

HIGH SCHOOL CIVICS TEST SIMILAR TO U.S. NATURALIZATION TEST

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House Bill 4136 as enacted
Public Act 391 of 2016
Sponsor: Rep. Peter J. Lucido
House Committee: Education
Senate Committee: Education
Complete to 1-19-17

BRIEF SUMMARY: House Bill 4136 would amend the Revised School Code to ensure that the state high school social studies curriculum cover the same content as the civics portion of the naturalization test used by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. It would also require the state superintendent of public instruction to revise the high school social studies assessment to reflect the revised content standards. By May 1, 2018 or during the next update of the state curriculum content standards, whichever comes first, the State Board of Education would have to revise the state curriculum content standards to ensure they cover the same information as that covered in the 100 questions that make up the civics portion of the naturalization test.

FISCAL IMPACT: The bill would have an indeterminate, yet minimal, fiscal impact for the Department of Education (MDE), and it could have an indeterminate, yet minimal, fiscal impact on local school districts. For the MDE, the bill would increase administrative costs to review and possibly update the high school social studies assessment to include questions related to the U.S. civics portion of the naturalization test. The test could increase administrative costs for local school districts if their social studies curriculum content did not already include the content covered by the civics portion of the United States Citizenship naturalization test and thus require them to update their curriculum content to do so.

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

Proponents of the bill pointed to the dearth of civics literacy among the American public. They say high school students are woefully ignorant of basic facts about American government and history, even citing surveys suggesting that a startlingly small percentage of graduates can identify such important figures as Thomas Jefferson or the role he played in writing the Declaration of Independence.

One currently popular approach to addressing this deficiency is to make high-schoolers pass at least some portion of the exam that immigrants must take as part of the naturalization and citizenship process. In Michigan, students are required to take one semester of civics and cannot graduate without successfully completing the course. Making passage of some portion of the citizenship test a requirement for successfully completing civics is one way to ensure that high school graduates have digested some of the same basic information required of new Americans. (See **Background Information.**)

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

House Bill 4136 would amend the Revised School Code to ensure that the state high school social studies curriculum and the high school assessment cover the same content as the civics portion of the naturalization test used by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Either by May 1, 2018 or during the next update of the state curriculum content standards after this bill takes effect, whichever comes first, the State Board of Education would revise the state curriculum content standards to ensure they cover the same information as that covered in the 100 questions that make up the civics portion of the naturalization test.

Now under the law, all Michigan high schools require a one-semester civics course offered during five periods per week. The course must include instruction about the form and functions of our federal, state, and local governments, and stress the rights and responsibilities of citizens. A high school diploma cannot be issued to a student who has not successfully completed this course. [The course requirement is not, however, a graduation requirement for a high school student who enlists or has been inducted into military service.] All of these provisions would be retained, with any necessary changes to the course's content.

Additionally, the bill would require the state superintendent of public instruction to amend the state's high school social studies assessment so that it includes questions related to the learning objectives in the state curriculum standards, as updated by the bill. The revised assessment would be administered beginning with the first assessment date following the curriculum content revision.

The bill takes effect March 29, 2017 (although it contains later deadlines).

MCL 380.1166

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

To review the questions that constitute the civics portion of the oral naturalization test administered by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration, located within the Department of Homeland Security, visit the following website:

<http://www.uscis.gov/citizenship/see-all-section-items-title/Civics%20Questions%20and%20Answers%20for%20the%20Naturalization%20Test/55254?destination=node/41140>

ARGUMENTS:

For:

Proponents argue that including this kind of information about American government and history into the social studies curriculum would elevate its importance. Students are more likely to pay attention if they know that they will be tested on the information. At least

nine states¹ have already passed legislation requiring students to pass a citizenship test derived from the naturalization test, with many more considering such legislation. This test contains the facts that as a nation we consider it important for new Americans to know; it is not information identified with any advocacy group or political party.

The Civics Education Initiative, which has spearheaded the push to require that high school students pass a test based on the naturalization test administered by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, hopes to have the requirement adopted in all 50 states by the 230th anniversary of the signing of the Constitution on September 17, 2017.²

Against:

Opposition to this bill focuses, in part, on the imposition of another mandate on local schools, in the form of required curriculum. Revisions to the high school social studies curriculum, in the form and to the extent to which the legislature sees fit, runs counter to the legislature's professed interest in local control. Surely the requirement of a civics course is sufficient to ensure that all students are educated in our founding documents, with the specific curriculum determined by each teacher. Insisting that the curriculum follow the 100 questions that make up the civics portion of the naturalization test removes teacher flexibility and creativity.

Initially, the bill would have required high school students to pass a test which covered the same content as the naturalization test, resulting in pushback against yet another mandated state test on students. However, the enacted version of the bill removes the requirement of an additional test and merely requires that the content be incorporated into the curriculum and state assessment.

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■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House Fiscal Agency staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.

¹ Arizona, Idaho, Louisiana, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, and Wisconsin.

² <http://joefossinstitute.org/civics-education-initiative/>