

AOE Testimony:

Testimony To: Senate Committee on Education

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Civics Education

Over the past three years, the Agency of Education has advanced the importance of a strong social studies/civics education for K-12 students through leadership and support initiatives such as: (1) adoption of new national social studies standards, (2) facilitation of field-developed Proficiency-Based Graduation Requirements and indicators, (3) participation in a state-wide Civics Task Force, (4) supporting and offering grant funding for student participation in the *We the People* program, (5) development of a Social Studies Portrait of a Graduate (PoG), and (6) creation of Peace Education modules with a focus on US History and Civics.

An overview of the regulatory framework and initiatives supporting civic literacy and proficiency are included below.

Both Vermont Title 16 and the [Education Quality Standards \(EQS 2120.5\)](#) (*d. global citizenship (including the concepts of civics, economics, geography, world language, cultural studies and history)*) require annual K-12 social studies education for Vermont students.

College, Career and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards

In 2017, the Vermont State Board of Education adopted the [College, Career and Civic Life C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards](#) (C3) to guide the teaching of civics, economics, geography, and history within Vermont. The Four Dimensions within the Framework -- *Inquiry, Disciplinary Concepts, Sources and Evidence, and Taking Action* -- all support civic education and the belief that our democracy “will not sustain unless students are aware of their changing cultural and physical environments; know the past; read, write, and think deeply; and act in ways that promote the common good.” Specifically, Dimension 2 highlights *Civics as a Disciplinary Concept*, where students dig in to *Civic and Political Institutions, Apply Civic Virtues and Democratic Principles, and understand Processes, Rules, and Laws*.

Proficiency-Based Graduation Requirements and Indicators

In December 2017, nearly forty K-16 Vermont educators and community members from across the state convened in Montpelier to begin the process of developing a sample set of [K-12 PBGRs](#) and indicators that could be utilized by all SU/SDs. These

PBGRS/Indicators were based upon the C3 standards (EQS 2120.8) and the development process culminated with a Civics Proficiency: *Civics: Students act as productive citizens by understanding the history, principles and foundations of our American democracy, and by acquiring the ability to become engaged in civic and democratic processes.*

Additionally, in FY20 a survey on the status of PBGRs was deployed to supervisory unions/districts (SU/SDs). This [document](#) contains a list of supervisory union/district websites that was generated from the 2020 Proficiency-Based Learning/Personalized Learning Survey regarding the current status of proficiency-based graduation requirements. At the secondary level, SU/SDs' PBGRs, rather than classes, are a more accurate reflection of the delivery of C3 standards.

Transferable Skills

The [Sample Transferable Skills Graduation Proficiencies](#) are examples of skills that reach across content areas and meet the expectations within the [Education Quality Standards](#). Responsible and Involved Citizenship and [sample scoring criteria](#) is one example of a holistic, integrated approach to civic literacy supported by Vermont's sample transferable skills.

Portrait of a Graduate

A [Vermont Portrait of a Graduate](#) (PoG) was collaboratively developed to be used as a tool for reviewing and refining local proficiency-based graduation requirements, as a guide for making instructional decisions, and communicating the skills and dispositions of a career/college ready student. The PoG specifies the cognitive, personal, and interpersonal skills and abilities that students should be able to demonstrate upon graduation considering six attributes: learner agency, global citizenship, academic proficiency, communication, critical thinking, and well-being. Social studies education programs should provide students with valuable learning experiences that support the development of PoG skills and abilities. The [Social Studies Portrait of a Graduate](#) links to the content, skills and attributes developed within the social studies and how they fit into the six attributes of the Vermont Portrait of a Graduate. Specific terms, such as Civic Virtue, Bias Assessment, Tolerance, Civic Engagement, Deliberation and Argumentation, have been identified in the in the Social Studies PoG; some annotated examples are included below:

- As students construct arguments, provide explanations, listen to, and share ideas and perspectives they are learning to be cognizant of bias and value the dissonance of opinion. Social studies practices -- such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication and questioning -- are skills needed in life beyond the classroom as they promote successful civic engagement.

- Students learn to practice tolerance when faced with differing opinions, points of view, cultures, religions, and understandings of gender; having a strong civic disposition leads to the respect for human dignity and individual worth. It is important within a democratic society that students engage within their communities and partake in civic practices such as voting, volunteering and jury service. Productive civic engagement is also evidenced when students contribute to public discussions, challenge injustices, collaborate for change, practice social responsibility, and respect the rights afforded to others.
- Careful listening and intentional word choice build trust and respect for others, strengthen student dispositions - such as patience and concentration - and build on the democratic process. The social studies disciplines have provided students with a strong foundation to act responsibly and advocate for positive change when they encounter injustice.
- Social studies students understand that their words can leave an impact, therefore they think first of their intentions before they communicate in print, in person, or digitally. Analysis of evidence allows students to assess the credibility of resources representing multiple points of view with the understanding that sources may collide, and differing viewpoints may alter how the data is perceived. Careful analysis can also demonstrate that words can communicate bias and students should be skilled at recognizing such partiality. This is also referenced in the AOE document [Continuity of Learning: Digital Literacy and Screen Time](#).
- By becoming civically engaged, students honor the virtues and democratic principles of mutual respect, honesty, cooperation, equality and respect for individual rights when interacting with others, as well as when acting on one's own behalf. Students understand how they view themselves within social, cultural and political spheres and how their actions and behaviors are interpreted by others.

Civics Task Force

A Civics Task Force was developed in 2018 with the purpose of discussing the state of civic education within Vermont schools. K-12 educators, administrators and curriculum directors joined members from the AOE, higher education, and the legislature to develop strategies to heighten awareness for the need for strong civic education. In 2019, several members of the Task Force addressed social studies educators at the annual Vermont Alliance for the Social Studies conference. While new members asked to join the Task Force after this presentation, a follow-up meeting has not been rescheduled as a consequence of COVID.

We the People

The Center for Civic Education's [We the People](#) program provides students an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of constitutional

principles and ideas in a Congressional Hearing format. In March 2020, teams from Poultney, Williamstown and St. Johnsbury schools (two of whom were supported through grant funds from the Agency of Education) competed in front a state legislator and 15 members of the Vermont Bar Association. As a VBA member noted,

“the students explored basic constitutional provisions on issues relating to voting rights, due process, shared sovereignty, speech and the like, [and] they quickly pulled historical and current examples to the fray, not shying away from hot topics such as non-citizen voting, marijuana legislation and the rise of nationalism. All involved couldn’t help but be awash with pride as so many young people engaged in meaningful discourse regarding civics.”

Both St. Johnsbury and Poultney qualified to compete at the Nationals last spring but were unable to travel due to COVID restrictions. There are no Vermont teams competing in 2021.

Peace Education

In June of 2020, the AOE began a collaborative project with educators from North Carolina and Alabama, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and NewGen Peacebuilders to develop a Beta set of Peace Education lessons and activities. This work is aligned with the C3 Standards and uses the Institute of Economics and Peace’s [8 Pillars of Peace](#) as a framework on which the Inquiry Frameworks were developed. Students will have the opportunity to delve into Inquiries such as “Can Harm be Mended?”, “Did the Civil Rights Movement End?”, and “Has the US Lived Up to the Creed Inscribed on the Statue of Liberty?” This new content includes compelling questions, lessons, activities, data, resources, and case studies/examples which are designed to support US History/Civics teachers to constructively discuss issues and opportunities of peacebuilding. Professional development for VT and AL educators begins later this month.