

BUSH WANTS NEW CITIZENSHIP TEST

GOAL IS A CONSISTENT, MEANINGFUL EXAM

Saint Paul Pioneer Press (Minnesota)
January 17, 2004 Saturday CITY EDITION

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Section: MAIN; Pg. A9

Length: 502 words

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Body

WASHINGTON -- The **Bush** administration has decided to revamp the civics **test** that hundreds of thousands of prospective citizens each year must pass to become Americans, and is developing a **new exam**, officials say.

President **Bush** alluded to the effort in his speech last week on immigration reform, and this week the Bureau of **Citizenship** and Immigration Services convened a two-day conference of more than 100 immigrant advocates and academics in Washington to discuss the principles for change and its implications.

The current **test** has long been criticized as a random collection of unrelated details that conveys little of the significance of **citizenship**. But efforts to change it elicit concern from immigrant advocates, who fear a **new test** could become a barrier to **citizenship**.

"I don't **want** to make the **test** harder, and I don't **want** to make it easier -- I **want** to make it more **meaningful**," said Eduardo Aguirre, director of the **citizenship** agency, one of three **new** Homeland Security divisions that were part of the former Immigration and Naturalization Service.

A question on the current **test** asks, "What are the first 10 amendments to the Constitution called?" A hypothetical question on the **new test** might be, "What does the Bill of Rights mean for you?" said another official.

Aguirre said he also **wants** to move toward a more standardized **test**. The current **test** is an oral **exam** in which an examiner picks 10 or so civics questions from a list of 100 included in a study guide. Therefore, the examiner's discretion can result in lack of uniformity.

The government plans to develop a **new** civics **test** this year, try it out next year and complete the switch in 2006, said an official with the Bureau of **Citizenship** and Immigration Services.

In a related move, the agency is already experimenting with changes to the English-language **test** that prospective citizens must also pass.

Nearly 574,000 people became U.S. citizens in 2002, the latest year for which statistics are available. The law requires that people seeking **citizenship** show that they can understand and speak basic English and demonstrate "a knowledge and understanding of the fundamentals of the history, and of the principles and form of government, of the United States."

The present version of the civics **test** dates from the mid-1980s amnesty program for illegal immigrants. During the Clinton administration, a presidential commission recommended that the **test** be replaced. The recommendation has languished until now.

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The current **test** "is just not coherent," said political scientist Noah Pickus, director of the Institute for Emerging Issues in Raleigh, N.C., and an advocate for changing the **exam**.

"You can make a coherent and **meaningful examination** by identifying what you believe are the key principles in our history and government," he said. "The first thing is to identify what really matters and then to realize that you are trying to tell a story to a **new** citizen, to inspire and encourage them."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (92%); **CITIZENSHIP** (90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (90%); IMMIGRATION LAW (89%); ACADEMIC **TESTING** (78%); STANDARDIZED ACADEMIC **TESTING** (78%); TALKS & MEETINGS (77%); LANGUAGE & LANGUAGES (77%); TYPES OF GOVERNMENT (77%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (72%); CONFERENCES & CONVENTIONS (72%); STATISTICS (70%); POLITICAL SCIENCE (69%); AMNESTY (60%)

Company: IMMIGRATION SERVICES (60%)

Organization: IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (55%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (55%)

Geographic: RALEIGH, NC, USA (79%); NORTH CAROLINA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (95%)

Load-Date: August 21, 2005