

AUGUST 4, 2015

WHAT'S THE RIGHT WAY TO TEACH CIVICS?

BY VAUHINI VARA

New legislation in some states requires students, starting in the coming school year, to correctly answer sixty of a hundred citizenship questions in order to graduate high school.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RANDY DUCHAINE / ALAMY



Two years ago, the board of the Joe Foss Institute, an Arizona-based nonprofit, started to wonder what else they could be doing to foster civic-mindedness in schoolchildren. Joe Foss was a flying ace during the Second World War, who went on to become a Republican governor of South Dakota and a president of the National Rifle Association. For more than a decade, the eponymous institute had been sending veterans into schools to tell war stories and show short films promoting American patriotism. But the program was limited to the number of students veterans could meet face-to-face. What if the institute could influence changes in curricula?

The institute decided to try and get states to make laws requiring that, before graduating, students pass a version of the exam given to aspiring citizens before they are naturalized. Test-takers prepare to answer any of a hundred questions, which can be studied online or in a paper pamphlet; they are asked up to ten, and they must get six right in order to be naturalized. The questions aren't exactly difficult—Who is the President? What did the Declaration of Independence do?—which is part of the Joe Foss Institute's point. More than ninety per cent of would-be Americans pass the test. Any educated middle-schooler, the institute felt, should be able to do the same, and yet eighth graders have consistently scored poorly on national civics assessments. "We kind of operate under the theory that if it's good for immigrants who become naturalized citizens, it's good for students," Frank Riggs, the president and C.E.O. of the institute, told me over the phone.

To persuade politicians of this, the institute formed a 501(c)(4) called the Civics Proficiency Institute (<http://www.joefossinstitute.org/civics-education-initiative/>) and, Riggs said, raised about eight hundred thousand dollars. Among the donors: Norman McClelland, the chairman of a dairy company; Jim Chamberlain, the founder of a contracting firm; and Ken Kendrick, the managing general partner of the Arizona Diamondbacks. With the help of hired lobbyists, they started talking to politicians in several states. In January, the first of these target states—Arizona, an obvious choice—passed a version of the institute’s model bill. It requires students, starting in the coming school year, to correctly answer sixty of the hundred citizenship questions in order to graduate from high school; they can take the test as many times as needed to pass. The law, because it was the first of its kind, attracted national press (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2015/01/16/arizona-will-require-high-school-students-to-pass-citizenship-test-to-graduate-can-you-pass/>).

Since then, seven more states have passed similar laws—a feat for any lobbying organization, let alone one without a track record. On Monday, the National Conference of State Legislatures, which tracks state legislation, reported that seven states—Arizona, Idaho, Louisiana, North Dakota, South Carolina, Tennessee and Utah—passed such laws in the first half of the year; in July, they were joined by Wisconsin. What’s notable about that list, besides its length, is its redness. Riggs, over the phone, came across as plainspoken and strategic-minded. He told me the institute chose conservative states, at first, where it already had allies, or as he put it, “traction.” Though the institute is nonpartisan, its message, that schools should not only teach the facts of how American government works, but that they should nurture civic-mindedness, seems especially compatible with traditional ideas about patriotism.

The institute’s ambitions go well beyond the Republican-leaning parts of the U.S., though; it hopes to bring its total to twenty states by next year and to cover the map by the following year. “We definitely have the image of a more conservative organization, but have been very, very careful to promote our citizen-education initiative as a bipartisan, good-government initiative,” Riggs said. Aiming to create upstanding citizens might seem like a secondary or tertiary goal of education—less important than preparing students for college, setting them up to make a decent living, or instilling a love of learning. But it was one of the main reasons the U.S. established public schools. Jack Crittenden and Peter Levin write, in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

(<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/civic-education/>), that when Horace Mann, in the eighteen-hundreds, advocated for common schools to educate American children, his thinking was that:

Such schools would educate all children together, “in common,” regardless of their background, religion, or social standing. Underneath such fine sentiments lurked an additional goal: to ensure that all children could flourish in America’s democratic system. The civic education curriculum was explicit, if not simplistic. To create good citizens and good persons required little beyond teaching the basic mechanics of government and imbuing students with loyalty to America and her democratic ideals. That involved large amounts of rote memorization of information about political and military history and about the workings of governmental bodies at the local, state, and federal levels. It also involved conformity to specific rules describing conduct inside and outside of school. Through this kind of civic education, all children would be melded, if not melted, into an American citizen.

This approach had its problems. Mann’s citizen-making project emphasized Protestantism over Catholicism, for instance, one of the factors that led Catholics to create their own private schools apart from the public ones. Still, Riggs and his colleagues hope to spur a revival in preparing children for citizenship; Riggs calls it the “third C,” along with “college” and “career.” Given Arizona’s troubled history with immigration policy, I asked Riggs whether children who happen to be recent immigrants—and whose knowledge of American-history trivia might, understandably, be shaky—could be disadvantaged by the new state laws, like Catholics were in the eighteen-hundreds; couldn’t the legislation represent another barrier keeping immigrant students from graduating high school? He noted that, under the model that his institute is advocating—and the one that states have adopted—students can take the test as many times as needed. “I don’t think that the citizenship test disadvantages a particular class of students,” he said.

A more common criticism of the civics tests, especially from the left, is that it gives over-tested students yet one more exam to take, meaning that time-crunched educators have less flexibility to develop their own lesson plans. Even some who agree with Riggs that students are undereducated in civics are skeptical that a hundred test questions will solve the problem. It’s also unclear

whether the test is the best way to inspire civic-mindedness. Joseph Kahne, an education professor who has studied civic learning, said that, by some measures, young people are woefully disengaged in civic life; for example, they tend to vote at lower rates than older citizens. (To be fair, by other measures—like involvement in their local communities—kids do better than older people.) But research, Kahne said, suggests there are better ways to educate students in civics. He and colleagues have found (http://www.civicsurvey.org/sites/default/files/publications/Different_Pedogogy-Diff_Politics_062013.pdf) that when students discuss current events and form their own opinions on hot-button issues, they become more interested and knowledgeable in these topics; also, when students have the chance to volunteer, they become likelier to volunteer in the future. As for the citizenship exam, “What it measures actually isn’t what we care most about,” he said. “It’s a set of disconnected facts. Certainly the questions like, ‘What’s the name of the ocean on the West Coast of the United States?’ aren’t even related to civic and political life.”

Over the next year, Riggs told me, the institute aims to pursue its civic-education initiative in more blue and purple states—places like Iowa, Minnesota, and perhaps Colorado. He has noticed that he and his colleagues have had to work harder, in those kinds of states, to defend their campaign against critics, including those who feel that a new test of factual civics knowledge would give teachers less time to focus on more nuanced aspects of civic education. Riggs argued that the test would complement, rather than replace, higher-level approaches. “It doesn’t impede, and shouldn’t be substituted for, the teaching of more advanced civics,” he told me. “It’s intended to ensure that high-school graduates have at least the basic knowledge of American civics that we require of naturalized citizens.”

Watch: For forty-five years, Alex Carozza has run a small accordion shop near Times Square.



Vauhini Vara,
the former
business editor
of
newyorker.com,

lives in San Francisco and is a business
and technology correspondent for the
site.
