

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: April 21, 2015

Published in Print: April 22, 2015, as **Why Are We Teaching Democracy Like a Game Show?**

COMMENTARY

Why Are We Teaching Democracy Like a Game Show?

By **Joseph Kahne**

Suppose a legislature passed a law that made it a graduation requirement to know the name of the town in which Shakespeare was born. By passing that law, the members reasoned, teachers would teach this fact, students would learn it, and presto—the nation would benefit from improved literacy!

This hypothetical may sound odd, but legislators in more than a dozen states want to prepare young people for democracy by taking this approach. They have drafted bills to make passage of the naturalization test, the test given to those who want to become U.S. citizens, a graduation requirement. This law has already passed in Arizona and North Dakota.

To some, this graduation requirement may sound fair. If those who want to be American citizens must pass this test, why not require it for high school seniors?

Unfortunately, the test consists of a **fixed set of 100 factual questions**. For example, one test question asks for the name of the territory the United States purchased in 1803, and another asks respondents to "name one of the two longest rivers in the United States." Memorizing the answers to such questions might prepare students for the game show "Jeopardy!," but doing so won't promote good citizenship any more than memorizing who wrote *Moby Dick* would promote good literacy skills.

Instead, this law will make matters worse. Forcing students to study and then regurgitate these facts will point students and their teachers in the wrong direction. We need young citizens who are committed to helping make their communities better and who can assess policy proposals, not merely youths who know how many voting members of the U.S. House of Representatives there are. Google provides the answer to any question on the naturalization test in seconds.

Don't get me wrong. We need laws to promote civic education. Fortunately, we know a good bit about what works. For example, researchers have found that when students get opportunities to discuss current events and

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“Democracy thrives when citizens think critically and deeply about civic and political issues, when they

are asked to form and justify their own opinions on controversial issues, their interest in and knowledge about these topics increases. And when young people have opportunities to volunteer in their communities and reflect on the experience, their likelihood of volunteering in the future increases.

Attending to such findings, several states have launched commissions to craft laws that provide supports for teachers to implement productive and engaging curriculum more often and more effectively. The California Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning, for example, **proposed that curriculum and instruction guidelines be modified to bolster the focus on government, economics, history, and law.** The task force wants professional development provided so that teachers more effectively engage students in service learning, use of simulations, and discussion of controversial issues. The task force also recommends strengthening ties to community organizations, because engagement in extracurricular activities tied to youth interests also boosts later civic engagement.

Recognizing the increasing power and centrality of the Internet, the task force also emphasizes the need to develop media-literacy skills that will enable students to assess the credibility of online content and to create digital content and share their perspectives in informed and compelling ways.

Finally, the task force has proposed enhanced assessments. To ensure equity, it asks for data to be collected regarding the quality of learning opportunities that different groups of students receive. And it also recommends assessing outcomes—students' ability to analyze issues, their understanding of key documents like the U.S. Constitution, and their engagement in working to make their communities better. Assessments, when used to capture deeper learning and desired behaviors, can help guide and improve practice.

Schools can prepare students to become leaders and problem-solvers for the 21st century. But to do so, policymakers need to reinforce the focus on substantive reform, not distract teachers and students with empty symbolic efforts. That way, teachers can concentrate on helping students understand the content of the Constitution, rather than on requiring that they memorize the answer to the test question, "When was the Constitution written?"

Democracy thrives when citizens think critically and deeply about civic and political issues, when they consider the needs and priorities of others, and when they engage in informed action—not when they memorize a few facts. Let's make high-quality civic learning a priority. Let's not take the easy way out and pass laws in more than a dozen states that turn civic education into a game of Trivial Pursuit.

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