

Public Attitudes About Civic Education

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Attitudes about the goals and content of civic education in America have varied over time based on historical circumstances, educational philosophies, and political sentiments. The views of elites in government, academia, and the non-profit sector have been widely articulated, while the public's opinion about civic education is given less prominence. This study employs the Civic Education and Political Engagement Study (CEPES), an original national probability survey, to examine public opinion about civic education in the current era. It finds strong public support for citizenship education. At the same time, people believe that nation's schools are doing a poor job of educating students for citizenship. Long-established goals of civics instruction, such as preparing people to be responsible citizens and to vote, are considered priorities. Other topics, such as promoting diversity and cultural understanding, improving social conditions, and exploring the relationship of the U.S. to other nations receive less public support. People's views about civic education priorities differ based on their own civic education experience.

Key Findings:

*The American public strongly believes that civic education in secondary schools is important. 93% of respondents to the CEPES feel that all students should be required to take a civic education, social studies, or government course in junior high and high school.

*The public feels that preparing people to be responsible citizens (76%) and to exercise their right to vote (65%) are very important goals of the nation's schools. There is substantially less support for preparing young people to use 21st century technology and media to engage with politics (40%).

*Imparting civic knowledge to junior high and high school students is considered to be a valuable educational objective. Over 60% of the public feels that educating students about government and how it works as well as core democratic principles as set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution are high priorities. 51% feel teach about how early American history influenced the development of the U.S. government is a very important goal.

*There is less support for using the civics curriculum to promote cultural understanding than for the citizenship preparation and civic knowledge objectives. Still, a majority of people feel that educating students about the relationship of the United States to other nations and world affairs, promoting understanding of cultural diversity, and improving social conditions are very or somewhat important goals.

*The public gave an average grade of B-/C+ to their own civics instruction and an F to their perception of the job the nation's schools are doing in educating next generation of citizens.