

State Civic Education Requirements

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This fact sheet summarizes state requirements related to civic education, which means learning about citizenship, government, law, current events, and related topics. Civic education is most directly addressed in courses labeled “civics,” “government,” or “U.S. government.” Social studies is a broader category that also includes such disciplines as history, economics, and geography. However, standards and tests in the social studies often include content relevant to civics. Thus we examine requirements for the social studies with a special emphasis on provisions that relate explicitly or implicitly to civics and government.

What states *should* require is a complex and controversial matter, dependent on what constitutes good citizenship and how states should influence education.¹ This fact sheet, however, is a strictly factual analysis that is meant to inform debates about policy by summarizing the state requirements that are now in place.

We summarize state standards that define the content of social studies courses (focusing on the aspects of social studies standards that relate to civic education), state laws that require civics or social studies to graduate from high school, and state-mandated tests in civics or social studies. We also review the content, subject, and format of state assessments. Among our findings:

- All states have standards for social studies, a broad category that includes civics/government along with other disciplines such as history and geography. The theme of power, authority, and government is included in all 51 states’ social studies standards (including the District of Columbia’s). The theme of civic ideals and practices is found in every state’s standard except Missouri’s.
- Thirty-nine states require at least one course in American government or civics¹

¹ The state of Illinois requires students take US History *or* US History & Civics, and is not included in this total

- In the 2012-13 school year, 21 states require a state-designed social studies test. This is a similar number as in 2006 but a dramatic reduction compared to 2001, when 34 states conducted regular assessments on social studies subjects. Two states, Maryland and Florida, have recently instituted new social studies assessments, not yet required this year.
- Just nine states require students to pass a social studies test in order to graduate from high school: Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. Georgia's assessment will be phased out but Maryland and Florida will add high-stakes tests.
- Eight states have statewide, standardized tests specifically in civics/American government: California, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Ohio, Virginia, and West Virginia. Of those, Ohio and Virginia are the only ones that require students to pass that test to graduate from high school.
- Social studies assessments have shifted from a combination of multiple-choice and performance tasks to almost exclusively multiple-choice exams since 2000.

The previous scan of state standards, requirements and laws relating to civic education was conducted more than five years ago.² In the past decade, education policy has changed rapidly, due, in part, to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), Race to the Top, and other federal policies. In 2008, CIRCLE found little change in the amount of time devoted to social studies, but more recent research suggests that states have shifted educational resources away from social studies toward subjects that are included on state-wide assessments.³ The pendulum may be swinging back as several states are now reforming their requirements for civic education.

Methodology

To collect and analyze this information, CIRCLE reviewed state laws, standards and requirements through state websites (frequently, from state department of education websites) or, in two cases, by contacting state officials. Two different teams conducted independent scans and the few discrepancies were resolved by fact-checking and discussions. The full data summarized in this fact sheet is available online at <http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/CIRCLE-Bechtel-State-Civic-Education-Final.xlsx>. That spreadsheet also includes search terms and the codebook that we used to summarize state laws.

Standards

Standards are official state documents that itemize what must be taught. They do not necessarily come with rewards or sanctions for compliance, but they influence curricula, textbooks, tests and other assessments, and education for teachers both before and during their teaching careers.

All states have social studies standards. Most states have standards that are specifically relevant to civics or government, as distinct from their history, geography, and economic standards.

We coded state social studies standards based on the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies.⁴ States are not required to use these standards, but it provides a conventional framework and widely recognized set of categories. For the main results, see Table 1.

Table 1: Frequency of State Standards, by General Category

Standard	Number of States with the Standard
Time, Continuity and Change	51
Power, Authority and Government	51
People, Places and Environment	50
Production, Distribution and Consumption	50
Civic Ideals and Practices	50
Science, Technology and Society	46
Global Connections	46
Culture & Diversity	44
Real World Application	42
Individuals, Groups, and Institutions	36
Individual Development and Identity	12

(Throughout this Fact Sheet, the District of Columbia is counted as a state, so the total is 51.)

We also searched for three additional elements relevant to civics that are common in state standards: understanding historic documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address; studying contemporary US History; and developing civic skills (specifically, communication, deliberation, collective decision-making, critical analysis of information). The frequency of these standards is listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency of Specific Civic Themes in State Standards

Standard	Number of States with the Standard
Historic Documents (Constitution, Bill of Rights, etc)	48
Civic Skills	41

Because most standards are long, complex, and distinctive documents that evolve over decades, an enumeration of general themes does not do justice to their variety. To give somewhat more flavor, we cite several examples of how civic skills are presented in standards:

- Alaska expects students to exercise political participation by discussing public issues, building consensus, becoming involved in political parties and political campaigns, and voting.
- Florida expects students to analyze trends in voter turnout and various forms of political communication, monitor current public issues in the state, and conduct a service project to further the public good.
- Hawaii expects students to distinguish information that is relevant or irrelevant, analyze and accept multiple perspectives and interpretations, debate positions on issues regarding rights and responsibilities, come to consensus on issues, take actions to gain larger community involvement on issues (e.g., in service learning project), work cooperatively, discuss and listen, support individual group members, share resources, make compromises, and take leadership roles.
- Maine expects students to develop research questions, apply research methods, synthesize information from varied sources, conduct fieldwork and interviews, communicate in oral/written/visual form, display critical reasoning and ethical reasoning skills, and develop individual and collaborative decisions considering multiple points of view
- New Mexico expects students to demonstrate the skills needed to participate in government at all levels, including: analyze public issues and the political system; evaluate candidates and their positions; debate current issues.

Graduation Requirements

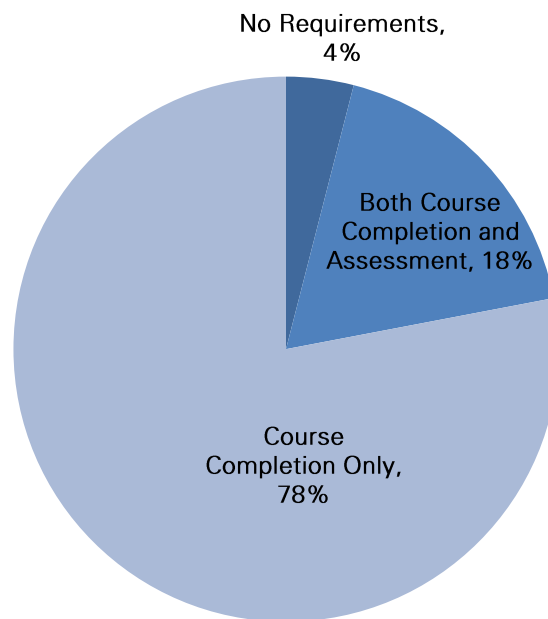
Forty-nine states (including the District of Columbia) require students to complete at least one social studies course during high school. The two exceptions are Colorado and Iowa. Iowa has a strong tradition of local control, so the lack of a statewide course requirement does not imply that civics is rarely taught there. The subject matter required by states varies, with U.S. history and civics/American government as the most commonly required courses.

- 43 states require U.S. history to graduate
- 39 states require civics/American government
- 28 states require world history to graduate
- 18 states require economics
- 15 states require geography

The states that do *not* require courses in civics or American government for graduation are: Alaska, Colorado, Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington.

Very few states require students to pass a social studies assessment in order to graduate from high school. In 2012-2013, only nine states had this requirement: Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. Georgia's assessment will be phased out but Maryland and Florida will add tests. Other states have mandatory social studies tests, but passage is not required for high school graduation.

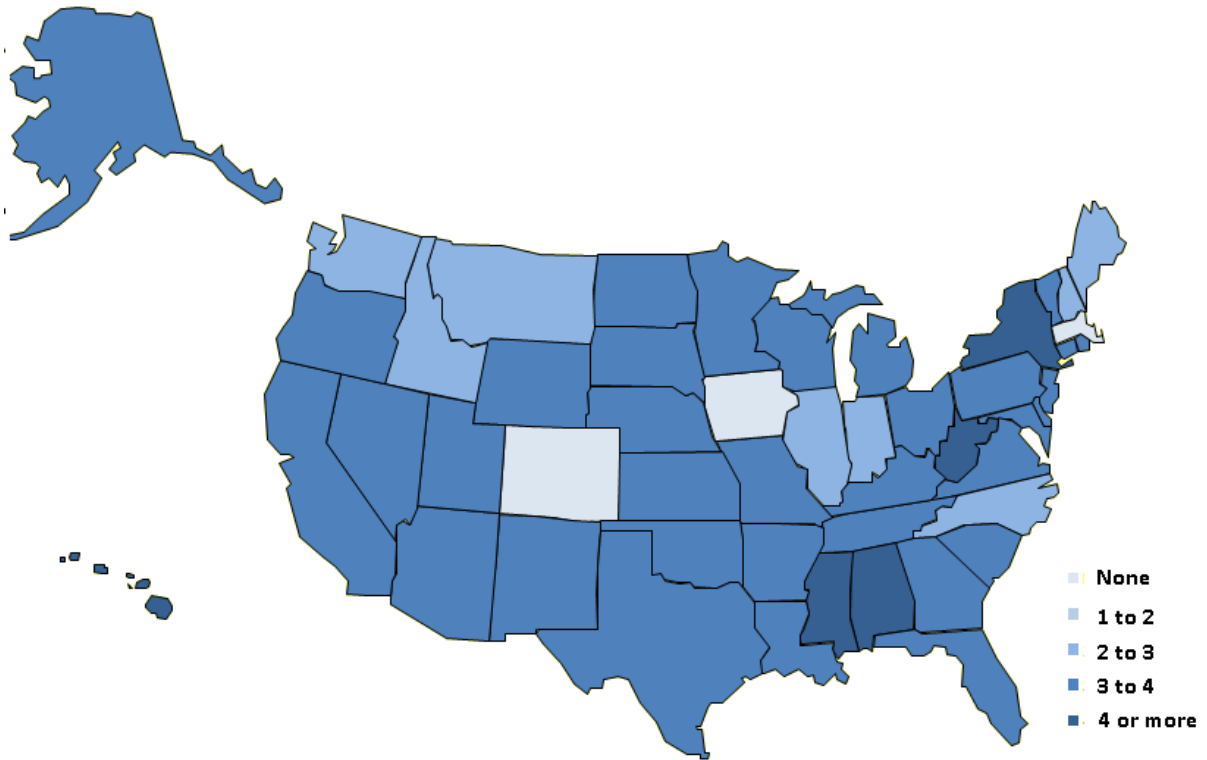
Figure 1: State Social Studies Graduation Requirements



Number of years of social studies required to graduate

Forty states require at least three years of social studies in order to graduate from high school. The exceptions are Colorado (no requirement), Idaho (2.5 years), Illinois (two years), Indiana (two years), Iowa (no requirement), Maine (2 years), Massachusetts (no year requirement), Montana, New Hampshire (2.5 years), North Carolina (two years), and Washington State (two years). In 39 states, civics/US government represents a mandatory course that counts toward the total course requirements in social studies.

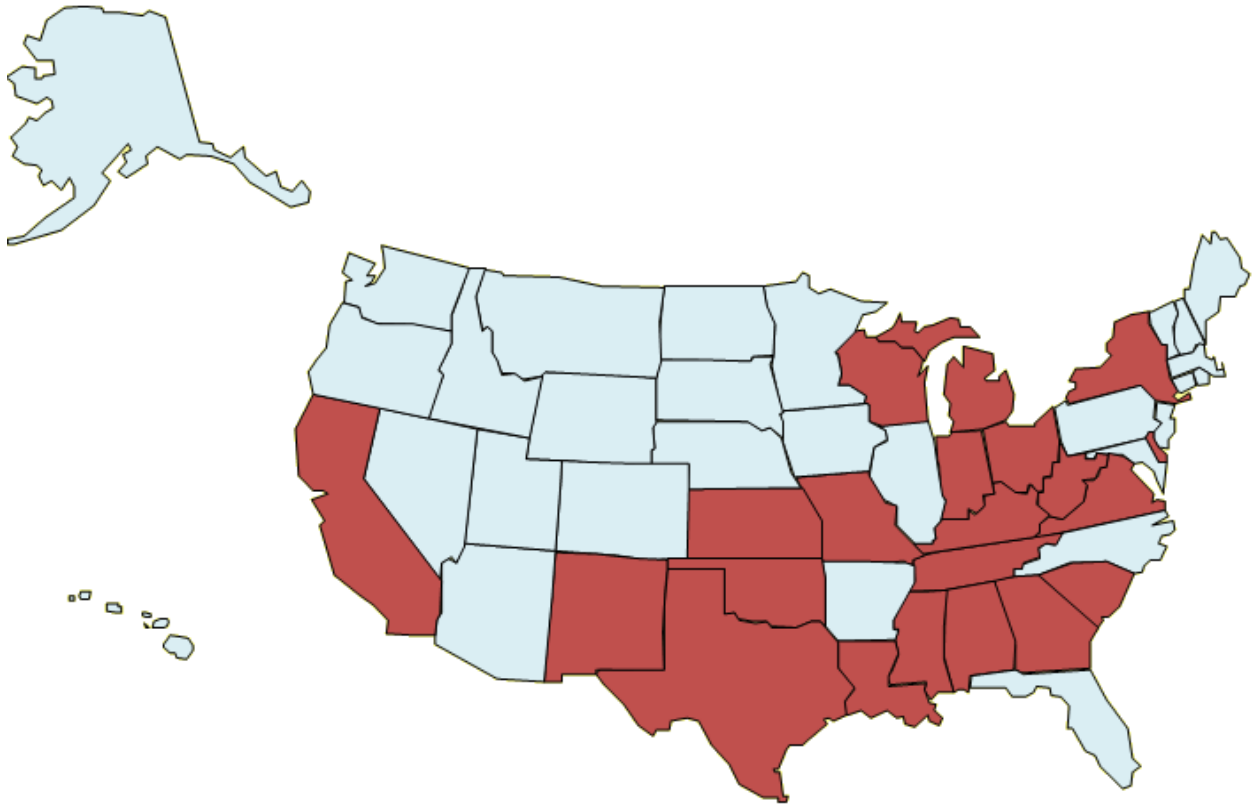
Figure 2: number of years of social studies required for graduation



Social Studies Assessment: Subjects

The number of states requiring social studies tests or other assessments has decreased dramatically since the passage of No Child Left Behind. In 2001, 34 states conducted regular assessments on social studies subjects.⁵ By 2006, the number had fallen to 21.⁶ For the 2012-13 school-year, 21 states mandate a state-designed social studies assessment sometime before 12th grade (for public school students). The Maryland legislature passed a bill in 2012 that will reinstitute a mandatory test for the high school graduating class of 2017.⁷ In Florida, under the Sandra Day O'Connor Civic Education Act, a middle school civics test is being piloted in 2012-13 and will become mandatory by 2013-14.⁸ Thus the number of states with required tests is likely to rise to 23. On the other hand, Georgia plans to phase out its test by 2015 and other changes are possible. Figure 3 shows only the states with tests actually in place in 2012-13.

Figure 3: states that have social studies assessments



United States history is the most commonly assessed subject. Out of the 21 states with state assessments this year:

- 15 states assess US history
- 14 assess state history
- 8 assess world history
- 8 assess civics/American government
- 6 assess economics
- 5 assess geography

The states that have mandatory assessment specifically in civics/government are California, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Ohio, Virginia, and West Virginia. Insofar as state assessments cover civics or government, they generally emphasize the U.S. Constitution and the duties of different branches and levels of government. Far fewer states assess students on their understanding of how citizens can become involved in the democratic process or foreign, international, or global affairs.

- 20 states test the U.S. Constitution in some way on their assessment(s)
- 15 states test the role of government on their assessment(s)
- 11 states test the rights and responsibilities of citizens on their assessment(s)

- 5 states test the U.S. in world affairs on their assessment(s)

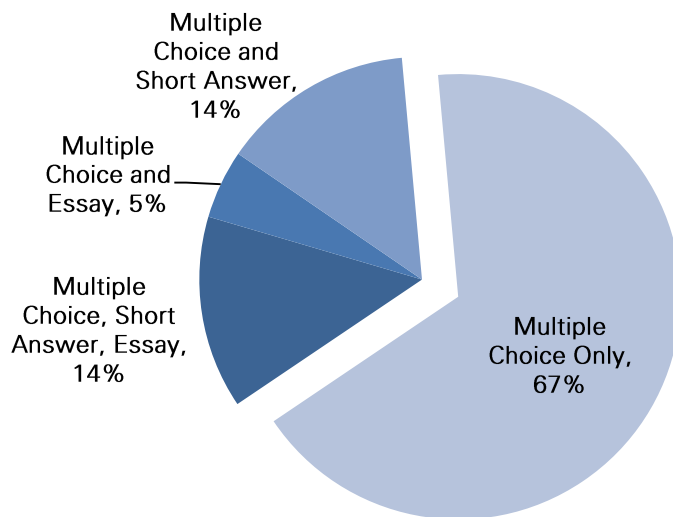
Social Studies Assessments: Items

Social studies assessments have shifted from a combination of multiple-choice and performance tasks to almost exclusively multiple-choice exams. In 2001, of the 35 states that regularly assessed social studies, 31 used multiple choice items, 10 used essay items, and 14 used short-answer and other constructed-response items.⁹

For the 2012-2013 school-year:

- All 21 states that assess social studies use multiple-choice items in their assessments
- Just six states (29% of the ones that assess) use short-answer items in their assessments
- Just 4 states (19% of the ones that assess) use essays in their assessment

Figure 4: Types of Items on Social Studies Assessments



On April 27, 2012, the Tennessee legislature passed a bill that will require school districts to assess their students' knowledge of civics by giving them assignments that are "student-influenced" and that involve an "inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks." These assignments will be used (once in grades 4-8 and a second time in grades 9-12) in lieu of written tests to find out whether Tennessee's students can "demonstrate understanding and relevance of public policy, the structure of federal, state and local governments and both the Tennessee and the United States constitutions."¹⁰ The Tennessee bill represents an important experiment, considering that all other states either do not assess civics at all or rely on highly conventional written tests.

Opportunities for Engagement Outside the Classroom: Service Learning

Many educational researchers have argued that in order for students to develop the necessary civic skills, they need opportunities to engage in the community outside the classroom. Service-learning is one common way for students to connect school lessons to community issues, and vice-versa. Research on service-learning has shown that effective programs increase students' engagement and civic skills.¹¹ Currently, 20 states have state standards related to service-learning. However, in 2011, funding for the Learn and Serve America Act was entirely eliminated from the federal budget. This program had provided funding for service-learning programs in schools. The reduction in federal funding for service-learning programs may have reduced student access to service-learning programs.

Other ways of applying social studies and civics to community or public issues (such as creating media products, conducting research, or serving as interns) are not mandated in state laws and standards.

Conclusion

Social studies courses such as history, civics, and economics provide students with the necessary civic skills and knowledge to be effective 21st century citizens. However, since the passage of No Child Left Behind, many states have shifted focus away from social studies and have dramatically reduced the number of social studies assessments. Although some states still currently assess social studies, the scope of the assessments has become increasingly narrow. States are, to a greater extent, using multiple-choice only tests that focus primarily on memorizing information, rather than demonstrating civic skills. Furthermore, assessments focus mostly on the history and geography of the United States; far fewer states assess students in world affairs or economics.

Notes:

¹ See, for example, Peter Levine, "Education for Civil Society," in David Campbell, Meira Levinson, and Frederick M. Hess (eds.), *Civics 2.0: Citizenship Education for a New Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012), pp. 37-56.

² Tiffany Lennon, "Citizenship Education," Education Commission of the States Policy Brief, 2006. <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/71/30/7130.pdf>

³ Mark Hugo Lopez, Karlo Barrios Marcelo, and Peter Levine, *Getting Narrower at the Base: The American Curriculum After NCLB*, CIRCLE monograph, December, 2008 (via <http://www.civicyouth.org/new-circle-report-on-the-k-12-curriculum-in-the-era-of-nclb/>); Patricia Velde Pederson, "What is Measured is Treasured: The Impact of the No Child Left Behind Act on Nonassessed Subjects," *The Clearing House: A Journal of Education Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, vol. 80 no. 6 (July-August 2007), pp. 287-291.

⁴ National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Chapter 2—The Themes of Social Studies*, <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands#1>.

⁵ Stephen Buckles, Mark C. Schug, and Michael Watts, "A National Survey of State Assessment Practices in Social Studies," *The Social Studies*, vol. 92, no. 4 (2001), pp. 141-146.

⁶ Lennon, p. 2.

⁷ Michael Dresser, "Law Puts Social Studies Back in the Limelight: Bill Requires Social Studies to be Taught, Tested in Maryland Schools," *Baltimore Sun*, May 22, 2012, via <http://articles.baltimoresun.com>

⁸ Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act, via <http://floridacitizen.org/resources/other/justiceact>

⁹ Buckles, Schug, & Watts, 2001

¹⁰ Tennessee Senate Bill 2066, via <http://wapp.capitol.tn.gov>.

¹¹ Shelley Billig, Sue Root, and Dan Jesse, *The Impact of Participation in Service-Learning on High School Students' Civic Engagement*. College Park, MD, 2005: CIRCLE Working Paper 33. Via <http://www.civicyouth.org/circle-working-paper-33-the-impact-of-participation-in-service-learning-on-high-school-students-civic-engagement/>