

# Affirming Support for Alternatives to the USCIS Naturalization Test as a Measure of the Civic Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions of Students

*A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies—Approved March 2018*

## Introduction

What is the intent of civic education? At its core, civic education should provide students with the ability to take informed action to address problems relevant to life in a democratic republic. It should target the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to ensure that young people are truly capable of becoming active and engaged participants in civic life.<sup>1</sup> Authentic assessment in civic education should thus reflect the importance of the three core components of civic teaching and learning—knowledge, skills, and dispositions—drawing on proven practices in civic education.<sup>2</sup> The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) affirms this conception of civic education and assessment and encourages educational policymakers at the state and local level, as well as teachers, to consider alternatives to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Naturalization Test as a high-stakes or ultimate measure of civic learning and readiness.

## Intended Audience

This position statement is intended for all audiences with an interest in civic education, but especially desires to inform those decision makers within states, districts, and schools who seek to ensure civic literacy and readiness within our next generation.

## Background

Civic literacy is a pressing concern among many stakeholders and decision makers at the state and national level. Consider, for example, the worries over student proficiency on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in Civics; poor scores over the years have raised questions about the civic literacy and competency of students in American public schools.<sup>3</sup> Relatedly, additional data suggest that participation in civic life is low, and the ability of citizens to engage with each other seems a struggle.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is not just the supposed lack of knowledge that is a concern. It seems that for many, the skills and dispositions of civic life are also lacking.

As a result of these growing concerns, the call has been raised for improvements in how students are prepared for civic life, including some measure of civic literacy and learning that will demonstrate that those students are indeed prepared for engagement in their communities and nation.<sup>5</sup> Among these proposed measures is the use of the USCIS Naturalization Test as a measure of student civic competence and a guide

for instruction. This proposal is increasingly popular, with strong national advocates and significant supporters in state legislatures across the country. While this effort to improve civic literacy and learning through implementation of a common standardized assessment is admirable, it does not in fact serve as an adequate measure and threatens to derail the effort at implementing both a quality civic education and an effective associated assessment.

## Effective Civic Education

Let us consider what we mean by effective and quality civic education. The National Council for the Social Studies itself has addressed this a number of times, most recently in the 2013 position statement “Revitalizing Civic Learning in Our Schools.” Drawing a great deal from the *Guardian of Democracy* report (2011), NCSS argues that effective civic learning should focus on 6 proven practices:

1. *Classroom Instruction*: This is tied directly to content knowledge; students need a common foundation of knowledge across the social science disciplines to be the most informed citizens they can be. This includes an emphasis on critical thinking and disciplinary literacy, with a pedagogical approach that avoids rote memorization in favor of practical application, the use of primary sources, and engaging with the content.

2. *Discussing Current Events and Controversial Issues*: It is hard to prepare students for civic life when we are reluctant to engage with them on the issues of the day. Helping them understand how to discuss controversial issues without rancor is a necessary component of civic education, and requires an emphasis on developing not just the knowledge necessary for civil (and civic) discussion, but also the skills and dispositions. Indeed, NCSS has itself recognized this importance by releasing recent position papers related to this component.<sup>6</sup>
3. *Service Learning*: Service learning has a long, and sometimes controversial, history in citizenship education.<sup>7</sup> Proponents argue that it provides students the opportunity to engage in the practice of civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions through critical thinking, problem-solving, and community engagement. What this means, however, is that service learning needs to be actual service learning, rather than the “volunteer do goodism” that sometimes passes for it within schools.<sup>8</sup>
4. *Extracurricular Activities*: Providing students the opportunity to engage in civic life outside of their classrooms and schools again encourages them to gain deeper knowledge, practice the skills, and demonstrate the dispositions that should be encouraged within civic education. This might include, for example, field trips to participate in community meetings, taking part in mock trials, or participating in student-led groups.
5. *School Governance*: What better way to encourage engagement with civic life than by including students in the governance of the community in which they spend most of their time: the school. Once again, allowing students to play a role in the decision-making aspect of school governance requires the development of a particular set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions. This may take many forms, from the “We the School” model found at Constitution High School in Philadelphia that has students heavily involved in the rule-making and decision-making within the school, to having a student presence within the traditional parent-teacher and school advisory councils.
6. *Simulations of Democratic Processes*: This last area of quality civic education encompasses a great deal, and includes elements from areas already discussed. This is, in many ways, about building skills and dispositions by engaging in simulations that reflect what they will be doing as full-fledged participants in civic life. These simulations may occur at the classroom level, or encompass the broader school community, or even contain an extracurricular component.

These six areas of civic education practice have since been explored more deeply in Guilfoile and Delander’s (2014) “Six Proven Practices for Effective Civic Learning”; these practices are the ones most likely to best prepare students for civic life beyond the classroom and school. More recently, Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg (2017) suggested that these practices expand to include:

1. **News Media Literacy Education**: Helping students understand how to make sense of what they see, hear, and learn from all sorts of media, with a critical but not cynical lens. This ensures, for example, that as consumers of daily news media, students will be able to distinguish so-called fake news from legitimate argument and news.
2. **Social and Emotional Learning**: This area reflects the idea that we are best capable of engaging in civic life when we are our best selves; whether it is decision-making or empathetic communication, understanding our social and emotional knowledge helps us grow into our roles as participants within our community.
3. **School Climate Reform**: Addressing inequitable relationships within schools, whether in school discipline models or access to curriculum, facilitates additional civic growth on the part of the student.
4. **Action Civics**: This additional area of civic educational practice encompasses much of what has already been discussed, engaging students in practicing the roles and responsibilities of citizenship by taking charge and making proposals and decisions that can have long-term consequences. Action civics reinforces the knowledge, skills, and dispositions so important in civic learning and literacy.<sup>9</sup>

This is the sort of quality civic education approach that is most likely to have a positive and long-term impact on student civic engagement.

### **The USCIS Naturalization Test**

The USCIS Naturalization Test is a series of 100 questions provided by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service, intended as one step in the naturalization process for immigrants pursuing citizenship. While there are 100 questions, the person pursuing citizenship needs only to get 6 of 10 correct on the delivered exam, which is most often provided orally in English.

This test, as constructed, was not designed to measure civic literacy and learning but rather memorization of information related to the United States of America. It does not get to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions so necessary for civic life; instead, it assesses memorized answers, freely available

online. This test thus does not truly measure student civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. It is a relatively simple test to pass for even the most uninterested student. There is also no evidence that implementing a version of this test would result in greater civic engagement.<sup>10</sup> As described in the *Guardian of Democracy* Report (2011) supported by NCSS and later reinforced by the Six Proven Practices for Effective Civic Learning (2014) and “The Republic is Still at Risk” (2017), understanding for an effective and engaged civic life requires more than simple content knowledge. While the Naturalization Test as presently constructed does assess a surface level of civic knowledge that may be quickly forgotten, it ignores the skills and dispositions component so necessary for true civic literacy and learning. Indeed, rote knowledge of civics content does not equal understanding of what it means to be a citizen.<sup>11</sup>

**If the USCIS Naturalization Test becomes the cornerstone of civic literacy and the driving force in civic education reform for state and district education policymakers, the negative impact on instruction is likely to be significant.**

To be clear, the Naturalization Test may serve as a minimal introduction to civic knowledge, and the work of supporters is to be applauded for making an effort to improve and encourage some level of civic learning. But the test itself touches only one area within the Six Proven Practices, and thus only the knowledge element of the civic education trinity of knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Indeed, it only skims the surface of that knowledge as well, through an easily memorized and then forgotten collection of questions and answers. Instruction should align with assessment; if the USCIS Naturalization Test becomes the cornerstone of civic literacy and the driving force in civic education reform for state and district education policymakers, the negative impact on instruction is likely to be significant.

### **Effective Instruction in Civics**

While the Naturalization Test serves as a means of measuring a basic level of civic knowledge, the fear is that this will be as far as many states will be likely to go, and it is a poor tool for civic instruction. Indeed, we see a trend developing already

across many states that have adopted this test; they require only some version of the Naturalization Test as a graduation or promotion requirement, ignoring the other areas so important in civic learning and literacy. It is not a stretch to think that instruction would be aligned with such an assessment, despite the flaws in such an approach. Let us consider what a quality alternative to the USCIS Naturalization Test as the main approach to civic literacy would look like.

We should consider, first, that whatever approach is taken, it is aligned with state standards and, ideally, draws on best practice and elements of the NCSS *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework* as well as the Six Proven Practices. An appropriate approach might be, for example, to incorporate the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment. This assessment provides a range of questions that go deeper than what we would find on the Naturalization Test. For example, questions ask students not only what document lists the rights of an American citizen, but how those rights might impact decision-making, community relationships, and the common good. This, again, gets beyond simply assessing for basic knowledge; it becomes more about what you can do with that knowledge.

Another option would be a project or performance-based model that requires students to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions we want them to have. The Civic Action Project (CAP) from the Constitutional Rights Foundation would be one example of this approach. This model requires students to identify a problem or issue within their community and develop, present, and in some cases implement a way to address the problem. This approach requires students to demonstrate knowledge, skills, and dispositions and draws across most of the Six Proven Practices and the additional elements suggested by Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg (2017). While there is no standardized assessment protocol for programs like CAP, the goal here is to ensure instruction that addresses the triad of civic literacy, avoiding the limitations imposed by a dependence on the Naturalization Test. An “end-product” that demonstrates civic literacy and learning would better provide for alignment between instruction and assessment.

Other options for instruction exist for a portfolio or project-based model that provides for a broad spectrum of civic learning. Online games which integrate elements across the spectrum of knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for a well-rounded civic education could serve as a strong component of a civics portfolio. iCivics, for example, has developed a number of quality online simulations that address necessary content while encouraging skill development; these provide a place to begin when considering what an online assessment might look like that moves beyond simple foundations.

Some states with strong and growing civic education programs might serve as laboratories to explore different methods of assessment around civic literacy and learning. Illinois, for

example, mandates a civics course that engages students in discussion, service-learning, and, most excitingly, simulations of democratic practice. Tennessee has adopted a project-based approach to measuring civic learning and engagement that requires students to model best practices and demonstrate their civic competency through a variety of measures similar to what we have touched on here. Arizona, while using the Naturalization Test as a measure of civic knowledge, has also established a strong and growing program, *Excellence in Civic Engagement*, that assesses and recognizes schools and stakeholders for the extent to which the Six Proven Practices are integrated into the school and classroom community and beyond. Here we have an evident demonstration of civic knowledge balanced with the modeling of skills of dispositions. Other states, such as Kansas and Nebraska, continue to consider approaches such as this to address the need for quality civic learning and assessment.

## Conclusion

The concern over the growing emphasis on the Naturalization Test as an adequate measure of civic literacy is that it will ultimately become the sole measure of civic literacy; instruction follows assessment, and many states that have adopted the test have done so without any additional consideration of the many different factors that make up true civic literacy. The measure of civics knowledge provided by the USCIS Naturalization Test is minimally beneficial, but using it alone as a measure of civic literacy or a path towards instruction neglects the vital skills and dispositions necessary for ensuring a well-rounded, literate, and engaged citizen. Options and opportunities for quality assessment, aligned with quality instruction, in civics abound. Let us embrace them and ensure that our instruction aligns with our assessment, and our students are truly prepared for the demands of participation in civic life. 🌍

## Notes

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