

## OUR VIEW

# Civics games offer reminder for all

The annual Wisconsin Civics Games are back, giving students in our state the chance to show off their knowledge of how government runs in the United States.

This is the fourth year for the Editorial Writing and Cartoon Contest, which is sponsored by the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. It's open to all middle school and high school students. That includes home-schooled students.

The focus for the essays and cartoons is "the importance of the First Amendment." Use of personal experiences, current events and historical examples is encouraged. Full information is available on the WNA's website. The deadline is 11:59 p.m. Dec. 4.

The WNA Foundation launched the games in 2018 "in response to declining civics education and participation." It's hard to argue they're wrong about that. Last week the Associated Press sent an article about exactly that, the failure of civics education in the United States.

Civics was once a core subject for schools, but that's clearly no longer the case. One teacher in South Carolina said he gives his students the same test given to immigrants seeking citizenship. Only 30-35% pass. "The rest of them are clueless. I mean, they're just clueless"

That instructor wasn't talking about high school students. He works at the University of South Carolina Beaufort.

In Wisconsin, the law requires students graduating from high school to take "a civics test comprised of 100 questions that are identical to the 100 questions that may be asked of an individual during the process of applying for U.S. citizenship by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services." To pass, students have to answer at least 65 questions correctly.

We couldn't find solid numbers for the results of the test and how Wisconsin students do as a whole. The state doesn't track it, though districts do. Local rates in recent years tended to have a failure rate of less than 7%.

It's not just students, though. Take the subject for this year's civics games. Most people can recall that the First Amendment provides for freedom of speech and religion. But how many can name, without having to look it up, the other three freedoms specifically mentioned?

When you don't understand how a system works, you're going to be much more easily misled about it. It's also easier to be intimidated by things you don't know about. The misunderstandings that can flow from those factors have real consequences for how the public sees government, what it can do, and what it should do.

The good news is that a lack of information is correctable, especially in this case. The key documents, including the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and state constitutions are the very definition of public records. They're easy to find, and people can read them for themselves in a fairly short time.

The testing materials are easily available as well. The Wisconsin Department of Public Education keeps a copy of the test and the answer key on its website. It also links to study resources and even has a link to civics flashcards from the federal government.

There's really no excuse to not know the basics of how government works — or at least the way it's supposed to. Think of the documents listed above as kind of an owner's manual for the United States. Understanding them matters.

For students in the area, we hope you'll consider entering the Civics Games. We'd love to be writing about how an area student picked up one of the top prizes after judging wraps up in a few months.