

# Critique of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute's *The State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History in 2021*

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## *Introduction*

Americans want to restore history and civics education to the nation's schools. That's not because these subjects have somehow vanished from the curriculum, but because there is agreement across the political spectrum that current instruction in these vital areas falls short.

Agreement beyond that point, however, is scarce. One side believes that improvement entails teaching children more about the defects of their country and about what steps they can take now to change it for the better. The other side believes that improvement requires teaching children how America became a free, independent, and self-governing nation and about what steps they can take to ensure it remains so.

This report is grounded in that second view. It is based on the observation that American adults possess such low levels of knowledge about our founding, our Constitution, our system of government, and our history that they often face real difficulty in participating in our self-governing republic. Voting, elections, citizenship, jury service, taxes, law enforcement, differences between state and federal authorities, and many more ordinary aspects of life in our country are hindered for those who don't know our past and who have limited knowledge of our current institutions. That's part of why learning our history and our civics in school is so important.<sup>1</sup>

But another reason that history and civics are important in schools is that they are the foundation for love of country—the kind of love that makes us a unified people willing to respect one another's rights and, if needed, to make sacrifices for the common good.

Those of us committed to teaching what I'll call *traditional* history and civics are concerned not just about the practical inconveniences for adults who know too little of these subjects, but also about the increasing number of Americans who are disaffected from the republic to which they rightly owe gratitude, affection, and duty.<sup>2</sup>

More Americans than ever are now at work to restore civics and history education.<sup>3</sup> That work of restoration, however, is complicated by the disagreements between those who emphasize the defects of America and those who emphasize its virtues. Worse, that disagreement itself is sometimes misrepresented by advocates who say they have found a perfect compromise.

Compromise, of course, sounds good. America is generally governed by elected leaders who reach compromises in order to advance legislation. And surely we can find ways to teach history and civics that give due weight to both America's faults and its positive achievements. But every

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<sup>1</sup> “[Most Americans don't know what's in the Constitution: ‘A crisis of civic education.’](#)” CBS News, January 19, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, [The 1776 Report](#) (2021).

<sup>3</sup> E.g., [The Civics Alliance](#), National Association of Scholars.

compromise has to be weighed carefully to see whether it genuinely gives each side its due or whether it tilts in one direction and shortchanges the other.

In this essay, I will examine a document that promises to be part of a great compromise between the advocates for the two different approaches to history and civics reform. That document was recently published by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and it is titled *The State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History in 2021*.<sup>4</sup> I will attempt to show in some detail why *The State of State Standards* does not succeed in establishing a properly weighted compromise.

My criticism of the Fordham Institute is a tribute to its influence as a commentator on American education, whose works command great authority, especially among American conservatives. When it errs, it errs with great effect. I take the time to criticize *The State of State Standards* at length precisely because any work that bears the Fordham Institute's imprimatur must weigh heavily in national discussions of education policy.

Before I start, let me acknowledge the good intentions of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in general and of the authors of this report in particular. As readers will surely agree when they read the report, I have no doubt that the Institute meant well and that in its own view, *The State of State Standards* is a constructive effort to reach common ground, and therefore a genuine and well-judged compromise. But I believe it is mistaken. I will focus on those mistakes in the coming pages rather than on *State Standards*' considerable virtues.

*The State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History in 2021* is a survey of the K-12 civics and history standards in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. It aims to give Americans a fair understanding of the quality of civics and United States history instruction across the nation, by way of informing them how they may improve their schools.

The Fordham Institute's *State Standards*, unfortunately, is gravely flawed. The Fordham Institute now advocates for Action Civics, also known as "protest civics," in its assessment of each state's content standards. Each state's civic instruction is upgraded or downgraded depending on its commitment to Action Civics. It is impossible to tell how much of the Fordham Institute's judgment of "Content and Rigor" is really a judgement of each state's commitment to Action Civics. The Fordham Institute's survey therefore is unreliable.

### *The Nature of Action Civics*

Action Civics, also known by names such as *civic engagement*, *community engagement*, and *project-based civics*, formally claims to be a form of "service-learning" applied to civics

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremy A. Stern, Alison E. Brody, José A. Gregory, Stephen Griffith, and Jonathan Pulvers, with David Griffith and Amber M. Northern, [\*The State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History in 2021\*](#) (Washington, D.C.: The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2021). 376 pp.

Throughout this report, we refer to "the Fordham Institute" and "*State Standards*," rather than to "Stern et al." Partly this is because we are not in a position to distinguish which words of the report should be attributed to which individual authors. (For the individual authors' CVs, see [\*The State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History in 2021\*](#).) Partly this is because the Fordham Institute does bear institutional responsibility for *State Standards*. But mostly it is because a critique, no matter how friendly, must cause some pain. We prefer to address our criticism to the Fordham Institute and to *State Standards* than to named individuals. The praise we direct to *State Standards*, contrariwise, should be taken as addressed to Jeremy Stern and his co-authors.

education. Students in service-learning classes earn credit for work outside the classroom with a nonprofit organization. Action Civics classes, drawing upon service-learning pedagogy, generally consist of three overlapping practices:

- 1) Group Projects: Part or all of a class engages in extra-curricular political protest or lobbying.
- 2) Internships: Individual students hold unpaid extra-curricular internships with political advocacy organizations.
- 3) Political Activism: Students draft materials for political activism by activities such as writing letters or designing posters. Some classes simply train students in these activities; others actually use the materials they create for political advocacy.

Students *must* complete these activities to receive course credit.

Service-learning and Action Civics favor a collectivist approach simply by emphasizing group action: Action Civics discourages individual judgment that, for example, sustains the lone dissenter on a jury. Service-learning and Action Civics invite abuse of public schools' institutional neutrality, since school administrators and teachers decide which nonprofit organizations they will recognize as institutional partners. Service-learning and Action Civics delegitimize classroom learning by teaching that it has no purpose except to prepare students for collective action in the world outside the classroom. These flaws alone make service-learning and Action Civics ill-suited for teaching children the essential lessons of civics.

Their overt politicization redoubles the damage they do to America's schools. Service-learning and Action Civics pretend to offer a nonpartisan way to channel school resources and student time into civics instruction, but in truth they open the door to political advocacy by left-leaning nonprofit organizations. They accommodate the pervasive left-leaning biases of America's teachers, school administrators, state education bureaucrats, and nonprofit organizations that work in this area, all of whom are in a position to craft the requirements of service-learning and Action Civics so that they steer students toward "coursework" that supports radical political activism. They make it next to impossible for students to steer their Action Civics work toward nonpartisan advocacy, much less for conservative advocacy.

In practice, and as intended by the radical educational establishment that has sponsored both service-learning and Action Civics, Action Civics skews toward left-wing causes. Teacher bias comes into play when teachers guide students into choosing a particular cause for their protests and demonstrations. Action Civics champion Generation Citizen touts projects such as support for the Green New Deal, climate change protests, driver's licenses for illegal immigrants, the "school to prison pipeline," feminist perspectives, and opposition to gentrification.<sup>5</sup> Action Civics educational materials frequently teach radical community organizer Saul Alinsky's "power mapping" techniques.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas K. Lindsay and Lucy Mercer, [\*"Action Civics," "New Civics," "Civic Engagement," and "Project-Based Civics": Advances in Civic Education?"\*](#) (Texas Public Policy Foundation: 2020), 13-14.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., [\*"Welcome to 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Civics!"\*](#); [\*"Power Mapping: A Tool for Utilizing Networks and Relationships," Idealist on Campus.\*](#)

Vanishingly few, if any, Action Civics projects have ever supported advocacy by, for example, pro-life organizations, pro-Second Amendment organizations, or immigration control organizations. Equally few, if any, advocate for the restoration of broken-windows policing, stop-and-frisk policies, and strict voter ID laws; for ending corrupt “consent agreements” between activists and collusive regulators; or for upholding property rights against dubious “eminent domain” takings. Nor do Action Civics projects include protests against teacher unions or the demand for an end to qualified immunity for school administrators. Nonpartisan Action Civics would include an enormous range of such projects. We may register the bias of Action Civics in practice by the absence of all but a narrow range of projects that align with the radical educational establishment’s political priorities.

Action Civics replaces American civics education with a taxpayer-funded gift to the radical left: young minds to be indoctrinated in neo-Marxist “social justice” propaganda, free labor for left-wing activist groups, free bodies for left-wing protests, free vocational training in left-wing activism, and free use of Saul Alinsky-style community organizing techniques adapted for the classroom.<sup>7</sup>

Action Civics now works in tandem with Critical Race Theory, Social Justice Education, and other forms of far-left propaganda disguised as pedagogy.<sup>8</sup> Action Civics is more accurately called “protest civics,” because it uses taxpayer dollars and classroom time to draw students into the network of professional organizers and rent-a-mobs by which radical activists force political transformation on America.<sup>9</sup>

Action Civics doesn’t just operate through civics classes: it can appear anywhere in the curriculum.<sup>10</sup> Its primary means of intrusion into America’s schools, however, is via civics classes. Civics classes are the central battleground to defend students from Action Civics.

Even if Action Civics could be de-politicized, or at least politically balanced, it would waste precious classroom time that should be used to teach students real civics. The actual defenses of Action Civics usually are obfuscations by scholars who praise Action Civics for being more ‘effective in civics instruction’ or ‘inspiring for civic engagement,’ when what they mean is that Action Civics teaches Action Civics and makes students ‘feel engaged.’<sup>11</sup> Yet asking students to

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<sup>7</sup> For the preceding paragraphs on service-learning and Action Civics, see Stanley Kurtz, “[“Action Civics” Replaces Citizenship with Partisanship](#),” *The American Mind*, January 26, 2021; Lindsay and Mercer, *Action Civics*; David Randall, [Making Citizens: How American Universities Teach Civics](#) (National Association of Scholars, 2017); [The Challenge from Action Civics](#), Civics Alliance, National Association of Scholars.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Kurtz, “[Biden Set to Push Critical Race Theory on U.S. Schools](#),” *National Review*, April 19, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Kurtz, “[How Dems Will Push Protest Civics and CRT on Schools](#),” *National Review*, June 1, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Elana Goldenkoff, “[Civic Engagement in the STEM Classroom](#),” ECR Community, September 18, 2020; Paul F. Lai, [Civics English: Integrating Civics in Middle School English Language Arts Teaching](#) (University of California, Berkeley: Ph.D. Dissertation, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Lori A. Morgan, “[Developing Civic Literacy and Efficacy: Insights Gleaned Through the Implementation of Project Citizen](#),” *i.e.: inquiry in education* 8, 1 (2016): Article 3.

report on their “engagement” does not measure whether they actually have learned anything. The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) therefore misleads when it claims that “students who participate in civic engagement *learn more academic content*”, since it actually cites research that studies “academic engagement[, which] was measured by asking students to report on their own perceived involvement with the course content and field of study.”<sup>12</sup>

We fear that the Fordham Institute accepts at face value the contention that Action Civics actually increases content knowledge, when Action Civics proponents such as the AAC&U refer to research that does not actually support that claim.

More plausibly, we should judge that Action Civics imparts no knowledge of how the republic works, save in the sense that a vandal knows enough of a house to destroy it.

### *The Fordham Institute Embraces Action Civics*

So far as we can judge, the Fordham Institute embraced Action Civics in the spirit of compromise. It would forward traditional content-rich pedagogy as a complement to Action Civics—which it surely embraced without understanding quite how radically destructive Action Civics is.

But embrace Action Civics it has. In their Forward to *State Standards*, David Griffith and Chester E. Finn, Jr. of the Fordham Institute essentially champion Action Civics by praising its core pedagogical components.

And now imagine that, in *addition* to taking courses in civics and U.S. History, every high school senior was also required to write a capstone paper on the historical background of a current social or political problem, the costs and benefits of potential solutions to it, and possible means of addressing it—for example, through legislation or advocacy.<sup>13</sup>

We imagine rather that teacher bias will limit students’ options as to which advocacies they will be permitted to sketch in their capstone papers. But we need no exercise in speculation to know that the Hirschian Fordham Institute of old would have ascribed equal or greater value to a capstone paper that explored the best arguments for all sides of a conflicted current issue rather than advocating for just one, or which explored a historical issue rather than a contemporary one. Teaching students how to distance themselves from the fray in order to develop disinterested judgment is a more important lesson than teaching them how to let loose the enthusiasms they already harbor. The Fordham Institute now fails even to mention these pedagogical options.

Purely as a question of pedagogy, we regret that the Fordham Institute would embrace Action Civics, whose mode of instruction contradicts E.D. Hirsch’s Core Knowledge-based pedagogy,

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<sup>12</sup> Christine M. Cress, “[Civic Engagement and Student Success: Leveraging Multiple Degrees of Achievement](#),” *Diversity and Democracy* 15, 3 (2012); Sara M. Gallini and Barbara E. Moely, “[Service-Learning and Engagement, Academic Challenge, and Retention](#),” *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 10 (2003): pp. 5-14.

<sup>13</sup> Stern 2021: 7.

which the Fordham Institute has so persistently advocated.<sup>14</sup> The saddest consequence of the Fordham Institute’s embrace of Action Civics is that it must abandon its Hirschian heritage.

*State Standards* also declares that “we have broadened our conception of ‘content’ to include relevant skills (e.g., ‘informed advocacy’) and dispositions (e.g., ‘respect for other persons and opinions.’) ...”<sup>15</sup> But what the Fordham Institute defines as the “skills” of “informed advocacy” are precisely the nuts and bolts of Action Civics pedagogy:

if we could require only one specific exercise, it would be to have twelfth-grade civics students use their knowledge of American history and government to research and analyze the historical roots of and continuing reasons for a current social or political problem, the costs and benefits of proposed solutions to that problem, and possible means of addressing it—and then make the written case for a specific course of action.<sup>16</sup>

That said, *State Standards* does not fully embrace Action Civics or Critical Race Theory. Yet, as Peter Gibbon, Senior Research Fellow at Boston University Wheelock College of Education and Human Development, notes, “Though the report doesn’t endorse ‘action civics,’ it does approve of ‘active participation’ and ‘successful service-learning projects.’”<sup>17</sup> We may recollect that service-learning is the pedagogy of Action Civics, and also keep in mind that “active participation” is a euphemism for Action Civics. The Fordham Institute effectively endorses all the components of Action Civics.

The Fordham Institute certainly is aware of the critiques of Action Civics: “We understand that current opinions differ on the topic of ‘action civics.’”<sup>18</sup> But its ‘understanding’ has not moderated its embrace of Action Civics.<sup>19</sup> The Fordham Institute concludes that our schools’ civics and history instruction must lead to more Action Civics: “one way or another, we must coax a clearer and more sustained focus on civics and U.S. History learning out of our overburdened education system, so that more students emerge from it with the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions.”<sup>20</sup>

We wish that the Fordham Institute would return to its traditional focus on ensuring that America’s students graduate from high school with comprehensive academic content knowledge of American history and civics, rather than recommend burdensome Action Civics mandates that positively reduce student learning.

*The Fordham Institute Means “Action Civics” When Its Says “Content and Rigor”*

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<sup>14</sup> Chester E. Finn, Jr., “[Knowledge matters: E. D. Hirsch, Jr.’s fifth book on education is as important as his first](#),” Thomas B. Fordham Institute, August 17, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Stern 2021: 19.

<sup>16</sup> Stern 2021: 31, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Stern 2021: 10.

<sup>18</sup> Stern 2021: 33.

<sup>19</sup> Stern 2021: 33.

<sup>20</sup> Stern 2021: 34.

The heart of the Fordham Institute’s survey of state standards consists of its reviews of Content and Rigor. Here, Content and Rigor largely assesses whether standards include detailed requirements for factual knowledge of American government and history. The Fordham Institute states that “the bulk of a state’s score for ‘content and rigor’ is still based on what it expects students to know or understand (e.g., the causes of the Civil War).”<sup>21</sup>

Yet the Fordham Institute does not say exactly what “bulk” means. The most important point is that the Fordham Institute no longer regards such content knowledge as *all* of Content and Rigor. The Fordham Institute now conflates Content and Rigor with Action Civics to forward “informed advocacy.”

The Fordham Institute states in its Methods Appendix that Action Civics counts for evaluation of Content and Rigor.

Problem analysis—Based on their knowledge of American government and history, students should be able to research and analyze the reasons for a current social or political problem, the costs and benefits of potential solutions to it, and possible means of addressing it, such as advocacy, organization, publicity, money, elections, and legislation.

Advocacy—Students should practice the art of persuasion in various formats and contexts, backing their opinions with evidence, responding thoughtfully to the opinions of others, and revising their own opinions when appropriate.<sup>22</sup>

The Fordham Institute’s extended and approbatory description of South Dakota’s standards gives a strong sense of its model for civics. These standards include:

“possible civic engagement activities” in the “unpacked” version of every social studies standard—including those that deal with history, geography, and economics. Examples of suggested activities range from writing an editorial about the need for compromise to brainstorming ways of using civil disobedience to implement change, so the standards cannot be accused of foolish consistency. Still, the message that civic engagement is *always* a priority is the right one, and many of the suggestions that appear in this space are thoughtful and creative.<sup>23</sup>

We may note that South Dakota’s “unpacked” standards contain substantial material that tilts “civic engagement” toward radical political advocacy.

**Contact an organization with whose platform you agree and see how you can get involved.**

Students research and contact an organization working toward the issue of global climate change. ...

**Examining protests and their connection to the past**

Students could investigate the events following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020 and create a timeline of major successes and challenges in the lives of

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<sup>21</sup> Stern 2021: 19.

<sup>22</sup> Stern 2021: 370.

<sup>23</sup> Stern 2021: 300. See also Stern 2021: 227, 253.

African Americans from the 13th Amendment to modern day society. Once the timeline is completed, students should answer the following question; “How much of the past injustices against African American people affects the modern issues and events of today?” Students can talk about their answers in small groups as the teacher circulates and records observations. Once students are done discussing, as a class, they should provide solutions for racial injustice.<sup>24</sup>

What the Fordham Institute describes as “thoughtful and creative,” most Americans would describe as “radical and left-wing.”

The Fordham Institute extends its embrace of Action Civics throughout its individual analyses of the state standards.

- Support for concepts such as “advocacy,” “active citizenship,” “informed citizenship,” “effective citizenship,” “civic participation,” “informed participation,” “influencing policy,” “applying what they have learned,” “civic involvement,” “creating an action plan,” “individual action,” “informed action,” and “thoughtful action” in its review of the Alabama, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia, and Washington state standards.<sup>25</sup>
- Approving citation of service learning, service projects, or “action-oriented civics projects” in its review of the Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Maine, Massachusetts, Nebraska, North Dakota, and West Virginia state standards.<sup>26</sup>
- Approving citation of “active engagement,” “civic engagement,” and mention of “power” in its review of the Alabama, Arizona, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, South Dakota, and Wisconsin state standards.<sup>27</sup>
- Disapproving comment of standards that are “observational rather than participatory,” that fail to address “specific forms of civic engagement,” that lack “advocacy” skills, or where “The goal of producing active and informed citizens can hardly be detected,” in its review of the Arkansas, Louisiana, Missouri, and Pennsylvania state standards.<sup>28</sup>

When the Fordham Institute summarizes the Strengths of particular standards, it repeatedly includes language such as “The standards exhibit a commitment to active learning and preparing students to take informed civic action,” “The standards cultivate skills and dispositions that are

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<sup>24</sup> [Appendix 2: Civic Engagement Example Activities](#), South Dakota Department of Education. See also Stanley Kurtz, “[Noem Pledges to Bar Action Civics and Critical Race Theory.](#)” *National Review*, May 10, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Stern 2021: 40, 75, 99, 112, 148, 155, 161, 167, 173, 180-81, 198, 203-04, 208, 215, 225, 227, 234, 242, 252, 285, 292, 323, 334, 340.

<sup>26</sup> Stern 2021: 41, 49-50, 66, 99, 161, 174, 209, 253, 347.

<sup>27</sup> Stern 2021: 41, 49-50, 142, 148, 166, 179, 297, 299-300, 354.

<sup>28</sup> Stern 2021: 58, 155, 198, 277, 279. See also the Fordham Institute’s disapproval of Tennessee. Stern 2021: 307.

essential to informed citizenship,” and “The ‘active citizenship’ standards are an unapologetic call to arms.”<sup>29</sup> Contrariwise, the Fordham Institute laments when “The expectations that relate to civic skills and dispositions are academic and uninspiring.”<sup>30</sup>

The Fordham Institute does not state precisely how important Action Civics is in its Content and Rigor grades. If we judge by the amount of space *State Standards* devotes to Skills and Dispositions, which are a subsection of Content and Rigor, we may estimate that an otherwise perfect civics standard that explicitly barred Action Civics would be downgraded at least from an A to an A minus, and perhaps as far as a B. Likewise, an utterly wretched civics standard that enthusiastically and effectively supported Action Civics would be upgraded at least from an F to a D, and perhaps as far as a C. We cannot say precisely, since the Fordham Institute does not provide sufficient information to assess its grading mechanisms. What we can say is that the Fordham Institute will not give you an A unless you support Action Civics.

*The Fordham Institute Means “Action Civics” When Its Says “Skills and Dispositions”*

Within *State Standards*, the entire Civics “Skills and Dispositions” section in each state review provides advocacy for Action Civics.

The Fordham Institute’s conflation of Skills and Dispositions and Action Civics begins with Strength 3: “*Exemplary civics and U.S. History standards champion essential civic dispositions such as respect for other persons and opinions, an inclination to serve, and a commitment to American institutions and ideals.*”<sup>31</sup> The Fordham Institute then elaborates that “Some civic dispositions are habitual, meaning they should be practiced as well as preached, which is why the strongest civics standards insist on students’ active participation.”<sup>32</sup> It then defines “specific disposition-focused activities” as Action Civics:

For example, California devotes an entire appendix to the features of successful service-learning projects (but doesn’t require them), while Massachusetts (in addition to asking its high school civics students to research and write papers on issues of local and global concern) expects every high school student to complete a “civic action” project.<sup>33</sup>

We should note here that the “skills” and “dispositions” culminate in actual Action Civics programs—that what is at issue is not simply character training, or “how to write a paragraph,” but a coherent pedagogy with concrete commitments to classroom hours and discrete courses. As the Fordham Institute itself states in its critique of the Hawaii state standards,

the emphasis on civic dispositions is consistent but broad. ... in many higher grades, at least one standard somewhat vaguely requires that students learn how individuals can

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<sup>29</sup> Stern 2021: 50, 80, 98, 186, 226. See also Stern 2021: 234, 340.

<sup>30</sup> Stern 2021: 278.

<sup>31</sup> Stern 2021: 32.

<sup>32</sup> Stern 2021: 33.

<sup>33</sup> Stern 2021: 33.

improve their communities or change society. Yet most of these standards would benefit from more thoughtful articulation and concerted integration into the course content.<sup>34</sup>

The Fordham Institute uses Skills and Dispositions to advocate for the entire Action Civics curriculum.

### *Tactical Advocacy for Action Civics*

The Fordham Institute does generally avoid advocacy for the more radical variations of Action Civics, such as those propagated by Generation Citizen.<sup>35</sup> Yet even the Fordham Institute's critique does approve some startlingly radical elements. In its discussion of South Dakota's standards, for example, the Fordham Institute notes approvingly that they

include suggestions that students develop an argument for or against the electoral college and voter registration requirements, the expectation that they will identify bias and misleading information in media sources, and an explicit call to "organize actions for social justice." As those examples suggest, the quality of the skills guidance varies, but ultimately the good outweighs the bad.<sup>36</sup>

The Fordham Institute, moreover, does not appear to apply a uniform Action Civics standard to the different states, but rather to provide advice to each one about how to increase Action Civics as much as possible in the immediate future.

- *Illinois*: "The treatment of civic dispositions begins well but finishes with less purpose. ... The later standards do not mention current events as a reference point for teaching or service learning as an opportunity for learning. ... Correlate the high school civics and U.S. History standards with the requirements of state law."<sup>37</sup>
- *New Jersey*: "if the state is serious about active citizenship, then it should at least consider embedding these expectations in specific courses or grade levels. ... Incorporate the 'active citizenship' expectations for twelfth grade into the relevant high school courses (i.e., U.S. History, World History, or a separate course in civics/U.S. Government)."<sup>38</sup>
- *Ohio*: "students in high school are expected to 'analyze a public policy issue in terms of collaboration or conflict among the levels of government involved and the branches of government involved'—a worthy assignment that might be even more meaningful if students were explicitly asked to research a problem in their community, evaluate the proposed solutions, and make the case for a specific course of action."<sup>39</sup>

The Fordham Institute applies similarly tactical advice in its reviews of the California, Colorado, District of Columbia, Georgia, Hawaii, Iowa, Maryland, Mississippi, New Mexico, and North

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<sup>34</sup> Stern 2021: 112.

<sup>35</sup> Lindsay and Mercer, *Action Civics*, pp. 13-15.

<sup>36</sup> Stern 2021: 300. See also Stern 2021: 104.

<sup>37</sup> Stern 2021: 122-23, 125.

<sup>38</sup> Stern 2021: 228, 230.

<sup>39</sup> Stern 2021: 260.

Carolina state standards.<sup>40</sup> The Fordham Institute’s critique provides arguments for state education bureaucrats, which they can use to convince state legislators to authorize more Action Civics.

*The Fordham Institute: Justifying Traditional Civics to the Woke Establishment?*

The Fordham Institute continues to push for a great deal of rigorous, traditional content in civics and history standards, often with great style.

- *Illinois*: “A sense of the generality of the Illinois standards for civics can be gained by noting that the concepts to be covered in thirteen years of education take only two pages to describe and contain only four proper nouns: ‘Illinois,’ ‘United States,’ ‘Illinois Constitution,’ and ‘U.S. Constitution.’”<sup>41</sup>
- *Kansas*: “the summary for the subsequent era is a single cosmic sentence: ‘Students will evaluate the impact of the Cold War and Civil Rights on the social, cultural, environmental, economic, and political fabric of the United States.’”<sup>42</sup>

Some of its critiques illuminate the preening vacuity of “woke” curriculum standards: “Oregon’s newly adopted civics and U.S. History standards are inadequate. Instead of specific and rigorous content, they offer vague exhortations and copious virtue signaling.”<sup>43</sup> Others note in subdued fashion especially horrific excesses in state standards. So, in its critique of California’s standards, the Fordham Institute mentions in a footnote that the state might rethink some of the individuals its standards present as civic role models:

Yuri Kochiyama, an advocate for social change, tolerance for Muslims, and reparations for Japanese Americans who were interned during WWII, may draw criticism for her later support of the Revolutionary Action Movement and Osama bin Laden. Minoru Yasui, who suffered a similar wartime experience, took his case to the Supreme Court, and devoted his life to tolerance, might be substituted.<sup>44</sup>

Its repeated emphasis to check for confirmation bias, albeit it could be weaponized by radical teachers to persecute conservative students, might prompt radical teachers to examine their own groupthink.<sup>45</sup>

The Fordham Institute thus continues the Hirschian critiques for which it has achieved some note—but now they are framed as suggestions *to make Action Civics more effective*. The Fordham Institute now argues that students have to learn traditional civics and history content if they are to be effectively “civically engaged”:

most essential social studies skills have little meaning in an information vacuum—meaning, they are impossible to demonstrate without significant background knowledge.

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<sup>40</sup> Stern 2021: 66, 75, 93, 105, 108, 112, 134, 167, 192, 234, 248.

<sup>41</sup> Stern 2021: 122.

<sup>42</sup> Stern 2021: 143. See also Stern 2021: 80.

<sup>43</sup> Stern 2021: 270-72. See also Stern 2021: 68, 235.

<sup>44</sup> Stern 2021: 63, 72.

<sup>45</sup> Stern 2021: 32.

... there is a sense in which any standards that focus on students' knowledge of core content are also skills standards, which is why states with "exemplary" social studies standards invariably organize them around the essentials of American history and government rather than abstract skillsets.<sup>46</sup>

Or, as it says of the Connecticut state standards, "Understanding a problem based on time and place and the choice between individual and collective action emerge in high school. These are excellent civics skills but difficult to forge sans content."<sup>47</sup>

The Fordham Institute appears to be testing a line of argument that will justify traditional civics content to the rising Woke Establishment. If this is indeed the case, we are afraid it has misjudged the larger horizon. Just as service-learning pedagogy more broadly hollows out all classroom education by saying it can only be justified by how it supports service-learning, so Action Civics hollows out history and civics by saying it can only be justified by how it supports Action Civics. There are only so many classroom hours, and Action Civics is a hungry parasite.

Consider how the Fordham Institute itself criticizes the District of Columbia for too much history content, which comes at the expense of "current issues" that are the prompts for Action Civics:

the focus on the history of the District and its government feels excessive, given the number of current issues (e.g., housing, crime, and jobs) that students are likely to find more engaging and relevant. ... Reduce the volume of historical material in D.C. History and Government and include more opportunities for students to apply their knowledge of history and government to the study of current issues in their communities (e.g., by asking them to write a paper on housing, education, or juvenile justice).<sup>48</sup>

The Fordham Institute's critique itself bears witness to the acid power of Action Civics: the champion of historical content has already come to criticize "excessive" historical content.

Fundamentally, Action Civics proponents don't believe in the value of traditional civics. We greatly fear that the Fordham Institute has undertaken a wager that will likely, at best, stave off for a few years the time when Action Civics advocates pocket the Fordham Institute's concessions and proceed with their destruction of the civics and history curriculum.

### *Conclusion*

We must reiterate our praise for the Fordham Institute's intentions. It wishes to forward the goal of bipartisan civics education. It desires in this what every civic-minded citizen would like.

Indeed, the Fordham Institute has produced material of great value in its review in *State Standards of Civics and History* standards. Its authors have devoted an extraordinary amount of labor to reading every civics and history standard in the country. The Fordham Institute's critiques usefully point out where standards lack traditional content coverage. We are indebted to this component of *State Standards*.

Yet *State Standards* blends advocacy for traditional content with counterproductive advocacy for Action Civics. We believe that the Fordham Institute has erred in seeking to compromise with

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<sup>46</sup> Stern 2021: 31-32.

<sup>47</sup> Stern 2021: 80.

<sup>48</sup> Stern 2021: 93, 95; and see also 156.

the proponents of a radical pedagogy, which cannot ultimately be reconciled with the traditional pedagogy that the Fordham Institute has historically forwarded. We also believe that the Fordham Institute has erred by crafting its Content and Rigor grades so that the reader cannot tell if it rewards Action Civics or its antidote of traditional civics. The Fordham Institute would have acted in a truly impartial manner if it had ascribed a separate grade to each state's Action Civics commitments. Americans then could have used the Fordham Institute's *State Standards* as an informational resource that would allow them to oppose or to support Action Civics as they saw fit.

The Fordham Institute's conflation of Action Civics and traditional civics means that Americans cannot use *State Standards* as a reliable tool to evaluate the 50 states' standards in Civics and History. The Fordham Institute's conflation is the opposite of bipartisan, because it subordinates *State Standards* to advocacy for the radical pedagogy of Action Civics.

We make the following recommendations to the Fordham Institute—and to any other conservative education organization that takes on the work of evaluating content standards.

- 1) Assess any commitment to Action Civics as a very great negative—one that would reduce an A at least to a C, if not to an F.
- 2) If one must accept Action Civics, separate out the evaluation of content and rigor from the evaluation of Action Civics, so that readers can usefully distinguish what is actually good about civics and history courses from the radical pedagogy that afflicts them.
- 3) Provide absolute transparency about methods.

Assessments of content standards ought to embody these characteristics. The Fordham Institute's *State Standards*, alas, does not.

We offer these critiques with affection, for the Fordham Institute has done a great deal to forward education reform in the past. We offer them with regret, since the Fordham Institute has committed a great misstep by its support of Action Civics in *State Standards*. We offer them with hope, since we are confident that the Fordham Institute will read our criticism in the friendly spirit with which we offer it, will reflect, and will decide to repudiate its advocacy for Action Civics.