

August 8, 2016

Robert Austin
Utah State Board of Education (USBE)
Teaching and Learning Licensing
250 East 500 South
PO Box 144200
Salt Lake City, Utah 84114-4200

Dear Robert:

It is my pleasure to provide general comments on the April 15, 2016 revisions to the Utah Secondary Social Studies Standards (hereafter: "Revisions"). We will limit our comments to the *United States Government and Citizenship* portions of the standards.

Having opened our doors last month, let me also clarify that we are new to the social studies curriculum conversation, and we recognize and respect the years of policy expertise and practical teaching experience that have no doubt shaped the Revisions. Please forgive us if we miss some of the nuances, justifications, or institutional or political contexts informing some of the revisions. If you believe any of our comments or suggestions should be re-directed to a different entity, please let us know.

To help frame our comments and suggestions, we present the following facts or observations:

- Utah's millennials (aged 18-29) have some of the lowest voter turnout in the nation. In the 2014 mid-term election, only 8.1% of millennials turned out to vote. Even in the last Presidential election, only 34% of Utah's 18-29 year olds voted.
- Individuals from disadvantaged background are far less likely to vote and participate in civic life.
- As a block, communities of color have low voter turnout. In 2014 only 38% of ethnic minorities were registered to vote.
- Millennials spend much of their time and seek much of their information about current events on social media platforms.
- For a growing number of adults, political activity and discourse takes place on social media (learn more [here](#)).
- Research suggests that millennials have a skeptical view of civic life and politics—they have a point. The curriculum should engage this skepticism and impatience with the polarized nature of politics today.
- Compared to earlier generations, young people may have further barriers to participation in civic life. Today's young people face job insecurity their whole lives, [notes economist Joseph Stiglitz](#). Others may be saddled with student debt, if they can attend higher education at all. For many buying a home or even starting a family may be a distant dream. These issues should be on the table in the civics classroom, if only to compare candidates or public policies from one era to the next. These and other practical or subjective barriers to civic participation can also serve as hooks to choices that citizens make in the voting booth.

General Comments

- The Revisions seem heavily weighted toward abstract concepts (“civic virtue” or “defending liberties secured by the Constitution”) and towards content that may not be that relate-able to young people coming of age. These abstract concepts could be balanced with concepts related to having a voice; creating a better society, a society that allows all to thrive or live in dignity. These concepts may be more relate-able to young people.
- Students need more practical information about voting in Utah. What are the deadlines, what types of choices will they be making, what resources are out there to clarify these choices, etc.
- The curriculum should include direction, adaptations, or incentives to address the different civic learning needs of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. Research suggests a more collaborative approach is more effective for such students, engaging families, communities or “collective impact” partnerships. Teachers may need professional development opportunities to meet this proposed standard.
- To this end, teachers or schools or school districts should be given incentives or recognition to support service learning. Pilot funding from the Legislature would help test the effectiveness of such approaches.
- Teachers should have training and support to lead unbiased discussions about controversial topics, given that these issues are more likely to engage students.
- Integrate digital media literacy in the civics education curriculum. Since students spend so much of their time online, they need support to think critically and avoid the echo-chamber effect of these spaces.

Practical Suggestions by Strand

Foundational Principles US Gov Strand 1: It’s not clear how responsible citizenship plays into the framework of the Constitution—there is no obvious connection between these two things. Those links are stronger and probably more teachable if anchored in specific amendments of the Constitution-like the 15th Amendment and the Voting Rights Act. Since this is all about responsible and effective citizenship, students need a way into those sections of the Constitution or its amendments that pertain to them and actions they can take in real time.

- Guiding Questions: maybe add a question about how the definition of citizen has changed (this gets at recent developments like Citizens United). Again, this will help students make better sense of contemporary, “top-of-the-fold” issues.

US GOV Strand 2 Civil Liberties, Civil Rights and Responsibilities

Students should also understand the development or evolution of those rights, from the 15th Amendment to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and recent decisions upholding the VRA. Showing how hard-won those rights are should help motivate students to enjoy those rights.

The focus is on the Constitution, but where the real action is, especially on issues of civic engagement, is in the amendments-unless those are assumed to be part of the Constitution.

U.S. GOV standard 2.3: maybe add to the list “serving on advisory committees.”

US GOV Strand 3 Distribution of Power

- Guiding Question: Again, if we want the curriculum to be more relevant or more helpful for explaining current issues in governance, we should add to the question about functions of political parties: what are the limitations of the party structure in the U.S.

U.S. GOV Standard 3.2: might add something about what it means for a non-governmental civic organization to be nonpartisan—or why this is important.

US GOV Strand 4: This section pertains to the government's role in the economy but also, and just as important, to the government's role in financing basic or societal needs—and how this role is shared between levels of government. Again, this brings the discussion down to a more practical, and hence relate-able level.

US GOV Strand 5: The U.S. and our Relationship to the World

Add to US GOV Standard 5.4: climate change. The point here is to engage the students on more current issues, no matter how controversial.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. We look forward to future iterations of the Revisions.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Judi Hilman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Judi Hilman
Executive Director

Resources

Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement, 2013. <http://civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/CIRCLE-youthvoting-individualPages.pdf>

Joseph E. Stiglitz, The New Generation Gap, 2016. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/new-generation-gap-social-injustice-by-joseph-e--stiglitz-2016-03>

Pew Research Center, Civic Engagement in the Digital Age, 2013. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/04/25/civic-engagement-in-the-digital-age/>