



# Can the Civics Test Make You a Good Citizen?

## Reconciling the Civics Test with Inquiry-Based Instruction

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**S**tudents' knowledge of civics is bleak. As evidenced by National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) civics assessment data, only 23 percent of students performed at or above the *proficient* level on the 2014 civics assessment.<sup>1</sup> Whether eroded by the effects of the *No Child Left Behind* Act of 2001 (NCLB) or the ever-shrinking footprint of social studies in K-12 schooling, educators across the political and pedagogical spectrum agree that students' lack of civic knowledge is problematic.

Two recent initiatives have tried to combat this lack of civic understanding among students. Some educators have championed the legislative efforts of the Civics Education Initiative that focuses on foundational civic knowledge through the testing of civics-related content. To date, roughly 30 states have adopted this 100-question multiple-choice test as a high school graduation requirement.<sup>2</sup> Other educators have joined the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) in advocating for the C3 Framework, an approach for reframing the study of civics around inquiry in the hopes that anchoring citizenship in the compelling questions of social studies might help students acquire deeper understanding and operationalize civic ideas.<sup>3</sup>

But many teachers are confused by the mixed signals that surround these two efforts. In our home state of Kentucky, high school teachers are required to help

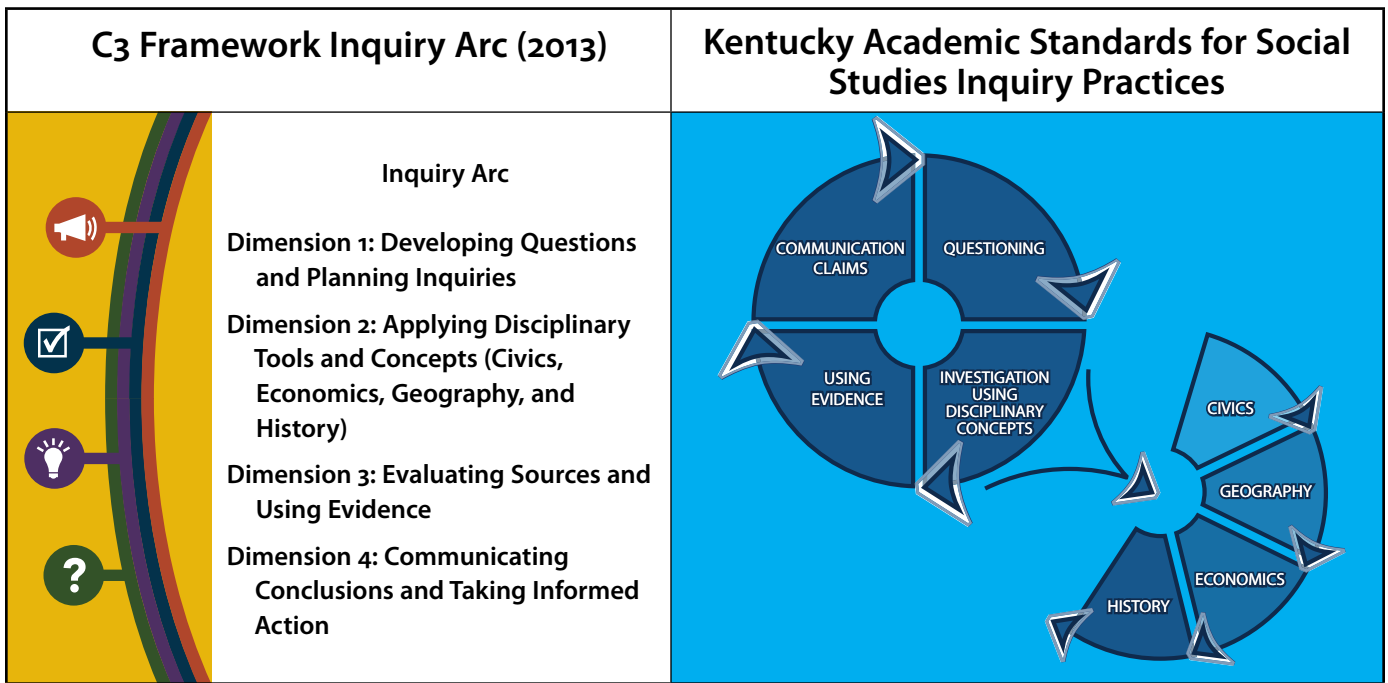
students pass the fact-based civics test, now a high school graduation requirement. At the same time, social studies teachers are reorienting their instruction around inquiry-based practices that are at the center of the new social studies standards. Although content is important in the inquiry process, teachers also are emphasizing disciplinary processes and inquiry skills that help students argue with evidence about thorny questions. Understandably, teachers want to implement both sets of requirements (testing and inquiry), but they wonder if they should be teaching just the “facts” or a deeper level of understanding of civic ideas.

In this article, we tackle this tension between a fact-based civics test and inquiry-based teaching and learning. We begin with a short history on the civics test and the new standards in Kentucky before turning our attention to one approach to the civics test using an

Inquiry Design Model (IDM) inquiry—“Does the civics test make you a good citizen?” In doing so, we confront the pervasive content versus skills debate that so often balkanizes social studies educators.

### The Rise of the Civics Test

As part of the Joe Foss Institute's Civic Education Initiative, legislation was proposed across the nation, asking states to require high school seniors take and pass an exam based on the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Naturalization test.<sup>4</sup> The 100 fact-based questions about U.S. history, geography, and civics “were chosen specifically because they constitute the bare minimum of knowledge a person needs to begin understanding how our government works and who we are as a people.”<sup>5</sup> Examples of questions include: What are the first three words of the Constitution? How many amendments does the Constitution have? What is the economic system in the United States? Since the Joe Foss Institute launched the Civics Initiative in 2014, roughly 30 states have adopted some sort of requirement related to the passage of a civics test.<sup>6</sup>



In 2017, the Kentucky General Assembly passed a law requiring students to pass a civics test composed of 100 questions in order to graduate from a public high school.<sup>7</sup> Kentucky’s test is derived from the USCIS naturalization process. Students must have a passing score of 60% or higher (USCIS requires an oral examination in which immigrants seeking naturalization pass six out of 10 questions correctly) and may retake the exam as many times as needed. For Kentucky legislators, like those across the nation, the requirement was seen as a much-needed step toward addressing society’s lack of basic civic knowledge. The struggle Kentucky educators now face, as a result of implementation efforts, is how they can balance this mandate with best instructional practices. In other words, it’s one thing to “know” basic civics, but another to actually “do” civics.

### The Rise of Inquiry

Inquiry-based learning is not new but the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards codified a language around inquiry into a standards document meant to provide states with guidance for upgrading their existing social stud-

ies standards.<sup>8</sup> The most obvious difference between the C3 Framework and past standards efforts is the Inquiry Arc, “a set of interlocking and mutually reinforcing elements that move from developing questions and planning inquiries to communicating conclusions and taking informed action.”<sup>9</sup> Many states from Vermont to Hawaii are revising their academic standards around the core inquiry practices outlined by the C3 Framework.

Kentucky adopted new social studies standards in July 2019.<sup>10</sup> The standards place four inquiry practices—Questioning, Investigating Disciplinary Concepts, Using Evidence, and Communicating Conclusions—at the center of good social studies. Based largely on the C3 Framework’s Inquiry Arc, the inquiry practices require teachers and students to ask questions that drive student investigation of the subject matter and eliminate the “skills vs. content” dilemma in social studies as both are needed to successfully engage in inquiry. However, this shift presents a new struggle for teachers with regard to building inquiry-based curriculum: How do I teach my content through inquiry?

### C3 Framework Inquiry Arc (2013) Kentucky Academic Standards for Social Studies Inquiry Practices

In an effort to support teachers seeking to use inquiry in their classrooms, the lead writers of the C3 Framework co-created the Inquiry Design Model (IDM). The IDM is a curricular scaffold for teachers and students wanting to do disciplinary inquiry. At the core of the IDM is a one-page blueprint that articulates the questions, tasks, and sources that define a curriculum inquiry.<sup>11</sup> Teachers using the IDM can essentially teach the entirety of the Inquiry Arc and hit on all four inquiry practices within a week’s worth of instruction.

### A Time of Reconciliation

So, is there a way to teach the factual knowledge needed to pass the civics test using an inquiry approach? We have been exploring just this question. Using the IDM process, we built an inquiry framed by the compelling question—Does the civics test make you a good citizen? For this inquiry, we use an *embedded action* inquiry blueprint where the Taking Informed Action sequence—understand, assess, and act—is embedded within the supporting ques-

tions and summative performance task, rather than occurring entirely at the end of the blueprint.<sup>12</sup> In the sections that follow, we walk through the anatomy of the inquiry, demonstrating the questions (compelling and supporting), the tasks (both formative and summative), and the sources (both primary and secondary) that are featured on the blueprint.

## Questions

The compelling question for the inquiry—Does the civics test make you a good citizen?—frames a study of the civics exam itself and what it means to be a “good citizen.” As part of the inquiry, students take the test and evaluate whether the knowledge within the test is necessary or sufficient as they consider the notion of citizenship, and more importantly *good* citizenship. In other words, the inquiry puts students in the center of a policy dilemma—how do educators help students prepare for civic life and what role should the civics test play in that endeavor?

In addressing the compelling question, the inquiry structures students’ work as they proceed through the series of supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources. The supporting questions are sequenced to

progressively build students’ understandings of the civics test’s content and to explore other kinds of civic learning and the role that each play in preparing students to be good citizens.

The supporting questions help students break down the compelling question and, simultaneously, prepare them for the exam:

- What is on the civics test?
- How did the class perform on the civics test?
- What is the most important material on the civics test?
- What other kinds of civic learning could be on the test?

Understanding the civics test content, as well as how it can complement being a good citizen, illuminates the intersection between the civics test and the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and experiences needed to prepare students for informed participation in civic life.

## Sources

The main source propelling this inquiry is the civics test itself. Although each

Kentucky school district can create its own civics tests, all exams must be based upon the 100 questions from the USCIS Citizenship Exam.<sup>13</sup> This inquiry employs the *Digital Driver’s License* online platform, a resource available to all Kentucky districts, to administer and collect results to the test.<sup>14</sup> Students use the test and test result data to answer supporting questions 1, 2, and 3.

To help students grapple with the idea of a “good citizen” and the test content, the staging task includes sources that describe the test, showing both positive and negative perspectives. We included the Joe Foss Institute’s reasoning for supporting civics exam legislation, noting specifically that the test’s content includes the “things every student should know to be ready for active, engaged citizenship.”<sup>15</sup> Other sources supporting the staging task include excerpts from the *Chicago Tribune* and *The Atlantic*. Both articles provide arguments for and against the exam, specifically related to how it prepares students for active citizenship. (See Table 1).

For supporting question 4, where students evaluate the test content’s utility and contributions to civic learning, we provided a list of online civic education

**Table 1.** Supporting Question 4 Source Excerpts

<p>“Critics: Civics Test Not Designed to Judge High School Knowledge.” —<i>Chicago Tribune</i></p>	<p>“Why Civics is About More Than Citizenship.” —<i>The Atlantic</i></p>
<p>National Council for the Social Studies: Students should learn by doing—with teachers fostering active discussions, highlighting opposite viewpoints and encouraging them to actively learn how government works.</p> <p>Illinois Sen. Dennis Kruse, R-Auburn: “I think it’s in the lack of basic education in our schools We’ve got a generation of people who don’t know where we came from. . . . Something is not connecting, the kids, they are not connecting and retaining the information.”</p>	<p>Fordham Foundation’s Robert Pondiscio: “The more educated you are, the more likely you are to be civically engaged.”</p> <p>Joseph Kahne in <i>Education Week</i>: “There’s not any evidence base to show that this will be effective. . . . It’s something state legislators can pass and feel good about.” He argued that the testing approach to civic education is the equivalent of “teaching democracy like a game show.”</p>

## Kentucky Civics Test Inquiry

### Does the civics test make you a good citizen?

Kentucky Academic Standards	<p>HS.C.RR.2 Explain how active citizens can affect the lawmaking process locally, nationally and internationally.</p> <p>HS. C.I.CC.2 Engage in disciplinary thinking and construct arguments, explanations or public communications relevant to meaningful and/or investigative questions in civics.</p>
Staging the Question	Create a mind map to list, organize, and connect associated ideas, actions, and/or people to the central concept: “good citizen.”

Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3	Supporting Question 4
UNDERSTAND	UNDERSTAND	UNDERSTAND	UNDERSTAND
What is on the civics test?	How did the class perform on the civics test?	What is the most important material on the civics test?	Should the civics test include other kinds of civic learning?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
Take the school or district’s civics test.	Draft a report identifying the class’s area of strength and weakness with reference to specific questions.	Using a Kanban board, deliberate and rank the importance of different test items for engaging in civic life.	Create a claim, or series of claims, supported by evidence, about whether the test should include other kinds of civic learning.
Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
<p><b>Source A:</b> School or district’s civics test</p> <p><b>Source B:</b> Civics Test from the Digital Drivers License (DDL)</p> <p><b>Source C:</b> US Citizenship and Immigration Services, 100 Civics Questions</p>	<p><b>Source A:</b> Civics Test Results Matrix from the Digital Drivers License (DDL)</p> <p><i>Featured Sources from Supporting Question 1</i></p>	<p><b>Source A:</b> Civics Test Question Cards</p> <p><i>Featured Sources from Supporting Questions 1–2</i></p>	<p><b>Source A:</b> List of civic education resources</p> <p><i>Featured Sources from Supporting Questions 1–3</i></p>

Summative Performance task	<p><b>ARGUMENT</b> Construct an argument (e.g., detailed outline, poster, essay) that discusses the compelling question using specific claims and relevant evidence from contemporary sources while acknowledging competing views.</p>
	<p><b>EXTENSION</b> Analyze how individual test items connect to issues facing students’ communities. Identify which content will help address their chosen issue, as well as additional information they would need in order to take informed action.</p>
Taking Informed Action	<p><b>ASSESS</b> Evaluate the district’s civics test and consider the extent to which the test supports student’s preparation for “good citizenship.”</p> <p><b>ACT</b> Create a proposal about the needs of the civics test and/or preparation for citizenship to share with the local school district, school board, state official, or national organization.</p>

resources (e.g., iCivics, Center for Civic Education, Mikva Challenge). Teachers can pull excerpts from these resources or have students explore them on their own, considering what each says about preparing students for civic life.

### Tasks

The formative performance tasks help scaffold students' evaluation of the civics test, building their understandings of its content and its potential role towards creating good citizens. To introduce students to the inquiry, the staging the compelling question task asks students to create a mind map where they connect ideas, actions, or people around the central concept "good citizen." Within the inquiry, we provided resources to familiarize teachers and students with scholarly understandings of "good citizenship." The central criticism of the civics test is that it focuses on memorization of individual facts, rather than having students engage in civic practices. The inquiry's sources explain the dimensions of a rigorous and meaningful civic education, notably the need for teachers to develop students' *civic knowledge*, as well as *civic skills* and *civic dispositions*, and provide opportunities to take action in a *civic experience*. We selected excerpts from the C3 Framework and Westheimer and Kahne's 2003 article titled "What Kind of Citizen?"<sup>16</sup> With teacher guidance, the staging task introduces students to the compelling question and bridges the concept of a "good citizen" to the remainder of the inquiry.

In the inquiry, students answer the supporting questions by completing four formative performance tasks, building towards the summative argument task:

- Take the school or district's civic test.
- Draft a report identifying the class's areas of strength and weakness with reference to specific questions.

**To help students grapple with the idea of a "good citizen" and the test content, the staging task includes sources that describe the test, showing both positive and negative perspectives.**

- Using a Kanban board, deliberate and rank the importance of different test items for participating in civic life.
- Create a claim, or series of claims, supported by evidence about whether the exam could include other kinds of civic learning.

To answer the first supporting question, students take the school or district's civics test. The second task has them reflect upon their collective test results and draft a report identifying the class's areas of strength and weakness with reference to specific questions. The intention of this task is to have students organize the content knowledge contained within the civics test, and likewise, reflect upon areas of needed growth in order to be successful on the test. In the third task, students connect the test back to the compelling question by considering how the content helps prepare them for participation in civic life. Students deliberate and rank test questions' importance using a Kanban organizational board. Kanban boards help visually represent information or tasks by evaluating and organizing items in relation to one another. (See Figure 1). These tasks prepare students for the

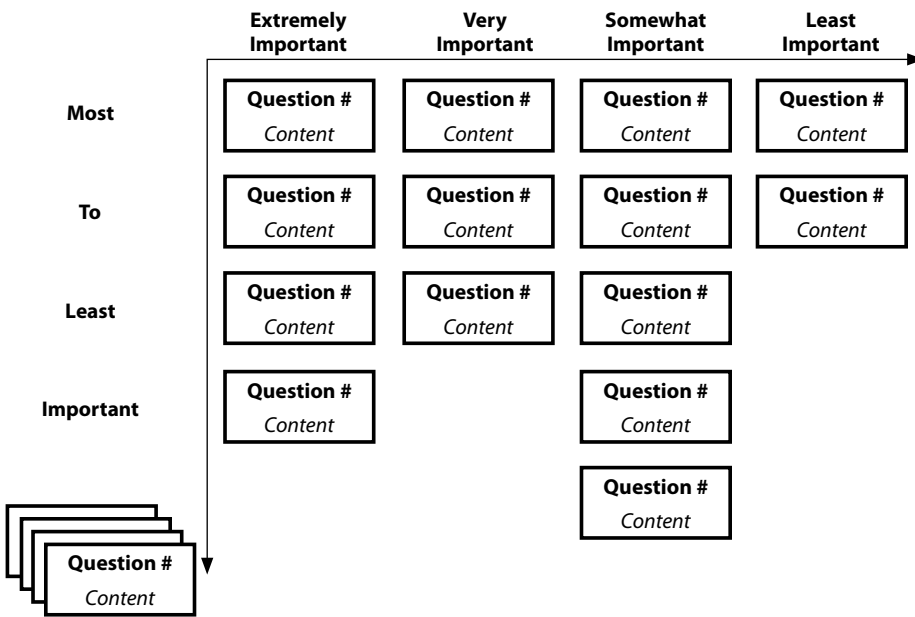
final supporting task where they create evidence-based claims about whether the test could include other kinds of civic learning needed to be an active participant in civic life.

In this inquiry, the task logic is designed to help students build their understanding of the civics test by progressively developing their assessment of its content. The task sequence prepares students to construct complex and evidence-based arguments in response to the compelling question, "Does the civics test make you a good citizen?" Students' arguments will likely vary, but could reflect any of the following:

- The civics test's content includes important information needed to participate in civic spaces.
- Even though the information on the civics test is valuable, the test only assesses memorized content and not the skills, dispositions, and/or experiences needed to be a good citizen.
- Though the test doesn't include action opportunities, the information does help create a knowledge base for good citizens to draw upon and take action.
- There is a lot of information on the test that could be seen as disconnected from modern civic issues. The test, and preparation for the test, doesn't necessarily connect those dots.
- Knowing a lot of facts doesn't necessarily mean you are positively impacting your community, so a test alone cannot make you a good citizen.

Students could extend their arguments by analyzing how individual test items connect to issues facing their communities. Using the test items, students select an issue and identify the exam content

Figure 1. Kanban Board and cards



<b>What is the supreme law of the land?</b>	<b>What does the Constitution do?</b>
<b>The idea of self-government is in the first three words of the Constitution. What are these words?</b>	<b>What is an amendment?</b>
<b>What do we call the first ten amendments to the Constitution?</b>	<b>What is <u>one</u> right or freedom from the First Amendment?</b>
<b>How many amendments does the Constitution have?</b>	<b>What did the Declaration of Independence do?</b>

to help them address the issue, as well as additional information they need in order to take informed action on the issue.

### Take Informed Action

After students have completed the formative and summative performance tasks and developed understandings of the civics test’s content, they are ready to deepen their evaluation of the test and take informed action. Students evaluate their own district’s civics test and assess the extent to which they believe the test supports preparing students to be good citizens. If students do not believe it adequately supports good citizenship, their evaluation should provide suggestions about a more authentic way for students to demonstrate civic learning. Suggestions must consider the civics test’s requirements to follow the USCIS questions. Accordingly, suggestions can include ideas to supplement the test (e.g., a civic capstone project). To take informed action, students act by writing a proposal about the civics test’s areas of need (or needs of civic education for the state in order to prepare students for active citizenship) to share with the local school district, school board, state official, or national organization.

### To Inquiry and Beyond

In this article, we laid out an ambitious plan to combat the struggles teachers face when trying to implement the civics test in a meaningful way. In a future article, we hope to talk about how the implementation of the inquiry actually went, from both teacher and student perspectives. For now, we know many teachers in many states face the same kind of incongruence around inquiry and a fact-based test. Our hope is that this column might start a conversation about how we move with educational policy, making the best of what seems like just one more thing. 🌍

### Notes

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5. Diana Hess, Sam Stone, and Joseph Kahne, "Should High School Students Be Required to Pass a Citizenship Test?" *Social Education* 79 (2015): 173–176.
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