



State of Tennessee

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Report Examines Changes to Civics Education in Tennessee

Tennessee students will soon have to apply the lessons they learn about civics in the classroom to “real world” situations – a major departure from years past.

Last year, the Tennessee General Assembly passed a law requiring school districts to assess students’ civic knowledge at least once in grades 4 through 8 and at least once in grades 9 through 12. The legislation is significant, a new report from the Comptroller’s office suggests, because it is the first time the state has required any type of assessment for civics education.

The new civics assessments, which will begin in the current school year, differ from other state-mandated assessments in two important respects: (1) they will not be standardized tests developed by vendors according to state-determined specifications, but instead are to be developed and implemented by school districts, and (2) they are required to be “project-based,” which is education lingo for a more hands-on, practical approach to learning.

Project-based assessments differ considerably from the multiple choice format that dominates most standardized testing. Project-based learning involves student-driven projects that are both central to the curriculum and rooted in the real-life situations, involving complex tasks based on challenging questions or problems. Students work to develop solutions that could actually be used to address the issues they are studying.

An example of a project-based approach to learning is Project Citizen, a program some Tennessee schools already use. In Project Citizen, students work together to identify problems in their communities, research those problems, consider possible alternatives, develop solutions in the form of public policies and petition local or state authorities to adopt those policies.

The Comptroller’s report cites research suggesting that project-based approaches in the classroom can result in more in-depth learning and better performance on complex tasks - outcomes that align with Tennessee’s recent education reform efforts to ramp up student expectations.

The report also provides an overview of the evolution of civics instruction in U.S. public schools, how civics is taught and tested in Tennessee schools and the implementation of the new project-based assessments for civics in Tennessee.

To view the full report online, go to: <http://www.comptroller.tn.gov/OREA/>

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