

**League of Women Voters White Bear Lake Area**

**Report on  
Civics Education in Six Public High Schools  
within the White Bear Lake Area**

**2/02/2018**

**Lisa Larson and Mary Santi**

Educated citizens are fundamental to a democracy because democracy depends on citizens who actively and effectively participate in political life. Citizens must understand how democracy works, why democracy is important, and what people personally can do and accomplish through political action. A civics education develops students' understanding of democracy and motivates them to actively participate in the political life of their community and country. Ample evidence shows high school civics education must improve. In fact, few issues are more critical in strengthening American democracy than improving high school civics education. And few issues are a more appropriate concern for the League of Women Voters. Improving civics education should have nonpartisan support across the political spectrum; strengthening American democracy is an interest we should all share in common. Working to improve civics education is a vital contribution to the country's future.

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## **I. Introduction**

This study results from an LWVWBLA-wide January 2017 Policy and Pasta discussion about the role of civics education in giving young people an understanding of and appreciation for civic values.

The completed study led us to two observations:

- **school culture appears weighted toward STEM at the expense of civics education**
- **civics has not fared well in the competition among five required social studies courses for time and other finite school resources.**

These two observations led us to seven questions about implementing effective high school civics requirements in MN. We hope these questions help inform the readers of this report and any subsequent LWV studies on this topic.

1. **Should districts be allowed to embed civics education content in other social studies courses? Why or why not?**
2. **Should districts be required to provide a specific civics course with attached course credit? Why or why not?**
3. **Should districts provide a civics course at a particular grade between grades 9 and 12 and, if so, which grade?**

- 4. Should the number of required or elective civics courses a district provides be increased and, if so, by how many such courses and why?**
- 5. Should project-based learning be a required civics education component? Why or why not?**
- 6. In addition to the recently enacted state civics test students need not pass to graduate, what other accountability measures, if any, should districts or the state use to ensure students acquire the knowledge and skills they need to become engaged citizens?**
- 7. How well prepared are social studies teachers and school administrators to provide students with a good civics education?**

What follows briefly introduces:

- national studies and surveys that indicate promoting democratic values in schools is not a priority and Americans' preference for strong leaders is increasing
- the statewide civics requirements MN high school students must complete to graduate
- the role of civics education in safeguarding America's system of self-governance
- our plan to interview principals and civics teachers to ask how democratic values are taught in the Forest Lake, Irondale, Mahtomedi, Mounds View, Stillwater, and White Bear Lake South High Schools.

### **National Studies and Surveys**

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment measuring what students know and can do in various academic subject areas. Civics is one of many NAEP subjects. In 2014, only 23 percent of students achieved a score of proficient or above on the NAEP civics test, a one percent increase in proficiency since 1998. In response to a 2011 World Values Survey question asking whether democracy is a good or bad way to run a country, over 16 percent of Americans said having a democratic political system was bad for the country. The survey also showed Americans' support for a strong leader divides along educational lines: more than 38 percent of people who did not finish high school thought a strong leader is good; more than 81 percent of college graduates thought a strong leader is bad. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2015 one in three adults held a bachelor's degree or higher.

### **MN's High School Graduation Requirements**

MN students must complete at least 21.5 course credits to graduate from high school, including 3.5 social studies credits that encompass U.S. history, geography, government and citizenship (civics), world history, and economics. State law prohibits the state from administering a statewide social studies assessment. A new state law requires public school students beginning in 9<sup>th</sup> grade to try to answer 30 of 50 questions that appear on the test administered to applicants for naturalization. Students need not correctly answer the questions to graduate.

### **The Importance of Civics Education in a Democracy**

Democracy depends on the collective views of average citizens. The Founding Fathers didn't want citizens to fall prey to demagogues, a problem endemic to democracy. They saw education as the way to safeguard America's system of self-governance and help voters discern serious leaders from con men so as to choose leaders wisely.

A long-standing tension exists in schools between educating students to be skilled workers and responsible citizens; both goals are important. The National Council for the Social Studies believes public schools must prepare competent, responsible, informed, and thoughtful citizens who participate in their communities, act politically, and are concerned with moral and civic virtues.

### **Study Action Plan**

To learn how educators use high school curriculum and instruction to cultivate students' knowledge of democracy, their belief in democratic values, and their role as engaged citizens, we interviewed administrators and civic teachers working in the local public high schools within the LWVWBLA region. We asked:

- what each school includes in its government and citizenship curriculum
- how well students perform on district and state civics tests
- whether, when, and how students participate in substantive school decisions or otherwise gain experience in participating in a democracy

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## **II. Content Overview; School and Stakeholder Interviews**

Below are the responses to our questions from the public high schools in our region and four other civics education stakeholders. Of the six schools we contacted, Mahtomedi and Stillwater High Schools would not grant us an interview. Their email replies appear first. We summarized the conversation of each interview we conducted and, after each interview, sent the people we interviewed a copy of our summary for their review. The summaries of those interviews appear below in chronological order. A list of 12 findings and our comments follow the summaries.

## **Mahtomedi High School – email reply**

Hello,

My name is Angie Buckingham and I teach Principles of Democracy (American Government). I am writing this to respond to an email you sent to our principal Kathe Nickelby. Please let me know if you have any other questions.

1. Since students must complete at least 21.5 credits to graduate and 3.5 of those credits are social studies credits covering government and citizenship, and also U.S. history, geography, world history, and economics, proportionally how much time and what personnel and other resources do you allocate to government and citizenship instruction in your high school?

*Our government/civics requirements are covered in our Principles of Democracy A course. This course is typically taken by students in their 11th or 12th grade year. Currently this course is offered during the fall semester and is taught by Angie Buckingham, Janine Nelson, and Jeff Sansgaard.*

2. How do you plan to implement and administer the new state civics test requirement and is the content of the state civics test already part of your school's civics curriculum and instruction?

*The content of the class was already included in the course curriculum. The new civics test will be administered to students enrolled in the Principles of Democracy A course. It is given in addition to their final exam for the course.*

3. What local civics assessments do your teachers administer and how well do your students perform on local or state civics assessments?

*We do not administer any other local or state assessments. Their are unit assessments that have been created to assess the curriculum standards and a final exam is given at the end of the course. Although many of the MN Civics test questions were already included on our final exam, this will be the first year we are giving our students the MN Civics test as written by the state of Minnesota.*

4. What specific opportunities are available for students and faculty to participate in democratic processes at your school?

*During election years we offer a Politics class that focuses specifically on the election process and elected roles in government. We also have student-led mock elections and several guest speakers in leading up to the election.*

Angie Buckingham  
Social Studies Teacher  
Mahtomedi High School  
[651-762-5945](tel:651-762-5945)  
[angela.buckingham@isd832.net](mailto:angela.buckingham@isd832.net)

## **LWV Mahtomedi follow-up (no reply):**

Ms. Buckingham,

Thank you for your answers to the four questions. The information is much appreciated but raises several points we'd like to pursue in a conversation if possible: for example, realistically, how well does the one semester course on Principles of Democracy prepare high school graduates for civic engagement (the 2014 NAEP civics test results show only 23 percent of eighth graders are at least proficient in civics); what specific course outcomes lead most directly to civic engagement and how do

you reliably measure students' attainment of those outcomes; and to what extent are "democratic processes" made part of the daily experience of students and teachers at the school.

Please let us know what days and times might be available for a half-hour conversation.

Thank you again.

Mary Santi and Lisa Larson

### **Stillwater High School - email reply**

Good morning,

I will do my best to answer over email. As you can imagine, time is at a premium for my teachers and me during the school day which is why I attempted to answer these questions over the phone a couple of weeks ago. I am simply trying to be protective of their time as there are a number of meetings directly related to student achievement that I ask them to participate in and I try to be somewhat protective of the demands for their time.

1. At SAHS, 43 credits are required to graduate. Of those, 8 are required in Social Studies (2 in Human Geography, 2 in World History, 2 in US History, 1 in Government, 1 in Economics). We currently have 4 different teachers who teach Government or AP Government to our senior students.
2. We have embedded these questions into our Unit 1 summative assessment to meet the requirement and do an activity in class as well about whether students could pass the test and "earn" their citizenship instead of simply being granted it by birth.
3. Our assessments also add writing portions that do more than test base knowledge but also analysis and application skills to our understanding of what being an effective citizen means, which lawmakers vault as an ideal rhetorically but neglect in the mentioned legislation. Long story short, our version of testing students as citizens, whether in regular or AP government courses, has a higher standard, but meets the requirement. Our students who take the AP Govt exam have historically averaged approximately a 4.0 (on a 1 to 5 scale) which is an exceptional performance and well above the state average.
4. Our students are required to participate in some kind of government experience as part of their participation in the class. Some pursue interests at the local level by attending school board or city council meetings. Others pursue interests at a state or national level through experiences with legislators. I am currently working with a group of AP Government students to re-design the traffic flow of our student parking lot in an effort to increase safety and this will likely involve working with city administrators to push for change in traffic flows around the high school.

I hope this helps.

Thank you for your interest.

Regards,

**ROBERT BACH**  
Principal  
Stillwater High School  
[5701 Stillwater Blvd. N.](#)  
[Stillwater, MN 55082](#)  
[651-351-8042](#)

## **Forest Lake High School – Interview #1**

Meeting with Forest Lake High School Principal Jim Caldwell and 9<sup>th</sup> grade social studies teacher Jen Hesse on Thursday, November 16, 2017

Before meeting to discuss civics instruction and curriculum at Forest Lake High School, we emailed Principal Jim Caldwell four preliminary questions, promising to follow-up by sending a summary of the meeting to him for his review. We discovered during the half-hour meeting – our first for this project – the questions served as a catalyst for a wide-ranging discussion about civics education in the high school and the need for civic engagement in the community at large.

Government and citizenship is a required one-semester course taught in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, either fall or spring semester. This school year, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade is located in the middle school but will become part of the high school beginning in the 2018-2019 school year. For grades 10 through 12, the social studies teachers find the concepts of government and citizenship readily overlap with other social studies areas. However, it is the 9<sup>th</sup> grade social studies teachers who administer formative assessments and the statewide civics test to measure students' attainment of state and local government and citizenship standards.

The 9<sup>th</sup> grade social studies teachers elected to administer the newly enacted statewide civics test to students “cold” (without preparation), confident that much of the test content was already part of the district's social studies curriculum. More than half the students taking the test achieved a passing score.

Students are not required to take any other government and citizenship course before graduating. High school students may enroll in a one-semester political science course as an elective. State graduation requirements give the district little flexibility to expand opportunities for students to take elective courses on government and citizenship.

Ninth grade social studies teachers work to encourage students to form, research, support, and discuss their political ideas and opinions in class. The advent of technology exponentially increases students' ready access to information supporting many points of view. Unfortunately, the district does not have sufficient resources to hire a middle school media specialist to help students learn to identify reliable sources of online information or discern fact from fiction. In addition, the high school media specialist's myriad duties prevent her from working with students to effectively assess the sources, reliability, and utility of online information. This lack of personnel is especially troubling given today's proliferation of misinformation.

Students have several opportunities to participate in “democratic” activities. These include: a student council composed of self-identified volunteers who elect council

officers from among their ranks and work with two faculty advisors on various social activities; and an “Upstanders” (“do the right thing”) organization empowering students to advocate for issues directly affecting the school and its students such as school-police relationships and students’ equitable access to instructional goods, materials, and opportunities.

The conversation ended on the topic of whether high school graduates are sufficiently prepared to engage in the political affairs of their community. The principal raised the issue of Forest Lake’s failed referendum questions and the large number of district voters, many with school-age children, who did not vote in the 2017 election. When people choose not to vote, perhaps because they think their vote doesn’t count/matter or they’re too busy, they empower relatively few (those who do vote), by default, to speak on behalf of many. In this case, it led to failed referendum questions.

### **Irondale High School – Interview #2**

Meeting with Irondale High School Principal Amy Janecek on Thursday, November 30, 2017

Principal Amy Janecek finds the knowledge and skills she acquired as a social studies teacher useful in supporting government and citizenship instruction and practice at the high school. She observed that students must master non-cognitive 21<sup>st</sup> century soft skills like digital literacy and problem solving if they want to analyze information effectively and become critical thinkers.

Irondale students beginning in 10<sup>th</sup> grade can take a one-semester U.S. Government or Advanced Placement U.S. Government course or a 12<sup>th</sup> grade one-semester Comparative Government course to satisfy the state’s government and citizenship credit requirement.

The school administered the newly enacted state civics test in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History course. The principal and the U.S. history teachers were not surprised when 90 percent of students passed the state test on their first attempt because the content of the test corresponds with basic concepts students cover in their U.S. History course. The U.S. Government teachers use a combination of unit checks, in part to assure course alignment with state government and citizenship content standards, end-of-unit formative assessments, and a final end-of-course assessment to measure students’ progress in and mastery of the required standards.

Students are encouraged to participate in various activities such as the Student Council, the History Club, and the Speech and Debate Club to gain exposure to and experience in democratic processes. Irondale students routinely attend the district’s school board meetings. These kinds of formal, school-sponsored activities are meant to encourage groups of students to develop and pursue a passion for

community engagement and to share their opinions and ideas. The range of activities varies and can include such diverse topics as addressing the absence of respect in social media, recognizing diverse and historically important figures, and creating a welcoming environment. The availability of specific activities can depend on teachers' popularity and expertise and students' expressed interest.

The principal considers students' experiences with making change happen in their community valuable and willingly supports such activities even when only a few students express interest in an activity. Forty percent of the students attending the school are eligible for a free or reduced price lunch or are students of color. These students may be less engaged in such activities. The principal hopes programs like Early College can help mitigate this circumstance.

The school's media specialist provides support to teachers whose class assignments require students to access, filter, and analyze online information. The teachers and media specialist work together to help students learn to identify and understand accurate and relevant online information and resources and how to synthesize the ideas they read and develop their own ideas and perspectives.

### **Rep. Dean Urdahl – Interview #3**

Meeting on Wednesday, December 6, 2017, with MN State Representative Dean Urdahl, chief House author of MN's required high school civics test law, MN Statutes, section 120B.02, subdivision 3 (Laws 2016, chapter 189, article 25, section 3), effective for students enrolling in grade 9 in the 2017-2018 school year or later

Republican State Representative Dean Urdahl was first elected to the MN Legislature in 2003. He is a retired middle school social studies teacher who has written several books about MN history. Rep. Urdahl was the chief House author of HF 1497, a bill he introduced in 2016 to require public school students to demonstrate a basic knowledge of civics in order to graduate from high school; SF 1674 was the senate companion to Rep. Urdahl's bill.

**MN's civics test law**, in MN Statutes, section 120B.02, subdivision 3, states:

Subd. 3. Required knowledge and understanding of civics.

(a) For purposes of this subdivision, "civics test questions" means 50 of the 100 questions that, as of January 1, 2015, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services officers use to select the questions they pose to applicants for naturalization so the applicants can demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the fundamentals of United States history and government, as required by United States Code, title 8, section 1423. The Learning Law and Democracy Foundation, in consultation with Minnesota civics teachers, must

select by July 1 each year 50 of the 100 questions under this paragraph to serve as the state's civics test questions for the proximate school year and immediately transmit the 50 selected civics test questions to the department and to the Legislative Coordinating Commission, which must post the 50 questions it receives on the Minnesota's Legacy Web site by August 1 of that year.

(b) A student enrolled in a public school must correctly answer at least 30 of the 50 civics test questions. A school or district may record on a student's transcript that the student answered at least 30 of 50 civics test questions correctly. A school or district may exempt a student with disabilities from this requirement if the student's individualized education program team determines the requirement is inappropriate and establishes an alternative requirement. A school or district may administer the civics test questions in a language other than English to students who qualify for English learner services.

(c) Schools and districts may administer civics test questions as part of the social studies curriculum. A district must not prevent a student from graduating or deny a student a high school diploma for failing to correctly answer at least 30 of 50 civics test questions.

(d) The commissioner and public schools and school districts must not charge students any fees related to this subdivision.

<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/?id=120B.02#stat.120B.02.3>

Rep. Urdahl proposed the legislation in response to Civics Education Initiative advocates whose goal is to help pass legislation in all 50 states requiring high school students, as a condition of graduating, to pass a test of 100 basic facts of US history and civics; the test questions duplicate questions from the US Citizenship Civics Test, a test all immigrants applying for US citizenship must pass.

<https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/USCIS/Office%20of%20Citizenship/Citizenship%20Resource%20Center%20Site/Publications/100q.pdf>

The advocates, in support of their initiative, cited a 2014 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) study showing only 23 percent of students proficient in civics and a 2016 Annenberg Foundation survey showing one-third of US citizens can't name even one branch of government.

<http://joefossinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Civics-Education-Initiative0116.pdf>

The very complicated politics surrounding student testing in MN, a consequence of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, among other factors, made passing the civics test bill difficult and impacted the substance of the law, despite the fact the "new" civics test questions were already part of MN's social studies content standards. As a retired social studies teacher, Representative Urdahl was certain

MN students were familiar with the civics test content and expressed that view when advocating for the bill.

We reviewed with Representative Urdahl the questions we posed to each high school principal we interviewed. We also reviewed with him some tentative findings from our first interviews.

### **The Absence of a Civics Course Requirement**

Representative Urdahl expressed specific concern about several points. He thinks district practice varies statewide in terms of whether or not students are taught state government and citizenship content standards in a separate civics course in a particular grade. He would prefer all students take a separate course where they specifically focus on civics instruction and curriculum and receive credit for that course. However, he supports flexibility in terms of when students take all or part of the civics test, based on their current course work.

One way to amend state statute to address his interest in requiring a separate civics course follows (the proposed new language is underlined):

#### **"120B.024 CREDITS.**

Subdivision 1. Graduation requirements.

(a) Students beginning 9th grade in the 2011-2012 school year and later must successfully complete the following high school level credits for graduation:

- (1) four credits of language arts sufficient to satisfy all of the academic standards in English language arts;
- (2) three credits of mathematics, including an algebra II credit or its equivalent, sufficient to satisfy all of the academic standards in mathematics;
- (3) an algebra I credit by the end of 8th grade sufficient to satisfy all of the 8th grade standards in mathematics;
- (4) three credits of science, including at least one credit of biology, one credit of chemistry or physics, and one elective credit of science. The combination of credits under this clause must be sufficient to satisfy (i) all of the academic standards in either chemistry or physics and (ii) all other academic standards in science;
- (5) three and one-half credits of social studies, encompassing at least United States history, geography, government and citizenship, world history, and economics sufficient to satisfy all of the academic standards in social studies;
- (6) one credit of the arts sufficient to satisfy all of the state or local academic standards in the arts; and
- (7) a minimum of seven elective credits.

(b) Districts and charter schools must provide students with a specific course and specific course credit to meet the government and citizenship graduation requirement under paragraph (a), clause (5)."

OR

(b) Districts and charter schools must provide **12<sup>th</sup> grade** students with a specific course and specific course credit to meet the government and citizenship graduation requirement under paragraph (a), clause (5)."

Depending on districts' current practice regarding civics curriculum and instruction, the effective date of this amendment may need to be delayed.

### **The Absence of Student Outcome Data**

Representative Urdahl is concerned about the absence of any required district or state data on civics test outcomes. He wondered whether, for example, amending MN Statutes, section 120B.36, subdivision 1, requiring school performance reports, might be one way to introduce local accountability for civics test outcomes without imposing a heavy burden on teachers and administrators or incurring significant cost.

One way to amend state statute to address his interest in gathering data on students' civics test results follows (the proposed new language is underlined):

"120B.36 SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY.

Subdivision 1. School performance reports and public reporting.

(a) The commissioner shall report student academic performance data under section 120B.35, subdivisions 2 and 3; the percentages of students showing low, medium, and high growth under section 120B.35, subdivision 3, paragraph (b); school safety and student engagement and connection under section 120B.35, subdivision 3, paragraph (d); rigorous coursework under section 120B.35, subdivision 3, paragraph (c); the percentage of students under section 120B.35, subdivision 3, paragraph (b), clause (2), whose progress and performance levels are meeting career and college readiness benchmarks under sections 120B.30, subdivision 1, and 120B.35, subdivision 3, paragraph (e); longitudinal data on the progress of eligible districts in reducing disparities in students' academic achievement and realizing racial and economic integration under section 124D.861; the acquisition of English, and where practicable, native language academic literacy, including oral academic language, and the academic progress of all English learners enrolled in a Minnesota public school course or program who are currently or were previously counted as English learners under section 124D.59; the percent of students graduating in the current school year who correctly answered at least 30 of 50 civics test questions under section 120B.03, subdivision 3; two separate student-

to-teacher ratios that clearly indicate the definition of teacher consistent with sections 122A.06 and 122A.15 for purposes of determining these ratios; staff characteristics excluding salaries; student enrollment demographics; foster care status, including all students enrolled in a Minnesota public school course or program who are currently or were previously in foster care, student homelessness, and district mobility; and extracurricular activities.

(b) The school performance report for a school site and a school district must include school performance reporting information and calculate proficiency rates as required by the most recently reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

(c) The commissioner shall develop, annually update, and post on the department Web site school performance reports consistent with paragraph (a) and section 120B.11.

(d) The commissioner must make available performance reports by the beginning of each school year.

(e) A school or district may appeal its results in a form and manner determined by the commissioner and consistent with federal law. The commissioner's decision to uphold or deny an appeal is final.

(f) School performance data are nonpublic data under section 13.02, subdivision 9, until the commissioner publicly releases the data. The commissioner shall annually post school performance reports to the department's public Web site no later than September 1, except that in years when the reports reflect new performance standards, the commissioner shall post the school performance reports no later than October 1.

Effective date: This section is effective for the 2017-2018 school year and later."

(It's worth noting entities like alternative learning centers (ALCs) that work with students who are academically behind and have lower attendance and graduation rates may regard reporting the civics test data as an unfair measure of an ALC's educational outcomes.)

### **Preparation Requirements for Social Studies Teachers**

Representative Urdahl thinks it important to encourage students to participate in real-world democratic processes such as political campaigns whenever possible. He realizes much depends on individual teachers whose interest and expertise are critical to engaging students and can vary greatly. He is concerned about MN's preparation requirements for social studies teachers. MN Rules, part 8710.4800, governing social studies subject matter and teacher licensure

requirements, mentions citizenship only twice in the extensive rule.

<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/rules/?id=8710.4800>

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) has a report comparing civics education in the 50 states:

<https://www.ecs.org/citizenship-education-policies/>

### **White Bear Lake High School – Interview #4**

Meeting with White Bear Lake High School Principal Don Bosch and American Government teacher Stephanie Kerbage on Thursday, December 7, 2017

Previously, in the White Bear Lake High School, state government and citizenship content standards were taught in a 9<sup>th</sup> grade civics course or embedded in other social studies courses like economics. Currently, the required state government and citizenship content standards are taught primarily in a one-semester one-half credit 12<sup>th</sup> grade American Government course. The course syllabus indicates students must observe and analyze a public meeting, prepare, present, and discuss timely issues, and draft a bill. American Government teachers share their lesson plans and regularly meet to discuss course improvements. While the high school structures students' course schedule to give 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders more flexibility to take course electives, including American Democracy in a Changing World, few social studies electives focus specifically on civics.

Ms. Kerbage plans to administer the state civics test to her American Government students mid-course. She does not think the students will find the test difficult. We briefly discussed testing policy and impact. Schools, teachers, students, and parents tend to emphasize subject areas like reading and math where students take state-mandated tests and test results are publicly reported. While such an emphasis can be useful, it may also stifle creativity by encouraging teachers to “teach to the test” and cause educators to lose sight of the whole child. State law, MN Statutes, section 120B.30, subdivision 1a, paragraph (c), specifically prohibits a statewide social studies test. <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/?id=120B.30#stat.120B.30.1a> American Government teachers use unit tests, class projects, and a final exam to measure students' attainment of civics course material.

High school students are encouraged to participate in school activities including strategic planning sessions and student council. Students regularly attend local school board and city council meetings and participate in mock elections in election years. Students' socio-economic status (SES) may be a factor in how much they engage in school activities. The school is aware of that fact and tries to counteract it.

Both Principal Bosch and Ms. Kerbage think elementary school students are losing ground in terms of their exposure to basic government and citizenship concepts. Students' perception of what is educationally valuable is often solidified in early grades; young students won't value civics unless it is emphasized. Too little emphasis on civics in elementary school makes it difficult for teachers to prove the value of civics in high school. The lack of emphasis on early civics education can affect student outcomes in high school civics courses.

We also reviewed with Principal Bosch and Ms. Kerbage some of the tentative findings from our first interviews and some of the substance of our conversation with Representative Urdahl. Recalling the value of public reporting, we specifically discussed the viability of requiring a school to include student outcomes on the state civics test in the school performance report required under state law, MN Statutes, section 120B.36, subdivision 1

<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/?id=120B.36#stat.120B.36.1>

Principal Bosch and Ms. Kerbage, concerned about the tension between uniformity and flexibility in administering the state civics test, asked about parameters for reporting the test data: is a student pass rate determined for each test administration; are online and classroom test administrations comparable; is a student's score recorded only when the student passes the test or each time the student takes the test; how are test results reported if test questions are embedded in another test; and must the test be timed to make test data comparable.

### **Mounds View High School – Interview #5**

Meeting with Mounds View High School Associate Principal Greg Martin and social studies teachers Ema Kate Brohman and Alex Hinseth on Thursday, December 7, 2017

Finding high school seniors are more civic minded and better able than younger students to understand the theories of citizenship and the origins of American government, Mounds View High School requires students to meet MN's government and citizenship requirement by taking a one-half credit one-semester US Government course in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Teachers use unit tests and end-of-course assessments to measure student progress and success in mastering course content. Previously, more than a dozen years ago, students met the state's civics requirement by taking a 9<sup>th</sup> grade civics course.

Teachers and administrators think students learn the government and citizenship content standards best when the standards are taught in a separate class rather than embedded in other required social studies courses like US History. However, the school deliberately embeds related topics such as bias, identifying credible sources, online literacy, and digital citizenship in other social studies courses in other grades to teach students to become curious and engaged global citizens.

About 50 percent of students take the Advanced Placement (AP) US Government and Politics course. <http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/ap/ap-us-government-and-politics-course-description.pdf>

The school administered the state civics tests to its 10<sup>th</sup> grade students enrolled in the US History course after the students completed a unit on the US Constitution. More than 90 percent of the students met the standard for proficiency on the test, answering at least 30 of 50 test questions correctly. Although the school regularly collects, maintains, and reports much student data, reporting and analyzing student data on the civics test may be technically problematic if some students use paper and pencil and some students use Chromebooks to take the test.

The school's majority population of upper middle class white students leaves student demographics not particularly diverse and this lack of diversity may extend to students' course taking patterns. The school annually administers a student survey to measure students' connectedness to the school. The school uses survey results to work to improve the diversity in its classrooms and course offerings. Interested students may participate in post-secondary concurrent enrollment courses and programs where they can earn secondary and post-secondary credits and workplace accreditation. All students take at least one college-level course before graduating and about 90 percent of student graduates go on to college.

Students participate in various school activities including the National Honor Society, the Student Council, volunteer and community projects, and a community-based public policy project in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Students' successful effort to have the sidewalk widened on the bridge over 35W near the school is an example of such a project. There is no student representative on the local school board and, although students do not regularly attend school board or other local government meetings, they sometimes take field trips to learn how local government works. About 87 percent of students participate in at least one school activity.

### **MN Board of School Administrators – Interview #6**

Meeting with Dr. Tony Kinkel, recently appointed Executive Director of the MN Board of School Administrators (BOSA) on Tuesday, January 9, 2018

BOSA is the MN state agency charged with licensing K-12 school administrators, approving and reviewing preparation programs for school administrators, advising and enforcing professional ethics for school administrators, proposing rules governing school administrators, and granting licensure variances, among other duties. Before Dr. Kinkel became the BOSA executive director, he was a social studies teacher in MN, an elected MN legislator, a community college president in Tennessee, and Maryland's community colleges director. His experiences as a K-12

teacher, a community college administrator, and an elected state official suit him well to navigate BOSA's intersecting worlds of education and politics.

Among other topics, we discussed school principals' role in supporting and emphasizing the importance of high school civics education. Dr. Kinkel regards high school civics broadly as an education for citizenship where the school's responsibility to teach students to effectively engage in community affairs extends beyond just the school. He:

- agreed school culture appears weighted toward STEM and thinks the focus on STEM should not be at the expense of civics education
- discussed the value of embedding the concepts of government and citizenship in a competency-based system for training school administrators
- noted MN's preparation and licensure programs for school administrators have distinct niches focused on such themes as equity and personal development but not on the theme of civic engagement
- wondered whether principals had enough time to focus on educating students for citizenship given the critical role a principal plays in establishing school culture and the impact school culture has on faculty priorities, student outcomes, and school interactions with the larger community
- worried about educators over-emphasizing the role of the federal government as compared to state and local governments where citizens can have more influence on politics, politicians, and developing and implementing policies affecting their interests
- was alarmed by students' overreliance on social media and influencers as key information sources and students' inexperience in critically analyzing media credibility and reliability
- thought the outsized influence of social media on students' understanding of politics and politicians (and the importance of voting) could be counteracted by educating students to identify and seek reliable information sources, engage in critical thinking and independent analysis, and avoid relying solely on tribal identity as a way to understand competing points of view

### **Learning Law and Democracy Foundation – Interview #7**

Meeting with Jennifer Bloom, Executive Director of the Learning Law and Democracy Foundation on Monday, January 15, 2018

The Learning Law and Democracy Foundation, first established in 1981: helps civics teachers develop curriculum for teaching students how government works and what it means to be an active citizen; sponsors programs, workshops, and institutes for teachers and community members; and administers programs to help students gain experience in participatory democracy, among other activities. Ms. Bloom has

been the foundation's executive director for more than 20 years. MN Statutes, section 120B.02, subdivision 3, directs the foundation to annually select 50 questions from the US naturalization test for MN's statewide civics test.

<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/?id=120B.02#stat.120B.02.3>

According to Ms. Bloom, competing interests clamor to influence the content of civics education in MN schools.

- Although state government and citizenship content standards apply to all school districts, practices vary widely in terms of how much time – a quarter of a semester, a trimester, one semester, part of a block schedule – districts allocate specifically to civics curriculum and instruction. A lack of sufficient instructional time diminishes the value and benefit of good content standards. Disparities exist in the time and other resources districts allocate for civics instruction and courses, in part because there is no district accountability for complying with the state's government and citizenship content standards.
- Another factor responsible for disparate student experiences and learning is the content of the AP civics course many students take as a school-sanctioned alternative for acquiring civics credit. The AP civics course tends to focus on memorization and not on student engagement, analytical skill development, or practical experience although efforts are underway to add project-oriented curriculum to the course.
- There is competition for time and other school resources among the various social studies areas, with courses in geography and world history expanding at the expense of civics. This competition for resources surfaced when the state adopted its current academic content standards in 2003. Under state law, students must complete all social studies standards and corresponding benchmarks to graduate from high school. The educators who wrote the social studies benchmarks discussed including enough detail in each benchmark to allow teachers to teach the content of a benchmark in two to three class periods; the more detail a benchmark contains, the more time a teacher must devote to its instruction. When the social studies benchmarks were completed, geography and world history benchmarks had more detail than civics benchmarks, and required more course time for instruction.

Ms. Bloom talked about Project Citizen, an interactive project-based civics program her foundation sponsors. The program requires participating students to collaboratively identify and study a public policy issue, research and evaluate policy options, select a solution to resolve the issue, and develop an action plan to realize the solution. Students in many schools and districts participate in the program, which meets just the first of the state's 35 government and citizenship content standards. Sometimes, however, depending on school and district priorities and

resources, participation in this program can pass for much of students' civics instruction.

### **Retired High School Civics Teacher – Interview #8**

Meeting with JoEllen Ambrose, long-time and now retired Anoka-Hennepin School District high school civics teacher, on Tuesday, January 23, 2018

Ms. JoEllen Ambrose first began teaching a full year two-semester 8<sup>th</sup> grade civics course in an Anoka-Hennepin middle school in 1979. She transferred to the district's newly opened Champlin Park High School in 1992 where she taught both a one-semester one-credit 9<sup>th</sup> grade civics course and a one-half credit 12<sup>th</sup> grade politics and law course. When Ms. Ambrose retired in 2014, the school required students to take a one-trimester one-half credit civics course in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and one-trimester one-half credit US government and politics course in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Anoka-Hennepin students must complete these courses to graduate, among other social studies high school graduation requirements. Ms. Ambrose now works with Augsburg College and Bethel University to prepare individuals to become licensed social studies teachers and she sometimes works as a substitute teacher. The topic of our conversation concerned the state of high school civics education in MN.

The insufficient and disparate amounts of instructional time MN districts allocate for civics education is a concern Ms. Ambrose shares with other stakeholders we interviewed. Students in the Anoka-Hennepin District, one of MN's largest school districts, must complete at least four social studies credits to graduate from high school; this contrasts with the state's 3.5 required social studies credits. Among the district's required social studies courses are a one-semester one-credit 9<sup>th</sup> grade civics course and two one-half credit 12<sup>th</sup> grade courses in economics and law and politics. Despite the district's four required social studies credits, since 1992 when the district changed a full year 8<sup>th</sup> grade civics course into a one-semester one-credit 9<sup>th</sup> grade course and two one-half credit 12<sup>th</sup> grade courses, the district's proportion of social studies teachers to math teachers has declined by about one-third. This staff reduction led social studies teachers prone to irony to proclaim "core-no-more," suggesting the school no longer regarded social studies as part of the core academic curriculum. This trend is consistent with other comments we heard about schools allocating resources to teach STEM at the expense of civics education.

One of the Champlin Park High School principals Ms. Ambrose worked with was a former social studies teacher who, in his role as principal, emphasized the importance of project-based learning and encouraged civics teachers to include simulations and other activities in their regular and AP course curriculum. The principal advocated project-based learning because he thought students needed to know and experience how government really works if they expected to become effective advocates. Civics teachers were pleased to have school administration support project-based learning. This circumstance is consistent with our

observation that educators' efforts to facilitate and model democratic processes vary by school and often depend on the preparation, training, and interest of a particular school principal.

We discussed the merits of adopting a state policy requiring students to take civics in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. While 12<sup>th</sup> grade students are close to becoming eligible voters who should find personal meaning in learning about the mechanics and responsibilities of voting and engaging with public officials to understand officials' functions, actions and impact, these same students are also occupied with AP courses and programs, the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, Post-Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) courses and programs, and other concurrent enrollment/applied learning opportunities leading to a post-secondary certificate or other credential. Currently, high school students taking dual credit courses at a community college can take a college-level psychology course to meet high school civics requirements. Given the various courses and programs competing for high school seniors' time and attention, if civics were a required 12<sup>th</sup> grade course, Ms. Ambrose thinks it should be offered first semester senior year. Alternatively, civics could be required in 11<sup>th</sup> grade when there is less competition for students' time and attention and more flexibility in course scheduling.

Finally, Ms. Ambrose thinks it problematic no state accountability measures exist to ensure students know and can apply MN's government and citizenship content standards and benchmarks. Another stakeholder we interviewed attributed disparities in the time and other resources districts allocate for civics education to this lack of accountability. A lack of accountability can diminish the value and benefit of good content standards.

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### **III. Twelve findings based on responses from WBL-area high school administrators and civics teachers and other education stakeholders; our comments**

Findings from our interviews with WBL-area school administrators and teachers and with other education stakeholders include:

**(1) Disparities exist in time and other resources districts allocate for civics instruction and courses, in part because there is no district or state accountability for complying with MN's government and citizenship content standards.**

- State law prohibits a statewide social studies test.

- Representative Dean Urdahl prevailed against considerable opposition in getting the state civics test enacted.
- The state civics test tests students' basic knowledge of government and citizenship but does not test whether students can effectively apply that knowledge as engaged citizens
- Districts and charter schools are not required to provide a specific civics course or civics course credit.
- Districts and charter schools are not required to report any civics outcome data for students.
- Students, teachers, schools, and parents tend to pay attention to academic subject areas where test results are publicly reported.

**(2) Depending on the WBL-area district, students take a required one-semester, one-half credit government and citizenship course in a grade from 9 to 12. Although not true in WBL-area high schools, some MN districts embed civics curriculum in a US History or other social studies course and do not offer a stand-alone civics course.**

- Most students take only one civics course during high school, including students who take civics in 9<sup>th</sup> grade
- There is a compelling argument for requiring students to take a civics course in 12<sup>th</sup> grade when they are close to becoming first-time voters. For high school seniors, civics as a topic is both immediate and real, and opportunities for learning about the mechanics and responsibilities of voting and engaging with public officials to understand their functions, actions, and impact should be a personally meaningful experience.
- The Mounds View High School has its 12<sup>th</sup> grade students take civics because the faculty thinks high school seniors are more civic minded and better able than younger students to understand the theories of citizenship and the origins of American government.
- Embedding civics instruction in another social studies course may leave students less prepared for effective civic engagement

**(3) Schools emphasize preparing students for work and higher education much more than they emphasize preparing students for citizenship. Schools provide greater resources for STEM initiatives that often include project-based learning than for civics education or student engagement in democratic processes.**

- Most education stakeholders, including policy makers, school boards, educators, and parents, see STEM as more important than civics.
- Many education stakeholders advocate for and support STEM education in schools, including in applied learning settings where students acquire

“hands-on” knowledge and skills. No similar system-wide opportunities exist for experiential or project-based learning in civics.

- Competition among social studies courses for scarce school resources has seen geography and world history courses expanded at the expense of civics courses.

**(4) Aside from a required government and citizenship (civics) course, students may have few opportunities to take other government-related courses because state and local graduation requirements can leave little flexibility in students’ course schedules and schools offer few higher-level elective civics courses.**

- Some experts criticize American education for being too wide and shallow and insufficiently focused and deep.
- While WBL High School students’ course-taking schedule gives them more flexibility to take elective courses in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades, few higher-level civics-related courses are available in any high school.
- Very few civics courses are available to high school graduates who enroll in MN post-secondary institutions; high school students taking dual credit courses at MN community colleges can take a college-level psychology course to meet their high school civics requirement.

**(5) Practices in facilitating and modeling democratic processes can vary by school based on such factors as: educators’ backgrounds, priorities, training and experiences; student interest; school resources and practices; and school demographics and culture.**

- Students’ opportunities to participate in democratic processes greatly depend on a school’s culture and the presence (or absence) of interested and experienced teachers and administrators.
- Some but not all districts expect or encourage students to attend local school board or city council meetings.
- Schools are not especially democratic institutions, limiting students’ ability to observe first-hand how democratic processes really work.
- Civics teachers are pleasantly surprised when a high school principal supports project-based learning in civics education.

**(6) Social studies teachers think many students are familiar enough with the basic concepts contained in the state civics tests to pass the test on their first attempt.**

- Many students pass the state civics test on their first attempt.
- Students’ test scores and pass rates can vary by the demographic characteristics of the school.

- Advocates for schools with diverse student populations opposed requiring students to pass the civics test as a condition of graduating from high school.
- Opponents in MN's legislative and executive branches saw a statewide civics test as too much testing although the law's proponent (a retired middle school social studies teacher) argued the test content was already embedded in K-12 social studies content standards and curriculum and no other accountability for civics instruction exists.

**(7) Long-term and real-world consequences result from failing to adequately prepare students to be engaged citizens.**

- Large numbers of millennial voters did not vote in the 2016 election although the outcome of the election significantly affected their lives.
- Although millennial voters are the larger demographic group, AARP-eligible voters outnumbered millennial voters going to the polls, leaving millennial voters underrepresented in the public sphere.
- The Forest Lake High School principal attributes the district's failed 2017 referendum questions on funding district operating and building and facility costs to the large number of district voters, many with school-age children, who did not vote in the election.

**(8) Too little emphasis on civics in elementary school makes it more difficult for teachers to prove the value of civics in high school and can affect students' engagement and outcomes in high school civics courses.**

- Students' attitudes toward education develop early.
- If students do not acquire a foundational understanding of civics in the early grades, it is more challenging for teachers to give students – or for students to acquire - an in-depth understanding of civics in later grades.

**(9) Socio-economic status (SES) can be a factor in determining whether students participate in school-sponsored activities intended to expose them to democratic processes.**

- WBL-area schools are not as demographically diverse as other districts in the Twin Cities metropolitan area or regional centers.
- Immigrant families with children in public school may face cultural and other barriers to understanding or embracing a civics education.

**(10) Limited financial resources for school personnel such as media specialists to help students discern fact from fiction and become adept at synthesizing and analyzing ideas can limit students' opportunities to become well-informed citizens.**

- Limited financial and personnel resources, competition for students' time and attention during the school day and school year, and little faculty focus or interest can deny students access to a sound civics education
- Social media exert an outsized influence on students' understanding of politics and politicians (and the importance of voting), which schools can counteract if students are taught to identify and seek reliable information sources, engage in critical thinking and independent analysis, and avoid relying solely on tribal identity to filter and understand competing view points.

**(11) The preparation requirements governing subject matter and licensure requirements for social studies teachers in MN Rules, part 8710.4800, mentions citizenship education only twice in the extensive rule.**

- Teachers profoundly affect classroom instruction and student learning.
- The lack of a focus on civics education in preparing and licensing social studies teachers suggests there can be much variation in terms of teachers' ability to effectively teach civics to students.

**(12) MN's preparation and licensure programs for school administrators have distinct niches focused on various themes but not on the theme of civic engagement.**

- Principals, as school leaders, profoundly affect the priorities, as well as the culture, operation, and success of a school.
- Without preparation and licensure programs for school administrators focused specifically on civics education, whether principals emphasize civics education appears left to chance and whether, for example, a school principal might have taught social studies before becoming an administrator as Irondale High School Principal Amy Janecek did.