

## **What Do we Know about Civic Education? Not Enough**

### **If we Expect Students to Become Good Citizens, We Must Know More about Civics in our Schools**

If you ask the average person in the United States today to describe how much civic education our students get in an average day, what students view as their role as citizens and how they act on those views, you'll likely get a wide range of answers. While that is understandable it reveals something about the current state of civic education.

Civics, once public education's front line in preparing students to be good citizens, has been on the wane in recent years. And what we do know about how civics is taught and how well U.S. students achieve in civics is woefully inadequate. There is virtually no empirical research that can tell us about the state of civic education writ large in the nation's schools.

There is ample evidence that in recent years schools have not given sufficient attention to civic education. A [2008 report](#) from the Center on Education Policy showed many school systems, focused on raising student achievement in English language arts and mathematics to meet the accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB), reduced instructional time for other subjects, such as civics and social studies. Other researchers and advocacy groups have pointed to similar evidence.

What is less known and where there is precious little evidence, however, is regarding the current status of civic education in U.S. schools. In an attempt to fill in some of the gaping holes in our understanding of civic education and civics achievement, the Center on Education Policy at the George Washington University, at the request of the Spencer Foundation, recently released [Civic Education and Charter Schools: Current Knowledge and Future Research Issues](#), a report that looks at the status of civic education in both traditional public schools and public charter schools. *(Reminder to all readers: public charter schools are part of the public school system. They are typically governed independently by an organization or under a contract or charter with a state or other jurisdiction, but they are still publicly funded schools).*

By analyzing data from the 2010 civic assessment of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and reviewing additional literature on charter schools and civic education, CEP was able to answer some basic questions about the status of civic education in charter schools and as compared with traditional public schools, but just barely. The most interesting finding from our analysis is that the research that exists about civic education in *any* kind of school (charter, traditional public, or private) is limited at best.

Indeed, CEP's analysis of the NAEP data should be seen as a "first cut" at examining the differences in civic education between charter and traditional public schools because there are limitations in the NAEP data as it pertains to this particular dataset. Additional research for the report covered a range of issues related to civic education in charter schools; civics achievement and civic engagement in public and private schools; and instructional practices for improving civic education and engagement, but again, the pickings were slim.

So what does all this mean for the future of civic education in the nation's schools as it pertains to instruction, achievement, and research? The good news is that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the federal waiver program may have a positive influence on more school systems paying attention to and investing in civic education. Many proponents of civic education have expressed their enthusiasm for the opportunities the CCSS offer educators to incorporate civics into their curriculum. Presumably as states are freed from the rigid accountability provisions of NCLB, there will also be more flexibility to shift resources to support a range of subjects, civic education included.

It is often said that well-informed citizens are at the cornerstone of a strong democracy. Without even a basic knowledge of government, history and a citizen's role in promoting and defending a robust democracy, individuals are hamstrung in understanding their own rights and the rights of others. In an era when U.S. students are often compared with or competing against their international counterparts, it is crucial that they understand their own nation's history and system of government and how that has and will continue to impact the world around them.

And if there is hope that civic education will get the attention it deserves in the nation's schools, then perhaps the body of research that looks at civics achievement and instruction and civic engagement in *all* schools will become more robust too. The current lack of research leaves the nation at a real disadvantage if we hope to understand and improve civic knowledge and engagement among students and civics instruction.