and equal protection clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Our Republic has continued to exist and there is little evidence that we are going to lose it anytime in the foreseeable future. However, this should not allow us to be complacent and neglect the obligation we have to ensure that the next generation is not only capable of preserving the Republic, but of improving it. Each generation must work to preserve the fundamental values and principles of its heritage; to work diligently to narrow the gap between the ideals of this nation and the reality of the daily lives of its people; and to more fully realize the potential of our constitutional, democratic republic. We can emerge from this civic recession, but to do so will require a full-scale national investment from every level of government and every sector of society to ensure that our citizens understand their government and participate fully in it.