



# **City Club *of* Portland**

Good citizens are the riches of a city

**CIVIC ENGAGEMENT:  
ARE STUDENTS BEING PREPARED?**

**Comprehensive Study Charge  
May 2011**

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the Board of Governors on March 14, 2011**

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## BACKGROUND, ISSUES & CHALLENGES

In an era characterized by “excessive partisanship,” developing young people who are knowledgeable and engaged in civic life seems more important than ever. Yet civic education and history, which are taught under the rubric of “social studies,” are increasingly taking a back seat to “testable subjects” like reading and math.

Youth voter engagement is low. The Carnegie Corporation and the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) joint report on “The Civic Mission of Schools” in 2003 noted that young people in the United States are less likely to vote and are less interested in political and public issues than either older Americans or young people in earlier decades.<sup>1</sup> More recent data reinforces this assessment. In 2008, a year of record participation, only half of all voters under 30 cast ballots—21 million voters under 30 did not vote.<sup>2</sup>

Basic knowledge of our political system appears to be suffering as well. According to the Classroom Law Project, an organization dedicated to educating youth about civics and democracy, only about 22 percent of graduating seniors in Oregon can identify the state’s two United States Senators, while 23 percent of Oregon’s high school students thought that former Governor Ted Kulongoski was actually one of Oregon’s U.S. Senators.<sup>3</sup>

Nationwide the picture is much the same. A national civics assessment administered in 2010 (the most recent such assessment) showed that 73 percent of fourth-graders, 78 percent of eighth-graders and 76 percent of twelfth-graders were below “proficient” in civics understanding. The assessment was targeted to evaluate how well students are “learning the knowledge and skills of democratic citizenship and government.”<sup>4</sup> A recent assessment published by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute found that the majority of states scored a “D” or below in their comprehensive quality review of state United States History standards. Oregon, along with 17 other states, scored an “F”.<sup>5</sup>

The deficiencies of civic training, knowledge, and participation of course affect immigrants as well. Providing students from immigrant families with the context and tools for civic participation and civil public discourse in the cultures and communities of the U.S. is a challenge faced by teachers and schools.

The “Civic Mission of Schools” report found that: (1) formal instruction in U.S. government, history, and democracy increases civic knowledge; (2) students who have the opportunity to discuss current issues and events in the classroom have greater interest in politics, improved critical

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<sup>1</sup> Carnegie Corporation and Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), “The Civic Mission of Schools,” 2003, <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/CivicMissionofSchools.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> CIRCLE, “The Youth Vote in 2008,” August 2009, [http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS\\_youth\\_Voting\\_2008\\_updated\\_6.22.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_youth_Voting_2008_updated_6.22.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Classroom Law Project, “Oregon Civics Survey 2006,” 2006, [http://www.classroomlaw.org/files/posts-pages/about/2006\\_or\\_civics\\_survey.pdf](http://www.classroomlaw.org/files/posts-pages/about/2006_or_civics_survey.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, “The Nation’s Report Card: Civics 2010,” May 2011, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2010/2011466.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas B. Fordham Institute, “The State of State U.S. History Standards 2011,” February 2011, [http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2011/20110216\\_SOSHS/SOSS\\_History\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2011/20110216_SOSHS/SOSS_History_FINAL.pdf).

thinking, more civic knowledge, and more interest in discussing public affairs outside of the school setting; and (3) participating in simulations of democratic processes can lead to increased political knowledge and interest.<sup>6</sup>

Recognizing the importance of engaged and informed citizens, Oregon law requires the civic education of students in the state. The Oregon Legislature has established minimum requirements for Oregon's public school students. The Oregon Revised Statutes ("ORS") require instruction in U.S. History and the U.S. Constitution, beginning no later than 8th grade and continuing in grades 9 through 12.

ORS 336.067 also mandates "special emphasis" on the teaching of:

*(a) Honesty, morality, courtesy, obedience to law, respect for the national flag, the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the State of Oregon, respect for parents and the home, the dignity and necessity of honest labor and other lessons that tend to promote and develop an upright and desirable citizenry.*

*(b) Respect for all humans, regardless of race, color, creed, national origin, religion, age, sex or disability.*

*(c) Acknowledgment of the dignity and worth of individuals and groups and their participative roles in society.*

ORS 336.067 goes on to require that the Superintendent of Public Instruction prepare an outline of suggestions to best accomplish these goals, and incorporate that outline in the courses of study for all public schools.

In practice, however, these statutes are spottily applied. School districts, principals and teachers are free to address these concepts in ways that do not interfere with more measurable subjects. Confirmation that students are being taught social studies relies on attestation of the school or teacher and not on proficiency tests as is required for subjects like math, science, and reading. There are limited ways to verify and to measure the effectiveness of the curriculum and teaching methods in these areas. Another obstacle to civic education in Oregon's schools is the increasing financial pressure on school districts, with across the board cuts common. While the majority of school funding comes from the state, a full 17 percent of school budget comes from the federal government, and with all of the other budget cuts, this 17 percent is critical to local schools. Increasingly, and as a direct result of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, these federal funds come with strings attached—and a focus on testable results.

NCLB emphasizes reading, language arts, mathematics, and science achievement as "core academic subjects," requiring standardized testing to show improvement in reading and math in order for schools to qualify for continued federal funding. This puts pressure on localities to focus on these testable subjects to the exclusion of other subjects. A 2006 study of representative school districts in all 50 states showed that 71 percent of school districts have reduced instructional time in other subjects to make more time for reading and math. In some districts, they have doubled reading and math time, sometimes completely cutting out social studies—including civics.

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<sup>6</sup> Carnegie Corporation and Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), "The Civic Mission of Schools," 2003, <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/CivicMissionofSchools.pdf>.

Only 21 states provide for mandatory testing in social studies. Oregon is not among that minority.

When they are offered, social studies courses, including civics and history, often tend to rely heavily on a teacher-lecture format rather than a student-centered research and inquiry approach that might not only be more interesting and engaging, but which have been shown to be more effective in preparing young adults to participate in civic life. Students may not be engaged by a teacher-lecture approach alone and may be dissuaded by the exclusive use of this approach in participating in civic activities and debate.

## **OBJECTIVES & SCOPE**

This study will focus on the Portland Public Schools' high school curriculum for two specific areas of the general study area called "social studies." The two specific areas of focus are United States and Oregon history and civics (meaning governmental structures, responsibilities and processes found at the national and state levels). For the purposes of this study, "social studies" refers to these two subjects and not the broader definition referred to by educators and defined in state regulations.

The overall aim of this study is to determine the degree to which public schools prepare and encourage students to engage in an active civic life as adults. To do so, one must examine what is being taught, options available to teachers to present the material, and whether this subject as presented is likely to lead to engaged citizens when students come of age. In order to make this determination, the following should be addressed by this study:

- 1) Describe how the curriculum, standards and testing process works in the State of Oregon, including the agencies and parties responsible for developing, overseeing, and evaluating student progress within the public school setting.
  - a) What are the grade 9-12 curriculum requirements set by the state and how are they determined?
  - b) How does the state determine a student is proficient in a subject?
  - c) What subjects are tested and/or subject to the No Child Left Behind Law and how does this law impact subjects not included in the testing process?
  - d) How has the educational approach changed over the last twenty years including the hours dedicated to these subjects (i.e., Social Studies and NCLB subjects)?
- 2) Assess the current social studies curriculum for content and skill set development based on the following five points:
  - a) Provides specific instruction in government and history both in content (lectures, syllabi, etc.) and "hands on" formats (discussion, debate, mock exercises, etc.);
  - b) Incorporates discussion of current local, national and international events, particularly those in which students of this age would be interested;
  - c) Provides opportunities for the students to apply what they are learning through community service;

- d) Offers extracurricular activities that encourage the student to become involved in their school and communities; and
  - e) Encourages students to participate in simulations of democratic processes and procedures, including the participation in student government.
- 3) Do the materials and teaching techniques provide a means to demonstrate to the student how ideas and humanistic understanding change over time and how social transformations have occurred in the past and may occur in the future? Evidence that this is the case includes but is not limited to the following:
- a) The examination of controversial issues in the past that allow the student to appreciate the cause and resolution;
  - b) The inclusion of multiple views concerning a single historical issue; and
  - c) The tracing of an idea or cultural value over time.
- 4) Identify positive areas and provide recommendations for improvement in the delivery of civics education. For example:
- a) Should social studies as defined by this report be a mandatory “testable” subject?
  - b) Should there be greater uniformity among districts on how and what is taught as social studies?
  - c) Should proficiency and understanding certain activities and subjects be required as a condition of graduation?
  - d) Are teachers given enough opportunity to learn the subject matter and to prepare adequately to present these content areas in the classroom?

Often in education success at the high school level is partially determined by preparation at a previous level. Consequently a brief discussion of how well students at the high school level are prepared by middle school and earlier coursework and activities to engage in a challenging curriculum would be helpful for this study and for developing conclusions and recommendations.

The focus of the study is on what is being taught, options available to teachers to present the material, and whether this subject as presented is likely to lead to engaged citizens when students come of age. The study is not to assess teacher performance—rather, the focus is what resources are available to a teacher and the opportunities available to a teacher to further the development of tomorrow’s citizen.

## **TENTATIVE REPORT OUTLINE**

1. Executive Summary
2. Background
3. Discussion & Analysis
4. Conclusions
5. Recommendations