

Tackling “Our Worst Subject” Requires New Approaches—and Better Data

CHESTER FINN, president emeritus of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and a frequent Education Next contributor, likes to recount a story from his time working as a senior official at the U.S. Department of Education under education secretary William Bennett. In 1987, after telling a Chicago journalist that the city’s schools were the worst in the nation, Bennett summoned Finn to his office and asked if he was right. “Well, Chicago has some competition from Newark and St. Louis and Detroit,” Finn replied. “But you weren’t wrong.” Coming well before the advent of widespread statewide testing, much less state- and district-level participation in the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, Bennett’s claim seems to have survived contemporaneous efforts at fact-checking.

I often reflected on that exchange during my time working for Senator Lamar Alexander, who was then ranking member of the Senate education committee. In speeches, Alexander had a habit of referring to U.S. history and civics as “our worst subject.”

“Is that right?” he’d occasionally ask when preparing his remarks. Well, I couldn’t say that it was wrong.

According to NAEP, only 14 percent of 8th graders nationwide scored proficient in U.S. history in 2022, while just 22 percent reached that benchmark in civics—both notably lower than the 27 percent and 31 percent who demonstrated proficiency in math and reading, respectively. One might fairly wonder whether the National Assessment Governing Board has set expectations too high in U.S. history and civics, but a glance at item-level results gives ample cause for concern. Just one in three students, for example, could correctly match each of our three branches of government to its core function—a task one in six would get right by answering at random. Whether or not these are our worst subjects, we clearly have a problem.

In this issue, Yale law professor Justin Driver proposes a new way to teach civics that he calls “student-centered civics education” (see “Building Better Citizens Begins in the Classroom,” *features*, p. 22). The approach “foregrounds the major Supreme Court decisions that have shaped the everyday lives of students across the nation”—decisions concerning student speech, corporal punishment, religious expression, and more. Its adoption, he argues, would frame students as “active participants in shaping our constitutional order” while

also providing a jumping-off point to explore “more-abstract concepts that undergird civic knowledge.”

Driver’s proposal may not appeal to all readers. Some may find it too centered on judicially defined rights, perhaps at the expense of the concomitant responsibilities inherent in citizenship. Others may find its emphasis on student activism too resonant of so-called “action civics,” an approach that often downplays the importance of basic knowledge of how our government operates.

Driver, for his part, would “welcome such disagreements . . . because their existence would indicate that civic education is being actively debated in venues where such debates remain all too rare.” So would I—and I hope his piece provokes ample conversation.

Still, improving civic education will take more than curricular reform. It will also require more and better data on the results produced by competing approaches.

Since Secretary Bennett opined on Chicago’s national standing, our ability to compare student achievement in math and reading across states and school districts has been transformed. Every two years, the NAEP program provides a new set of results for all 50 states and 26 urban school districts—a monitoring system that, though

imperfect, enables us to broadly gauge their success (or lack thereof) in developing student literacy and numeracy skills.

In U.S. history and civics, by contrast, NAEP provides a single national data point about every four years. While the program will in 2030 permit states to test enough students in civics to produce state-level results, recent history suggests that fewer than a dozen will embrace that opportunity. Requiring all of them to do so would take Congressional action.

The first record I can find of Senator Alexander using the phrase “our worst subject” is in the title of a 2005 subcommittee hearing on a bill requiring states to participate separately in the NAEP U.S. history and civics tests. Nearly two decades later, we have little reason to believe that his judgment was incorrect. Now would be an apt time for Congress to give civics assessment another look.



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