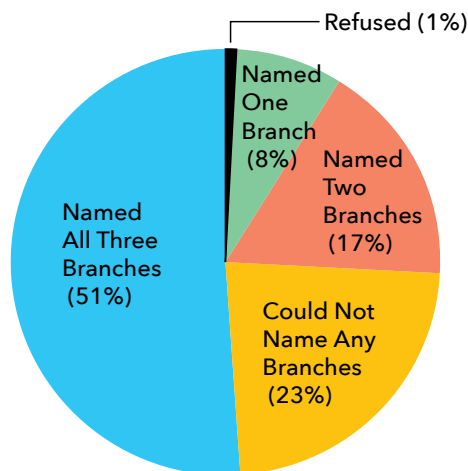


Civics Diploma Seals: *Energizing Civic Education for Students*

**Lisa Kissinger and Members of the NCSS Seal of
Civic Readiness Task Force**

Data from a variety of sources confirms one of our worst fears as social studies educators—Americans’ civic knowledge is remarkably low. A recent research study revealed that only 51% of Americans surveyed could name all three branches of the U.S. government correctly—and 23% of Americans surveyed could not name any branches (Figure 1).¹



Source: Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey, August 4-9, 2020.
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Figure 1. Proportion of Americans Who Can Name the Three Branches of Government.

Source: www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/pandemic-protests-2020-civics-survey-americans-know-much-more-about-their-rights/

Student performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in Civics is stagnant. In 2018, the average civics score for eighth-grade students was not significantly different from 2014 and had only increased by 3 points from the first NAEP assessment in 1998.² While the data is discouraging, there is a reinvigorated focus on student engagement in civics in specific areas of the country. The data invites the question “What can be done to energize school-based civic education to produce better outcomes for our society?”

“Our entire nation, our republic and our democracy, runs on the fact that we get involved on a civic level. We need to understand our responsibilities as citizens. We understand that if not for us, we wouldn’t be functioning as we are, we wouldn’t be doing as well as we are, we wouldn’t have the freedoms and rights that we do.”

—Ethan Bodruk, student,
East Coweta High School,
Sharpsburg, Georgia.

Efforts have been made in recent years to improve state and national civic education policy. iCivics launched the CivXNow Coalition in 2018 with over 170 cross-ideological partners, including

the National Council for the Social Studies, committed to strengthening civic education policies. CivXNow goals incorporate a wide range of strategies, including full-year civics courses in state requirements, embedding civics in student and school accountability measures, and providing classroom resources and professional development for teachers. States have also created recognition programs to celebrate schools for their commitment to civic learning through an examination of instructional practices and organizational structures. Through these strategies, students will develop the civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors necessary for lifelong, informed, effective engagement in our constitutional democracy.

An Innovative Strategy: The Civics Diploma Seal

Democracy by its nature requires an informed and engaged electorate, and research tells us that it is critical that students participate in civic learning that includes the 21st century skills of collaboration, cooperation and consensus-building, an understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and knowledge of the roots of our democracy.³

Seven states have demonstrated their commitment to civic education by creating a high school Civics diploma seal. A diploma seal is an

endorsement that indicates exemplary performance in a specific area of study. A Civics diploma seal can signify a student’s competency in civic knowledge, responsibility, values and engagement. Diploma seals benefit students and the community by encouraging students to participate in learning that challenges them to go beyond what is required for graduation. Seals send a signal to colleges and employers that a student has excelled in an area of study. Local education agencies can take great pride in the number of diploma seals that are awarded to students, and diploma seals can serve as an accountability measure for school effectiveness. The most widely available diploma endorsement is the Seal of Biliteracy. Currently, more than 40 states and Washington, D.C., offer a Seal of Biliteracy diploma endorsement (www.SealofBiliteracy.org). Education policymakers, students, teachers, school administrators and families see value in a Civics diploma seal.

Arizona, California, Georgia, Nevada, New York, Ohio, and Virginia have established the Civics diploma seal to encourage civic education and participation. State requirements to earn the diploma seal are broad, ensuring that this diploma endorsement is accessible to all students.

“This is a Diploma Seal for anyone.”

–Regina Wallace, Social Studies Supervisor, Clayton County, Georgia

Table 1. Civic Education Requirements

To Earn a High School Diploma			
<p>Seven states have established Civics diploma seals:</p> <p>Arizona California Georgia Nevada New York Ohio Virginia</p>	<p>Five states require service learning:</p> <p>Arizona Georgia Illinois Maryland Virginia</p>	<p>Eight states require some form of civic participation.</p> <p>Arizona Georgia Illinois Maine Massachusetts Nebraska New York (option for Diploma Seal) Pennsylvania</p>	<p>14 states require a high school course in Government/Civics and a passing score on a Civics Literacy test:</p> <p>Alabama Louisiana Arkansas Michigan Florida Missouri Georgia Nevada Idaho North Dakota Indiana West Virginia Kansas Wyoming</p>
39 states require the completion of a high school course in government or civics			

Note: Information was current as of December 2021.

Civic education requirements vary by state, reflecting differences in priorities, philosophies, governance and structure. Table 1 illustrates the range of civic education requirements.

Arizona, California, Georgia, Nevada, New York, Ohio, and Virginia offer models of different approaches to the Civics diploma seal. Building on the differences in priorities, philosophies, governance and structure, each state has a unique set of criteria to earn the seal. While there are state-by-state differences, there are some notable similarities. Civics diploma seal requirements are generally divided into two categories: civic knowledge and civic participation. All seven states require students to demonstrate civic knowledge through social studies coursework. Some states require students to pass a civics test to demonstrate civic knowledge. To encourage students to apply civic knowledge, six states recognize civic engagement or participation outside of the classroom. Arizona and Georgia require students to develop a portfolio describing their accomplishments. New York offers the option of a Civics Capstone project at the middle and high school levels.

Civics Diploma Seal Requirements

This section presents the Civics diploma seal requirements in the seven states that have established Civics diploma seals, starting with the first state to do so (Virginia) and ending with the most recent (Nevada).

Virginia Board of Education Excellence in Civics Education Seal

Adopted by the Virginia Board of Education in 2003

www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/graduation/diploma_seals/index.shtml

One of eight possible diploma seals, the Virginia Board of Education Excellence in Civics Education Seal was the first of its kind in the nation. The Excellence in Civics Education Seal is awarded to students who meet each of the following four criteria: (1) Earn a Modified Standard Diploma,

a Standard Diploma or an Advanced Studies Diploma; (2) Complete Virginia & United States History and Virginia & United States Government courses with a grade of “B” or higher; (3) Complete 50 hours of voluntary participation in community service or extracurricular activities, such as volunteering for a charitable or religious organization that provides services to the poor, sick, or less fortunate; participating in Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts or similar youth organizations; participating in Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC); participating in political campaigns, government internships, Boys State, Girls State or Model General Assembly; and participating in school-sponsored extracurricular activities that have a civics focus (any student who enlists in the United States military prior to graduation will be deemed to have met this community service requirement); and (4) Have good attendance and no disciplinary infractions as determined by local school board policies.

“If you’re going to offer a Civics diploma seal, think through the criteria for the Civic Seal (especially regarding GPA). Involve teachers beyond social studies with this effort. Communicate with school counselors.”

—Craig Perrier, High School Social Studies Specialist for Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia

Georgia Civic Engagement Diploma Seal

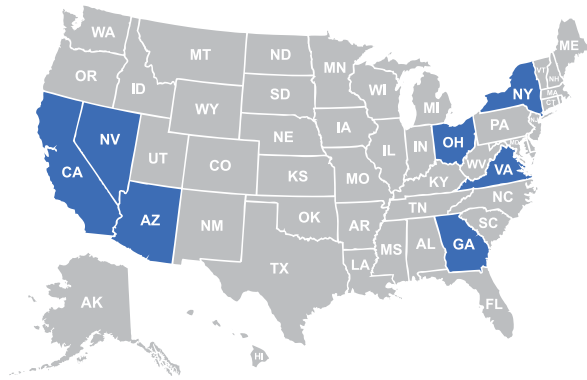
(Started in the 2018–19 school year)

www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Curriculum-and-Instruction/Pages/Social-Studies.aspx

Goal: To provide a way to recognize and promote active citizenship among Georgia’s young adults.

The Georgia Civic Engagement Diploma Seal was introduced by the Georgia State Education Department and the Office of Social Studies for the 2018–2019 school year. To earn the Georgia Civic Engagement Diploma Seal, students must complete all Social Studies course requirements for graduation; complete 50 community service or extracurricular activity hours, 15 of which must be related to civic engagement (or enlist in the

States that Have Established Civics Diploma Seals (blue)



military); complete 15 hours of civic engagement activities (e.g., meeting, mock trial, etc.); pass the American government basic skills test; and make a Capstone presentation to explain how knowledge gained in high school social studies courses and activities contributed to civic engagement. Projects are designed by the local districts. School districts apply to the Georgia Department of Education for permission to grant the seal.

“The Civics Diploma Seal supports ‘taking informed action,’ giving schools direction and focus. The Seal has also created interest and enrollment in Social Studies electives. As a result, we’ve introduced a new elective to our schools--Introduction to U.S. Intelligence and National Security.”

—Joy Hatcher, Social Studies Program Manager, Georgia Department of Education

Arizona Seal of Civic Literacy

(Started in the 2019-2020 school year)

www.azed.gov/diplomaseals/sealofcivicslit

Goal: Encourage schools and students to go beyond the minimum requirements for civics/government and gain valuable knowledge, skills, dispositions, and actions.

In 2018, the Arizona legislature approved House Bill 2561, which enabled creation of the Arizona Seal of Civic Literacy. To earn the Arizona Seal of Civic Literacy, students must complete all social studies course requirements for graduation with a GPA of 3.0 or higher on a 4.0 scale; pass the Arizona Civics test, produce

a portfolio demonstrating the completion of 3 civic learning programs (Advanced Placement [AP] exams, extracurriculars), 2 civic activities (e.g., meetings, voter registration), 75 hours of service learning or community service for a public agency or charitable organization that serves the public good, and a written reflection. The Arizona State Board of Education annually approves a list of civic learning programs such as summer institutes/intensives, two-year participation in the JROTC, school-sponsored extracurricular activities, and community service opportunities. School districts apply to the Arizona Department of Education for permission to grant the seal.

“Because the seal requires students to increase their civic knowledge through enhanced learning opportunities by participating in civic learning programs, civics-focused extracurricular activities, civic engagement opportunities and Service Learning projects, students will gain the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to participate fully in local, state, and national government. Instead of just taking a civics course during senior year, these students will begin their work on the seal during their freshman year and continue to expand their learning and engagement. I am really excited about the potential this program has to increase opportunities for our students.”

—Tammy Waller, Director of K-12 Social Studies and World Languages, Arizona Department of Education

California State Seal of Civic Engagement

(Started in the 2020-21 school year)

Basic information:

www.cde.ca.gov/pd/ca/hs/hsstateseal.asp

Frequently Asked Questions: www.cde.ca.gov/pd/ca/hs/sscefaq.asp

Resources to Support Civic Engagement: www.cde.ca.gov/pd/ca/hs/civcengprojects.asp

Goal: “It is the intent of the Legislature to

establish a State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE) to encourage, and create pathways for, pupils in elementary and secondary schools to become civically engaged in democratic governmental institutions at the local, state, and national levels.”
California Education Code Section 51470

The California State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE) arose out of Assembly Bill 24, signed into law in October 2017. This paved the way for the State Board of Education to adopt statewide criteria in September 2020 for awarding a SSCE to pupils in grades 11 and 12 who have demonstrated excellence in civics education and participation and an understanding of the U.S. and California constitutions, and the democratic system of government.

A hallmark of the SSCE is its accessibility to all students throughout the state, regardless of their backgrounds, communities, and experiences. As California is a local control state, each local education agency (LEA) that chooses to offer the SSCE opportunity is in charge of developing local requirements and application procedures that are responsive to and reflective of the community. Although all students must meet the same five statewide criteria, the process and requirements of meeting those criteria look different in each LEA. Nevertheless, all LEAs are encouraged to develop pathways to engage students civically in younger grades and to support deep, interdisciplinary, and accessible civic learning and engagement through grade 12.

“The California State Seal of Civic Engagement will serve as a jumping point for more equitable civic learning opportunities for K-12 students, especially those from marginalized communities. Students deserve to feel valued and honored for their commitment to serving our communities.”

*–Michelle Alas, former Policy Director,
GENup, California*

New York Seal of Civic Readiness

(Piloted 2021–22, full implementation 2022–2023)

www.nysed.gov/curriculum-instruction/civic-readiness-initiative

Goals:

- *Elevate the importance of social studies in classrooms K-12.*
- *Enhance social studies Instruction to include standards and practices of civic participation.*
- *Increase the graduation rate by creating a viable alternative to the traditional path to a Regents diploma that schools can offer with existing resources.*
- *Empower the voices of our youth, particularly in historically marginalized communities.*

The New York Seal of Civic Readiness was created by the New York State Board of Regents. To earn a Seal of Civic Readiness, students must complete all requirements for a New York State local or Regents diploma and earn a specified number of points in two areas: Civic Knowledge and Civic Participation. Options exist within each category to encourage inclusivity in earning the seal. To earn Civic Knowledge points, students demonstrate they have earned credit in social studies courses, received a passing or mastery score on a Social Studies Regents Exam, or completed a civic readiness research project. To earn points in Civic Participation, students have the option of completing a culminating high school civics project; a service learning project; achieving proficiency in a civic engagement elective course; or participating in an extra-curricular program or work-based learning experience that promotes civic engagement or civic action. A middle school and high school Civics Capstone project is also an option. Projects are developed by the local districts. Students who earn the Seal of Civic Readiness can apply that accomplishment toward a +1 Civic Readiness pathway to a diploma.

“I would like to earn the Civics Diploma Seal because it would help further my career in policy making and international relations.”

–Neil Lazurus, student, Shenendehowa High School, New York

Ohio Citizenship Seal

(Beginning with the class of 2023, the Citizenship Seal is one of 12 seals students will be able to use toward 2 seals required for graduation.)

https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Ohio-s-Graduation-Requirements/Graduation-2021-and-beyond_Guidance-Document.pdf.aspx

Goal: Diploma seals help students develop an array of critical skills that are valuable to them as they transition to the next steps after high school.

As a demonstration of student readiness for the next steps after high school and beginning with the class of 2023, Ohio state law requires that each student must earn at least two diploma seals. One of these seals is a Citizenship Seal. To earn Ohio’s Citizenship Seal, students must demonstrate readiness in the subjects of American history and American government.

American History options:

1. *Earn a final course grade that is equivalent to a “B” or higher in an American History course.*
2. *Earn a score of proficient “3” or higher on Ohio’s State Test in American History.*
3. *Earn a score equivalent to proficient on an appropriate Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate test in U.S. History.*
4. *Earn a “B” or higher in an appropriate American History College Credit Plus course.*

American Government options:

1. *Earn a final course grade that is equivalent to a “B” or higher in an American Government course.*
2. *Earn a score of proficient “3” or higher on Ohio’s State Test in American Government.*

3. *Earn a score equivalent to proficient on an appropriate Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate test in U.S. Government.*
4. *Earn a “B” or higher in an appropriate American Government College Credit Plus course.*

Students who take Ohio’s Alternate Assessment for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities may also use a score on that assessment to earn this seal.

Nevada

(Implementation to take place in the 2022-2023 school year)

https://doe.nv.gov/Nevada_Academic_Standards/Social_Studies/

Goal: Nevada is increasing ways for students to showcase their abilities and to demonstrate civic knowledge by fulfilling their civic and social responsibilities through action to positively impact the well-being of the communities to which they belong. The Nevada Seal of Civics will enhance civic engagement and awareness for all stakeholders.

In 2021, Senate Bill 194 created the Nevada State Seal of Civics Program to recognize students who graduate from a public high school, or a charter school, or a university school for profoundly gifted pupils who have attained a high level of proficiency in civics. Students will be eligible to earn the Seal based on their overall grade point average (at least a 3.25 grade point average on a 4.0 grading scale or, if a different grading scale is used, a 3.85 weighted grade point average on a grading scale approved by the Superintendent of Public Instruction); demonstrated proficiency in civics by earning: (1) At least 3 credits in social studies; (2) A score of at least 90 percent on the examination for civics required pursuant to Nevada Revised Statute 389.009; a satisfactory score in citizenship; and a completed service learning project. The criteria points for the Seal, the rubric for evaluating citizenship, and resources to implement service learning will be completed by September 2022.

Call to Action

“Since the founding of this Nation, education and democracy have gone hand in hand. The Founders believed a nation that governs itself, like ours, must rely upon an informed and engaged electorate. Their purpose was not only to teach all Americans how to read and write but to instill the self-evident truths that are the anchors of our political system.”

—President Ronald Reagan

For many high school students, the benefits of civic education seem irrelevant and take place in their future lives. The Civics diploma seal can counter both of those misperceptions and provide significant short-term and long-term benefits to high school students. Earning recognition for the acquisition of civic knowledge, skills and experiences will encourage students to develop healthy civic habits that will lead to a lifetime of civic participation.

Civics diploma seals are tangible symbols of the value of comprehensive and research-based civic education practices in schools. We call on state and local councils for social studies to lead the charge for advocacy for Civics diploma seals in each state. State councils for social studies, partnering with civics organizations and other stakeholder groups, need to advocate for opportunities for students to acquire civics knowledge, skills, and experiences to develop into the informed electorate on which our democracy so desperately depends.

Generating the political energy to make changes to state or local educational policy can seem daunting, even to seasoned champions of civic education. We have created or adapted resources to help NCSS members advocate for a Civics diploma seal program in states, districts or schools, including:

- Frequently Asked Questions about Civics Diploma Seals
- Civics Diploma Seal Requirements
- Step by Step Process
- Sample letters, presentations
- Summary of recent research on Civic Education

The Toolkit is accessible on the NCSS website at <https://www.socialstudies.org/advocacy/ncss-seal-civic-readiness-toolkit> 🗨️



Notes

1. Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey, August 4–9, 2020, Annenberg Public Policy Center, www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/pandemic-protests-2020-civics-survey-americans-know-much-more-about-their-rights/.
2. NAEP Civics: Civics Results, 2018, The Nation’s Report Card, www.nationsreportcard.gov/civics/.
3. Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, “The Republic Is (Still) at Risk—and Civics Is Part of the Solution” (Medford, MA: Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, 2017), <https://tischcollege.tufts.edu/research/republic-still-risk-and-civics-part-solution>.



Lisa Kissinger is the Academic Administrator for Social Studies at Shenendehowa Central School District, Clifton Park, New York. Lisa serves on the Executive Committee of the DemocracyReady NY Coalition, and was appointed to the New York State Education Department Civic Readiness Task Force. Lisa is also the Vice President for Member Outreach for the New York State Council for the Social Studies.

The other members of the NCSS Seal of Civic Readiness Task Force were: **Mary Ellen Daneels**, Director of the Illinois Civics Hub and Illinois Democracy Schools Network; **Shawn Healy**, Senior Director, Policy and Advocacy, CivXNow Coalition, a project of iCivics; **Wesley Hedgepeth**, NCSS Vice-President and Task Force Co-Chair; **Joseph Karb**, former member of the NCSS Board of Directors and Task Force Co-Chair; **Frank Pisi**, Director, History-Social Science, Sacramento County Office of Education, California; **Sarah Smith**, Education Program Consultant for the California Department of Education; and **Stefanie Wager**, NCSS President, 2020–2021.