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EXAMINING CIVICS EDUCATION IN SCHOOL VOUCHER PROGRAMS

INTRODUCTION

A number of organizations and educators are engaged in efforts to improve civics education in the nation's public schools. Broad agreement on the importance of this issue is reflected in the inclusion of civics education in the standards governing public education in 40 states.

State-level school choice voucher programs enable a growing number of the nation's children to attend nonpublic schools using taxpayer dollars. The [study](#) outlined in this brief—and forthcoming in *Public Integrity*—explores the extent to which those programs are legally required to engage in civics education similar to public schools.

METHODS

To identify the states with school choice voucher programs, the authors reviewed data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2017) and the Education Commission of the States (2017). After identifying the 14 states (and the District of Columbia) with active school choice voucher programs, the authors located and reviewed both the specific state statutes that created the voucher programs and state statutes related to K-12 education more broadly. The authors then compared the extent to which voucher program participants are required to offer civics education against regulations for non-participating public and nonpublic schools in those states where voucher programs are implemented.

FINDINGS

This study found that all 14 states (and the District of

Columbia) that had active school choice voucher programs also had laws requiring civics education for students attending public schools. Five of those states also had requirements for accredited nonpublic schools. However, these requirements are not specifically extended to schools receiving public dollars by way of voucher programs.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Because publicly funded voucher programs will likely continue to play a role in education in the foreseeable future—and given the autonomy nonpublic schools possess in designing voucher students' curriculum—it would be useful to suggest the ways in which private schools accepting vouchers could enhance civics education without necessarily requiring each school to develop and vet its own curriculum.

There are existing, well-developed courses available for adoption or adaptation. One widely-used curriculum that has been closely studied and found to be extremely effective is the "We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution" program. Developed in 1987, the "We the People" education program is administered by the Center for Civic Education, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education organization. The program was adopted by the Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution as the principal education program of the federal Constitution's bicentennial. The curriculum promotes civic competency and responsibility among elementary, middle, and high school students through "an innovative course of instruction in the history and principles of the U.S. constitutional democracy."

While the states where school voucher programs exist have not signaled an intention to regulate the curriculum of these programs with respect to civics education, it is worth considering what general oversight parameters might look like if states were to do so. One way to ensure desirable civics education outcomes in voucher-accepting schools would be for state governments to simply add a civics requirement as a condition of participation. Private schools participating in voucher programs might be required to demonstrate compliance in that area by annually documenting civics class participation for voucher students in applicable grade levels. Schools might also report voucher student performance in civics-related courses.

CONCLUSIONS

The legitimacy of an electoral and constitutional system requires a civic consensus on the nature of ethical public service and the standards against which those ethics are to be measured. In the United States, that consensus is dependent upon at least a basic understanding of America's history, its Constitution, and its Bill of Rights. In light of the critical importance of civic knowledge and competence, the authors would argue that all students whose education is supported by tax dollars should receive a quality civics education.



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