CIRCLE Fact Sheet

THE CENTER FOR INFORMATION & RESEARCH ON CIVIC LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT | www.civicyouth.org

What the NAEP Civics Assessment Measures and How Students Perform

by Peter Levine
with support from the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation

January 2013

Only eight states currently test their students on American government or civics (usually as part of a much broader social studies test), and so relatively little is known about young people's civic knowledge, skills, behaviors, and values.[1] Given the paucity of state data, the federal National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in Civics receives predominant attention. The fact that only about one quarter of students typically reach the "proficient" level on the NAEP Civics assessment is probably cited more than any other statistic about civic education, and it is often used to support proposals for adding civics requirements.

Indeed, civic education deserves increased attention, and students' knowledge may be problematic, but these interpretations of the NAEP are based on misunderstandings. This fact sheet explains how to interpret its results.

Background on the NAEP Civics assessment

The NAEP system was designed to give a regular national "report card" on students' academic proficiency to inform citizens and policymakers. Each NAEP is a test-like assessment on one subject given to randomly sampled American students. In Civics, the NAEP assessment is now administered to more than 21,000 students every three years. Equal thirds of the participants are fourth graders, eighth graders, and 12th-graders.

Compared to other prominent tests and surveys in civics, the NAEP is the most carefully designed and validated and has the largest national sample. Whereas existing state civics tests rely exclusively on multiple-choice questions, the NAEP Civics assessment also includes short essays, which are better measures of advanced skills.

Although participation is voluntary, response rates are generally high. Of the fourth graders in public schools who were asked to participate in 2010, 99% did so, along with 92% of 12th graders in public schools (but just 62% of 12th graders in private schools).[2]

A more significant source of bias may arise from a lack of motivation. The assessment has no stakes for individuals, schools, or districts; in fact, teachers and students are not even told their own performance. Given the lack of consequences, it is very unlikely that students study or prepare for the NAEP. Teachers have no reason to align their curricula to the NAEP's content, unless it happens to match requirements of their state or district.

The NAEP scores do not indicate whether students' civic knowledge is sufficient

Typically, the release of NAEP Civics results is treated as evidence that students know far too little about civics. The most recent results (from the 2010 assessment) generated an article in *The New York Times* entitled "Failing Grades on Civics Exam Called a 'Crisis.'"[3] Only 24% of 12th graders were deemed proficient, and a similar number reached proficiency in 4th and 8th grade.[4] Many reporters cited these statistics, along with specific questions on which students performed poorly. The *Times* story began, "Fewer than half of American eighth graders knew the purpose of the Bill of Rights."

These interpretations of the NAEP are misleading. The test is designed to produce the overall results that it yields. When the current NAEP Civics Framework was developed in 1998, a committee of teachers and other knowledgeable citizens decided how difficult each proposed question ought to be for students at each grade level, and then decided what overall score should qualify a student as having "basic," "proficient," or "advanced" knowledge. If members of the committee had agreed on a more—or less—demanding idea of what qualifies as success in civics, they would have set the cutoff scores either higher or lower, and those decisions would have been equally valid. The committee was informed by empirical data, but ultimately it had to make a value-judgment about what questions to ask how much knowledge is satisfactory.[5] Each subsequent NAEP Civics assessment has then been carefully constructed to be as equally difficult as the 1998 assessment. Thus 24% percent of 12th graders were rated "proficient" in 2010 because the NAEP 12th grade test had been designed to yield roughly that proficiency rate.

On the most recent NAEP Economics assessment (2006), 42% of seniors reached the proficient level—18 points higher than the scores for the most recent NAEP Civics.[6] That does not imply that students are more knowledgeable about economics (which receives less attention than civics in most American schools). It simply means that the economics committee defined "proficient" less rigorously than the civics committee did. Neither committee was right or wrong.

For a citizen or policymaker who wants to decide whether students know enough, there is no substitute for looking at individual NAEP items and making an independent decision about whether most students at a given grade level *should* know the answers. Citizens may find some NAEP items surprisingly difficult, but they may think that other items are easy and should yield mostly correct answers. At the end of this fact sheet, some examples of items are provided as illustrations.

What the NAEP results do show

Although overall scores on the NAEP Civics assessment do not tell us objectively how well students perform, the assessment is highly informative if interpreted correctly. The results can be used to learn:

1. *Which students perform better and worse than the norm for their grade.* The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that White students, female students, students whose parents had completed college, and students not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch scored better than their counterparts on at least one of the grade levels of the NAEP Civics in 2010. For more detail on demographic differences in NAEP outcomes, see the NCES's *The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010.* Other research finds that students from more advantaged background receive the most intensive and engaging opportunities to learn civics in schools; unequal inputs may in part explain unequal results.[7]
2. *How students' knowledge has changed over time.* Some questions have been repeated on each NAEP Civics assessment since 1998 to establish trend lines. The difficulty of the whole test is then calibrated by comparing performance on the other items to these repeated questions. Although the way the NAEP is designed makes it resistant to change in the mean scores, some shifts have occurred. At 4th grade, the trend has been upward since 1998; at 12th grade, scores have declined since 2006. Those findings are surprising in light of the fact that time devoted to social studies has shrunk in the early grades—under pressure from testing and standards—but it has increased in high school.[8] For details on trends in scores, see *The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010*.
3. *Which educational practices are related to higher scores.* Students who take the NAEP are asked about the frequency of various instructional practices, from completing worksheets in class to conducting debates. Their teachers are also surveyed about these practices, giving two separate perspectives on what happens in the classroom. In a subsequent fact sheet, CIRCLE will explore how instructional practices relate to students' scores on the NAEP.
4. *How well students understand various specific topics.* By examining performance on individual items, we can learn more about which topics American students are mastering and which ones may need more attention. We will turn to that issue at the end of this fact sheet. But first, it is important to understand what the NAEP measures.

What the NAEP Measures

According to the Framework document that has governed the NAEP since 1998,[9] 20% of the NAEP Civics assessment should focus on "American constitutional government and its history" and the "distinctive characteristics of American society and American political culture" that "are linked to American constitutional democracy." Another 25% of the items should assess students' understanding of how "the government established by the Constitution [embodies] the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy." Thus a total of 45% of the test should relate to the US constitutional system, defined broadly.

Twenty-five percent of the items should involve the role of citizens. Because the NAEP may not assess students' actual civic participation, students are instead asked to identify and explain actions taken by citizens in historical or hypothetical situations. For example, students cannot be asked whether they volunteer, but they could be asked why some citizens volunteer. Another 10% of the items must address the nature of civic life, politics, and government; the remaining 20% of the test investigates the role of the US in the world.

Perhaps the most succinct summary of what the NAEP measures comes from an official definition of civics "proficiency" at the 12th-grade level:

> Twelfth-grade students performing at the *Proficient* level should have a good understanding of how constitutions can limit the power of government and support the rule of law. They should be able to describe similarities and differences among constitutional systems of government, and they should be able to explain fundamental American democratic values, their applications, and their contribution to expanding political participation. They should understand the structure of American government and be able to evaluate activities of political parties, interest groups, and media in public affairs. They should be able to explain the importance of political participation, public service, and political leadership. They should be able to describe major elements of American foreign policy and the performance of major international organizations.[10]

What qualifies as a "*good* understanding" is a matter of judgment, not statistical fact.

Fig. 1: Comparing the Civic Mission of Schools, state standards, and the NAEP

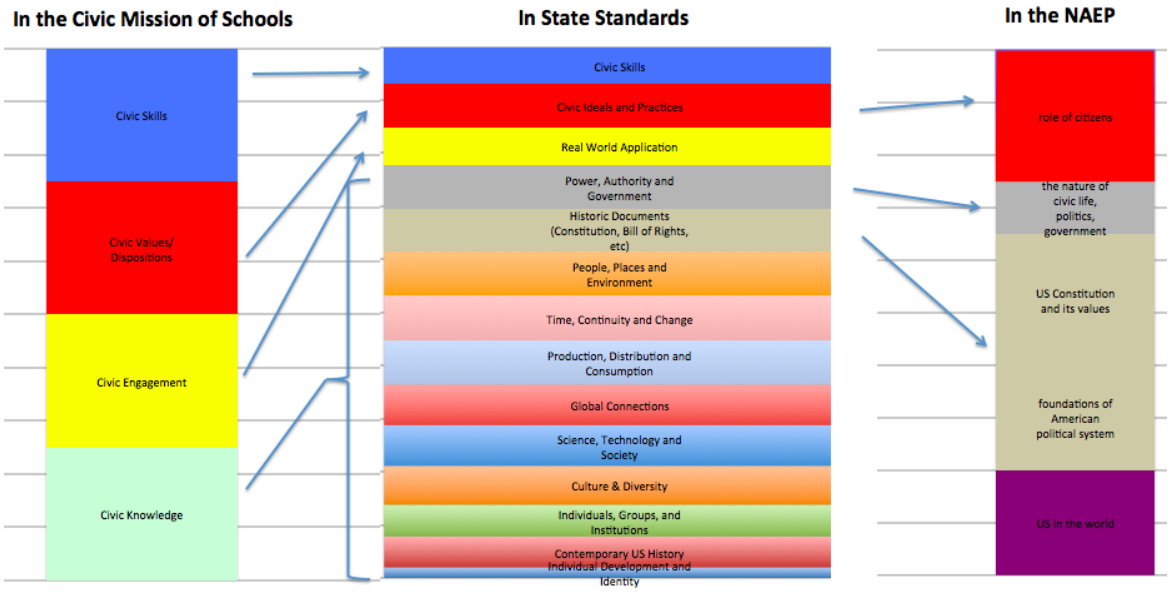

Figure 1 puts those specifications in comparative context. The NAEP's breakdown is shown in the right-hand column. At the left are the outcomes deemed essential in the *Civic Mission of Schools* report, which was written by 60 diverse experts and led to the formation of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools.[11] The outcomes that they selected were:

- civic skills (such as working with other people to address a public problem),
- civic values (such as concern for the common good and the rights of others),
- civic engagement (such as voting and volunteering), and
- civic knowledge, including knowledge of law, history, politics, and community life.

The *Civic Mission of Schools* did not suggest how these four categories should be weighted, so they are shown as equally important in the left-hand column.

Immediately, one can see that the *Civic Mission of Schools* outcomes differ from the measured topics in the NAEP Civics Assessment. The NAEP is weighted far more heavily toward knowledge, and especially knowledge of the US Constitution. In fact, the entire NAEP could be described as a test of knowledge, although students are asked some factual questions about civic engagement under the heading "role of citizens" and may be asked to display such academic skills as interpreting a cartoon or giving reasons for political position. Since the NAEP is a paper-and-pencil test taken privately by individual students, it does not directly assess students' ability to collaborate or deliberate in groups. By statute, it may not ask about behaviors outside of school or about values.

The middle column indicates the topics that are typically emphasized in state standards. All states have standards for civics, and most draw on the voluntary

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies from the National Council for the Social Studies.[12] CIRCLE recently reviewed all the states' standards and identified specific elements that matched the categories in the *National Curriculum* document. In figure 1, those categories are shown in proportion to how many states require them. For example, all states and the District of Columbia have standards for "civic skills," but only 12 states have standards about "individual identity and development," so civic skills are shown as a larger portion of the column. Overall, the central column of the graph gives a rough, aggregate portrait of what American students are expected to learn.

Comparing the three columns reveals that:

- "Civic skills" are emphasized in the *Civic Mission of Schools* report and are mentioned in most state standards, but they do not represent one of the tested categories in the NAEP. (Some NAEP items arguably require civic skills, such as interpreting a speech, to answer correctly.)
- "Civic engagement" is cited as an explicit outcome in the *Civic Mission of Schools* and is often included in state standards, but it is not directly measured in the NAEP.
- One fifth of the NAEP is devoted to international or global issues, which were not mentioned at all in the *Civic Mission of Schools* and are not common in state standards.
- The "role of citizens" represents 25% of the NAEP and overlaps with two categories in state standards ("civic skills" and "civic ideals and practices") as well as two outcomes in the *Civic Mission of Schools* framework ("civic skills" and "civic values/dispositions"). However, the NAEP items on this topic are much more academic, consisting of questions about how and why citizens act, instead of measuring actual actions by students.
- The US Constitution and the foundations of the US political system are much more prominent in the NAEP than in state standards or the *Civic Mission of Schools*.

Is the NAEP aligned with what students learn?

The NAEP is a federal assessment with no consequences for students or schools. In contrast, state standards are legal documents adopted by state governments that are meant to govern curriculum, instruction, textbooks, and tests. Nevertheless, the NAEP Framework may reflect the typical emphasis in classrooms better than the state standards do.

In a large, nationally representative survey of 4,483 young adults conducted in 2012, CIRCLE found that 44.9% of young adults remembered "the Constitution or the U.S. system of government and how it works" as the most prominent theme in their own high school civics courses. This was followed by "great events and heroes from the past" (30.1%), and lastly, "issues and problems facing our country today" (23.6%).[13]

State standards are typically broader than the NAEP, often mentioning themes like "culture and diversity" (44 states) and "contemporary history" (35 states). But state standards are so voluminous and so weakly tied to state assessments that they may have little impact on what is taught. Also, it is entirely possible that a list of themes gives a misleading picture of what state standards emphasize. Although the US Constitution is only one category in the *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*, the CIRCLE survey suggests that it actually consumes most of the time in civics and government courses. In any case, recent graduates recall studying the same topics that are measured on the NAEP.

How students perform on particular items

As noted above, the overall scores for the NAEP do not support either a critical or a positive assessment of students' knowledge; instead, they reflect the specifications of the test. Likewise, one cannot compare the subscores for particular content areas, such as the role of citizens versus the US in the world, because each area is carefully designed to yield similar average scores. In 2010, in each of the five major categories of knowledge that the NAEP assesses, the questions that had been designed to be of medium difficulty were answered correctly by between 48% and 51% of students, on average. These rates were almost identical because the items had been written and selected to yield equivalent scores.

One can look at particular items on the Civics assessment and form judgments about students' performance compared to reasonable expectations. There is an element of subjectivity in such judgments. The question of what young people *should* know is intrinsically value-laden; it is not a matter than can be settled with statistics. The value of the NAEP lies in making available such data for the public to judge.

Items that drew high scores: In 2010, 92 percent of 4th graders could name the current US president, and 84 percent of 12th graders could understand a voter registration document. These were meant to be easy questions, and students did well on them—in fact, somewhat better than anticipated by the NAEP Committee. However, 8% of fourth-graders could *not* name the president, and 16% of high school seniors could *not* understand a document that they might have to complete in order to vote. One could argue that these scores, although relatively high compared to other NAEP items, were still not high enough.

Items that drew low scores: Only 12% percent of fourth graders could write an acceptable short constructed response (SCR) essay that cited two different reasons why the U.S. benefits from having people from diverse countries and backgrounds. Perhaps this result reveals a problematic lack of understanding of the value of

diversity. On the other hand, the question may have been too difficult, or the guidelines for grading the responses may have been too stringent. Of the ten questions that yielded the worst scores on the 2010 NAEP Civics assessment, three required students to propose more than one reason for a single principle. That format may be especially challenging, regardless of the content.

Another item that drew a particularly low proportion of correct answers was this one, from the 8th-grade assessment:

> *The process for amending the United States Constitution is described in Article V of the Constitution. According to Article V, both Congress and the states must participate in the amendment process. This requirement reflects which of the following ideas about the distribution of power in America?*
>
> *A. Separation of powers among the three branches of government*
> *B. Separation of church and state*
> *C. The importance of local government control*
> *D. The importance of federalism*

The correct answer, D, was selected by just 16% of students, less than would be expected if students chose at random. Again, one could debate whether this result indicates a problematic lack of understanding of an important topic, or whether the question was too hard. In contrast, 59% of 8th graders knew that it is the federal government, not the states, that determines import duties, and 62% could identify "the three parts of the national (federal) government of the United States," when all of the incorrect options included elements of state or local government. It would seem, then, that a majority of 8th-graders have some grasp of issues related to federalism, but only 16% could correctly answer a question that employed that word.

Eighth-graders were also asked, "Who is most likely to benefit in a country where there is an unlimited government?" Sixty-one percent chose the correct answer ("Political leaders who are in power"), but this was a lower rate than expected—the question had been rated as easy. It could be argued that almost all 8th-graders should have been able to answer this question correctly.

Items related to civic dispositions or civic engagement: Although the NAEP emphasizes knowledge, it includes some questions that bear on dispositions or behaviors. They yield mixed evidence about students' performance.

For instance, 4th-graders were given a prompt:

> *When he became President, John F. Kennedy said: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Give an example of one important thing that individuals can do for their country and explain why it is important.*

A full answer would demonstrate “an understanding of what will support the country” and also provide “at least one reason” for the example the student proposed. Scorers were given an example of an acceptable response: “Pick up trash because that would help us have a cleaner neighborhood and country.” Twenty-seven percent of 4th graders gave fully acceptable responses, and another 32% gave partial responses (an example without a reason, or a reason without an example). Forty-one percent of respondents gave unacceptable responses or left the item blank. The difficulty of the question was predicted to be medium, and so the scores were lower than expected.

Eighth-graders were given a hypothetical problem—students want to use a small schoolyard for conflicting purposes—and were asked to summarize and justify a process for addressing the conflict along with “one reasonable rule for everyone to follow that will stop the arguing.” The question was designed to be hard, so that only one in four would answer it acceptably, but 41% gave fully credited answers and another 11% received partial credit. It seems that 8th-graders were unexpectedly good at addressing a problem of conflicting interests, or else the scoring guide was too lenient.

At the 12th-grade level, students were asked to “list two of the responsibilities of US citizens.” Fifty-one percent provided two acceptable responsibilities and another 32% gave one credited response, for a total of 82% who knew at least one responsibility—again, a higher-than-expected response.

Conclusion

The NAEP provides rich information about students’ civic knowledge. It is not designed to measure interactive skills, values and dispositions, or actual civic engagement. It is a carefully and well-designed test of knowledge but may suffer somewhat from the lack of stakes for teachers and students, as they have no extrinsic motivation to prepare or focus. Conclusions about the meaning of scores are subjective, and the boundaries between “basic,” “proficient,” and “advanced” scores could have been set at different levels.

The most valuable statistics include:

- differences in mean scores among groups of students,
- relationships between particular teaching practices and mean scores,
- changes in average performance over time, and
- students’ responses to particular questions.

This fact sheet has provided some examples of students performance on NAEP Civics items; many more are available online at http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/itmrlsx/search.aspx?subject=civics

[1] Surbhi Godsay, Whitney Henderson, Peter Levine, and Josh Littenberg-Tobias, "State Civic Education Requirements," CIRCLE Fact Sheet, updated version, October 19, 2012, via http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=4422.

[2] National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), *The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010* (Washington: DC, NCES, 2011), NCES 2011466, via http://nces.ed.gov/, p. 47.

[3] Sam Dillon, "Failing Grades on Civics Exam Called a 'Crisis'," *The New York Times*, May 4, 2011

[4] NCES, *The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010.*

[5] N.L. Allen, J.R. Donoghue, and T.L. Schoeps, The NAEP 1998 Technical Report (Washington: DC, NCES, 2011), NCES 2001509, pp. 843-5

[6] NCES, The Nation's Report Card, Economics 2006, via http://nationsreportcard.gov/economics_2006/

[7] J. Kahne and E. Middaugh, "Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School," in J. Youniss and P. Levine, eds., *Engaging Young People in Civic Life,* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2009), pp. 29-48.

[8] P. Levine, M.H. Lopez and K.B. Marcelo, *Getting Narrower at the Base: The American Curriculum After NCLB* (Medford: MA: CIRCLE, 2008), via www.civicyouth.org.

[9] National Assessment Governing Board, *Civics Framework for the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2010), via http://www.nagb .org/publications/frameworks/civicsframework.pdf.

[10] NCES, "The NAEP Civics Achievement Level Details," via http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/civics/achieveall.asp

[11] Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, the *Civic Mission of Schools* (2003) via http://www.civicyouth.org/special-report-the-civic-mission-of-schools/

[12] 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

[13] The survey was funded by the Spencer Foundation. Further results and explanation can be found here: http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=5215.