

# STAFF MEMORANDUM: CIVIC EDUCATION



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*Relevant memoranda will be released in conjunction with the Commission’s public hearings. Staff encourages those with views on issues under discussion during the hearings to provide their input to the Commission at [www.inspire2serve.gov](http://www.inspire2serve.gov) and stands ready to revise its current understanding of these issues in light of new information as the Commission’s work continues.*

## **Background**

The June 20, 2019 public hearings will provide an opportunity to discuss policy options the Commission is considering with respect to creating an expectation of service. The morning hearing focuses on doing so through civic education. More than a collection of facts about U.S. history, civic education seeks to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to understand their civic roles and responsibilities and, should they choose, address personal, community, and national issues.<sup>1</sup> High-quality civic education plays a critical role in creating engaged citizens who are more likely to make a positive impact on the nation and their communities by pursuing military, national, and public service.<sup>2</sup>

However, civic education is not limited to a singular course or topic of instruction. For example, service learning—defined as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities”—can be used as part of any subject to reinforce the real-life value of concepts learned in the classroom and allow students to use their academic knowledge and skills to address community challenges.<sup>3</sup> To create a culture of service in the United States, it is vital to incorporate meaningful civic instruction and service learning opportunities into the educational experience at all levels.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this memo, the staff adopts the following definitions as presented in Michael Hansen, Elizabeth Levesque, Jon Valant, and Diana Quintero, *The 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well are American Students Learning?* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2018), 16, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/2018-Brown-Center-Report-on-American-Education\\_FINAL1.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/2018-Brown-Center-Report-on-American-Education_FINAL1.pdf). *Civic knowledge* is defined as “an understanding of government structure, government processes, and relevant social studies knowledge and concepts,” *civic skills* are defined as “abilities that allow students to participate in a democracy as responsible citizens,” and *civic dispositions* are defined as “attitudes important in a democracy, such as a sense of civic duty and concern for the welfare of others.”

<sup>2</sup> James G. Ladwig, “Beyond Academic Outcomes,” *Review of Research in Education* 34, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 113-41, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x09353062>. See also Jonathan Gould, ed., *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2011), 6, <https://www.carnegie.org/publications/guardian-of-democracy-the-civic-mission-of-schools/>

<sup>3</sup> Joe Bandy, “What is Service Learning or Community Engagement?” Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, accessed March 27, 2019, <https://wp0.vanderbilt.edu/cft/guides-sub-pages/teaching-through-community-engagement/>.

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## Policy Options

This memo details a series of policy options that generally address two topics:

- (1) *Identifying and encouraging non-federal education authorities (NFEAs) to adopt best practices in civic education and service learning.*<sup>4</sup>
- (2) *Leveraging federal funds to incentivize NFEAs to improve the quality and delivery of civic education and service learning.*

### ***(1) Identifying and encouraging NFEAs to adopt best practices in civic education and service learning.***

The Commission encourages NFEAs to develop a continuum of civic education, starting in kindergarten and continuing through high school and beyond. The following options represent possible recommendations for action by NFEAs:

- **Introduce civic education in elementary school.** NFEAs are encouraged to expose students to civic education, including the basics of government, history, law, and democracy and provide students opportunities to participate in civic-related activities.
- **Further expose students to civic education and engage them in interactive programs in middle school.** NFEAs are encouraged to expand civic education instruction and provide students with opportunities to design, participate, and lead interactive, applied civic exercises, projects, and extracurricular activities.
- **Ensure students have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions expected of informed and engaged citizens by the end of high school.** NFEAs are encouraged to offer a year-long civic education course as a condition of graduation, facilitate student discussion of current events, and assess students' civic knowledge beyond rote memorization. NFEAs are encouraged to provide every high school student an opportunity to complete an interactive, applied civic education project prior to graduation.
- **Encourage institutions of higher education (IHEs) to take steps to improve the civic health of their communities and the nation.** IHEs are encouraged to identify community-level opportunities for civic engagement, develop financial incentives for students to become civically engaged, and improve content delivery of civic programs.
- **Connect civic education with service.** In addition to applied civic education, NFEAs are encouraged to incorporate service-learning methodologies into the high school experience and explore the feasibility of creating full-time service terms during a summer, semester, or other period of time.
- **Demonstrate a commitment to civic education.** NFEAs should review legislation and curricula against best practices across the nation, develop partnerships with non-profits, philanthropic organizations, and the private sector, leverage skilled educators to train teachers in civic education instruction, create recognition programs for schools, districts, and students, and expose students to state and local policymaking through youth advisory councils.

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<sup>4</sup> NFEAs include state, territorial, tribal, and local governments, as well as school districts and other non-federal authorities responsible for public education across the United States.

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## *(2) Leveraging federal funds to incentivize NFEAs to improve the quality and delivery of civic education and service learning.*

Federal investment in civic education has been declining for the past two decades and lags behind the investment made in other academic subjects of need.<sup>5</sup> Federal support for civic education and American history peaked at an estimated \$150 million in fiscal year (FY) 2010.<sup>6</sup> Between FY 2011 and FY 2016, the federal government directed no funds for civic education. The federal government currently allocates just under \$4 million in available funds for direct civic education programs.<sup>7</sup> The following describes potential options through which the federal government could better support civic education:

- **Create a federal grant program to support civic education initiatives.** This program would exist within the U.S. Department of Education and disburse funds in the form of competitive grants to NFEAs to develop and implement civic education programs. The program would reserve a portion of funds for Opportunity Zones, as defined in the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act.
- **Create a federal grant program to fund service term pilots.** The program would exist within the Corporation for National and Community Service and disburse funds in the form of competitive grants to NFEAs to pilot programs, including, but not limited to, semester- or summer-long service terms during high school.
- **Require all states to participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment and disaggregate its results by state.** The NAEP Civics Assessment would be administered every two years in the same manner as the NAEP Math and Reading Assessments. The results of the assessment for each state would be publicly available and published to differentiate between states.
- **Institute national award and recognition programs to honor excellence in civic education.** These would include awards and recognitions for states, districts, schools, teachers, and students. The awards could be modeled after the National Blue Ribbon Schools Program or the National Teacher of the Year Award.
- **Develop and distribute civic education resources and materials.** The program would be overseen by the Library of Congress, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. Resources would be freely distributed to the public in both physical and digital forms.
- **Create a Mobile Constitution Center.** The Mobile Constitution Center would be staffed by an expert on constitutional issues and equipped with replicas of key documents from American history to visit locations around the country, with a focus on rural areas.
- **Create an institutional home for federal civic education initiatives.** The U.S. Department of Education would create a dedicated position or office with the responsibility of overseeing and coordinating federal civic education grants and initiatives.

<sup>5</sup> As a comparison of federal funding for other academic subjects of need, the federal government invests over \$1.7 billion supporting STEM education. See Jonathan Behrens, "Final FY19 Appropriations: STEM Education," American Institute of Physics, March 8, 2019, <https://www.aip.org/fyi/2019/final-fy19-appropriations-stem-education>.

<sup>6</sup> Of this amount, about \$100 million was allocated to the U.S. Department of Education's Teaching American History Grant program and the remainder was allocated to various civic education initiatives and organizations.

<sup>7</sup> Based on staff review of U.S. Department of Education budget tables and conversations with experts.



## Issue to Consider

### **Content and Goals of Civic Education**

There is broad agreement that the average American does not receive or retain crucial civic knowledge and skills from their education.<sup>8</sup> Broad agreement also exists when discussing the gap in civic education between socio-economic and demographic groups.<sup>9</sup> However, disagreements about the specific knowledge and skills that should be imparted in school as part of civic education come into sharp focus during debates over new curricular standards, the employment of certain pedagogical techniques, and even descriptions of shared American values.<sup>10</sup> Attempts to change the civic education landscape must grapple with fundamental disagreements over the role of civic education in imparting knowledge of civic rights and responsibility, creating engaged and informed citizens, and establishing connections between education and service.

### **Educational Federalism**

Current laws and practice in the American education system derive from the Tenth Amendment's reservation of powers, preventing the federal government from mandating that NFEAs adopt specific curricular standards or instructional content. However, the federal government maintains the ability to influence state education law and policy and does so primarily by issuing grants that encourage NFEAs to develop and implement education-related programming. Nonetheless, some argue that the federal government has the authority to be more prescriptive in the area of K-12 education on the grounds that there is a constitutional right to education.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to considering whether the federal government *can* mandate education policies, policymakers should consider whether the federal government *should* do so. Policymakers must consider tradeoffs between uniformity of standards and content with the ability of NFEAs to determine the education policies and curricular standards most appropriate for their constituents.

### **Resourcing**

The resources available in the education sphere—including staff, funding, and time—are extremely limited. Adding requirements to the existing K-12 structure and curriculum would require NFEAs to stretch these resources further, increasing the obligations placed on and potentially straining students, teachers, and administrators.

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<sup>8</sup> Hansen, et. al, *The 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well are American Students Learning?*

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, "Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School," The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), Working Paper 59 (February 2008), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED503646.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Dana Goldstein, "Is the U.S. a Democracy? A Social Studies Battle Turns on the Nation's Values," *The New York Times*, April 17, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/07/us/usa-democracy.html>

<sup>11</sup> Derek W. Black, "The Constitutional Compromise to Guarantee Education," *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 70 (March 2018): 735-837. <https://review.law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/03/70-Stan.-L.-Rev.-735.pdf>

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## *Staff & Funding*

Education spending currently represents approximately 3 percent of total federal spending. However, the U.S. is experiencing an acute teacher shortage, with every state and territory reporting a lack of qualified teachers in at least one academic subject.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, per student spending differs greatly from state to state, ranging from \$18,719 in New York to \$6,227 in Idaho.<sup>13</sup> Absent additional investment by the federal government, states, and localities, schools—particularly ones serving under-resourced, low-income communities—may have a limited ability to implement new policies or programs or take advantage of new funding sources.

## *Limited School Time*

Schools possess a limited amount of time to pursue many goals, including providing effective instruction, implementing career and college preparatory curricula, promoting students' academic and personal growth, and supporting students' physical and emotional wellbeing. Schools must also meet numerous requirements from state and local authorities, enforce graduation requirements, and administer standardized testing. Adding new civic education and service-learning demands could lead some schools to shift away from other important priorities.

## *Student Obligations*

Students have numerous obligations, both in and out of school. Schools should explore innovative ways to build civic education and service-learning programs into existing school time, particularly in situations where students must use their non-school time to pursue paid work and meet familial and extracurricular obligations.

## **Evaluation**

Many problems in civic education do not have clear right or wrong answers. As a result, traditional standardized assessment models may not allow educators and policymakers to easily determine students' development of civic skills, knowledge, and dispositions. New and innovative assessment tools, which may better assess civic education outcomes, may be more resource intensive to implement, exacerbating existing challenges.

*The June public hearing of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service is intended to generate discussion of issues surrounding civic education in America. Feedback can be shared at <https://inspire2serve.gov/content/share-your-thoughts>.*

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *Teacher Shortage Areas Nationwide Listing 1990-1991 through 2017-2018*, June 2017, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/pol/ateachershortageareasreport2017-18.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce D. Baker, Danielle Farrie, and David Sciarra, *Is School Funding Fair? A National Report Card*, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition (Newark, NJ: Education Law Center, February 2018), 20, 32. [http://www.edlawcenter.org/assets/files/pdfs/publications/Is\\_School\\_Funding\\_Fair\\_7th\\_Editi.pdf](http://www.edlawcenter.org/assets/files/pdfs/publications/Is_School_Funding_Fair_7th_Editi.pdf).