

Take Action Now: High School Graduation Requirements

From: Arlene Gardner

Date: May 12, 2008

The proposed changes to the high school graduation requirements in New Jersey offer an opportunity to have a positive impact on what New Jersey students will learn. New Jersey currently requires four years of language arts, three years of math, three years of science and three years of social studies (NJAC 6A:8-5), including two years of United States history (required by statute) and one year of world history, for high school graduation. On April 25, 2008, the New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee, co-chaired by Susan Cole, president of Montclair State University, and Arthur Ryan, Chairman of Prudential, which has been meeting privately all year, publicly presented its report. The recommendations encourage local districts to provide (but do not require) a fourth year of math and science; suggest end of course assessments for language arts, math and science but local district assessments in social studies, world languages, arts, technology, health and physical education; and propose adding one semester of economics starting with the graduating class of 2014. We would like to recommend that a semester of civics or American government also be required along with the semester of economics for high school graduation.

The National Council on Economics Education reported in 2007 that 17 states require students to take an economics course as a high school graduation requirement (Survey of the States: Economic and Personal Finance Education in Our Nation's Schools in 2007). By contrast, more than 30 states currently require one semester or one year of civics or American government for high school graduation (High School Graduation Requirements-Citizenship, Education Commission of the States, 2008). Both the National Association of State Boards of Education and the Partnership for Twenty-First Century Skills have emphasized civic literacy as a core part of 21st century skills. ("Citizens for the 21st Century: Revitalizing the Civic Mission of Schools," NASBE, 2006; and www.21stcenturyskills.org.) A majority of the public believes that preparing students to be competent and responsible citizens is a very important goal of the public schools, on par with preparing students for college and work ("From Classroom to Citizen: American Attitudes on Civic Education," Alliance for Representative Democracy, 2004).

The Inventory of Civic Education in New Jersey, conducted in the fall of 2004, revealed that only 39% of New Jersey school districts require all of their students to take a civics course in any grade. (http://civiced.rutgers.edu/CIVIC_Inventory_Report_11-04.pdf.) Except for students taking an American Government elective (10-20% of the student body of any given high school), students in the other 61% of New Jersey school districts are exposed to anywhere from one week to one month of civic content knowledge as part of U.S. history. This hardly seems sufficient.

Exposure to a high school civics or American government course has been shown to have a positive impact on student knowledge, skills and dispositions. Although only 64% of young people nationally indicated that they had taken a high school course in civics or American government, those young people who *did* have a high school course in civics or American government were two to three times more likely to engage in civic activities and more likely to believe that they are personally responsible for making things better in society ("Citizenship: A Challenge for All Generations," National Conference of State Legislatures, 2003).

The Redesign report makes clear that its goal is to design a high school curriculum for students to be “ready for work or for further education” in the 21st century (NJ High School Redesign, pp. 4, 5, 37). This is a necessary and laudable goal, but one that fails to consider the other purpose of high schools: to create citizens in a multicultural, democratic society. Creating citizens with the knowledge, skills and inclination to participate in a democratic society is the very purpose for which public schools were established. Yet, we are graduating a significant number of young people who have no sense of what it means to be a citizen in a democratic society and no sense of civic responsibility. While *not* every student will grow up to be a scientist or a mathematician, every student *will* become a citizen. How can our future citizens be informed and engaged if their entire education about American government is a perfunctory review of the Federal Convention of 1787, the United States Constitution, and the three branches of government?

Numeracy, language literacy and an understanding of science are certainly important for our students to succeed in the workforce. But we are social beings. We interact to make decisions. We need to know how society functions. How government functions. How to work together. How to resolve conflicts. How to act responsibly. Why we should care about our community and our society. How to impact public policy debates. Yes, some of this may be taught by parents and by religious organizations, but the schools are “best equipped to address the cognitive aspects of good citizenship” and “the only institutions with the capacity and mandate to reach virtually every young person.” (*The Civic Mission of Schools*, 2003).

From the late 1960s through the 1990s, there was a marked decline in the teaching of civic education as well as in the amount of research on civic education and political socialization. (Torney-Purta, “The School’s Role in Developing Civic Engagement,” 2002.) The past decade has seen a renewed interest in including civic education as a core part of education as well as in research on the impact of such education on students (Niemi and Junn, 1998), models for best practices (*The Civic Mission of Schools*, 2003) and the discrepancies in civic opportunities by student race and academic track (Kahne and Middaugh, “Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School,” Feb. 2008). Unfortunately, “No Child Left Behind” has forced schools to emphasize math and language skills at the expense of social studies, fine arts and physical education. This has stymied the resurgence of civics courses in many states. The Center for Education Policy recently reported that 36% of districts nationwide have decreased time on social studies—the largest decrease of any subject matter area—since 2001-02 when NCLB took effect (“Instructional Time in Elementary Schools: A Closer Look at Changes for Specific Subjects,” Feb. 2008).

Since creating citizens was the reason why public schools were originally formed, civic literacy is a core part of 21st century skills, and civic education has been demonstrated to have a positive impact in developing civic knowledge, skills and dispositions, we wonder why it has been missing from the majority of our schools for the past forty years. We now have an opportunity to correct this oversight, and in light of the unanticipated diminution in time spent on social studies since the implementation of NCLB, the need for a course requirement for civics has become even more compelling. For all of these reasons, we believe a semester course in civics or American government should be included as a requirement for high school graduation in the 21st century.

The discussion about high school graduation requirements will continue at the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association. Ultimately, the decision will be made by the State Board of Education and the New Jersey Commissioner of Education. The State Board of Education will be receiving the Redesign report at its meeting on May 21st. The next meeting will be June 18th and they will vote on amendments to high school graduation requirements at the July meeting. Please make your views known by sending a letter to the following individuals and to your local newspaper:

JoAnn Bartoletti
Executive Director
NJ Principals and Supervisors Association
12 Centre Drive
Monroe Twp., NJ 08831

Lucille Davy
Commissioner, NJ State Department of Education
PO Box 500
Trenton, NJ 08625-0500

Jay Doolan
Assistant Commissioner, NJ State Department of Education
PO Box 500
Trenton, NJ 08625-0500

Willa Spicer
Deputy Commissioner, NJ State Department of Education
PO Box 500
Trenton, NJ 08625-0500

New Jersey Department of Education
State Board Office
P.O. Box 500
Trenton, NJ 08625-500
Call 609-984-6024 to reserve time to speak at a State Board meeting