

# Why is U.S. History High-Schoolers' Worst Subject?

Gary J. Schmitt, Cheryl Miller | National Review Online

June 16, 2011



It's graduation time for America's high-school seniors, many of whom are now old enough to vote. But if the most recent evaluation of what they know about their country's history and its government is accurate, very few of them are ready for that responsibility. According to the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), just 12 percent of seniors are proficient in U.S. history while only 24 percent measure up in civics.

Such a dismal showing will come as no surprise to most Americans.



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Last fall, we asked 1,000 Americans what they believe high schools should be teaching about citizenship and whether students actually learn those things. According to the results, Americans think most high-schoolers lack rudimentary knowledge about American history and government -- a low opinion that certainly seems justified by the recent NAEP scores. When we asked respondents to rate their confidence levels about whether students have mastered important content and skills, the numbers never topped 50 percent for any item.

Worse, the more important the public considered a civics topic, the less confident they were that students were learning it. While almost 70 percent of respondents thought teaching students to identify the protections in the Bill of Rights was absolutely essential, barely one-third were at all confident that most high-school graduates can do so. Fewer still thought students had learned basic concepts about U.S. government, such as the separation of powers.

The NAEP results suggest they might be on to something. When asked about the topics they'd studied in civics, 72 percent of twelfth-graders cited the Constitution in 2006, but the rate dropped to 67 percent in 2010. Just 66 percent recalled covering Congress, compared with 69 percent in 2006.

Some would blame test-based accountability, with its emphasis on reading and math. It's not surprising that principals and teachers would focus their efforts on those subjects where they're held publicly accountable. Nonetheless, the vast majority of high-schoolers still take at least one course in civics or government before they graduate, and U.S. history remains a staple of the high-school curriculum. The trouble isn't simply that students aren't receiving civics instruction, it's also that the time allotted to the subject isn't being well spent.

While the public would prefer schools to devote their time to enhancing pupils' concrete civics knowledge, teachers favor the more social lessons of community service and tolerance -- no matter that the public ranks these among schools' least important goals.

For example, in a national survey of high-school teachers we conducted last year, over 75 percent of teachers deemed teaching tolerance to be absolutely essential; in our survey of the general public, only half of the public felt it merited that degree of attention. Likewise, a meager 18 percent of the public wanted schools to promote civic behaviors -- e.g., raising money for causes -- compared with almost half of all teachers. Nearly twice as many Americans as teachers considered teaching key facts and dates -- such as the location of the 50 states -- essential.

With American students less proficient in their nation's history than any other subject, it's hard to argue

against the public's emphasis on old-fashioned content. If creating good citizens who understand the workings of their government is a national goal, schools need to do better. And there seems to be no better place to start than by listening to what American citizens as a whole think is important to learn.

*Gary Schmitt is a resident scholar at AEI.*

*Cheryl Miller is the program manager for AEI's American Citizenship Program.*

