

Judiciary

New Test Results Show Crisis in Civics Education, Say Retired Justice O'Connor, ABA President

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By [Debra Cassens Weiss](#)

Updated: Less than half of America's eighth graders know the purpose of the Bill of Rights, and only one in 10 show knowledge about checks and balances, according to test results released today.

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- Cover story: [Flunking Civics: Why America's Kids Know So Little](#)
- Take our 10-question [civics quiz](#).
- Watch our [video](#) of a civics pop survey of passersby at Chicago's Millennium Park one afternoon in mid-March
- See the related [photo gallery](#).
- Read about the [ABA's involvement](#) in civic education.

The percentage of students who performed below the proficiency level was 73 percent of fourth-graders, 78 percent of eighth-graders, and 76 percent of 12th-graders, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a test administered last year. The [New York Times](#) has the story.

The results represent a small gain for fourth graders and a small dip for seniors since the last test in 2006. Results for eighth graders are about the same.

An [executive summary](#) explains what proficiency means. A fourth grader who is proficient can identify a purpose of the Constitution, while a proficient eighth grader can recognize a role played by the Supreme Court, and a proficient senior can define the term

"melting pot."

Retired Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who is pushing to revive civics education, called the results "truly disappointing."

"The scores reveal a very disturbing lack of basic knowledge of our system of government and how and why citizens must be engaged," O'Connor said in a [press release](#). "The report is a clarion call for action to restore the civic mission of our nation's schools. We can and must do better in providing civic education to all of our nation's school students."

ABA President Stephen Zack agrees with O'Connor, who serves as a special adviser to the ABA's Commission on Civic Education in the Nation's Schools. "This lack of knowledge is unacceptable, especially because it's a solvable problem," Zack said in a [statement](#). "Currently, fewer than half of all states test students on their knowledge of civics or government. Civics needs to be counted as another basic, like reading and mathematics."

Zack suggested that the Department of Education foster a competitive grant funding program for civic education in schools that require civics classes. He also notes the ABA-sponsored Civics and Law Academy program, which organizes lawyer-volunteers to teach civics lessons in schools.

Updated at 4:50 p.m. to include Zack's statement and links to additional ABA Journal coverage.

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