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U T A H V A L L E Y U N I V E R S I T Y

The State of Civics Education in Utah



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Introduction

Under the auspices of its Civic Thought and Leadership Initiative, Utah Valley University's Center for Constitutional Studies (hereafter, the Center) conducted two large surveys on the state of civic knowledge and civics teaching in Utah. The first, carried out in fall 2021 by Jay DeSart, Chair of UVU's Department of History and Political Science, surveyed adult Utah residents to evaluate their level of civic knowledge (DeSart, 2022). The second, carried out in winter 2022 and on which we will focus in this report, surveyed secondary-level social studies teachers, as well as teachers of 4th and 5th grades, the grades responsible for teaching Utah Studies and United States History. This survey on the state of civics education in Utah addressed the following questions:

- What civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions are being taught?
- What incentives and disincentives exist for the teaching of civics?
- How, if at all, do state and district civics standards affect civics instruction?
- What resources are most needed by civics teachers?

Our findings indicate that teachers understand the importance of civics and prioritize it in the classroom. In particular, they understand and are motivated by their

responsibility to prepare the next generation with the knowledge and habits of active citizenship. Teachers are influenced by state guidelines and standards, and they express a desire to improve their teaching practices concerning civics. At the same time, they are confident in their abilities and a majority think civics is well-taught at their schools. How this self-reported emphasis on teaching civics contrasts with the dismal results of the DeSart civic knowledge survey is a quandary that deserves future investigation and will be discussed in the conclusion.

Teachers and Schools

Teacher Demographics

The survey received responses from 518 teachers, comprising 224 elementary and 294 secondary teachers. Responses were collected via an online survey, distributed principally via district and charter school contacts.

Reflecting a common pattern seen across the United States, 81% of teachers we surveyed are female. However, 96% of our respondents are White, a higher percentage than the national average of 79% of the teaching force (NCES, 2017-18). Teaching experience ranges from those in their first year of teaching to those with over 30 years' experience,

79% having more than five years' experience as professional educators. Politically, 33% identify as Republicans or lean Republican, 23% as Democrat or lean Democrat, and 23% claim independence of party affiliation. The remaining 20% of respondents chose either not to identify or wrote in an 'other' option, from "Libertarian/conservative" to "abhor political parties," "shouldn't matter," and "best candidate for the job."

School Demographics

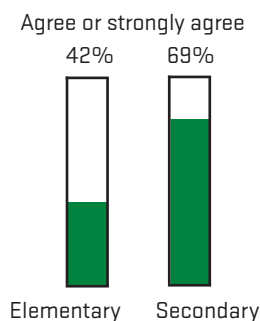
All 41 districts in the state, as well as a representative sample of charter schools, were invited to participate, and teachers across the state did so. Nearly 87% of the responding teachers teach at a traditional public school and approximately 11% teach at public charter schools, nearly the same percentage as Utah students who attend charter schools.

Thirty-four percent of the elementary teachers and 25% of the secondary teachers characterize their schools as rural, with the remainder teaching in urban or suburban schools. Approximately 50% of the schools at both levels are Title I schools, a socio-economic designation for schools with over 40% of the children receiving free or reduced-price lunch, higher than the 35% of Utah schools who received Title I schools during the 2020-21 school year (Utah State Board of Education, 2021).

What is Being Taught?

We asked teachers to agree or disagree with the statement, "Civics is being taught well at my school" (Figure 1). More than two-thirds of secondary teachers (69%) somewhat or strongly agree with this statement. Among elementary teachers, however, less than half (43%) somewhat or strongly agree that civics is being taught well at their schools. Although we did not explore why they answered this question as they did, it is likely that elementary teachers feel this way because they must cover a plethora of topics, many of which are less obviously about civics. Elementary teachers are also facing pressures to spend less time on social studies and civics and more on English Language Arts (ELA) and math; these concerns are discussed further below.

Figure 1 - Civics is Being Taught Well at My School



Civic Content Knowledge

The survey asked the teachers to identify, from a list of twelve topics, the areas of content knowledge they cover. The list offered included:

- Facts of the Utah Constitution
- Facts of the U.S. Constitution
- Early American history (pre-colonial – Civil War and Reconstruction)
- Modern American history (1900 present)
- Early Constitutional ideas or issues (e.g., The Declaration of Independence, Federalist/Anti-federalist debates, Civil War and Reconstruction)
- The Bill of Rights, other amendments, and the process by which the Constitution can be amended
- Modern constitutional ideas or issues (e.g., voting rights, freedom of speech, contemporary constitutional debates)
- Economic literacy
- Local politics and community participation
- The United States and its global context
- Current events
- Current elections
- Other

The elementary respondents report that they teach an average of 5.0 of the presented civics topics, and secondary respondents an average of 7.4. Because elementary teachers must give priority to math and ELA, their lower average is to be expected. On the other hand, secondary social studies teachers may specialize in topics which do not encourage coverage of every one of these topics (World History, for example, might not stress some of these content areas). Considering these facts, our numbers indicate that students are receiving good coverage of the expected topics in civics. When we examine only teachers of U.S. History, U.S. Government, and Civics, the average number of civics topics covered rises to 8.3. Both elementary and secondary teachers most frequently identify the topics of "facts of the U.S. Constitution," "the Bill of Rights and other amendments," "early constitutional ideas," and "modern constitutional ideas" as topics that they teach. In other words, both elementary and secondary teachers are prioritizing the Founding and the Constitution, which should lessen concern that these are being neglected. When given the chance to add additional topics, teachers suggested only a few additional topics, including student government, civic virtues (unspecified), and debate and discussion. As heartening as these results are, there is room for improvement. The three least-taught topics were "facts of the Utah Constitution," "economic literacy," and "local politics and community participation." These are also very important topics that provide students

information and skills they can use to improve their lives and the lives of others in their communities.

Civic Skills and Dispositions

In addition to civic content knowledge topics, the survey also asked teachers to consider which civic skills and dispositions they focus on in their classrooms. Such skills and dispositions are important in preparing citizens with the abilities and desires for informed civic engagement (Nokes, 2019). Again, a list of options was given, culled from a literature review on civics education. The presented topics, while not exhaustive, included:

- Collaborating with others to bring about change
- Defending the rights of others
- Standing up for one’s rights and liberties
- Love of country
- Engaging civilly with others, across differences in race, religion, political perspective, etc.
- Respect for the rule of law
- Thinking critically about information students encounter
- Distinguishing reliability of sources
- Deliberating on difficult topics
- Social justice and activism
- Protest and civil disobedience
- Respect for Founding documents and ideals
- Thoughtful engagement with American history
- Diplomacy and working with adversaries
- Encouraging truthfulness
- Encouraging self-control and responsibility
- The necessity of compromise in American history

Most of the educators marked multiple skills and dispositions that they encourage (Table 1). A few of the highest tallies, from both elementary and secondary teachers, were “engaging civilly with others,” “distinguishing between reliable and unreliable sources,” and “thoughtful engagement with American history.” Every option listed was marked by at least 20% of elementary teachers and at least 40% of secondary teachers. Even so, some skills and dispositions were understandably more important to — and more age-appropriate for — secondary teachers. For example, “deliberating on difficult topics,” received only 49 mentions by elementary teachers (23%), but 191 from secondary teachers (70%). These self-reported efforts to teach civic content knowledge, skills, and dispositions to young people in Utah are both admirable and reassuring.

Time Spent on Teaching Civics

To ascertain the state of civics instruction, one needs to understand not only what is being taught, but how often

Table 1 - Which Civic Skills and Dispositions, If Any, Do You Teach or Facilitate?

Elementary	
Top Three	1. Encouraging self-control and responsibility 2. Encouraging truthfulness 3. Engaging civilly with others, across differences
Bottom Three	14. Deliberating on difficult topics 15. Avoiding presentism (the tendency to judge the past by modern values and perspectives)* 16. Diplomacy and working with adversaries
Secondary	
Top Three	1. Thinking critically about information students encounter 2. Distinguishing between reliable and unreliable sources 3. Engaging civilly with others across differences in race, religion, political perspective, etc.
Bottom Three	15. Diplomacy and working with adversaries 16. Collaborating with others to bring about change 17. Social justice and activism**

*This topic was only asked of elementary teachers

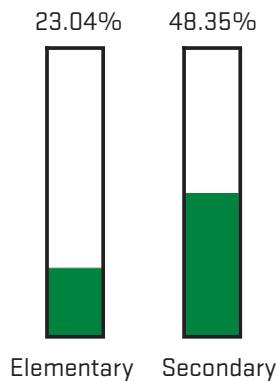
**This topic was only asked of secondary social studies teachers

teachers are teaching it. Thus, we asked teachers what portion of their instructional content and activities deal with civics. Elementary teachers reported that 23% of their instruction related to civics, while secondary teachers reported 48%. That elementary teachers reported spending half as much time as secondary social studies teachers is likely due to the fact that, at the elementary level, teachers instruct in all subjects (such as science and math), not just those typically associated with civics (such as history or government). While some secondary social studies teachers also teach subjects less commonly associated with civics (such as psychology or economics), these classes are taught less frequently.

It may be that while secondary teachers say they value civics (as our previous findings suggest), they nevertheless spend less than half their time teaching it. However, it is also possible that some of these teachers have a narrow definition of what “civics” is, and thus do not always recognize civics content when they teach it (for example, limiting “civics” to facts about government, not the skill of engaging with those who disagree). Regardless, the relatively low percentage of instruction dealing with civics makes understanding the incentives and disincentives teachers face, and the lack

of civics resources available, all the more important to understand.

Figure 2 - Portion of Instructional Time Spent on Civics-Related Topics and Activities



Incentives

Ranked Incentives

Teachers were asked to rank, in order of priority, their responses to the question, “What most incentivizes or motivates you to include civics in your teaching?” with “one” being the strongest incentive. The given options included:

- Required civics graduation test (included for secondary teachers only)
- Required state or district standards
- Teaching for standardized tests other than the required civics graduation test
- My school asks me to prioritize civics education
- I have a responsibility to prepare future voters
- I enjoy teaching civics topics
- My personal political values
- My personal experience in civic activities
- Other

As Table 2 shows, the option most often listed as the strongest incentive, at both elementary and secondary levels, was “I have a responsibility to prepare future voters.” The incentives with the lowest values were “my personal political values,” for elementary teachers, and “teaching for standardized tests other than the required civics graduation test,” for secondary (since no standardized tests measure social studies or civic knowledge, this makes sense).

Our findings affirm that Utah teachers understand the importance of civics, follow the state guidelines, and enjoy the responsibility of instructing the next generation in civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Rank	4th & 5th Grade Teachers
1	I have a responsibility to prepare future voters
2	Required state or district standards
3	I enjoy teaching civics topics
4	My personal experience in civic activities
5	Teaching for standardized tests other than the required civics graduation test
6	My school asks me to prioritize civics education
7	My personal political values
Rank	Secondary Social Studies Teachers
1	I have a responsibility to prepare future voters
2	I enjoy teaching civics topics
3	Required state or district standards
4	My personal experience in civic activities
5	Required civics graduation test (this option not given to the elementary teachers)
6	My personal political values
7	My school asks me to prioritize civics education
8	Teaching for standardized tests other than the required civics graduation test

Teacher-Suggested Responses

In addition to these ranked responses, teachers were invited to give open-ended responses. To interpret these responses, an outside researcher suggested inductively-produced themes, and then two members of our research team coded all responses accordingly, resolving any discrepancies. The themes we found include:

Betterment of Society/Prevent Decay of Society: Three elementary and 14 secondary teachers see the teaching of civics as a societal responsibility. “It’s important to develop a civic minded citizenry,” one says; “educated citizens [are] the basis of a strong society,” writes another. Others speak of a divide and write, “I want the next

generation to be better Americans who can heal the divide.” (17 responses)

General Importance/Meaningful for Students: Three elementary teachers and 10 secondary teachers comment on the importance or meaningfulness of civics to their students. One writes, “I think civics is the most relevant and most applicable subject to all students for preparing them for the rest of their lives.” Another focuses on civic skills, commenting, “I have a duty to teach students to collaborate and compromise. I have a duty to teach them to listen to legitimate sources. . . .” (13 responses)

Teaching Skills to Better Individuals’ Situations/ Making Government “Work for Them”: Four elementary and seven secondary teachers feel civics is important because, in one teacher’s words, “How else will students know how to make government work for them?” (11 responses)

Patriotism: Three elementary and two secondary teachers are inspired by their love of country or desire for students to appreciate our country. (5 responses)

Activities as Part of Class or Materials: Three elementary teachers and one secondary teacher are motivated due to materials they have been provided. (4 responses)

Remember the Past for the Future: Two elementary and two secondary teachers are concerned about repeating the mistakes of the past and desirous that students “evaluate political and historical events with more discernment.” (4 responses)

Comparable to Other Subjects: One elementary teacher, likely one being pressured to focus on ELA and math, writes, “History & Civics are just as important as Reading, Science & Math.” (1 response)

It is interesting to consider how these open-ended responses correspond to the given options. Many of these answers could possibly be subsumed under the ideas of preparing future voters, teachers’ enjoyment of the subject matter, and their personal political values. However, teaching for the improvement of society and of individual students’ lives, and to understand history to better prepare for the future, speaks so strongly to these teachers that they took time to say more, reiterating the importance and value of the topics.

State Standards Guide the Curriculum

When asked to use a Likert scale to respond to the statement “State standards or mandates influence the way I teach civics,” 72% of the elementary teachers and 79% of the secondary teachers marked “agree” or “strongly agree.” To slightly lesser degrees, a majority

of all teachers also marked “agree” or “strongly agree” when asked if district and/or local school standards and mandates influence their teaching. Additional teacher responses remind us that few districts and schools have delineated standards that differ (or add to) the state requirements.



In addition, teachers could respond to this prompt: “If desired, please describe the relationship, if any, between state, district, and school standards and your teaching of civics.” Using inductive methods, an outside researcher suggested several themes. Two members of our research team reviewed and revised those suggestions, then together coded the data. They found these themes:

Guidance of State Standards: By far, the most frequently mentioned theme is the dominance of state standards in teachers’ instructional decisions. Twelve elementary teachers and 28 secondary teachers mention this factor. Many echo this teacher’s words: “If I want to teach something, I check to see if it is in harmony with state, district, and school standards. If it is not, I don’t go there.” (40 responses)

Teacher Discretion: Teacher discretion is mentioned nine times by elementary and 11 times by secondary teachers. As we noted above, elementary teachers feel particular pressure to focus on ELA and math; for this reason, several of their responses mention finding a way to “sneak” or “squeeze” in civics. A secondary teacher writes, “It’s mostly the responsibility I feel as a teacher — it’s why I teach.” (20 responses)

Local School’s Discretion: This theme is mentioned by six elementary and 13 secondary teachers. Some speak of a principal or a school culture that emphasizes civic skills. Others mention their desire to “tak[e] into account the demographics and community that I live in.” (19 responses)

Not Taught/Not Given Time to Teach/Lack of Support for Social Studies Teaching: This theme is mentioned by 10 elementary and six secondary teachers. Elementary teachers are facing the tightest squeeze, as some have been asked to drop social studies completely in order to give more time to ELA and math instruction and/or in response to the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic. (16 responses)

Fear of Repercussions/Disagreements/Cultural Backlash: This theme is mentioned by six elementary and 10 secondary teachers. Multiple teachers express sentiments similar to this: “Actually, my teaching of civics is almost entirely determined by how I think my students’ parents will react.” (16 responses)

Remaining Unbiased: Six elementary and two secondary teachers mention the importance of remaining unbiased. One even says, “I am Switzerland in any discussion taking place.” Some feel that sticking to the standards helps prevent bias, but another mentions there might still be political or cultural repercussions because “expectations of parents do not align with our State Standards.” (8 responses)

State Testing: Seven secondary teachers mention state testing, stating “my instruction is tailored toward the state required civics exam.” But not all are enthused, feeling it to be a poor pedagogical choice. (7 responses)

The comments listed above illustrate the many ways teachers are trying to incorporate civics teaching and a few of the obstacles that they encounter. However, the comments are even more interesting when considered as responses to the prompt, “Describe the relationship, if any, between state, district, and school standards and your teaching of civics.” Forty teachers responded with strong indications that reiterated their intentions of following the state standards in their teaching. However, of 126 open-ended responses, 87 do not specifically address state standards. When offered a blank space to comment, nearly 70% of teachers took the opportunity to voice additional concerns and frustrations, sometimes tangentially related to standards, and to a strong degree, in concert with one another.

Table 3 - Ranked Disincentives for Including Civics in Teaching

Rank	4th & 5th Grade Teachers
1	Time constraints in my classroom
2	Not prioritized in standardized tests
3	Not required under the state or district standards
4	Not a priority at my school
5	Too easily politicized or controversial
6	Concerned about parent reactions
7	Administrators have asked me to spend less time on social studies
8	Dissatisfaction with the required civics graduation test*
8	Not relevant to my teaching or covered at other levels*
10	Other
Rank	Secondary Social Studies Teachers
1	Time constraints in my classroom
2	Too easily politicized or controversial
3	Concerned about parent reactions
4	Dissatisfaction with the required civics graduation test
5	Not prioritized in standardized tests
6	Not required under the state or district standards
7	Not a priority at my school
8	Administrators have asked me to spend less time on social studies**
8	Not relevant to my teaching or covered at other levels**
10	Other

*Ranked equally by elementary teachers

**Ranked equally by secondary teachers

Disincentives

Ranked Disincentives

To uncover what disincentivizes teachers from teaching civics, we asked teachers to rank a given list of deterrents. The results in Table 3 are informative.

As the table indicates, both groups of teachers find the greatest disincentive to be “time constraints.” Secondary teachers find it difficult to fit civics topics into the full social studies curriculum, while the problem for elementary school teachers is illustrated with the second and fourth deterrents, both indicating that social studies and civics are not receiving priority.

The second and third disincentives for the secondary teachers, “too easily politicized or controversial” and “concerned about parent reactions” are a commentary on our current political climate.

These deterrents were number five and six for the elementary teachers and they correspond to the teachers at both levels requesting more unbiased resources for lesson planning and professional development training on how to facilitate classroom conversations about controversial and difficult topics in class (see Table 4, Page 9).

The third-ranked disincentive for elementary, and sixth for secondary, “not required under state or district standards,” is both interesting and disheartening. This contrasts with the majority of teachers, reported in the previous section, who know the state and district requirements and clearly indicate that they look to those standards for guidance and work to adhere to them. That some teachers do not know that the state standards include civics topics is worrisome and should be addressed.

Teacher-Suggested Responses

In addition to the ranked responses, teachers could offer other open-ended answers to what disincentivizes their teaching of civics. An outside researcher suggested inductively-produced themes, and then two members of our research team coded all responses using those themes, resolving any discrepancies. The themes we found include:

Not Enough Time: This complaint comes primarily from 4th and 5th grade teachers, who must juggle multiple subjects and have been told to prioritize ELA and math. COVID-19 has also cramped teachers’ ability to teach civics, as one explains: “Especially with covid, more time is spent remediating students and learning is

just happening slower than before.” (10 responses)

Prioritize Other Subjects/Too Many Subjects to

Cover: Here too we heard from more primary than secondary teachers. One teacher explains that “When kids struggle with reading and math I put a lot more instruction and practice into those subjects.”

(5 responses)

Not Required for Testing: As one elementary teacher says, “We are mandated to focus on test scores. SAD!” The 8th grade civics exam must seem far in the distance, even though building civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions from early on is important. (4 responses)

Not Enough Materials: A 4th grade teacher, responsible for covering Utah Studies, writes: “Not enough materials that are grade appropriate. I have outdated Utah textbooks (published 1997).” (4 responses)

Fear of Repercussions/Conflicting Views: Here we had more comments from secondary teachers. One writes that they were worried about “the overreaction from the community to students learning about hard topics.” (4 responses)

As with the open-ended responses to incentives, these also correspond to the given options. Many of these answers are a reiteration and expansion of the options they already marked. Again, apparently, the disincentives speak so strongly to these teachers that they took the time to say more.

Resources

What Most Helps Teachers in Teaching Civics?

We asked teachers what resources have most helped them in teaching civics. Two members of our research team inductively created codes based on the responses, coded together to achieve inter-rater reliability, and then coded separately to complete the data set; our categories and results are presented in Table 4.

Although “Video/Virtual/Online” is the category with the most responses, the ubiquitousness of online resources means this category became meaningless. Our next most frequently mentioned resources are prepared lesson plans, and content and textbooks: time-constrained teachers welcome resources that guide their teaching. Teachers — particularly secondary teachers — have strongly benefited from professional development activities (see more under Recommended Professional Development section). Some are pleased with resources they have searched for and developed.

Nearly as many mention the usefulness of colleague collaboration as well as resources that align with federal, state, and district standards or are produced at those levels. Although elementary teachers have not used a lot of primary sources in the teaching of civics, these clearly become important in the secondary levels, and teachers at both levels appreciate current event resources. Finally, over the past few years all teaching levels likely participated in fewer field trips and other in-real-life experiences due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What Additional Resources Are Needed?

When asked in an open-ended question what they need to be more effective teachers of civics, the educators responded with a plethora of suggestions, from “anything” to requests for specific materials and training or professional development (see Table 4). The most poignant are from elementary teachers who respond with, “Anything. I don’t have any resources,” “Really anything. I provide my own resources,” and “Any resources would be nice.” Two members of our research team inductively created codes based on the responses, coded together to achieve inter-rater reliability, and then coded separately to complete the data set; our categories and results are presented in Table 4.

Elementary teachers in particular need basic resources like textbooks. Multiple 4th and 5th grade teachers echo one who says, “We have NO resources for teaching civics/soc studies.” Others ask for updated textbooks or better online resources: “The books I have in my classroom right now are from the 80s.” Some wish for not only “updated [but also more] age-appropriate materials (specifically textbooks).” As one explains, “I wish there were more resources for younger students. I really have to search and then vet the resources that are available.” Teachers also request prepared lesson plans to simplify lesson creation. Elementary teachers are interested in video and online resources, simulations and interactive components, and unbiased resources.

Secondary teachers are not quite as content- and textbook-hungry as their elementary peers, but it still is their most frequent request. Prepared lesson plans are their second most frequent request, also similar to the elementary teachers. Reflecting the abilities of their older students, secondary teachers are more likely than elementary teachers to request help leading discussions on difficult topics and assistance gathering primary sources. Secondary teachers also request sources for sharing current events (often looking for those that are not biased and not behind a paywall — or funds to pay for ones that are), funding for on-site field trips, in-person

speakers or videos of local and state leaders sharing their perspectives with students, project-based or service learning opportunities, and additional professional development. At rates similar to their elementary peers, secondary teachers ask for simulations and interactive resources, virtual or online resources, and more time or resources in general. Secondary teachers request age- and ability-appropriate resources, but not at the same frequency as elementary teachers — perhaps indicating a gap in sufficient materials in civics for elementary teachers. (One teacher was the exception, noting that there are more 4th-grade level Utah Studies materials than 7th-grade level ones.)



Recommended Professional Development

We asked teachers to tell us about any social studies professional development experiences that have been particularly useful to their teaching of civics. Sixty-nine percent of secondary teachers who chose to respond could list such an experience, but only 28% of elementary teachers who responded could. Multiple elementary educators echo the teacher who writes, “No, but I would LOVE to.” Another elementary teacher notes that they would benefit from more professional development such as is available to secondary social studies teachers. Professional development that received the highest number of mentions include the following:

- Driven2Teach (Larry and Gail Miller) (21 responses)
- Huntsman Seminar - Hinckley Institute (14 responses)
- The Center for Constitutional Studies (13 responses)
- The Bill of Rights Institute (10 responses)
- The Utah Council of Social Studies (10 responses)
- District professional development events (9 responses)

Table 4 – Most Helpful and Most Desired Resources in Teaching Civics
(Numbers represent teacher responses)

Coding Category	Resources Teachers Find Most Helpful			Resources Teachers Desire		
	Elementary	Secondary	Combined	Elementary	Secondary	Combined
Content and Textbooks	53	51	104	58	31	89
Prepared Lesson Plans	33	90	123	23	18	41
Discussions, Difficult Topics Support	0	2	2	4	15	19
Primary Sources	6	70	76	1	8	9
Current Events	25	33	58	3	11	14
Non-/Unbiased Resources	2	4	6	8	8	16
Field Trips/Speakers/Real-Life Exp.	0	5	5	3	18	21
Colleague Collaboration	9	22	31	1	1	2
Project-Based Learning/Service Learning	0	1	1	2	10	12
Professional Development	16	54	70	4	10	14
Video/Virtual/Online	76	104	180	11	24	35
Interactive, Simulation	4	13	20	9	11	20
Personal Resources	11	18	29	3	2	5
Fed/State/District Aligned or Produced	13	18	31	9	3	12
Pedagogies	-	-	-	4	5	9
More Time or Resources	-	-	-	7	8	15
Age- or Ability-Appropriate	-	-	-	10	7	17
Other	10	2	12	7	8	15

Overall, 52% of the respondents to this question name a professional development experience useful to their teaching of civics. Their enthusiasm for such experiences is palpable, with terms such as amazing, useful, fabulous, life-changing, beneficial, meaningful, and outstanding, used to describe their experiences. Troublingly, very few teachers mention any civics training in their teacher education programs, though

one does say that the materials that they received they still “integrate it into my everyday teaching.”

2021 Survey of Civic Knowledge among Utah Adults

Utah teachers clearly value the teaching of civics. They cover a variety of important topics, from Founding documents and history of our nation, to modern constitutional issues.

They work to instill key civic dispositions, including “engaging civilly . . . across differences,” determining “reliable and unreliable sources,” and fostering “thoughtful engagement with American history.” They also diligently attempt to incorporate the state standards and they use a variety of methods and materials. So, while there is room for improvement in the teaching of civics, such as increasing time spent or instruction on overlooked topics (like the Utah constitution), the state of civics instruction in Utah is promising.



However, while the state of civics education may be favorable within the classroom, it is alarming beyond the school grounds. Recent research suggests that adult Utah voters get a failing grade in civics (or a “D,” if graded on a “national curve”). A statewide survey conducted by the Center in fall 2021 (DeSart, 2022) asked a representative sample of 942 Utah adults a number of factual questions about the U.S. Constitution and political system, public policy, and assorted national and world political leaders. The questions were selected from surveys that have been administered to national samples by other major polling organizations (Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, Pew Research Center, and Monmouth University Polling Institute) to allow for comparison between Utahns and the rest of the country.

There were 21 questions on the survey assessing the amount of information respondents had about various topics. Questions ranged from being able to identify the three branches of the U.S. Government (only 57% could do so) and the rights guaranteed in the First Amendment (very few could name all five rights) to identifying the office held by various national and world leaders. For example, only 37% identified freedom of religion, and 18% remembered freedom of the press when asked about the First Amendment. On just the U.S. leadership questions, only 80% remembered that Kamala Harris is the vice president, 60% could name Speaker of the House as Nancy Pelosi’s position, and only a dismal 20% know that John Roberts is the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

The low level of civic knowledge spanned ideological lines. There were no significant differences between the information recall of conservatives and liberals, and overall, respondents in the Utah sample fared no better or worse than those in the national samples.

Conclusion

Utah teachers understand the importance of teaching civics and desire to do it well. While we are concerned that less than half social studies teachers’ time (and less than a quarter of elementary teachers’) is spent on civics, we recognize a number of mitigating factors, many of which we have just explored. Though teachers struggle with constraints of time and a lack of emphasis given to the topic, as reflected in administrators’ push to focus on the areas that are tested annually (math and ELA) and on which the school is graded or judged, they work hard to fit civics in, sometimes integrating it with reading and other subject areas. They also struggle with a lack of resources and civics-focused professional development; however, the desire to teach this critical topic well is evident.

So why is there a disconnect between teachers’ commitment to civics instruction and the adult population’s inability to recall basic civics facts? In short, we do not know. Because the data from our teachers and adult resident surveys only capture a snapshot in time, we cannot ascribe causal inferences. However, we can propose explanations as theses for further study, which we encourage other researchers to investigate.

First, it could be that teachers are overconfident in how well civics is being taught at their schools and that serious instruction in civics is lacking. However, our data suggests that teachers care deeply about civics, cover many important topics, and spend a meaningful (if insufficient) amount of

time on them, making this option unlikely.

A second explanation is that the retention problem is not one of time or topics, but of the method of delivery. One secondary teacher expressed his frustration with helping students recall what they had learned: “I have taught the Branches of Government for years and whatever I try, it just never sticks with the students. They can never remember which branch does what.” Because certain teaching methods better enhance memory recall, a change in the way civics is taught may make the difference. For example, a mock constitutional convention is far more participatory and thus more memorable than rote memorization or multiple-choice testing.

Third, it could be that the problem is not with time, content, or delivery, but rather, a lack of emphasis on the dispositions that help students care about civics in the first place. Students must care about civics and understand why it matters before they will care about its content. They need to understand how it relates to them, and why it matters, and they have to feel an obligation to meaningfully participate in civic life. This may be hard to teach, but is no less important because it is difficult.

A fourth possibility is that the problem is not with K-12 civics instruction at all, but that these subjects are neglected or abandoned in tertiary education, where an even greater emphasis on career training and the STEM disciplines abounds. If civics education is not reinforced and deepened in our colleges and universities, then students are far less likely to remember or value it later in life – everyone takes middle school algebra, but few remember it by college, let alone twenty years later.

A final and fifth possibility is that the problem is not with our educational system at all, but with our civic culture, beyond classrooms and lecture halls. If commitment to civic life has no place at the dinner table or if partisan polarization sours citizens on the public square, it may be that no amount of civic instruction will save us. The solution then lies not only with K-12 teachers but with the commitment each of us has to civil civic engagement.

A complete answer to the gap problem will likely draw on each of these theses, and possibly others, making solutions multifaceted and thus complicated. However, because our republic relies on “We the People” for the health of its politics and the durability of our institutions, solutions to the problem of civics education, even partial ones, are more crucial than ever.

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