TESTING DEMOCRACY:
How Large-Scale Assessment Systems Can Support Civic Learning

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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

K-12 schools in the United States play an indispensable role in preparing young people to succeed and thrive in adulthood. Families, communities, employers and higher education institutions count on schools to help students develop foundational literacy and numeracy skills, learn how to socialize with peers and adults, manage their emotions in professional settings, and so much more. Yet the large-scale assessment systems that state and local education agencies adopt to gauge how well schools are doing this work typically reflect a much narrower set of learning outcomes.

In this paper, we discuss the importance of redesigning large-scale assessment systems to better support one of the most important functions of the public school system—**cultivating informed and engaged citizens**. When we say "large-scale assessment systems," we mean far more than federally mandated statewide tests; we are referring to approaches for combining results from multiple sources of data collected from large, defined populations in a consistent and structured manner to capture information about different aspects of performance or learning opportunities. These systems typically consist of multiple indicators, from statewide tests to district exams, school climate surveys and participation in rigorous coursework.

Systems like these can be more than just measurements; they can be agents of positive change. By gathering these kinds of information, states and districts can send important signals about what matters, understand what is and isn't working, and step up with funding, technical assistance and other supports that better enable schools to do the work that society values.

Effective participation in civic and community life requires skills, knowledge and mindsets that schools can nurture through a variety of mechanisms outside traditional high school civics and government courses. As we describe in more detail below, a comprehensive approach to fostering civic learning involves developing competencies such as critical thinking, media literacy, and the ability to grapple with perspectives different from one's own. We adopt a definition of civic learning from the University of California at Riverside's Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG):

> "Civic learning is a process through which young people develop the knowledge, skills, and commitments to interact effectively with others, improve their communities and the broader society, and participate in democracy." (CERG, n.d.)

Large-scale assessment systems that incorporate at least some of these outcomes could help policymakers, educators and families gauge students' development in this area and inform decisions about the civic learning opportunities that schools provide.

Of course, existing policies and other contextual factors influence and constrain the design of large-scale assessment systems. Moreover, trying to measure the full set of outcomes that schools

foster would result in an overly burdensome and expensive system. For those reasons, in this paper, we do not argue for incorporating civics assessment into the state accountability systems required by federal legislation, nor do we call for major overhauls to existing large-scale assessment systems. Instead, we offer guidance to support relatively small modifications that could help raise the salience of civic goals and generate data to monitor[1] progress toward those goals.

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The primary audiences for this report are state and local education agency leaders who are responsible for setting goals and monitoring schools' progress. The report should also be of interest to groups and individuals who work with education leaders to design and implement large-scale assessment systems, including researchers, assessment developers, technical advisors and school board members.

In Section 2, we make the case for a greater emphasis on civic learning in the nation's public K-12 schools. In Section 3 we elaborate on the definition of civic learning and describe both the breadth of competencies it encompasses and the ways in which these competencies connect to other academic subjects. Sections 4 and 5 discuss the importance of large-scale assessment systems and provide a brief overview of the current landscape of large-scale assessments in civics. Building on this existing set of civics assessment efforts, Section 6 offers several policy recommendations to inform the work of local and state education agencies that are interested in helping schools pursue their civic missions. In Section 7, we discuss some likely challenges—and ways to overcome them—and we conclude with a call for collaboration on a more civically oriented approach to large-scale assessment systems.

SECTION 2: WHY FOCUS ON CIVIC LEARNING IN SCHOOLS?

As noted by many who work to promote civics learning in schools, "While there is no right to an education in the [U.S.] Constitution, every state constitution ... makes the education of its citizens for participation in our democracy its primary mission" (Shogan & Bridgeland, 2025). Yet even a cursory examination of school curricula, and the federal, state and local policies that influence educators' practices, suggests that this mission has been deprioritized.

One factor that has arguably contributed to this deprioritization is federal and state accountability policy. Accountability systems have typically emphasized other outcomes, particularly those that are linked to individual and societal economic goals (Hamilton & Martinez, 2024). Tests of mathematics and English language arts achievement have formed the backbone of the Elementary and Secondary

[1] We use "monitoring" to refer to a process of continuously gathering data, including but not limited to assessment data, for the purpose of documenting trends and identifying strengths and needs of an individual, organization, or system. Monitoring is one potential purpose of large-scale assessment systems.

Education Act (ESEA)'s accountability provisions. The rationale behind these provisions in each ESEA reauthorization, including the current Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), is that achievement in these core subjects will help ensure that students graduate with the knowledge and skills they will need to succeed in college and careers (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). But research suggests that these policies have contributed to a decline in civics instruction over the past several decades (Center on Education Policy, 2008; Hamilton et al., 2007; Sandra Day O'Connor Institute, 2024).

Recent data point to a clear need to rethink how schools address their civic missions. Only 22 percent of 8th graders achieved proficiency on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics assessment in 2022 (NCES, 2022). Students also perform poorly on assessments of related competencies such as media literacy (Breakstone et al., 2021), and teachers' ratings of their students' civics and media literacy skills reinforce these findings (Hamilton et al., 2020).

Recent survey data also raise alarms about support for democracy among the nation's youth. A 2023 survey of a nationally representative sample of 18- to 24-year-olds by Citizen Data and the Institute for Citizens & Scholars found that 57 percent reported dissatisfaction with American democracy (Institute for Citizens & Scholars, 2023). Similarly, a 2022 survey found that 27 percent of respondents aged 18 to 25 agreed with the statement, "Democracy may have problems, but it is the best system of government." This percentage was much higher among older survey respondents (APM Research Lab & McCourtney Institute for Democracy, 2023).

The factors that contribute to these findings are unclear and undoubtedly multifaceted, but data on students' exposure to civic learning in schools point to one possible culprit: limited access to high-quality civic learning opportunities. According to the 2024 State of Young People report from America's Promise Alliance, only 36 percent of survey respondents aged 18 to 24 reported that they had opportunities to discuss civics in school at least a few times a month, and a quarter indicated never having such opportunities (Flanagan et al., 2025). In this same survey, fewer than half (43 percent) of respondents reported feeling at least somewhat prepared to participate in civic activities.

Other national survey data indicate that many students lack access to comprehensive civic learning instruction (Savage & Ikoma, 2023) and that large numbers live in "civic deserts" that limit their opportunities for civic engagement (Atwell et al., 2017). Addressing these limited opportunities is especially important in light of evidence that low levels of civic engagement and access, as well as low scores on an assessment of media literacy, are associated with skepticism of democracy and support for authoritarianism (Apau et al., 2025)

Of course, schools are not the only institutions that promote civic learning, but they are uniquely positioned to contribute because of the large number of young people they serve and the amount of time students spend in them. An Aspen Institute report noted that "Public schools are the first and most significant civic institutions many young people interact with, so they send important signals about what it means to be a full participant in the community and in society" (Aspen Institute, 2022, p. 5). Yet few state and local education systems systematically examine schools' civic contributions.

Several factors make this a good time to refocus schools on their civic mission and to create mechanisms to assess their progress toward this mission. First, ambitious, collaborative initiatives including Educating for American Democracy, CivxNow, and More Perfect are working to improve civics instruction and professional development for teachers. Second, an increasingly polarized and partisan media environment, exacerbated by growing reliance on artificial intelligence for content

creation and dissemination, has raised alarms about how young people obtain and interpret information and its potential impact on their civic participation (Garcia et al., 2021). Third, recent surveys of educators, parents and students indicate widespread support for increased civics instruction in schools (CivxNow, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2024; Nitkin & Wood, 2022; Populace, 2022; Saavedra, 2021).

In light of the clear urgency and widespread public support for improved civic learning opportunities in schools, now is an ideal time to reimagine not only our approaches to civics instruction, but to how we assess schools' performance so it reflects the broad purposes of public education (Hamilton, 2025; Olson, 2025). In the next section, we present a definition of civic learning that incorporates the diversity of competencies (i.e., skills, knowledge, and mindsets) needed for effective civic engagement, and we describe the variety of educational opportunities that can foster these competencies. These ideas carry key considerations not just for instruction, but for assessment.

SECTION 3: AN EXPANSIVE VIEW OF K-12 CIVIC LEARNING

The word "civics" sometimes conjures images of students in a middle or high school government class offered through their school's social studies department. Although such courses play an important role in preparing students for civic life, they are only one of several mechanisms through which schools and other institutions contribute to the civic development of young people. As we noted earlier, we adopt a definition from the University of California at Riverside's Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG): "Civic learning is a process through which young people develop the knowledge, skills, and commitments to interact effectively with others, improve their communities and the broader society, and participate in democracy" (CERG, n.d.). This definition highlights the ways in which effective civic engagement draws on a wide range of competencies, and it emphasizes the learning process itself and the mechanisms through which that learning occurs. To inform efforts to design assessment systems that can be used to monitor civic learning, it is helpful to unpack this definition.

Civic Knowledge, Skills, and Mindsets

The middle and high school government courses we mentioned above typically aim to inculcate foundational understanding of government structures, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and other content related to citizenship. Mastering this content is crucial for effective engagement in a democratic society, of course. But many civics courses also engage students in learning activities that support the development of cross-cutting skills such as critical thinking and collaboration, which are important not just for effective civic engagement but also for success in other settings including education and the workplace (Cantile-Sakauye & Baldasarre, 2025).

In recent years, educators and scholars have embraced a vision of civic learning that incorporates a variety of learning outcomes that can roughly be categorized as knowledge, skills, and mindsets (the latter term encompasses CERG's "commitments" category). This broad view has a high level of public support: A 2019 report discusses findings from a landscape analysis that included conversations with a variety of constituencies whose views spanned the political spectrum. It found strong backing for an approach to civic learning that ensures students are "civically well-informed," "productively engaged for the common good," and "hopeful about our democracy" (Vinnakota, 2019, p. 8).

Drawing on several sources (Democratic Knowledge Project, n.d., Lee et al., 2021; Savage et al., 2023; Vinnakota, 2019), Table 1 lists some of the key competencies represented in many current definitions of civic learning.

Table 1: Civic Competencies

Civic knowledge covers topics such as the following: • Structure, functions, and responsibilities of governments in the U.S., including federal, state, and local • Relationships among nations and the effects of global events • Current events and their influence on individual and societal well-being • Rights and responsibilities of citizenship as enshrined in the U.S. Constitution
Civic skills includes abilities related to engaging in civic and community life, including: • Critical thinking • Collaboration • Written and oral communication • Social perspective taking • Civic discourse • Media/information literacy • AI literacy
Civic mindsets includes attitudes, beliefs, and commitments related to informed, responsible civic engagement, such as: • Commitment to exercise rights and responsibilities as a citizen • Sense of personal and collective agency • Concern for the welfare of others • Willingness to engage with views different from one's own

Although different civics curricula, standards and frameworks emphasize these categories to varying degrees, most of them address all three. One of the more widely used frameworks is the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards. Published in 2013 by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), C3 has influenced most U.S. states' social studies standards (Grant et al., 2023), and the learning expectations it describes include many of the skills, knowledge and mindsets listed above. For example, one dimension in the C3 framework is "Evaluating sources and using evidence," through which students develop the capacity to gather and make sense of materials in a variety of formats, including text, data displays and multimedia. The "Communicating conclusions and taking informed action" dimension highlights students' commitments to responsible citizenship.

Another framework that aligns with this expansive view is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics assessment framework, which is organized into three domains: knowledge, skills and dispositions (NAGB, 2018). The knowledge domain emphasizes understanding of key concepts related to American political and government systems as well as the relationship between the United States and other nations. The skills domain includes intellectual skills that "help citizens identify, describe, explain, and analyze information and arguments, as well as evaluate, take, and defend positions on public issues," along with participatory skills that "enable citizens to monitor and influence public and civic life by working with others, clearly articulating ideas and interests, building coalitions, seeking consensus, negotiating compromise, and managing conflict" (NAGB, 2018, p. xv). Finally, the framework includes "the dispositions to become an independent member of society; respect individual worth and human dignity; assume the personal, political, and economic responsibilities of a citizen; participate in civic affairs in an informed, thoughtful, and effective manner; and promote the healthy functioning of American constitutional democracy" (NAGB, 2018, p. xv). The NAEP framework's breadth reinforces the widespread view that civic learning involves a large number of complex competencies, though it has been challenging to measure many of them in a large-scale assessment format (Goodman & Kirsch, 2026; O'Malley & Norton, 2022).

Civic Learning: How and Where it Happens

The phrase "civic learning" does not refer just to a set of skills or knowledge that young people develop. It encompasses the learning process itself and the specific mechanisms that promote development of these competencies. This development can occur through a variety of classroom, school and community experiences beyond the social studies classroom. In 2011, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools published a report that identified six practices that research suggested could contribute to civic learning (Gould et al., 2011). A follow-up report (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017) added four practice areas, resulting in the list shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Ten Practices that Support Civic Learning

• Classroom instruction in civics-related topics including government, history, and economics
• Discussion of current events and controversial issues in the classroom
• Service learning that allows students to apply their civic competencies to problem solving in the community
• Extracurricular activities beyond service learning, through which students have opportunities to engage in roles that draw on their civic competencies
• School governance through which students participate actively in representative forms of government to inform school policy and practice while developing a sense of agency over school decision making
• Simulations of democratic processes such as mock elections that are accompanied by classroom conversations to foster learning
• News media literacy instruction that helps students interact effectively with information they encounter through a variety of media sources
• Civic engagement activities that enable students to put their knowledge of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship into practice in their communities
• Social and emotional learning instruction that helps students develop the interpersonal (e.g., teamwork, social perspective taking) and intrapersonal (e.g., self-regulation, responsible decision making) competencies related to effective civic engagement
• School climate reform to create a school and classroom environment that promotes a sense of community, belonging, and respectful interactions.

Sources: Gould et al. (2011), Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg (2017), Olivera-Aguilar et al. (2026)

This list of practices is not exhaustive, but it illustrates the variety of classroom, school, and extracurricular activities that can promote the civic competencies described earlier. Some widely used civic learning frameworks that emphasize competencies explicitly mention learning opportunities, often with a focus on civic participation or action. For instance, through its Civic Readiness Initiative, the state of New York adopted a definition of civic readiness that includes civic experiences as a domain, stating that "Civic Readiness should be promoted by engaging students in relevant experiences that include students as active participants" (New York State Education Department, 2025).

The NAEP civics assessment framework described earlier includes a dimension called "Contexts of Civic Education" that refers to the places and mechanisms through which students learn about and apply civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions (NAGB, 2018, p. xv). Although efforts to assess schools'

performance related to civic learning should distinguish student competencies from the opportunities students have to develop those competencies (which NAEP does, for instance, by measuring competencies through the civics assessment and measuring context through the school questionnaires), an assessment system that connects competencies to learning opportunities can support decision making more effectively than a system that addressed only one of these two types of measures. We discuss this issue in more detail in the policy recommendations section.

A few noteworthy features of this broad understanding of civic learning opportunities have implications for instruction and assessment.

1 **Civic learning opportunities can start early.** Although courses called "civics" are generally not offered before middle school, teachers of younger children can engage their students in developmentally appropriate instruction and activities that lay the groundwork for later, more sophisticated civic learning. Elementary social studies instruction typically includes civics content, but the time that schools devote to social studies in the early grades tends to be limited and declining (Sandra Day O'Connor Institute, 2024). Wolff and Mead (2025) describe several strategies that can support elementary-grades civic learning beyond the social studies curriculum. Examples include assigning "jobs" such as taking role or collecting materials, which cultivate a sense of responsibility and belonging; engaging students in discussions of civic issues such as fairness and concern for the welfare of others; modeling democratic values in the classroom; and adopting experiential or project-based curricula that build collaborative problem-solving skills.

2 **Civic learning is cross-disciplinary.** Social studies classrooms provide numerous opportunities for students to learn about key civics concepts and to develop and apply many of the competencies shown in Table 1. But this learning can also occur through instruction in other subjects. In math classes, students can learn how to interpret graphs and statistics—a key set of competencies related to news media literacy. Math teachers can also address civics-related topics directly; the electoral college, ranked-choice voting, and public polling all offer opportunities for students to apply quantitative concepts to civics. Similarly, students can learn how to spot scientific misinformation in science class and can develop social perspective-taking skills through character analysis in English language arts class. Infusing civics concepts across the school curriculum can help mitigate concerns that civic instruction will detract from other important learning outcomes.

3 **Civic learning can enhance college and career readiness.** Many of the competencies listed in Table 1 are similar or identical to cross-cutting competencies that contribute to college and career success. Civic competencies appear in numerous frameworks related to social and emotional learning or 21st-century competencies (Brandt et al., 2024; Hamilton et al., 2024; Winthrop, 2020). For example, in CASEL's widely used framework, the social awareness competency area includes specific competencies such as "taking others' perspectives" and "understanding the influences of organizations and systems on behavior"; self-management includes "demonstrating personal and collective agency"; and responsible decision-making includes "learning how to make a reasoned judgment after analyzing information, data, and facts" and "identifying solutions for personal and social problems."

Research demonstrates the importance of these competencies for college and career success (Cipriano et al., 2024; Durlak et al., 2011). Civic learning also contributes to the development of skills that employers say they need their employees to demonstrate, such as collaboration and critical

thinking (America Succeeds, 2025; Yoder et al., 2020). In addition, students can build social capital through civic learning activities (Kahne et al., 2006), and social capital is an important predictor of access to rewarding career opportunities (Charania & Freeland Fisher, 2023). One leading proponent of enhanced civic learning opportunities noted, "As artificial intelligence reshapes how everyone learns, works, and engages with information, the ability to discern what is credible, relevant, and meaningful—while applying ethical judgment—is increasingly important, not only for civic participation but also for success in the professional landscape" (Wiener, 2025). As educators navigate the multiple and sometimes competing expectations for schools' priorities, it is important for all constituents to understand that efforts to enhance civic readiness can also support students' readiness for postsecondary education and the workforce.

4

Views regarding the definition and appropriate scope of civic learning are contested. Although many civic education initiatives such as EAD have adopted nonpartisan framing, civics can be an inherently political (and politicized) domain. Partisan debates about school curricula have led to growing contention around how schools should address civics. The role that schools should play in promoting civic action is especially controversial; The Civic Mission of Schools report mentioned earlier included "action civics" among its list of practices, but some have argued against it, partly because of the risk that it could be implemented in ways that promote a particular political viewpoint (Hess, 2025; National Association of Scholars, n.d.). And the current presidential administration has issued calls for a specific approach to "patriotic education" that is narrower than most of the civic education frameworks put forth by educators and scholars in recent years (Belsha, 2025).

These controversies have reportedly resulted in educators limiting what they say in the classroom (Sims et al., 2025). At the same time, some scholars and educators have pointed to potential benefits of experiential or action civics for enhancing not just future civic engagement but the quality of the learning environment. One group of scholars (Cantor et al., 2025) recently described the scientific basis for incorporating community-based experiences into civics instruction, summarizing evidence of its potential effects on students' engagement and motivation, and arguing for the inclusion of "portfolios, exhibitions, and student reflections in accountability systems" to better capture the outcomes of such experiences. These disparate perspectives highlight the need for consensus-building activities to inform approaches to civic education and assessment, a topic we return to later in this paper.

SECTION 4: THE IMPORTANCE OF LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS

Decisions about how much to emphasize civic learning in schools, and which civic competencies to prioritize, are influenced by many factors, including funding constraints, community input and state and local content standards. Designing or choosing large-scale assessment systems that incorporate measures of civic learning can also influence teaching and learning and send potent signals about what matters.

Large-scale assessment systems reflect state and district choices about the learning opportunities and competencies that should be monitored over time. In the civic learning domain, these systems can generate comparable data on how well schools are serving their civic missions. Such data have the potential to bring about positive change by providing information to state and local education agencies so they can better support civic learning in their schools.

One important component of most assessment systems is a set of assessments (or tests) that aim to measure student achievement. A 2025 Center for Assessment paper identified four broad purposes of large-scale, statewide achievement assessments: Monitoring students' achievement and growth, providing data to support evaluation and continuous improvement, fostering transparency and public engagement, and providing signals about expectations for student learning. These assessments can also inform the decisions that families make about where to enroll their students, a particularly salient use in the context of expanding school choice (Hamilton & Le Floch, 2025). Assessments can serve these purposes even in the absence of accountability systems that impose consequences based on performance, and they can be developed and implemented at the local education agency (e.g., district or charter management organization) level in addition to the state level.

Student achievement tests are a valuable component of large-scale assessment systems, as they generate data to inform constituencies about student learning of academic content. But large-scale assessment systems can—and we would argue, should—supplement test scores with additional information about student outcomes (such as graduation rates) and/or access to high-quality educational experiences (such as rigorous coursework). Of course, it's important for developers of such systems to refrain from making them too broad or complex; we discuss the tension between complexity and focus in Section 6. This tension notwithstanding, now is an opportune time to rethink large-scale assessment systems to reflect a more expansive vision of student success, one that includes civic learning processes, opportunities and outcomes. For example, many states have adopted Portrait of a Graduate frameworks (Dunbar et al., 2025) that define success via the competencies that are embedded in our proposed civic learning definition (e.g., communication, collaboration, critical thinking, agency). Similarly, a Carnegie Foundation initiative is partnering with organizations to reimagine the high school experience by replacing outdated seat-time requirements with new pathways for students to demonstrate mastery of real-world competencies.

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The Center for Assessment has called for better design and evaluation of state assessment systems that align with local and state goals (Brandt et al., 2024). As policymakers redesign assessment and accountability structures to provide more meaningful, multidimensional data, it is essential that schools' civic responsibilities are not sidelined. Incorporating civic learning into these emerging systems will help ensure that students are not only academically prepared but also ready to participate fully and responsibly in public life. In fact, although research on the effects of large-scale civics assessment is limited, one review found some evidence that statewide civics assessments are associated with improved student learning of civic concepts (Campbell, 2019). In the next section, we briefly describe the landscape of large-scale civic learning assessment, highlighting both promising models and significant gaps in existing practice.

SECTION 5: THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF STATE POLICY AND ASSESSMENT OF CIVIC LEARNING

Although research consistently highlights the importance of civic learning alongside core subjects like mathematics and English language arts, policy approaches to elevate civic education have been inconsistent and fragmented.

Although research consistently highlights the importance of civic learning alongside core subjects like mathematics and English language arts, policy approaches to elevate civic education have been inconsistent and fragmented. Recent analyses describe state civics policies as lacking coherence, with wide variation in course requirements, graduation expectations and outcome assessments (National Governors Association & Watershed Advisors, 2025). For example, some states require only a semester of high school civics, while others offer seals of civic readiness, portfolio demonstrations, or project-based experiences. This uneven landscape—evident across both states and districts—means that students' opportunities to learn and demonstrate civic competencies differ dramatically depending on where they attend school.

Moreover, measures of civic learning are often missing from large-scale assessment and accountability systems (EAD, 2021). A recent policy scan found that only three states include civic readiness indicators in their school accountability frameworks (Hyslop, 2025) even though surveys show that educators and policymakers recognize the power of assessment to shape priorities and expand access to high-quality learning, particularly when assessments are designed to reflect shared values and inform local decision-making (Hamilton et al., 2020). While we urge caution in using large-scale assessments as high-stakes levers in civics, they can serve as tools that help systems focus attention, support improvement and advance equity in civic learning opportunities and outcomes over time.

State Policy Momentum

Despite the policy challenges described above, many states have recently strengthened their commitments to civic learning. The CivXNow coalition's 2025 policy scan documents a growing set of state legislative and regulatory actions aimed at expanding access to civics. Examples include requiring or incentivizing service learning, embedding media literacy standards, and establishing recognition programs for students such as state civic seals. Pennsylvania launched a bipartisan effort in 2025 to improve civic learning standards and instruction. The effort aims to provide more support and accountability across local districts by providing clear guidelines, high-quality instructional resources and curriculum development opportunities. Two former members of Congress formed a coalition of educators and government groups to focus on the quality of civics instruction across the Commonwealth (Mezzacappa, 2025). Other states, as described in the sections that follow, have also taken steps to embed civic readiness into their standards, accountability frameworks and recognition programs.

Approaches to Assessing Civic Learning and Engagement

In addition to policy mandates, states are beginning to explore ways to assess students' civic learning and engagement. When well designed and implemented, these assessments can provide valuable information to monitor progress and evaluate results (Hamilton et al., 2026). Common assessment approaches are described below.

Direct assessments. According to CivX Now, 29 states required students to take a civics assessment as of 2025. For example, Florida requires all middle-grade students (grades 6–8) to pass a one-semester civics education course (Florida Department of Education, n.d., b). The course includes an end-of-course civics assessment, which accounts for 30 percent of a student's final grade and is required for promotion into high school. High school students who enroll in a United States Government course must take the Florida Civic Literacy Exam (FCLE). Passing the FCLE exempts students from a postsecondary civic literacy assessment requirement later in high school (Florida Department of Education, n.d., a). Tennessee requires students to complete at least two project-based civics assessments and pass a civics exam based on the Naturalization test to graduate (Tennessee Department of Education, 2025).

As we noted earlier, the NAEP civics assessment is designed to provide national data on students' civic knowledge, skills, dispositions and civic learning opportunities. But this test is administered only intermittently (every four years) and at selected grade levels (most recently grade 8 only), and unlike the NAEP mathematics and reading assessments, NAEP civics does not provide state-level results. Collectively, these design features limit its usefulness for states in monitoring progress over time, even as NAEP continues to provide an essential window into civic learning at the national level. Similarly, the International Civic and Citizenship Study offers international benchmarks but is conducted infrequently, and the U.S. no longer participates.

Self-report surveys. Some states and districts use student or teacher surveys to capture information about opportunities to engage in civic learning. For instance, California and New Mexico use school climate surveys to monitor civic learning opportunities and inequities in those opportunities across key student groups. Surveys might ask students to report on their participation in activities such as service learning or discussions of current events in class. These surveys typically do not provide evidence of students' civic competencies or outcomes, though some surveys ask students to report on their own levels of civic preparedness or engagement (Olivera-Aguilar et al., 2026; Syvertsen et al., 2015; Tedeschi et al., 2021).

Administrative data. A growing number of states track participation in the Advanced Placement (AP) government exam, International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, dual enrollment or service learning as proxies for civic readiness. These indicators are often folded into broader college, career and civic-readiness frameworks (Hyslop, 2025; Furtado & Reeves, 2025).

Taken together, these assessment approaches highlight that evidence of civic readiness can be gathered to examine a variety of school- and student-level inputs and outcomes, including content knowledge, skill development, mindsets and opportunities to learn. Notably, though many states assess civic learning, most capture evidence of a relatively small set of civic learning opportunities and outcomes.

Assessment of Civics in Action: State and District Examples

That said, several states offer promising examples of approaches to assessing civic learning. In 2024, 16 states incorporated civics-based competencies like social awareness and active citizenship into their Portrait of a Graduate frameworks (Atwell & Tucker, 2024), and numerous districts have done so as well (Dunbar et al., 2025). Benites and colleagues (2025) at iCivics describe several approaches states have adopted to support local education agencies in formally recognizing students' civic development. One example is New York's Seal of Civic Readiness, which allows students to demonstrate competence through a combination of coursework, projects and participation in civic experiences. Indiana's "Graduates Prepared to Succeed" dashboard includes "civic, financial, and digital literacy" indicators alongside academic and workforce metrics, signaling the state's commitment to monitoring civic outcomes as part of its broader accountability system (Indiana Department of Education, 2025).

At the local level, districts and charter school networks are experimenting with assessments that go beyond traditional tests. Some schools integrate student portfolios, simulations, or project-based learning experiences to capture civic skills. For example, 38 high schools across three New York districts participate in the New York Performance Standards Consortium.[2] These schools operate under a long-standing state waiver that allows them to replace most Regents exams with performance-based assessments (Gewertz, 2015). Students in these high schools complete performance-based assessment tasks in lieu of most statewide Regents exams. To graduate, students must submit a final paper and deliver an oral presentation in all four core subject areas—English Language Arts, mathematics, science and social studies—before a panel of trained external evaluators. Although the consortium is not explicitly designed to assess civic learning, it illustrates how performance assessment can be used to promote and hold students accountable for competencies associated with the broad definition of civic learning proposed in this paper.

Innovative national programs are also emerging. For example, Schoolhouse.world's "dialogues" pilot has enabled high school students to build civility transcripts documenting their ability to engage in respectful disagreement, with eight selective colleges now considering these records in admissions (Sparks, 2025). These innovations illustrate a willingness to experiment with more authentic assessments of civic learning, though they remain outside most state systems for several reasons, including feasibility concerns.

Landscape Summary

The current landscape of large-scale civic learning assessments is marked by momentum but also fragmentation. States are experimenting with new policies and measures, but no state has adopted a coherent or comprehensive approach to monitoring civic readiness for all students. Existing large-scale assessments like NAEP provide some insight but are insufficient. States tend to rely on course-taking data, end-of-course exams, surveys, and recognition programs like seals of civic readiness or civics awards that recognize community service. At the same time, external

[2] School districts operating schools in the consortium include New York City, Rochester and Ithaca, NY.

organizations are exploring more innovative approaches to assessing civic learning through interactive civics tests and civility transcripts. Together, these efforts represent important progress. Nonetheless, better assessment and monitoring systems are needed to promote greater consistency, coherence and equity in civic learning opportunities and outcomes.

SECTION 6: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Our landscape analysis pointed to examples of large-scale assessment systems that incorporate civic learning. It also highlighted the significant gaps in data that could inform policy and practice to improve civic learning for all students. As we acknowledged in the introduction to this paper, state and district assessment systems must address multiple goals, and their design and implementation are subject to constraints related to funding, testing time, the political environment, and other factors. We also recognize that these systems alone cannot accomplish the urgent and ambitious task of dramatically improving civic learning among the nation's students. A large-scale assessment system should be one component in a coherent set of supports that include professional learning, high-quality curriculum materials and community partnerships. Patrick Kelly, an educator and member of the National Assessment Governing Board, recently offered recommendations for addressing the civic-learning crisis:

> States need to get serious about evaluating the caliber of history and civics education. This is a recommendation I don't make lightly. My experience as a teacher and parent demonstrates the many ways current accountability systems can reduce needed instructional time in return for unusable data from low-quality assessments. But I also know modern American education values those things that are measured … Since social studies is not a subject area required for federal accountability under ESSA, states should be innovative in their approach and avoid adding another one-time, high-stakes, selected-response assessment to their accountability portfolio." (quoted in Hess, 2025).

With this sense of urgency, and an understanding of the risks and limitations associated with incorporating civics into large-scale assessment systems, we offer several practical recommendations to help education agencies elevate and deepen civic learning by leveraging their existing assessment and monitoring systems without a major overhaul. Our recommendations are intended to inform the design and implementation of large-scale assessment *systems* that incorporate assessments/tests of students' civic competencies into a broader system of indicators. State and local education agency leaders who are responsible for large-scale assessment system design and implementation are the primary audiences for these recommendations, but they could be of interest to others who contribute to, or are directly affected by, those design and implementation decisions.

ENGAGE CONSTITUENTS IN STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CIVIC PRIORITIES FOR SCHOOLS

Education leaders can model civic outreach while gathering input to inform system design by convening representatives from each of the groups that will be affected by revisions to large-scale assessment systems. At a minimum, these groups should include state and local educators, family members, students, and other key

constituencies within or across local communities. Involving students is especially important, both because they have the greatest stake in the outcomes of these conversions and because this involvement provides an opportunity for authentic civic engagement that could have valuable learning benefits.

This engagement can take a variety of forms but should enable participants to discuss their goals and priorities for their public schools, their ideas about the importance of civic learning and where it fits in the curriculum, and what specific civic-related opportunities they would prioritize. This input then informs structured conversations and deliberation, through which participants carefully consider the diversity of perspectives and eventually reach something close to a consensus that guides the design and implementation of the system. District- or state-wide task forces like those recently convened by Chicago Public Schools, Maryland, and Utah are promising mechanisms for sustained collaboration that ensures representation of key constituencies.

DEVELOP A THEORY OF ACTION TO GUIDE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM REVISIONS

Assessment system revisions should be grounded in a clear theory of action that links civic learning goals to teaching, learning, and assessment practices (Marion et al., 2016). A well-specified theory of action can clarify how resources (e.g., professional learning, high-quality instructional materials), inputs (e.g., classroom practices, service learning), and outputs (e.g., student engagement, sense of civic efficacy) are expected to lead to improved civic outcomes.

Consider a principal who hears feedback that students need more authentic opportunities to apply what they learn in civics. The principal convenes her team to develop a simple theory of action that puts this feedback into a structured action plan. The team identifies community partners and, collectively, they map out how new service learning projects, combined with high quality instructional materials and professional development, are expected to build students' civic agency, collaboration skills and understanding of local issues. The theory of action states:

- *If* the school provides teachers with high quality instruction and training to support service-learning projects,
- *and if* teachers incorporate these materials and practices in their classroom,
- *then* students should have more frequent opportunities to investigate local problems, work collaboratively and communicate their ideas.
- *Over time,* these experiences should strengthen students' sense of civic responsibility and their ability to engage with diverse perspectives.

A clear theory of action also guides an evaluation plan. Qualitative and quantitative information such as school checklists, classroom observations, teachers' instructional logs, surveys and students' performance assessments can be collected and used examine questions that follow a causal chain:

- Were the instructional materials and professional development provided to the school as planned?

- Did teachers attend the professional development sessions? Did they use the instructional materials and apply the intended instructional strategies as expected?
- Did students demonstrate the civic competencies that the school prioritized? Did students' civic performance outperform other students from similar schools who were not exposed to this project?

A theory of action is the first step toward implementing and improving a program. It creates a structure for determining whether the program is working, for whom it works and under what conditions it supports meaningful gains in student outcomes.

MONITOR BOTH OUTCOMES AND OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN

Large-scale assessment systems should reflect not only what students know and can do (e.g., civic competencies and mindsets) but also whether their schools provide them with meaningful opportunities to learn (e.g., access to high quality civic instruction and experiences). To be clear: this type of large-scale assessment system requires more than an assessment students take to demonstrate their learning; it requires indicators of the learning opportunities schools provide to their students. Monitoring both outcomes and opportunities to learn helps agencies identify disparities in student and/or school performance, as well as potential inequities in access to the conditions that influence civic learning (NASEM, 2019; Hamilton & Parsi, 2022). Olivera-Aguilar and colleagues propose a set of civics opportunity-to-learn indicators that includes measures of students' participation in civics coursework, access to teachers who are highly qualified to teach civics, opportunities to participate in civics-related activities like service learning, and a school and classroom climate that encourages respectful discussion (Olivera-Aguilar et al, 2026).

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Additional measures might monitor whether schools have access to, and use, high-quality civics curriculum. States or districts can produce lists of high-quality civics curricula for schools to adopt. States can also integrate checklists and indicators into their accreditation processes that link to important civics learning inputs and outputs. Such indicators might examine the extent to which high-quality instructional materials and approaches—aligned to our broad definition of civics learning—are being implemented in a random selection of schools and classrooms (Valencia et al., 2024). When organized and used purposefully, these measures can support state and district leaders in combining data sources and using findings to identify where additional resources and support are needed to improve civic outcomes.

Anchoring this work in a clear theory of action allows leaders to connect inputs (resources and supports), outputs (what schools do with them), and outcomes (changes for teachers and students). This integrated approach makes it easier to see where strategies are falling short and to adjust accordingly—helping to expand equitable access to civic learning opportunities while also improving civic outcomes.

With a clear theory of action in place, civics assessments and other indicators can be incorporated or adapted (relevant resources for identifying existing measures include EdInstruments.org; Institute for Citizens & Scholars, 2024; Syvertsen et al., 2015; Tedeschi et al., 2021). Where gaps remain, states and districts can work with technical experts to develop new indicators, along with plans for gathering evidence of validity, reliability, and fairness.

INTEGRATE CIVIC LEARNING INTO ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS ASSESSMENTS

Large-scale reading and English language arts (ELA) assessments offer a practical way to elevate civic learning without creating new tests or expanding the burden of accountability (Wiener, 2025). Strong reading comprehension depends on background knowledge (Smith et al., 2021). When assessments include civic and historical texts, they can be used to strengthen literacy skills while promoting students' understanding of standards-based knowledge in civics-related content such as history and government. Using knowledge-rich passages that can be intentionally taught and learned can also reduce inequities by giving students from different backgrounds a more level playing field (Education Week, 2023).

Sophisticated literacy skills are essential for navigating an increasingly complex media and information landscape. Pondiscio (2025) described the clear connection between the skills required to demonstrate proficient performance on the NAEP reading assessment and the ability to make sense of the many scientific, political, and policy debates we encounter regularly. Discussing the 2025 NAEP results in which majorities of high school seniors performed at the Basic or Below Basic levels, Pondiscio noted that "… in a society where evaluating arguments is the lifeblood of citizenship, Basic is not enough. Functional literacy is not civic literacy. The problem is not whether you can read. It's whether you can reason."

Promoting civic learning through ELA requires integrating civic content into ELA assessments. Some states have tried to avoid bias in ELA testing by removing content that might be unfamiliar, but this strategy often advantages students who already come with greater access to cultural knowledge (Grissmer et al., 2023). Louisiana's Innovative Assessment Program, developed under the federal Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA) demonstrated that it is possible to align ELA tests with curriculum content, in this case through passages drawn from state guidebooks that draw from fiction and non-fiction texts. Although the pilot did not address civic learning specifically, it provided evidence that embedding disciplinary content in reading assessments is feasible and can influence classroom instruction (White, 2022).

While Louisiana's effort represented a major shift at the state level, more modest changes are possible. States could adopt an assessment blueprint for reading and ELA tests that ensures coverage of social studies standards in texts and prompts

(Wiener, 2025). Doing so would direct districts to integrate civic and historical texts into their locally developed interim and classroom-based assessments. These assessments are often designed to serve instructional purposes and can be adjusted more easily than large-scale state tests. With focused state support, districts could begin to embed civic content in ways that highlight its importance without requiring wholesale redesign of statewide assessment systems. This approach would highlight civics, encourage teachers to devote more attention to civic standards and standards-based content, and do so within an accountability system that leverages schools' existing focus on ELA. The results would still represent ELA performance, not civics achievement, but the design choices would create meaningful incentives for schools to treat civic readiness as part of their broader mission.

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EXPLORE OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP A BALANCED CIVICS ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

In our earlier description of the uses of large-scale assessment systems, we omitted any reference to informing day-to-day instructional decisions. A recent National Academy of Education volume examined *balanced assessment systems* in which high-quality formative assessment tools and practices provide the primary mechanisms for instructional improvement, with large-scale assessments serving monitoring and signaling functions (Marion et al., 2024). States and districts could support balanced civics assessment systems by curating resources and tools for educators to assess students' civic development, ensuring that these classroom tools form part of a coherent system that includes large-scale assessments. Classroom assessment tools could provide information on civic outcomes that are hard to measure on a large scale, using student focus groups, interviews, self-perception surveys, or teacher-administered rubrics. Classroom-based performance- or scenario-based tasks can also provide evidence of students' civic reasoning and other complex competencies (Brettschneider et al., 2026; Lo et al, 2026).

ESTABLISH A STRUCTURED APPROACH FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Large-scale assessments should inform an ongoing improvement process for civic learning. Continuous improvement should be anchored in a theory of action and informed by three practical questions to guide decisions: What are we trying to accomplish? What change might we try and why? How will we know if it helped? (Bryk et al., 2015; Shakman et al., 2020). Robust continuous improvement systems often pair short-cycle learning like plan-do-study-act cycles in classrooms with periodic, system-level reviews of aggregated evidence to understand whether a program is working, for whom it's working and the conditions that influence

successful implementation. Broad engagement—educators, students, subject experts, and research/data partners—creates opportunities to examine a program and theory of action from multiple vantage points. Importantly, such conversations must be grounded in evidence. The aim is a steady, transparent learning process in which large-scale assessments complement other classroom and school-level data sources (e.g., student and teacher observations) to inform changes and improvements over time.

SECTION 7: ANTICIPATING AND ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

As we have noted several times throughout this paper, redesigning assessment systems to address the civic mission of schools is not a straightforward task, and it certainly won't be easy. Anyone who has spent time in schools or talking with educators understands the tremendous pressures buffeting public education. Further, large-scale assessment systems, which themselves are frequent targets of political debate and public frustration, can be difficult to change because of the large number of political, legal, technical, and practical considerations they must address. In this section, we identify several challenges that policymakers are likely to confront as they embark on a redesign process, and we offer brief guidance regarding ways to overcome these challenges.

Lack of High-Quality, Direct Assessments of Some Civic Outcomes

Civic knowledge can be assessed through high-quality direct assessments, as demonstrated by NAEP and other standardized assessments. Self-report questionnaires have provided good information on students' civic mindsets, as demonstrated by several of the survey reports we cited earlier. But many civic outcomes, including skills such as collaborative problem solving and critical thinking about civic issues, are more challenging to assess through existing methods. Similarly, civic actions such as constructive and informed engagement in political discourse, cannot easily be subject to large-scale data collection. Advances in assessment methodology, including those enabled by emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence, might eventually help fill this measurement gap (Tucker & Baker, in press). There are clear opportunities for those who conduct or fund education research and development to help advance the assessment of civic outcomes. In the meantime, policymakers will need to prioritize assessment approaches that balance evidence of technical quality with feasibility (including cost) for large-scale systems.

Potential for Adverse Consequences

Assessment in any form carries potential benefits as well as risks, and large-scale assessments in particular can lead to unintended negative consequences, particularly when high stakes are attached to scores (Koretz, 2008). Throughout this paper, we have argued for reimagining large-scale *assessment* systems but have deliberately avoided recommending that assessments of civics outcomes be incorporated into high-stakes *accountability* systems. This is not to suggest that assessments of civic learning should never be used for accountability purposes. But we advocate for caution because there is relatively little evidence of validity to

Policymakers can help mitigate risks of adverse consequences by avoiding high-stakes uses, at least until they have gathered evidence regarding the potential effects of those uses, and by monitoring the impact of the assessment system on teaching and learning.

support this use of civics assessments. A widely embraced tenet in the measurement community is that the more significant the potential consequences of an assessment on test takers or others, the greater the demand is for high-quality evidence of validity, reliability, and fairness (AERA, APA, & NCME, 2014). Policymakers can help mitigate risks of adverse consequences by avoiding high-stakes uses, at least until they have gathered evidence regarding the potential effects of those uses, and by monitoring the impact of the assessment system on teaching and learning.

Perceptions That Civics Detracts From Other Important Goals

Those who make decisions about what to incorporate into large-scale assessment systems inevitably face the need to be judicious in what measures are included. Parsimony is important for keeping the data-collection burden reasonable (more on that below), but it can also help send clear signals to educators, students, families and other constituencies about priorities. As we discussed earlier, statewide assessment systems, driven in part by the demands of federal accountability policy, have emphasized mathematics and ELA assessment, with less emphasis on science. Educators have said that these testing demands have contributed to their decisions to limit instruction related to civics (Hamilton et al., 2024). One potential solution to this dilemma is to help educators and other constituencies understand the relationships between civic learning and other important educational outcomes, including academic learning in other core subjects as well as preparation for higher education and careers. We described these connections earlier, and they offer opportunities to signal that pursuing schools' civic missions does not mean backing away from other important objectives.

Concerns About Burden

A related potential barrier is the burden that additional data collection, analysis, and reporting imposes. Complaints about excessive time devoted to large-scale assessment are widespread, though the actual amount of time students spend on statewide assessments is relatively small (Olson & Jerrold, 2020). At a time when education budgets are stretched thin and instructional time is precious, policymakers need to help constituencies understand how new assessment-related demands are offset by the likely benefits of gathering systematic data to support civic learning. State and local education leaders can also help address this concern by providing supports such as flexibility in scheduling and clear guidance regarding use of results. Where feasible, using administrative data such as course grades, student participation in civic-related activities, or scores on Advanced Placement exams, can be a cost-effective way to supplement large-scale assessment systems (Terrones & Reeves, 2025).

Politicization of Civics

Definitions of civic competencies and how to prioritize and teach them are inherently political. So it is no wonder that civics has gotten caught up in the politicized curriculum debates about instruction in other areas including race, gender, and social and emotional learning (Schwartz, 2025). Educators and education leaders at the state and local levels might, depending on the goals and perspectives of their local communities and on the nature of the large-scale assessment system changes they propose, face pushback from community members. Fortunately, as Finn (2025) notes, Americans broadly agree about the importance of students developing some key civic skills and knowledge, and educators now have access to an extensive body of resources that align with those key outcomes. Policymakers can equip educators to respond to constituent concerns through the provision of communications resources that adopt nonpartisan language, summarize evidence regarding the importance of civic learning for student success in work and life, and including participants with a range of political viewpoints in stakeholder engagement activities and in data collection related to continuous improvement of the assessment system.

This list of challenges is by no means exhaustive. One benefit of the stakeholder engagement and continuous-improvement approaches we described earlier is that they provide opportunities for policymakers to learn about potential roadblocks and unanticipated consequences soon after they emerge and to work with constituencies to identify solutions.

CONCLUSION

Public education in the U.S. is experiencing rapid societal change, marked by evolving applications of technology, expanding school choice that could alter relationships between communities and schools, and shifting expectations for what schools should deliver. Despite this turmoil, the core civic purposes of public education should remain paramount. Civic learning in schools is more important than ever and will help sustain our democracy while equipping individuals to engage constructively in their communities.

By making thoughtful, feasible adjustments to existing practices and frameworks, state and district leaders can generate actionable information about how well schools are cultivating civic knowledge, skills, and mindsets and the extent to which schools provide high-quality civic learning opportunities.

Large-scale assessment systems are just one mechanism to support civic learning in schools, but as we argued above, these systems have the potential to enhance or detract from schools' civic missions. By making thoughtful, feasible adjustments to existing practices and frameworks, state and district leaders can generate actionable information about how well schools are cultivating civic knowledge, skills, and mindsets and the extent to which schools provide high-quality civic learning opportunities. Doing so will require collaboration among policymakers, educators, researchers and community members to reimagine assessment systems that honor both academic excellence and civic responsibility.

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