



# GUARDIAN OF DEMOCRACY

The Civic Mission of Schools



# Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools

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This report was produced by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools in partnership with the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, the National Conference on Citizenship, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University, and the American Bar Association Division for Public Education.

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Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools

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CAMPAIGN FOR THE CIVIC MISSION OF SCHOOLS



National Conference on Citizenship  
*Chartered by Congress*

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## Message from Campaign Partner: Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics at the University of Pennsylvania

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At a time when the nation is confronting some of the more difficult decisions it has faced in long time, a lack of high-quality civic education in America's schools leaves millions of citizens without the wherewithal to make sense of our system of government. Reasons for concern are reflected in the answers our Annenberg Public Policy Center surveys elicited from national samples of the U.S. population in the past decade. These were among our findings:

- Only one-third of Americans could name all three branches of government; one-third couldn't name any.
- Just over a third thought that it was the intention of the Founding Fathers to have each branch hold a lot of power, but the president has the final say.
- Just under half of Americans (47%) knew that a 5-4 decision by the Supreme Court carries the same legal weight as a 9-0 ruling.
- Almost a third mistakenly believed that a U.S. Supreme Court ruling could be appealed.
- When the Supreme Court divides 5-4, roughly one in four (23%) believed the decision was referred to Congress for resolution; 16% thought it needed to be sent back to the lower courts.

One can debate the importance of knowing the name of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court or the details of Paul Revere's ride, but there is little doubt that understanding such foundational concepts as checks and balances and the importance of an independent judiciary does make a difference. Specifically, those bewildered by such basics as the branches of government and the concept of judicial review are less likely to express trust in the courts, and, as trust declines, more likely to say that courts are too powerful and, judges should be impeached or court jurisdiction stripped when unpopular rulings are issued and that, under some circumstances, it might simply be best to abolish the Supreme Court. Importantly, those who have taken a high school civics class are more likely to command key constitutional concepts.<sup>1</sup>

The partners who have created this follow-up to the 2003 *Civic Mission of the Schools* (CMS) report share the belief that the well-being of our body politic is best served by an informed, engaged citizenry that understands how and why our system of government works. As this call-to-action argues, civic education not only increases citizen knowledge and engagement, but also expands civic equality, improves twenty-first century skills, and may reduce the dropout rate and improve the school climate.

The civic education movement spawned by CMS eight years ago has accomplished much, but much remains to be done. To improve civic literacy, skills and engagement, this report proposes that schools adopt six proven practices in civic learning, ranging from high-quality classroom instruction to several innovative pedagogies and activities outside of formal classes. Additionally, two important policy areas are spotlighted: assessment of civic learning and the role of teacher professional development. The report also lays out an agenda for a wide range of stakeholders including policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels; academics and researchers; funders; the media; and parents. These recommendations were crafted at a conference of national leaders in civic learning in March 2011, convened by the Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands in partnership with the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools and the National Conference on Citizenship. And like the first *Civic Mission of Schools* report, this report reminds its readers that the country shortchanges the civic mission of its schools at its peril.



Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Ph.D.

Director

Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania

## Message from Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools Co-Chairs

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At the close of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, a woman approached the eldest delegate, Dr. Benjamin Franklin, outside of Independence Hall. She asked whether the framers had created a monarchy or a republic. In reply, he told her that America would be “a republic, if you can keep it.”

Dr. Franklin’s brief response captures a vital, often overlooked aspect of one of the key ingredients in making our democracy work: an educated and engaged citizenry. In a democracy in which the final authority rests with the people, our local, state, and federal governments will only be as responsive and great as citizens demand them to be.

Over two centuries after Dr. Franklin’s remark, many believe that the democratic process he helped create is growing incapable of meeting America’s great national challenges. A recent study conducted by the Pew Charitable Trusts reports that only a third of Americans trust the federal government as an institution. This distrust is understandable among generations that grew up in the shadow of political scandals, increasing ideological polarization, and financial crisis.

When this distrust leads to disengagement, cynicism, and a national attention span that fails to see politics as much more than a series of elections and scandals, it distracts from the many challenges that we as a society must face—and can only face together through civic and political engagement. The great national challenges of our time can only be solved by an engaged citizenry knowledgeable about our problems and how best to solve them.

Those who blame our democratic shortfalls on a media failing its responsibilities, the proliferation of money in politics, and politicians serving narrow interests rather than the common good are not wrong—all these are very real threats to American democracy. But all three of these threats, and others, would be ameliorated by a more knowledgeable and engaged citizenry.

Knowledge of our system of governance and our rights and responsibilities as citizens is not passed along through the gene pool. Each generation of Americans must be taught these basics. Families and parents have a key role to play, yet our schools remain the one universal experience we all have to gain civic knowledge and skills. That is the civic mission of schools. Only through education—which spans well over a decade of a child’s life and encompasses that which takes place both within the classroom and outside of it—can we ensure that every young person can live up to Dr. Franklin’s challenge. It takes only a brief look at statistics about shortfalls in civic knowledge and participation (see pages 14–15 of this report) to see the extent to which our democracy is in peril.

To meet this peril, we both have founded programs that seek to reach tens of thousands of students. The iCivics program features online lessons on the three branches of government, the Bill of Rights, executive power, and the federal budget. The Center on Congress uses a range of curricular materials and teacher training to help citizens understand how to be effective in bringing their concerns to their elected officials.

Bringing a high-quality civic education to every American student requires more than individual programs and curricula, however. It requires a systematic approach that is only possible through public policy. Since American federalism means that local, state, and federal governments share custody of education policy, restoring the civic mission of schools must be the responsibility of policymakers at every level.

This report outlines that challenge. We strongly believe that following the recommendations in this report will revitalize the democracy we love so much for generations to come. After all, American democracy is only ours, as Dr. Franklin reminds us, if we can keep it.



Justice Sandra Day O’Connor  
United States Supreme Court (1981–2006)  
Founder, iCivics



Congressman Lee Hamilton  
United States House of Representatives (1965–1999)  
Founder, Center on Congress

***Justice O’Connor and Congressman Hamilton are co-chairs of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools.***

# Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools

## Executive Summary

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, America faces many challenges, both at home and abroad. Too often, however, our democracy, the very system that should be able to address those challenges, seems to fall short. A divided citizenry, Washington gridlock, an often superficial media, and the overwhelming influence of money in politics often prevent government from serving the common good.

While there is no single solution that alone can revitalize our democracy, there is one common-sense step our nation can take to strengthen it. Too often overlooked by politicians, educators, and civic engagement advocates, **investing in civic learning strengthens American democracy.**

Self-government requires far more than voting in elections every four years. It requires citizens who are informed and thoughtful, participate in their communities, are involved in the political process, and possess moral and civic virtues. Generations of leaders, from America's founders to the inventors of public education to elected leaders in the twentieth century, have understood that these qualities are not automatically transmitted to the next generation—they must be passed down through schools. Ultimately, **schools are the guardians of democracy.**

### STUDENTS WHO RECEIVE EFFECTIVE CIVIC LEARNING ARE:

- More likely to vote and discuss politics at home
- Four times more likely to volunteer and work on community issues
- More confident in their ability to speak publicly and communicate with their elected representatives.

**Improved civic learning can address many of our democratic shortfalls.** It increases the **democratic accountability of elected officials**, since only informed and engaged citizens will ask tough questions of their leaders. It **improves public discourse**, since knowledgeable and interested citizens will demand more from the media. It **fulfills our ideal of civic equality** by giving every citizen, regardless of background, the tools to be a full participant.

Despite these obvious benefits, a majority of America's schools either neglect civic learning or teach it in a

minimal or superficial way (too often as an elective). The consequences of this neglect are staggering, but unsurprising. On a recent national assessment in civics, two-thirds of all American students scored below proficient. On the same test, less than one-third of eighth graders could identify the historical purpose of the Declaration of Independence, and fewer than one in five high school seniors were able to explain how citizen participation benefits democracy. Despite the highest levels of voter turnout in over forty years, the 2008 presidential election witnessed nearly one hundred million Americans who were eligible to vote but did not.

A large body of research demonstrates the tangible benefits of civic learning. First and foremost, **civic learning promotes civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions**—research makes clear that students who received high-quality civic learning are more likely than their counterparts to understand public issues, view political engagement as a means of addressing communal challenges, and participate in civic activities. **Civic learning has similarly been shown to promote civic equality.** Poor, minority, urban, or rural students who do receive high-quality civic learning perform considerably higher than their counterparts, demonstrating the possibility of civic learning to fulfill the ideal of civic equality.

Research also demonstrates noncivic benefits of civic learning. Civic learning has been shown to instill young people with the **“twenty-first century competencies” that employers value** in the new economy. Schools that implement high-quality civic learning are more likely to have a **better school climate** and are more likely to have **lower dropout rates.**

Six proven practices constitute a well-rounded and high-quality civic learning experience, and this report details both what they entail and the research demonstrating the advantages of each.

1. **Classroom Instruction:** Schools should provide instruction in government, history, economics, law, and democracy.
2. **Discussion of Current Events and Controversial Issues:** Schools should incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.

3. **Service-Learning:** Schools should design and implement programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.
4. **Extracurricular Activities:** Schools should offer opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities outside of the classroom.
5. **School Governance:** Schools should encourage student participation in school governance.
6. **Simulations of Democratic Processes:** Schools should encourage students to participate in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.

Ensuring the proliferation of these practices requires a range of steps from education stakeholders at every level, but two strategies in particular stand out.

Policymakers must ensure that civic learning is included alongside English, math, and science as a core subject, emphasized by **standards and assessments** at the federal, state, and local levels.

Entities that provide pre-service and in-service **teacher professional development** should expand and improve their offerings in the area of civic learning.

### BENEFITS OF CIVIC LEARNING

- 81% of high school dropouts said they would have been less likely to do so if there were more opportunities for experiential learning.
- Students who receive both traditional and interactive civics score highest on assessments and demonstrate high levels of twenty-first century skills such as critical thinking, news comprehension, and work ethic.
- Schools with civic learning programs are more likely to be “safe, inclusive, and respectful.”

A full menu of policy recommendations addressed at a variety of audiences can be found on page 42 of this report. These recommendations have been compiled from various stakeholders over the past decade and at

a convening of leading civic learning experts in March 2011. Recommendations for the following groups have been proposed, a sampling of which follow.

### LOCAL SCHOOLS AND ADMINISTRATORS

- Change how civic learning is taught, from the dry facts of history and the structure of government to an emphasis on how citizens can and must participate in civic life.
- Treat civic learning as an interdisciplinary subject to be employed across the curriculum.

### STATE POLICYMAKERS

- Develop common standards and assessments in social studies through a state-led effort and hold schools and districts accountable for student civic learning achievement by inclusion of civic learning in state assessments and accountability measures.
- Utilize alternative forms of assessment such as group projects and activities or portfolio assessments. These assessments are better suited to assessing student achievement in civic learning than traditional “paper and pencil” tests.
- Require and support high-quality, ongoing professional development for all social studies and civic learning teachers.

### FEDERAL POLICYMAKERS

- Establish a competitive grant program for civic learning within the U.S. Department of Education that would fund innovation in civic learning, provide research on effective civic learning strategies, allow for the replication of successful programs that are proven by research, and develop programs to serve currently underserved school populations.
- Provide state level data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests in Civics and History, thereby allowing states to know whether they are meeting the civic mission of schools and whether they are adequately serving traditionally underserved student populations.
- Support the establishment of an award program recognizing civic learning achievement for students and schools. Model this program on the “Blue Ribbon Schools” program to increase attention paid to civic learning at the school level.

Nectar Mattress Coupon



### **COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**

- Require all students, regardless of major, to take at least one engaging civic learning course to overcome any lack of basic civic knowledge and skills and to ensure that all students leave higher education prepared to be informed and engaged citizens.

### **SCHOLARS AND RESEARCHERS**

- Develop and implement rigorous studies on innovative civic learning and teaching approaches, and provide data backed evidence of the effectiveness of civic learning approaches, programs, and teaching strategies.

### **FUNDERS**

- Corporate foundations need to become more engaged in funding civic learning, especially given that high-quality civic learning helps build the twenty-first century skills that the business community needs in the next generation of workers.
- The philanthropic sector should consider developing a consortium of foundations to coordinate and help fund high-quality civic learning.

### **PARENTS, THE MEDIA, AND ALL CITIZENS**

- Parents are the first and best civics teachers. Parents should encourage their children to develop an interest in keeping themselves informed on current events, encourage their children to take an interest in and volunteer in their community, and help their children develop civic skills and habits.
- Citizens from all walks of life can help their schools by volunteering time and resources to help schools provide effective civic learning.

All American children need to have the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to participate in, preserve, and strengthen our republic. This can only be achieved if all these groups embrace the civic mission of schools and work together to promote high-quality civic learning. By renewing this commitment, America can live up to the ideal of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.





# CIVIC COMMON SENSE

We begin by presenting a case statement in support of civic learning. While much of this report deals in statistics, classroom practices, and policy arguments, we begin with something more basic—a broad look at what civic learning is, why it matters, and its centrality to American democracy throughout our history.

BY MICHAEL GERSON, MIKE MCCURRY, LES FRANCIS, AND JOHN BRIDGELAND

## I. Our Current Challenge

It is the current crisis of America that great civic exertions are required of a divided people. Our bonds are strained, our civility has worn thin, and our sense of common purpose has weakened, just as the need for cooperation on large challenges grows urgent.

We are an optimistic people, and rightly so. Born out of the simple belief that life could and should be better, each generation of Americans has risen to great challenges, from a revolution for independence to a civil war to end slavery to economic upheavals to world wars to building a more just and inclusive society for all people. Our history, while imperfect, evokes pride. And even in difficult times, Americans believe in exceptionalism—not an exceptionalism built on a sense of superiority, but in firm confidence that a nation that protects individual liberty, promotes equality of opportunity, and permits the human spirit to flourish is fundamental to building a more perfect union at home, while serving as a beacon of hope to people around the world.

.....

The loss of quality civic education from so many of our classrooms has left too many young Americans without the most basic knowledge of who our forefathers are, or the significance of the founding documents, [...and] the risks and sacrifices made by previous generations, to ensure that this country survived war and depression; through the great struggles for civil, and social, and worker's rights. It is up to us, then, to teach them.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA**

.....

But the ideal of America as composed of a unified “We the People” can at times seem to ring hollow, since so little seems to unite three hundred million Americans. At a time of our greatest division, Abraham Lincoln reminded his countrymen that, “though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.” Americans’ bonds of affection are once again threatened, and we must call upon the better angels of our nature to restore them.

The present decline in common purpose is closely linked to a decline in civility. When Americans do not feel bound to their fellow citizens, spirited rhetoric leads to divisiveness and inaction. Even a brief look at cable news or political blogs makes clear that many Americans are talking past—rather than to—each other, and they often do so with a fundamental lack of respect for the other’s perspectives. Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously told opponents that they were “entitled to their own opinions, but not their own facts.” Today, on nearly every public issue, different fact patterns to which various sides subscribe make productive discourse nearly impossible.

Worse yet, these divisions and this dysfunction come at a horribly inopportune time. On our current trajectory, America will not only place unfair burdens on the rising generation, it will leave them unprepared and ill-equipped for success in a competitive world. And that course would betray the greatest duty of any generation—the duty to leave its children loved, prepared, valued, guided and educated to and for a better life. Consider just a few of the many challenges we face:

- We are at the beginning of an historic economic transformation as we move from an industrial, national economy to a technological, global one. The individual, economic, and societal impacts are already staggering, and few of our leaders have presented a plan that fully explains how we as a nation will emerge even stronger in the newly globalized world. Many wonder how we can

restore the American Dream, as rates of social mobility in America fall behind those of our European counterparts.

- Our education system routinely fails urban, rural, low-income and minority students. Too many students drop out of high school and college, and those who do graduate—particularly those from low-income families—often lack the education, skills, and training necessary to succeed in the twenty-first century global economy.
- Our national health care system measures worst among industrialized nations on nearly every metric, despite our spending more, on a per capita basis, on health than any other country on earth.
- The nation’s infrastructure—road, transit systems, water, sewers, airports, rail, and ports—is crumbling, literally falling to pieces at a rate that will cripple economic growth and individual freedom.

And perhaps worst of all, these crises come when we can least afford to deal with them. Our national debt will soon exceed our GDP for only the second time in American history, every child born today comes into the world owing at least \$45,000, and the “balance due” grows each and every day.

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Since the founding of this Nation, education and democracy have gone hand in hand. The Founders believed a nation that governs itself, like ours, must rely upon an informed and engaged electorate. Their purpose was not only to teach all Americans how to read and write but to instill the self-evident truths that are the anchors of our political system.

**PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN**

.....

Structural deficits leave us with no easy answers. Benefits and entitlements that Americans hold dear, such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, will not be immune from the pressures of our fiscal reality. On the revenue side we have, at the federal level, a tax code that is cumbersome and riddled with loopholes. The fiscal crisis of the states and cities is, in some cases, even more urgent, with fiscal pressures and constitutionally mandated balanced budget requirements forcing cuts in education, public safety, health services, and more.

Instead of securing the blessings of liberty for our posterity, we are imposing upon them a crumbling infrastructure, broken health care and education systems, and a burden of debt they do not deserve and should not bear.

## II. Centrality of an Educated Citizenry to American Democracy

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Appropriately, our crisis has led many Americans to turn back to the wisdom of the framers, as others—from Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King Jr.—did in times of national challenge. But it is important not just to quote or praise the framers, but to understand their ideals of liberty, equality, and democracy. They believed that democracy was not limited to voting in quadrennial elections. They envisioned Americans as educated citizens, active in the lives of their communities and country, and they believed that civic education was essential to responsible self-government.

America as a new nation was not created out of devotion to a motherland, a royal family, or a national religion. Americans are instead defined by our fidelity to certain ideals, expressed in the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights and subsequent amendments. While citizenship is formally acquired through either birth or naturalization, all

of us must learn to become Americans. Peoples from diverse cultural, religious, and racial backgrounds can fully join the American community by sharing its defining commitments. If Americans are not bound together by common values, we will become fragmented and turn on one another.

Knowledge of our history, ideals, and system are not innate, but acquired through education. As former Associate Justice Sandra Day O’Connor has written: “The better educated our citizens are, the better equipped they will be to preserve the system of government we have. And we have to start with the education of our nation’s young people. Knowledge about our government is not handed down through the gene pool. Every generation has to learn it, and we have some work to do.”

The Founders understood this. Many state constitutions, including several that predated our national constitution,



put the diffusion of knowledge and the civic mission of schools at the center of public education. George Washington and James Madison both went so far as to envision a national university to educate generations of good citizens. It was well understood that an educated citizenry was basic to a functioning society.

This education should include the important facts of our history. Americans should be familiar with the miracle at Philadelphia, the bravery at Valley Forge, the sacrifices at Gettysburg and Iwo Jima, and the courage displayed in Selma and Little Rock. But civic learning does not consist of facts or stories alone, as dramatic and inspiring as they may be. It must also be an education in the duties that we owe to one another and to the future of our country. John Gardner spoke powerfully about the American proposition—the social contract—when he said, “Freedom and responsibility, liberty and duty. That’s the deal.”

The *Civic Mission of Schools* report, written nearly a decade ago by a coalition of scholars and practitioners, set forth more formally the requirements of competent and responsible citizens. While the challenges we face are great, the demands of democratic citizenship are, with the right training, attainable for every American.

According to that report, competent and responsible citizens share four common traits:

- **Informed and thoughtful.** *They have a grasp and an appreciation of history and the fundamental processes of American democracy, an understanding and awareness of public and community issues, an ability to obtain information when needed, a capacity to think critically, and a willingness to enter into dialogue with others about different points of view and to understand diverse perspectives. They are tolerant of ambiguity and resist simplistic answers to complex questions.*
- **Participate in their communities.** *They belong to and contribute to groups in civil society that offer venues for Americans to participate in public service; work together to overcome problems; and pursue an array of cultural, social, political, and religious interests and beliefs.*
- **Act politically.** *They have the skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to accomplish public purposes—for instance, by organizing people to address social issues, solving problems in groups, speaking in public, petitioning and protesting to influence public policy, and voting.*
- **Moral and civic virtues.** *They are concerned for the rights and welfare of others, socially responsible,*

*willing to listen to alternative perspectives, confident in their capacity to make a difference, and ready to contribute personally to civic and political action. They strike a reasonable balance between their own interests and the common good. They recognize the importance of and practice civic duties such as voting and respecting the rule of law.*


## SPOTLIGHT ON STATE CONSTITUTIONS

- California: “A general diffusion of knowledge and intelligence being essential to the preservation of the rights and liberties of the people, the Legislature shall encourage the promotion of intellectual improvement.”
- Massachusetts: “Wisdom and knowledge, diffused generally among the body of the people, being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education.”
- Texas: “General diffusion of knowledge being essential to the preservation of the liberties and rights of the people, it shall be the duty of the Legislature to establish public free schools.”

Providing this sort of civic learning is a broad social responsibility, involving parents, community leaders, and public officials. But the role of schools as conduits for civic knowledge and virtue is deeply rooted in the American tradition.

From the earliest days of the republic, the civic mission of school enjoyed broad support: Federalist John Adams wrote that “liberty cannot be preserved” without civic education, and his Democratic-Republican counterpart Thomas Jefferson argued that since the citizenry is “the only safe depository of government power [...] if we think them not enlightened enough [...] the remedy is not to take it from them, but inform their discretion by education.”

As public schools began to proliferate in the early nineteenth century, advocates for universal education held the shared view that the only guarantor of democracy resided with those schools. This vision of public education as serving civic ends animated both the establishment of the American public school system and the development of its curricula. Many state constitutions explicitly set out civic education as a basis



for the newly established systems of public schools. Alexis de Tocqueville noted that the primary difference between European-style schooling and American schooling was that, in America, “[t]he general thrust of education is directed toward political life.”

By 1890, nearly every American child between the ages of five and 13 attended school regularly, with the vast majority in schools funded and administered by newly emergent school districts. Civic education was integral to curricula nationwide. Regardless of the fact that historic classroom methods of rote memorization are far removed from today’s pedagogical ideals, public schools of a century ago provide a model for placing civic learning at the center of American education.

Until the 1960s, three courses in civics and government were common in American high schools: *Civics* explored the role of citizens especially at the local and state levels, *Problems of Democracy* encouraged students to discuss current issues and events, and *U.S. Government* focused on structures and function of government at the national level. Since then, there have been some positive civic developments in schools, including the offering of courses in economics, AP American Government, and various specialized social studies classes. But, overall, the civic picture in our schools remains bleak.

Despite this decades-long decline, the civic role of American schools is at least as important today as when Adams and Jefferson proclaimed it nearly two centuries ago. Four major reasons underscore the centrality of civic learning to American democracy in the twenty-first century.

### **DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY**

We are reminded, again, of the wisdom of the founders, who knew that an educated citizenry is essential to the practice of representative government that is accountable to its citizens. There is simply no other way to ensure that elected leaders represent the values, needs, and wishes of their constituents.

Research shows that Americans who are not properly educated about their roles as citizens are less likely to be civically engaged by nearly any metric. They are less likely to vote, less likely to engage in political discourse, and less likely to participate in community improvement projects than their counterparts who receive civic education.

*Nectar Mattress Discount*

Our system requires democratic accountability as a check on government officials—accountability that becomes nearly impossible if citizens do not understand how to make it happen and how to demand better when it doesn’t. Because disengaged citizens fail to ask hard questions of their leaders, it is no wonder that problems become crises and power is so easily abused.

Complaints about the influence of “special interests” abound, yet it is axiomatic that such interests will have disproportionate influence over public policy if the citizenry is uninformed, disengaged or both. Citizens who do not receive civic education are likely to either disengage, or, if they want to engage, often do not know how to do so. Either way, when citizens are unwilling or unable to advocate for their interests or the public good, those with narrower interests are pushing against an open door. Resultant policies can lead to further cynicism and disengagement, trapping us in a cycle that provides little opportunity for citizens to engage.

### **PUBLIC DISCOURSE**

Our public discourse is increasingly driven by partisanship and ideology, both in new and old media and among elected officials. America is defined not by a single political viewpoint, religion, race, or ethnic heritage, but rather by a shared commitment to the free expression of many ideas in a vibrant democracy. Without an education system that teaches every student the importance of our ideals, it is little surprise that citizens from balkanized communities are not able to engage in productive discussions with one another. Given that the American people are diverse in nearly every way, civic learning that provides basic facts, educates students in core ideals, and fosters a discourse of civility is a prerequisite to constructive public dialogue.

Beyond merely ensuring that relatively enlightened and civil public discourse can exist, civic learning is perhaps the only means of addressing the root causes of vacuous and sometimes vicious dialogue. Undereducated citizens demand nothing more than controversy and celebrity from the media, and politicians, in turn, too often provide only sound bites and talking points to whet our collective appetite for sensationalism and manufactured controversy. While it would be easy to blame the media and politicians for the superficiality of our public discourse, mainstream media coverage responds to consumer demand and can only be as good as the consumers it serves.

Even worse than superficial dialogue in the public square is the expression of outright falsehoods. When as many as one-quarter of Americans believe that President Obama was born overseas and is therefore ineligible for the presidency, and a similar percentage of the electorate believes that former President Bush was a co-conspirator in the 9/11 attacks, it is no surprise that demagoguery and *ad hominem* attacks can overwhelm serious and productive discussion of public affairs. Even when public issues are discussed, misconceptions about basic facts—ranging from the causes of global warming to the nature of the financial crisis—prevent formation of good policy going forward. The only way to escape from these vicious cycles is to educate citizens to think critically and demand facts and evidence from the media and their elected officials.



## CIVIC EQUALITY

Many have argued that educational inequities are the preeminent civil rights issue of this era. If we accept the idea that education is a civil rights issue, then achieving excellence in civic learning for every child must be at the cornerstone of our efforts. Students in private schools or in wealthy public school districts often receive civic learning—either from their schools or informally from their parents or communities—a benefit not afforded to millions of students from less privileged backgrounds.

Recent research shows that low income, African-American, Hispanic, and rural students score lower on tests of civic knowledge and have less optimistic views of their civic potential than their more privileged counterparts. America’s commitment to civic equality is as old as the nation itself; it began with the declaration that “All men are created equal” and was made real over the centuries by extensions of the franchise to nonlandowners, African Americans, women, and eighteen-year-olds. Yet true civic equality demands that all citizens have the knowledge and skills to make positive changes in their communities and in the nation at large. Only if transmitted through our public schools—

.....

Our country’s ideals of citizenship and responsive government may be under threat in an era of persistent and growing inequalities. Citizens with lower or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government officials, while the advantaged roar with a clarity and consistency that policymakers readily hear and routinely follow.

**AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION (2004)**

.....



which educate more citizens in a more sustained way than any other institutions—can all students, regardless of background, exercise their full potential as citizens.

## A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

The late and influential public education champion, Al Shanker, himself a child of immigrants, once noted that the purpose of American public education is for immigrant children to “learn what it means to be an American with the hope that they would then go home and teach their parents.”

For generations, new immigrants from across the world have come to America from nondemocratic nations in search of liberty and a new life. Once in American public schools, they learned about our history, our government, and the role of citizens in a democratic society. As America continues to welcome immigrants to our shores, civic learning remains vital to inculcating civic values in the newest Americans.

Unlike in other nations, Americans are not united by race or religion, but rather by a shared commitment to a set of core civic ideals. Our vision of pluralism, of *E Pluribus Unum*, is only possible with civic learning to imbue all citizens with shared knowledge of and commitment to American democratic ideals. Given that studies show many native-born Americans would fail to pass the citizenship test, the aim of civic learning must be not only to teach immigrants the tools of citizenship, but also to teach them to every American.

## III. Our Civic Shortfalls

Despite a long history of civic education—dating from the founding fathers to the 1960s—the civic mission of schools has faded in the last half century. Since then, civic engagement has faced pressures and challenges from nearly all sides. Most significantly were events that undermined our national optimism and crippled our faith in

government: assassinations, war, and scandals eroded the faith of the American people in their government, leading to deep feelings of disillusionment and distrust.

The sense of possibility and national unity that emerged from America’s victory in World War II gave way to cynicism



toward politics and about our capacity for institutional improvement. Civic learning—the best, natural antidote to this cynicism—was similarly in decline. Some on the left criticized it as overly focused on narrow views of tradition and American values, and some on the right blamed it for a purported bias toward liberal activism and social causes. The courses that had predominated for generations began fading from curricula at precisely the time that Americans most needed them.

More recently, civic learning has continued to face challenges. The competitiveness movement in education shifted national focus to math and science, often at the expense of other disciplines, including civics. Concerns about introducing controversial issues into the classroom, the very issues most important for students to discuss, has led some teachers and districts to shy away from current events. And the omission of civics from many assessment regimes provided yet another excuse for ignoring civic learning altogether. The absence of civic content from assessments signals its status as a second-class subject, a conclusion held by too many superintendents, principals, teachers, and students nationwide.

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The better educated our citizens are,  
the better equipped they will be to  
preserve the system of government  
we have. And we have to start with the  
education of our nation's young people.  
Knowledge about our government is  
not handed down through the gene  
pool. Every generation has to learn it,  
and we have some work to do.

**JUSTICE SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR**

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Jefferson's warning is just as applicable today as it was over two centuries ago: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be." Statistics about the state of civic learning and civic engagement in the United States confirm the urgency of this crisis. Upon examining the data, it becomes impossible to ignore the individual disempowerment, lack of participation, and civic achievement gap that threaten the fairness and democratic nature of our system of government.

**A LACK OF CIVIC KNOWLEDGE**

- On the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment, well more than two-thirds of all American students scored below proficient.

- On the same test, less than one-third of eighth graders could identify the historical purpose of the Declaration of Independence, and less than a fifth of high school seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy.
- In a nationwide study of basic civic knowledge, researchers defined competency as the ability to correctly answer three-quarters of questions on subject-based tests. The results were staggering: only 5% of Americans were competent in economics, only 11% in domestic issues, only 14% in foreign affairs, only 10% in geography, and only 25% in history.
- In 2006, in the midst of both midterm elections and the Iraq war, fewer than half of Americans could name the three branches of government, and only four in ten young people (aged 18 to 24) could find Iraq on the map.
- Only one in five Americans between the ages of 18 and 34 read a newspaper, and only one in ten regularly click on news web pages.
- Over a year after his term began, President Obama is still thought to be a Muslim by 32% of Americans and is thought to be foreign born by 25%.

**LOW LEVELS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

- While most observers cheered the high voter turnout in the election of 2008—a turnout that did indeed break many previous records—there is also a more sobering tale to be told. Despite the highest levels of voter turnout in over forty years, the 2008 presidential election featured turnout of only 56.8% of eligible voters. This means that nearly half of eligible voters, corresponding to nearly one hundred million Americans, failed to vote.
- American congressional elections, even historically significant “wave” elections (such as 1994, 2006, and 2010) have far lower turnout than those parliamentary elections in nearly any other western democracy. With Americans so disengaged from national and well-publicized elections and political events, it is no surprise that they are largely similarly disengaged from local elections and state-level politics.
- Civic shortfalls extend beyond mere voting. Between 1973 and 1994, the number of people who have served as an officer of a club or organization, worked for a political party, served on a committee, or attended a public meeting on town or school affairs declined by over 35%.



- During the same time period, the number of people who wrote a letter to their local newspaper or voiced their views to their member of Congress declined by nearly 15%.
- In light of the economic and personal challenges facing families in the aftermath of the most recent economic recession, 72% of Americans note that they have cut back on time engaged in civic participation.

### **A CIVIC ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

- African-American and Hispanic students are twice as likely as their white counterparts to score below proficient on national civics assessments. A similar civic knowledge gap exists between America's wealthiest and poorest students.

- Eligible minorities vote at about two-thirds the rate of their white counterparts.
- Families that make above \$75,000 per year are twice as likely to vote (and six times as likely to be politically active) as families that make below \$15,000 per year.
- These gaps exist not because of differences in intrinsic aptitudes, but because American education provides far fewer and lower-quality civic learning opportunities to minority and low-income students. The civic achievement gap was largely created by education policy, and education policy can help solve it.

## **IV. Restoring the Civic Mission of Schools**

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While many of the statistics about civic knowledge are gloomy, there is reason for hope. There is no problem faced by Americans that is not being solved by Americans somewhere in the country. We today know more than ever before about what policies and practices are effective for passing along civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions to the next generation. Improving civic learning demands a collective effort by education stakeholders at every level, from the schoolhouse to the White House. The final section of this report includes a comprehensive agenda for policymakers at the national, state, and local levels.

Civic learning is, at its heart, necessary to preserving our system of self-government. In a representative democracy, government is only as good as the citizens who elect its leaders, demand action on pressing issues, hold public officials accountable, and take action to help solve problems in their communities. Our founding fathers, the founders of American public education, and generations of leaders have all recognized the centrality of civic learning to American democracy and to an active civil society upon which it depends.

To neglect civic learning is to neglect a core pillar of American democracy. Our commitments to civic equality,

democratic accountability, public deliberation, and a political culture based on shared values all depend on widespread civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. We face dramatic challenges as a nation, and overcoming them requires revitalizing our government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

The Founders of America were uniquely concerned that in creating a nation expressly founded on rights—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and those many rights guaranteed in amendments to the U.S. Constitution—future generations that were distant from the struggles of the Revolution and its aftermath would need to be reminded of their duties of active citizenship. They made civic education central to that realization.

Civic learning is the tool by which individuals living here become Americans, equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to participate in the life of their nation. Without civic learning, we cannot hope to preserve the republic born over two centuries ago. With it, we can unleash generations of Americans who are prepared to address our greatest challenges and leave future generations with the true blessings of liberty to continue to create a more perfect union.

## BENEFITS OF CIVIC LEARNING

The benefits of civic learning are many. This section of the report presents five of the primary benefits of civic learning and brings evidence to illustrate the importance and extent of those benefits. For both civic learning advocates and those who doubt the importance of civic learning alike, this section provides evidence of its vital importance in preparing students for citizenship, college, and careers.

### Benefit of Civic Learning: Promoting Civic Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions

The future of our republic depends on whether or not the next generation is prepared for informed and engaged democratic citizenship. While the case statement above addresses why civic learning matters in broad terms, this section provides concrete evidence that high-quality civic learning enhances the three pillars of good citizenship: civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

#### CIVIC KNOWLEDGE

Civic knowledge begins with a fundamental understanding of the structure of government and the processes by which government passes laws and makes policy. Democratic citizenship is all but impossible if citizens fail to understand basic concepts such as separation of powers, federalism, individual rights, and the role of government. But responsible citizenship requires even more knowledge—it demands that students understand the history that continues to shape the present, aspects of geography that are vital to understanding America and the world, and the economics that is necessary to assess public policy options.

Recent research suggests that students who have taken civics courses score better on civic knowledge tests than students who have not had such classes, even once researchers adjust for demographics, type of school and community, and many other factors that might affect knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Focusing on specific topics produces more striking results. For example, students who specifically recall studying the First Amendment know more about the First Amendment than other students do, even after many factors are controlled.<sup>3</sup> The original *Civic Mission of Schools* report perhaps put it best in summarizing the potential of civic learning: “If you teach them, they will learn.”<sup>4</sup>

Program evaluations of high-quality civic learning programs find positive impacts on students’ knowledge. For example, Kids Voting USA enhances students’ knowledge of politics (measured by current factual questions, such as “Who is the governor of Texas?”), reduces gaps in

knowledge between the most and least knowledgeable students, and increases the consistency between students’ opinions on issues and their own potential voting behavior.<sup>5</sup> A study of civics courses in which students were required to read and discuss the newspaper similarly found gains in knowledge and smaller knowledge gaps.<sup>6</sup>

Overall, the research suggests that taking civics courses boosts civic knowledge. Studying a particular topic can strongly enhance knowledge of that topic when the curriculum and teaching conform to best practices. Some programs have positive effects not only on the children who participate, but also on their parents, who demonstrate increased discussion and media use at home when their students have higher civic knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

In turn, civic knowledge encourages civic action. Young people who know more about government are more likely to vote, discuss politics, contact the government, and take part in other civic activities than their less knowledgeable counterparts.<sup>8</sup> This holds even when the researchers controlled for income and race, showing that as powerful as socioeconomic factors are, civic learning can increase the knowledge of all students.

#### CIVIC SKILLS

Civic skills are the abilities necessary to participate as active and responsible citizens in democracy. They are necessary for critical thinking and collective action, and they include speaking, listening, collaboration, community organizing, public advocacy, and the ability to gather and process information.<sup>9</sup>

Zynga Poker Chips

For the most part, large-scale tests and surveys do not actually measure participatory skills. Some tests measure academic skills relevant to civics (such as interpreting a written speech), and some surveys of youth measure their confidence in their own civic skills, which is an important precondition of action. In general, studying civics in school





is associated with stronger academic skills related to civics and more confidence in one’s participatory skills, such as making a speech or writing a letter to Congress.<sup>10</sup>

As with civic knowledge, the evidence is stronger for the impact of certain well-designed programs than it is for average courses. For example, a randomized controlled experimental evaluation of the “Facing History and Ourselves” curriculum found positive effects on students’ ability to interpret evidence, to understand what leads people to make choices, and to analyze cause and effect in historical cases.<sup>11</sup>

In turn, civic skills are strongly linked to actual participation. In the words of a study of civic engagement by three of America’s most distinguished political scientists, “[t]hose who possess civic skills, the set of specific competencies germane to citizen political activity, are more likely to feel confident about exercising those skills in politics and to be effective—or, to use the economist’s term, productive—when they do.”<sup>12</sup>



### **CIVIC DISPOSITIONS AND PARTICIPATION**

Civic learning also fosters dispositions supportive of responsible political engagement and encourages active civic participation.

**Dispositions:** The personal dispositions important in a democracy include concern for others’ rights and welfare, fairness, reasonable levels of trust, and a sense of public duty. Civic learning can enhance these dispositions. For example, students feel a greater sense of general trust in humanity, support for the American political system, and trust in leaders when they report that their teachers have promoted tolerance and respect for all students.<sup>13</sup> Teenagers are more likely to do something to prevent a peer from being harmed if they perceive that their teachers have created a fair and open environment.<sup>14</sup> A large study of Chicago Public School students found that interactive

civic learning strongly boosted young people’s commitment to participate in politics and in their communities.<sup>15</sup>

Again, program evaluations offer support for high-quality civic learning. Civic knowledge and skills help adults form their political attitudes on the basis of facts and issues rather than personalities and attacks.<sup>16</sup> Classroom discussion in civics classes has been found to boost students’ concerns about the unjust treatment of others.<sup>17</sup> The “Facing History and Ourselves” evaluation, for example, found positive effects on dispositions such as “civic efficacy, valuing the protection of the civil liberties of people with different political views, [and] awareness of the dangers of prejudice and discrimination.”<sup>18</sup>

.....  
**Citizenship requires both knowledge about government and the ability to be involved in governance. It means knowing how to identify and inform yourself about issues, explore and evaluate possible solutions, and then act to resolve problems. It demands that you know how to interact respectfully with others. And it asks that you accept responsibility for meeting your community’s and the nation’s challenges.**

**LEE HAMILTON, U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES (1965–1999)**

.....  
An important bridge between dispositions and action is self-efficacy, the sense that one’s own actions can make a difference, either alone or in combination with peers. A feeling of self-efficacy is, not surprisingly, strongly correlated with civic action.<sup>19</sup>

**Participation:** Voting, participating in community meetings, volunteering, communicating with elected and appointed officials, signing petitions, and participating in demonstrations are just a few of the important activities of citizens.

Numerous studies have shown that knowledge gained through courses in civics, history, economics, the law, and geography increase a student’s confidence in and propensity towards active civic participation.<sup>20</sup> Students who complete a year of American government or civics are 3–6 percentage points more likely to vote than peers without such a course and 7–11 percentage points more likely to vote than peers who do not discuss politics at home.<sup>21</sup> Participation in many extracurricular activities and



voluntary associations has also been found to predict civic actions such as voting.<sup>22</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Civic knowledge, skills, dispositions, and participation are mutually reinforcing. Having knowledge and skills facilitates participation, and participation can be a valuable way of acquiring knowledge and skills. The evidence

is clear: high-quality civic learning has been proven to increase the civic knowledge, skills, dispositions, and participations of citizens. While subsequent sections of this report will focus on other benefits of civic learning, the foremost benefit is that it is indispensable to creating citizens who can preserve, improve, and pass along our democracy for decades to come.

## Benefit of Civic Learning: Promoting Civic Equality

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Effective civic learning increases the civic health of our nation by empowering young people to exercise their democratic rights and responsibilities. But it also goes further. Effective civic learning promotes civic equality. By giving all students access to civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions that otherwise would be the province of a lucky few, effective civic learning doesn't just serve democratic practices; it also directly enacts democratic principles. Civic equality is an essential democratic norm—consider the maxims of “one person, one vote” and “equal justice under law”—and we cannot be said to live in a true democracy if individuals or members of groups systematically possess unequal civic and political power, if some votes and voices count more or less than others, or if some stand either above or below the law.

When young people have limited or no access to effective civic learning opportunities, however, they inherit an unequal democracy. Without civic knowledge, skills, identity, and propensity toward engagement, some students are essentially disenfranchised and disempowered. Civic learning opportunities are thus essential for promoting civic equity as a democratic ideal.

Unfortunately, we see antidemocratic effects of uneven civic learning opportunities throughout contemporary American politics and civil society. The United States suffers from a civic empowerment gap that is as large—and as potentially destructive—as the overall academic achievement gap. Perhaps the strongest predictor of individuals' civic and political power, for example, is their income, not their civic engagement or patriotism. As political scientist Larry Bartels explains, “political influence seems to be limited entirely to affluent and middle-class people. The opinions of millions of ordinary citizens in the bottom third of the income distribution have *no* discernible impact on the behavior of their elected representatives.”<sup>23</sup> But income is only one marker of political and civic inequality. Race, ethnicity, education level, and immigration status also all too

often divide the civic and political “haves” from the “have nots.”<sup>24</sup>

Whether as cause or effect of these disparities, American citizens do not participate in civic and political life at equal rates. Consider the table on page 19, which shows differences in participation rates from the 2008 presidential election, which—despite the highest overall levels of political participation in a generation—illustrates persistent civic participation gaps.<sup>25</sup>

Significant participatory disparities also persist beyond voting. Reliable analyses of political participation, as measured by political party membership, contributions of money or time to political campaigns, participation in protests, contacting an elected official, and other non-electoral political activities, show vast disparities linked with class, education, and race. Broader measures of both youths' and adults' civic participation—engaging in informal or formal community service, working on a community problem, attending a community meeting, following the news, joining a group, or even just participating in cooperative activity with a neighbor—also seem to be highly unequally distributed by income, educational attainment, and ethnoracial group.<sup>26</sup> For example, college graduates are more than four times more likely to volunteer or to work with neighbors to address a community need than are high school dropouts.<sup>27</sup>

These patterns of engagement do not result solely or even primarily from what schools are doing. They reflect many other disparities in society. Political parties target outreach and fundraising efforts to already mobilized citizens, declining union membership has led to a reduction in mobilization among working-class Americans, and linguistic and cultural diversity poses challenges to communities attempting to solve problems collectively.<sup>28</sup> Histories of neglect, shortsighted public policies, and outright discrimination leave whole



<b>Voting Rates Among U.S. Citizens by Demographic Characteristic (2008)<sup>25</sup></b>	
<b>Educational Attainment</b>	<b>% who voted</b>
Less than high school	39%
High school graduate	55%
Some college attendance	72%
College graduate	83%
<b>Income</b>	
Less than \$15,000 annually	41%
Over \$75,000 annually	75%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
Asian	44%
Hispanic (any race)	50%
Black (non-Hispanic)	65%
White (non-Hispanic)	66%

communities—especially low-income communities of color—mistrustful and cynical about the purpose of public life and value of civic action. Poor neighborhoods also offer residents access to significantly fewer civic engagement opportunities than are available to those who live in more mixed or affluent communities.<sup>29</sup> Insofar as civic learning takes place across the lifespan in workplaces, homes, neighborhoods, and many other venues, the civic learning opportunity gap is spread far and wide in American civic life.

But schools are also partly responsible for the civic empowerment gap. They exacerbate the civic learning opportunity gap by providing poor and nonwhite students fewer and less high-quality civic learning opportunities than they provide to middle class and wealthy white students.<sup>30</sup> A large-scale study of young people’s civic learning opportunities in California, for example, shows that “[h]igh school students attending higher SES schools, those who are college-bound, and white students get more [civic learning] opportunities than low-income students, those not heading to college, and students of color.”<sup>31</sup> These findings for low-SES schools were replicated in a study of 35 high school classrooms across the Chicago Public Schools, which serves an overwhelmingly low-income and nonwhite student population. In *none* of the observed lessons were the majority of the students engaging in deep inquiry or discussion for a significant length of time.<sup>32</sup> This is especially unfortunate since other research shows that *if* civic learning opportunities were provided in classrooms,

they would likely more than offset the civic empowerment gap caused by other factors.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, because they reach virtually all young people, schools bear significant responsibility for shrinking the civic empowerment gap, even if it is a problem mostly not of their own making. Scholars generally agree that three components influence individuals’ civic and political engagement: (1) resources/ability, including civic knowledge and skills as well as time; (2) motivation, which may include senses of civic identity or duty, a belief that one can make a difference (efficacy), and passion about a cause; and (3) opportunities/recruitment, especially being invited to participate in a civic or political activity or join a group.<sup>34</sup> Schools have the capacities to increase all three of these for young people.



To truly understand current events is to understand that crucial decisions being made today will inevitably raise new issues in the future. The next generation of citizens needs to become aware of the issues ahead of them and develop habits of deliberation now that will help them make the wisest possible decisions. Young people must learn how to make these decisions together, even as our country becomes more diverse.

**DAVID MATHEWS, FORMER U.S. SECRETARY OF HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE AND PRESIDENT, KETTERING FOUNDATION**



Widespread and equal distribution of effective civic learning opportunities will help reduce the civic empowerment gap by inviting all students to participate in civic life. Political scientists have uniformly found that the most powerful way to engage in civic or political activities is to invite him or her to participate.<sup>35</sup> Schools have an unparalleled opportunity to invite students into engaging and empowering civic activities. As we discuss below, these opportunities include in-class discussions, simulations, extracurricular activities, student government, school newspaper, service learning, internships, and more. When other sectors of civil society are not extending their hands in invitation to young people to become civically and politically engaged, schools can and must fill the gap.

This report's policy recommendations include tangible ways for education stakeholders to narrow the civic knowledge and empowerment gaps through increasing the empowering and engaging civic learning opportunities across all grade levels and in all schools—especially

in schools that serve low-income students of color. In providing such civic learning opportunities to all youth, schools can reduce the civic empowerment gap and promote our more democratic future.

## Benefit of Civic Learning: Building Twenty-First Century Competencies

Interest is high on the part of the business community and the American public in the competencies that young people require to thrive in an economy that is rapidly changing and global in scope. Educators are being urged to ensure that young people have acquired competencies that will serve them not only in their communities and nations, but also in workplaces that are part of the dynamic economic systems of the twenty-first century. Similar lists have been formulated by groups of corporate leaders and educators. In addition to skills in reading, mathematics, and the ability to use technology, these lists often include the following:

- Knowledge of economic and political processes;
- Skill in understanding presentations in a range of media;
- The ability to work cooperatively with others, especially those from diverse backgrounds;
- Positive attitudes about working hard, obeying the law and engaging in discussion that leads to innovative and effective civic action in the community.

Existing research suggests it is unlikely that acquiring factual knowledge testable in multiple-choice tests—the focus of much of K–12 education today—will necessarily spill over to foster these competencies or that employers will be able to provide the necessary training.<sup>36</sup> As a result, advocates for twenty-first century competencies need to look elsewhere for ways to help our young people acquire the competencies that will serve them in this century's economy.

High-quality civic learning provides one such opportunity. There is a high degree of overlap between twenty-first century competencies such as those listed above and the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are necessary for democratic citizenship. Civic competency appears along with academic, occupational, and personal

competency in some mappings of this area.<sup>37</sup> Classrooms characterized by content-rich curriculum as well as respectful and interactive discussions of social issues can make a significant contribution not only to civic outcomes valued in the community or the nation, but also to the achievement of twenty-first century competencies needed in the workplace.

Few national surveys, exams, and program evaluations measure higher-order skills, especially skills used in collaborative work. (Most surveys and exams, by their design, are strictly measures of individual work.) Thus, research is relatively scarce on the effects of civic learning on twenty-first century skills. Much of the relevant research, however, finds that civic engagement increases collaborative behaviors that seem likely both to use and to develop skills. For example, the study of civics boosts the frequency of students discussing current events with peers by at least 15 percentage points.<sup>38</sup>

More direct evidence is available from an analysis of data from ninth graders who were tested in the IEA Civic Education Study (CIVED).<sup>39</sup> Approximately 2,500 respondents to the CIVED from a nationally representative sample of U.S. schools were divided into four groups using two scales. One was a measure in which the students reported on the extent to which their civic-related classrooms were characterized by an Open Classroom Climate for Discussion (with items about the extent to which the teacher encouraged students to express and to respect differing opinions on issues). The second scale was a measure of Traditional Teaching (with items about the teacher's use of lectures and textbooks). When students were divided at the median into high and low on each scale, four groups differing in type of civic learning resulted.

- The *Both* group reported high levels of open discussion and of traditional instruction;
- The *Neither* group reported low levels of open discussion and of traditional instruction;



- The *Interactive* group was high only on open discussion;
- The *Lecture* group was high only on traditional instruction.

An analysis of the differences in scores achieved by the four groups was conducted on twelve measures, including knowledge (of basic economic and democratic principles), skills (in understanding media), and attitudes (toward ethnic minority groups and also sense of efficacy) as well as responsibilities to obey the law, work hard, attend to issues in the media, and vote. Also assessed were behaviors such as following national and international news and experience in school with diversity, cooperative activities and learning about other countries. Although originally developed as part of a study of civic engagement and citizenship, many of these competencies and measures correspond to the twenty-first century competencies enumerated in recent initiatives.<sup>40</sup>

The results of the analysis showed that experience of an interactive classroom climate in which respectful discussion is encouraged was associated with higher levels of achievement on *all* twelve competencies (see table below).<sup>41</sup> The highest scores were achieved by the groups who had civics classrooms characterized as highly *Interactive* or as high on *Both Interactive and Traditional Teaching*. There is no competency outcome among those examined in which education based on lecturing and use of the textbook alone was superior to an interactive discussion-based focus. Predictably, on all twelve comparisons the group receiving *Neither* type of civics had the lowest competency scores.<sup>42</sup>

Educators and advocates who are promoting the strengthening of civic learning in schools may be tempted to focus narrowly on the student’s role as a future citizen who is grounded in knowledge of democratic principles and prepared to vote. This is vital, but it is also appropriate to pay attention to the student’s future role as a productive and ethical worker who is grounded in positive attitudes toward work and the law, understands economic and democratic processes, is confident about expressing opinions, and can be collaborative with a diverse range of co-workers. Civic learning that blends interactive discussion with a strong content focus can contribute to a wide range of twenty-first century competencies.<sup>43</sup> These approaches should be a regular feature of formal education and should also be encouraged in groups that operate in collaboration with schools.<sup>44</sup>

About a quarter of ninth-grade students in the United States were receiving neither interactive nor traditional civic learning at the time of the study. Educators need to find ways to minimize the number of students who are not experiencing civic learning. This group of students is especially likely to be deficient in knowledge and skills vital in the workplace, to have limited experience with cooperation and understanding others, to feel uncomfortable expressing opinions constructively, to hold negative attitudes toward minority groups, and to think it not very important to work hard, obey the law, or vote. A parallel analysis showed that this group is also likely to expect to drop out of school or to obtain no education past high school. These students are disproportionately from home backgrounds with limited educational resources.

	<b>Few Civics Classes with Open Classroom Climate</b>	<b>Many Civics Classes with Open Classroom Climate</b>
<b>Few Civics Classes with Traditional Instruction</b>	Students with <b>neither type of civics</b> scored lowest on all twelve twenty-first century competencies.	Students with classes emphasizing <b>interactive civics</b> scored highest on economic knowledge and media literacy skills. They were equal to those with both types of instruction on ethnic attitudes and efficacy.
<b>Many Civics Classes with Traditional Instruction</b>	Students with classes emphasizing <b>lectures and textbooks</b> scored higher than those with neither type of civics but lower than students with interactive-only civics on all twelve twenty-first century competencies.	Students with both <b>traditional and interactive civics</b> scored highest on eight competencies, including learning to cooperate, following the news, believing that good citizens obey the law, and voting. They were equal to the interactive-only group on ethnic attitudes and efficacy.

*Note: “Highest” indicates highest of the four groups; “lowest” indicates lowest of the four groups.*



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Civic education is vital to helping young people understand the world around them. One of the great challenges facing America in the years ahead is to reduce our projected national debt, so that we have the resources to invest in an innovative, competitive, and growing economy. Through improved civic education, more Americans can acquire the knowledge to engage with policymakers and help put our nation on a sustainable fiscal path.

**PETER G. PETERSON, FORMER U.S. SECRETARY OF COMMERCE**

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Although we want young people to be civically engaged in the communities where they live, we also want to be sure they will be prepared for engagement with the wider range of settings they will encounter as young adults, including workplaces. There is considerable overlap between the skills acquired as part of civic learning and the skills required

in employment. Rather than viewing civic learning as an isolated part of the curriculum, educators and the public should consider this more inclusive picture.<sup>45</sup> Some educational methods that predominate in civic-related subjects have broad potential for positive effects.

Given the close link between civic learning and preparation for twenty-first century workplaces, it should be no surprise that our civic learning shortfall exists alongside a near crisis in workplace readiness. To cite just one study of many, research by several leading organizations focused on workplace preparedness reveals that four in ten employers have been unable to find high-school graduates possessing the “soft skills” necessary for entry-level positions.<sup>46</sup>

Yet civic learning holds the potential to reverse these trends. As the above study shows, students receiving high-quality civic learning score higher on a broad range of twenty-first century competencies than those without. The approach found in both traditional civic learning classrooms and those that employ more interactive methods both show positive effects. Fostering twenty-first century competencies and preparing the next generation’s workforce requires a wide range of actions from education policymakers, but improved civic learning is a hugely promising means toward this goal and should be supported by all who care about workforce development.



## Benefit of Civic Learning: Improving School Climate



A positive school climate is the foundation for learning and positive civic development. School climate refers not to discrete educational experiences that students may receive (such as a discussion in social studies class or a service-learning project) but rather to the overall ethos or norms of the school. As a matter of definition, a school with a positive climate is one that promotes norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe; supports a sense of unity and cohesion in the school as a community; promotes a culture of respect; and encourages students to consider themselves stakeholders in the school's success. The National School Climate Council perhaps defines school climate best: “[School climate is] the quality and character of school life based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning, leadership practices, and organizational structures.”<sup>47</sup>

School climate can be assessed with several metrics. One available assessment evaluates schools based on the presence of “official recognition and community acceptance of the civic purpose of education that is communicated to all teachers, students and administrators.” It also asks whether students have input into planning around the school, and whether deliberation is thoughtful and respectful.<sup>48</sup>

Positive school climate enhances education, generally. It promotes students’ learning and academic achievement, prevents various risky behaviors, promotes positive youth development, and increases teacher retention rates.<sup>49</sup> In light of these findings, a growing number of major educational reform leaders have underscored the fundamental and profound importance of school climate and how students,

parents, school personnel, and community leaders work together to support positive youth development and learning.<sup>50</sup>

Among the many positive outputs of high-quality civic learning, one is that it promotes a positive school climate. Conceptually, the links are clear: High-quality civic learning teaches the importance of community (both within the school and more broadly), respectful dialogue about controversial issues, creative problem solving, collaboration, teamwork, and the importance of diversity. All of these values are, in addition to being civic virtues, foundational to a positive school climate.

The proven practices for civic learning highlighted in this report are closely related to a positive school climate. Respectful and civil discussions of difficult issues, student voice in schools, community service, and an array of voluntary groups led by students are all opportunities for civic learning that also contribute to school climate. The research on the effects of the six proven practices of civic learning on school climate is relatively sparse, but some practices (such as civil discussions) are related to climate almost by definition, and others are closely linked. For example, a randomized study of one civic learning program found positive effects on a “safe, inclusive, and respectful climate” at participating schools.<sup>51</sup>

The benefits of civic learning extend well beyond civic outputs alone, and civic content in one classroom can help shape the norms of other classrooms and the school more broadly. Civic learning builds a positive school climate, which in turn has a positive impact on a wide range of outputs for students, ranging from academic achievement to personal character.

## Benefit of Civic Learning: Reducing the Dropout Rate

The dropout crisis in America is well documented. Over a million of the students who enter ninth grade each fall fail to graduate with their peers four years later. Seven thousand students drop out of school every day, a figure that corresponds to one student every twelve seconds. Of the students who fail to graduate from high school, more than half are racial or ethnic minorities.<sup>52</sup>

The causes of the dropout crisis are complicated and varied. Some are beyond the direct control of individual schools, as students drop out to support their families, because of troubles with the law, or because of pregnancy. Other causes, however, are very much within the hands of education policymakers, superintendents, and principals. When students cite boring classes, a school climate not conducive to learning, or a curriculum they perceive as irrelevant to their lives as reasons for dropping out, it becomes clear that schools can be part of the solution to the dropout crisis.<sup>53</sup> A range of recent research—most notably from the *Building a Grad Nation* movement—has detailed things education policymakers can do to move students toward graduation.<sup>54</sup> That report and others focus on a range of school-related factors, including teacher quality, high student expectations, parental engagement, and an increased focus on the middle grades.<sup>55</sup>

Research demonstrates that civic learning beginning in elementary and middle school, with a focus on civic responsibility, is directly tied to a student’s propensity to drop out of high school.<sup>56</sup> The effects of civic learning have been shown to be nearly identical to the inputs that are vital parts of keeping students in school. In particular, taking courses that require community service and participating in student government have been found to predict high school graduation and college attendance and success.<sup>57</sup> In addition to its role in giving children the knowledge and dispositions necessary for active citizenship, civic learning can serve as an important antidote to several common reasons for dropping out of school:

**Classroom factors** are perhaps the most obvious connections between dropouts and civic learning. Nearly half of all dropouts (47%) report that a major reason they leave school and fail to graduate is that they found their classes boring and irrelevant.<sup>58</sup>

Effective civic learning infuses the classroom with both content and culture that is not only relevant to good citizenship, but also helps students stay in school. High-quality civic learning is interactive, stimulates debate, encourages creative thinking, and immerses the students in questions of contemporary relevance. The next section

of this report, which discusses proven classroom practices, will demonstrate the capacity of high-quality civic learning to offset the sense of boredom and lack of relevance that leads students to drop out.

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When young people discover they can be agents of change, wonderful things happen. They start to serve in the neighborhoods, learn about public issues, create innovative solutions to tough public challenges and eventually become the voters, community project builders and leaders in our communities and nation. Central to this transformation from spectator to citizen is an understanding of who we are as Americans, our core democratic values, and the roles individuals can play. American history and civic education should be a central focus of public education in every school in America.

**ALMA POWELL,  
AMERICA’S PROMISE ALLIANCE**

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**A lack of experiential education** contributes to dropout rates. Four out of five dropouts (81%) said that they would have been more likely to stay in school had the curriculum provided more opportunities for experiential learning.<sup>59</sup> The National Dropout Prevention Center has produced a list of fifteen research-backed strategies for reducing the dropout rate—strategies that the Department of Education and the National Education Goals Panel have called “the most effective strategies to help prevent school dropouts.”<sup>60</sup> These strategies include after-school opportunities and other nonconventional learning opportunities as tools for reducing the number of dropouts.

Effective civic learning should take many forms, many of which include experiential learning and satisfy the National Dropout Prevention Center’s recommendation of engaging students outside of the classroom to lower the dropout rate. Three of the proven practices presented in the next section of this report focus on experiential education directly relevant to dropout prevention. *Extracurricular activities* contribute to both civic competencies and a reduced dropout rate through fostering students’ involvement in





the school community to give them a stake in the school as an institution. *Student participation in school governance* similarly gives students a stake in their schools and provides them with a skill set relevant to the professional world. *Simulations of democratic processes* such as mock trials, public debates, and mock elections similarly strengthen students' connections to their communities by creating engaging and educational opportunities that both have civic implications and reduce the likelihood of dropouts who believe that education is irrelevant to the world at large.

***Schools' isolation from the broader community*** creates a sense of alienation among students and encourages the false belief that what takes place in school is irrelevant to their communities and their later careers. Studies have found that, among at risk students, lack of engagement with the school community, in a lack of extracurricular involvement in particular—was a factor in dropping out.<sup>61</sup>

The National Dropout Prevention Center has singled out both school-community collaboration and service learning that “connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning” as vital tools in reducing the number of dropouts. Civic learning engages students in the community around them perhaps more than any other subject. When exposed to national, state, and local affairs, students learn the importance of current events and how they can make their voice heard in democratic processes.

Service learning connected to the classroom, a vital part of civic learning, similarly serves the role of connecting students' academic work to the world around them. If there is an abandoned lot in a school's neighborhood, for example, a service project to clean it up coupled with a discussion of local government and a petition sent to the local Parks Department bridges the gap between academics and the community at large. These sorts of connections not

only empower students, but also demonstrate for them the relevance of their studies to the community—a vital factor in preventing dropouts.

***Civic learning avoids treating young people merely as risks to themselves and others.*** Defining adolescents as people in need of surveillance, assessment, and remediation communicates the idea that they have nothing important to contribute. Programs that enlist them as contributors to their communities have been found to improve their thriving or flourishing, with benefits for academic progress.<sup>62</sup>

***Civic learning can engage young people in addressing the barriers to success in their schools.*** While the reasons for dropout rates (which exceed 50 percent in some school systems) are complex, students are well placed to understand these issues and work on them effectively. Adolescents who are involved in school reform efforts or who participate on school boards and advisory committees are not only engaged in ameliorating the causes of academic failure for others, but are also learning about citizenship themselves and report that their own academic success improves as a result.<sup>63</sup>

In sum, because civic learning ameliorates many of the factors that contribute to dropping out of high school, higher graduation rates are among the many benefits of civic learning. The more interactive forms of civic learning in particular, such as service learning, simulations of democratic processes, and student participation in school governance, are particularly effective at empowering students and demonstrating the relevance of their work in school to society at large. Much research remains to be done on the exact extent of civic learning's impact on the dropout rate and the types of civic learning that have the greatest impact. Nevertheless, this much is clear: civic learning can be a vital tool to help move America's most at-risk students toward graduation.



## PROVEN PRACTICES IN CIVIC LEARNING

In 2003, we set out a list of six “promising practices” that, together, constituted well-rounded civic learning. Nearly a decade later, extensive research has confirmed that these promising practices are indeed “proven practices” in civic learning. This section presents them and is of particular interest to teachers, principals, and superintendents.

### Proven Practice #1: Classroom Instruction

Effective civic learning begins with classroom instruction in civics, government, history, law, economics, and geography. High-quality instruction in each of these subjects (usually grouped together under the umbrella of “social studies”) provides students with both civic knowledge and the skills needed for democratic participation.<sup>64</sup> While the proven practices listed later in this section are all vital to developing well-rounded democratic citizens, high-quality classroom instruction must remain at the foundation of civic learning. America’s schools impact more citizens in a more sustained way than nearly any other institution, public or private, and the classroom experience is one shared by millions of young people. The founders of American public education intended for curricula to serve a distinctly civic purpose, and it remains as important as ever that teachers, curricula, and the day-to-day academic life of schools reflect the civic mission of schools.

Of all the practices contained in this report, classroom instruction is the most common. Nearly every high school teaches history and some form of civics. There is, however, abundant evidence of a narrowing of the curriculum that causes time devoted to civics to shrink, especially in elementary school, where only one-third of schools now report “focused instruction in civics or government at the fourth grade.”<sup>65</sup> The content of civics courses is often too narrow, featuring classroom instruction that is fact-based, bores students, and rarely comes across to them as essential to their future role as active, informed citizens. While students should, of course, learn the factual foundation of American democracy, understanding these foundations is not sufficient without attention to skills, values, and practical applications.

How civics is taught matters a great deal.<sup>66</sup> Nearly a decade ago, the *Civic Mission of Schools* report set out the content of classroom instruction in civics: “All Americans should grasp a body of facts and concepts such as the fundamental principles of our democracy and Constitution; the tensions among fundamental goods and rights; the major themes in the history of the United States; the structure of our government and, the powers and limitations of its various branches and levels; the diverse values, opinions, and interests of Americans and the ways in which they are

represented by elected officials, interest groups, and political parties; and the relationship between government and the other sectors of society. Studying these concepts should be seen not as rote education but as intellectually challenging and beneficial.”<sup>67</sup>

**PROVEN PRACTICE #1: PROVIDE INSTRUCTION IN GOVERNMENT, HISTORY, LAW, AND DEMOCRACY.** Formal instruction in U.S. government, history, and democracy increases civic knowledge. This is a valuable goal in itself and may also contribute to young people’s tendency to engage in civic and political activities over the long term. However, schools should avoid teaching only rote facts about dry procedures, which is unlikely to benefit students and may actually alienate them from politics.

In this era of educational standards and accountability, the quality and quantity of classroom instruction are largely determined by three factors: state standards, assessment requirements, and curricular frameworks:

- **State Standards:** A study by the Albert Shanker Institute found that most state standards in the social studies were overwritten, emphasized a laundry list of historical facts and dates for memorization, and contained far more material to be covered than most states and districts allot for classroom time for civic learning.<sup>68</sup> In social studies standards revisions since then, most states have added to the amount of material to be covered, rather than developing fewer and clearer standards that encourage an understanding of the vital importance of citizen engagement in our democracy. Standards drive textbook content, so it should not be surprising that a 2007 study

found that “textbooks determine 75–90 percent of instructional content and activities in schools across the nation, and reviews of [civic learning] textbook materials repeatedly find them to be turgid, poorly organized, and uninteresting.”<sup>69</sup>

- **Assessments:** As of 2011, only sixteen states require meaningful assessment in the social studies—a number that has declined in the past five years as states have eliminated civics assessments.<sup>70</sup> This fact, along with absence of civic learning and social studies from the required assessments in Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act (the most recent iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act), sends a message that civic learning is not a priority in education policy. The lack of inclusion in priority assessment is a contributing cause to a narrowing of the curriculum that deemphasizes the vital importance of civic learning. Moreover, detailed standards and standardized assessments discourage teacher attention to current events and local or constituency-specific issues of special importance to students in particular places or from particular backgrounds.
- **Narrowed Curriculum:** The narrowing of the curriculum far predates No Child Left Behind. In the elementary grades, civic learning used to be woven through the curriculum, while today only slightly more than a third of teachers report covering civic topics on a regular basis.<sup>71</sup> In high school, the situation is even more dire. Until the 1960s, three high school courses in civics and government were common, and two of them explored the role of citizens and encouraged students to discuss current issues. Today both of those courses are very rare. What remains is

a single course on American government that usually spends little time on how people can—and why they should—participate as citizens.<sup>72</sup> (While high school students are obtaining increasing numbers of credits in various social science and history electives, these courses rarely focus on what students can and should do to participate in their democracy.<sup>73</sup>) The single remaining civics course is usually offered in the eleventh or twelfth grade—a move that signals that civics is an afterthought, does not allow for students to build knowledge from year to year, and completely misses the large number of students who drop out before their senior year and are most in need of education regarding their rights and responsibilities as citizens.<sup>74</sup>

The current combination of assessments, standards, and requirements is not producing adequate results, even according to the overly narrow national assessment of students’ factual knowledge in civics: Three-quarters of students scored below proficient in civics on the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). To give but one example of knowledge shortfalls, only one in twelve eighth graders could give a complete response to a question about how the Constitution embodies the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy.<sup>75</sup> These results are similar to those from the 1998 and 2006 NAEP administrations.<sup>76</sup>

Effective civic learning must start with high-quality, engaging classroom instruction. Detailed research demonstrates what is necessary to provide effective and engaging classroom instruction. Success requires the support of policymakers and the public to ensure that proven and effective classroom practices are employed in every classroom in every school in the nation.

## Proven Practice #2: Discussion of Current Events and Controversial Issues

Political controversy is ever-present in democratic nations, and that is as it should be, since controversy is an intrinsic part of the political process and is necessary for the very survival of democracy.<sup>77</sup> But civic learning often fails to reflect or include such controversy. As a result, young people may not learn how to engage productively with the

issues and events that animate our political system today and will continue to do so in the future.

To ensure that school-based civic learning is authentic, we need to dramatically increase the attention given to discussing *controversial political issues*—meaningful and

timely questions about how to address public problems. Students should learn that such issues are fundamental to the nature of a democratic society, that they can be discussed in civil and productive ways, that there are strategies for engaging in such discussion, and that these issues deserve both their own and the public's attention.

We have even more evidence now than we did a decade ago that high-quality and inclusive discussion of important current issues and events is a critical component of civic learning. Such discussion helps young people develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for effective political and civic engagement, and it also teaches them intrinsically significant content.<sup>78</sup> Research has added a sophisticated picture of how the most skilled teachers promote these discussions and how students experience and learn from them.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, it is now clear that discussing current issues engages young people; numerous studies have demonstrated that students are more interested in, and say they have learned more from, civics classes that include frequent and high-quality issues discussions than those that do not.<sup>80</sup>

The need to include controversial political issues in school-based civic learning has a new urgency because of the increased vitriol of contemporary public policy discourse and migration among many American adults to ideologically homogeneous communities. As a result, many Americans increasingly talk primarily with people who share their own views, access media that reinforces their own prior beliefs, and generally confine themselves to an echo chamber of like-mindedness.<sup>81</sup> Yet research shows that “cross-cutting” political talk—in which citizens engage in discussions about important issues and events with people who disagree—develops tolerance for others and builds understanding of the range of views about how to best solve public problems.<sup>82</sup> Schools are particularly good venues for such discussions because they already include important deliberative assets, including student populations that reflect a greater range of ideological diversity than most people encounter in the world outside school.

Recent professional development programs that have been shown to improve teachers' effectiveness in using issues discussions share three notable characteristics: They engage teachers in examining students' learning (as opposed to focusing only on teachers' practices); they provide a good mix of content and method, so that teachers develop their own understanding of issues while learning how to engage students in discussion; and they extend long enough to allow teachers the time necessary to become skilled at this kind of challenging teaching.<sup>83</sup>

Highly engaging and intellectually powerful curriculum materials that work well with students have also been developed. Some textbooks now include attention to

**PROVEN PRACTICE #2: INCORPORATE DISCUSSION OF CURRENT LOCAL, NATIONAL, AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES AND EVENTS INTO THE CLASSROOM, PARTICULARLY THOSE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE VIEW AS IMPORTANT TO THEIR LIVES.**

When young people have opportunities to discuss current issues in a classroom setting, they tend to have greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communications skills, more civic knowledge, and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school. Conversations, however, should be carefully moderated so that students feel welcome to speak from a variety of perspectives. Teachers need support in broaching controversial issues in classrooms since they may risk criticism or sanctions if they do so.

current, controversial issues, although that is still relatively rare.<sup>84</sup> We still need a greater number and variety of materials, including materials that focus on local, state-level issues (or state-level applications of national issues), materials for younger children, materials written at a variety of reading levels (since the reading achievement of students in a single classroom may span as much as five grades), and materials in multimedia formats. Developing materials in languages other than English is also crucial if we take seriously our obligation to provide meaningful civic learning to young immigrants.

These curricular materials require qualified teachers to carry them out, and research has shown that teachers who effectively promote discussion share a number of characteristics:

- They select issues that are important, are linked to core curricular goals, and already are, or have the potential to be, interesting to students. They can articulate to parents, administrators, and the general public their rationale for including these issues, and they can explain how instruction meets important civic and curricular goals.
- They draw from a range of discussion models to explicitly teach students the skills they need to participate.



- They develop firm ground rules to ensure that discussions are inclusive and productive, and they cultivate a climate of respect and civility.
- They seek out or create learning materials that provide students necessary background information, and they make sure students have thoughtfully considered multiple perspectives before discussion. Without such background and preparation, students are unlikely to engage in high-quality discussion.
- They help students understand an issue or event well enough to form their own opinions, rather than pressuring students to adopt their views. They make sure that materials provide the best arguments on varying sides of an issue, that multiple points of view receive a “best case fair hearing,” and that students engage with multiple and complex perspectives.
- They recognize the ethical dilemmas involved in teaching about controversial issues. For example, they understand the multiple valid reasons for and against disclosing their own point of view to students, while recognizing the inappropriateness of trying to push their views on others or belittling those who disagree.

Teaching young people how to engage in discussions of controversial political issues and important current events is a critically important component of civic learning—and one that is needed now more than ever. Although there is still much to be learned from research about this practice, it is clear that such discussions can help young people understand issues facing our society and can build skills and dispositions for thoughtfully considering future issues. Moreover, young people appreciate and enjoy the chance to take part in robust, high-quality discussions of important issues. They know that these issues are important and want to be part of the public conversation about them.

## Proven Practice #3: Service-Learning

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey posits that “the conception of education as a social process and function has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind.”<sup>85</sup> This process of moving society toward a particular ideal requires informed, thoughtful students who are engaged in their communities beyond the classroom. They have the capacity to take action with the goal of impacting the public sphere. They view the role of citizen as active, rather than passive, engaged rather than alienated, and contributing rather than accepting.

Service-learning is an instructional methodology that makes intentional links between the academic curriculum and student work that benefits the community by providing meaningful opportunities for students to apply what they learn to issues that matter to them. Service-learning is far more than community service alone; high-quality service-learning experiences incorporate intentional opportunities for students to analyze and solve community problems through the application of knowledge and skills.

Service-learning helps to make education real, connecting academic skills and knowledge to issues that matter to young people. When students have opportunities to use the knowledge and skills they are acquiring in school to address

meaningful issues in their community, the content of their learning becomes more relevant to their lives, and they better understand the importance of civic participation.

Research makes clear the positive impact of service-learning on both academic and civic outcomes. Students who benefit from quality service-learning experiences have been shown to have higher commitments to civic participation and make significantly greater gains in academic achievement than nonparticipating students. Across a number of studies conducted on service-learning programs, test scores on state assessments for students who participated in service-learning have been demonstrated to be higher in reading, writing, mathematics, social studies, and science:

- Research shows that service-learning, when done well, has a positive civic impact on students’ civic knowledge, skills, dispositions, and engagement.<sup>86</sup>
- Middle and high schools students in Illinois who participated in service-learning programs showed statistically significant gains in their academic engagement, academic competence, aspirations to pursue postsecondary education, acquisition of twenty-first century skills, social-emotional learning

skills such as conflict management and self-control, civic dispositions, and support for their schools. They also gained work experience and specific skills in reading, writing, math, and science.<sup>87</sup>

- Elementary school students in Michigan participating in service-learning reported greater levels of behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement in school than their nonparticipating peers, showing statistically significant differences in the effort they expended, paying attention, completing homework on time, and sharing what they learned with others. Participating students also demonstrated significantly higher test scores on the state assessment than their nonparticipating peers in the areas of writing, social studies overall, and three social studies strands: historical perspective, geographic perspective, and inquiry/decision-making.<sup>88</sup>
- Middle and high school students from school districts in Ohio where teachers received funding to use service-learning practices in their classrooms outscored their peers on a number of pre/post measures. The 1,650 students in grades 6–12 who participated in service-learning had significantly higher gains than their peers on measures of academic engagement, academic competence, school attachment, aspirations, environmental stewardship, and acquisition of twenty-first century skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration.<sup>89</sup>



**Defining High-Quality Service-learning.** Beyond the centrality of service-learning to developing civic skills and dispositions, as outlined above, event research has refined the definition of high-quality service-learning and showed the connections between service learning and other key educational outputs. Historically, the quality of service-learning practice has varied widely.<sup>90</sup> Leaders in the service-learning community recently released the *National K–12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice*, which defines what constitutes high-quality service-learning. These standards make it possible to assess and document the impact of service learning programs, as

### **PROVEN PRACTICE #3: DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT PROGRAMS THAT PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO APPLY WHAT THEY LEARN THROUGH PERFORMING COMMUNITY SERVICE THAT IS LINKED TO THE FORMAL CURRICULUM AND CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION.**

Service programs are now common in K–12 schools. The ones that best develop engaged citizens are linked to the curriculum:

- Consciously pursue civic outcomes, rather than seek only to improve academic performance or to promote higher self-esteem
- Allow students to engage in meaningful work on serious public issues; give students a role in choosing and designing their projects
- Provide students with opportunities to reflect on the service work
- Allow students—especially older ones—to pursue political responses to problems consistent with laws that require public schools to be nonpartisan
- See service learning as part of a broader philosophy toward education, not just a program that is adopted for a finite period in a particular course



well as provide states, school districts, and teachers with a better understanding of the indicators of effective practice. Effective service-learning programs share the following eight traits:

1. Have sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs and meet specified outcomes.
2. Are used intentionally as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards.
3. Incorporate multiple challenging reflection activities that are ongoing and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one's relationship to society.
4. Actively engage participants in meaningful and personally relevant service activities.
5. Promote understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants.
6. Are collaborative, and mutually beneficial and address community needs.
7. Engage participants in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals and use results for improvement and sustainability.
8. Provide youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating service-learning experiences with guidance from adults.<sup>91</sup>

***Service-Learning, Academic Achievement, and the Achievement Gap.*** Recent research shows that service learning has positive consequences for academic achievement. A variety of studies have shown evidence of a range of achievement-related benefits from service-learning, including improved attendance, higher grade point averages, enhanced preparation for the workforce, enhanced awareness and understanding of social issues, greater motivation for learning, and heightened engagement in prosocial behaviors. Research shows that students who participated in service-learning activities in high school were 22 percentage points more likely to graduate from college than those who did not participate, and that civic engagement activities raised the odds of graduation and improved high school students' progress in reading, math, science, and history.<sup>92</sup> The National Research Council specifically suggests the use of service-learning as an important engagement strategy for high school, implicitly recognizing that service learning incorporates many of the research-based factors associated with student engagement in academic work, better preparing them for success in college and the workplace.<sup>93</sup>

Beyond these general benefits, service-learning works for students in low-income schools and communities. Schools in high-poverty areas are less likely to employ service learning as a teaching strategy. Yet research has shown this is a particularly effective pedagogy for use in such schools. In Philadelphia, for example, low-income students in service-learning classes gained more on standardized tests than their nonparticipating peers.<sup>94</sup> Similar results occurred in Michigan and Texas when service learning was of high-quality. Service-learning can significantly reduce the achievement gap between affluent and low-income students. Low-income students who participated in service opportunities had better school attendance and grades than low-income students who did not participate.<sup>95</sup> Despite the effectiveness of these programs, schools in high poverty areas are less likely to engage their students in service-learning experiences than their wealthier counterparts, a shortcoming that comes from inadequate teacher preparation, limited school resources, and narrowed curricula. Implementing high-quality service learning in disadvantaged communities will not only improve the civic health of those communities, but also help narrow both the academic achievement gap and the civic learning opportunity gap.

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Our Founding Fathers viewed a well-educated citizenry as central to the maintenance of our Republic. They also viewed the 'Public Happiness' of citizen participation in our self-government as a self-evident part of the 'Pursuit of Happiness' that they declared to be a right of all Americans. Such participation involves not only voting but also serving the community and working constructively to make this a 'More Perfect Union.'

**HARRIS WOFFORD,  
U.S. SENATE (1991-95)**  
.....

***Service-learning and Teacher Quality.*** Service-learning can significantly impact school reform efforts that seek to address teacher-quality issues. Research consistently identifies successful teachers as those who use instructional strategies that challenge students to use higher-order thinking skills, scaffold knowledge, and provide learning experiences that help students learn to transfer knowledge to new situations.<sup>96</sup> These conditions are all found in quality service-learning experiences: "Teachers who use service-learning are significantly more likely to use high-quality teaching strategies like cooperative learning, participate in projects integrating technology and requiring data collection, use



primary resources, and make meaningful connections to the community, resulting in stronger impacts in a variety of academic and behavioral categories than those who don't."<sup>97</sup>

Part of educating for democracy includes ensuring that students understand and value the importance of each individual making positive contributions to the well-being of his or her community. To achieve this ideal, opportunities to practice the skills and habits of citizenship should be incorporated throughout students' educational experiences—and service-learning is an extremely effective strategy for doing so.

As a strategy implemented in a variety of subject areas and for students of all ages, service-learning is not limited to a particular program and spans the boundaries of traditional history and civics courses. Whether in science or history, mathematics or language arts, service-learning can spark the civic imagination of students of all ages as they begin the lifelong habits of engaged learning and active citizenship. Given opportunities to use the knowledge and skills they learn in school to address meaningful issues in the community, students gain an understanding of the importance and benefits of civic participation and how to effectively engage in our democracy.

## Proven Practice #4: Extracurricular Activities

The term *extracurricular* seeks to remind us that learning takes place through a broad range of activities and experiences—some in formal classroom settings and some in more informal settings, both within and outside of school. Extracurricular activities should not be viewed as peripheral to high-quality civic learning, but rather as indispensable to well-rounded civic learning.

Extracurricular activities provide forums in which students can use skills and knowledge in purposeful experiences that have both meaning and context. As one of the definitive studies on extracurricular activities notes, extracurriculars “provide opportunities to acquire and practice skills that may be useful in a wide variety of settings [... to] help students to develop a sense of agency as a member of one's community; to belong to a socially recognized and valued group, to develop support networks of peers and adults that can help in both present and future; and to experience and deal with challenges.”<sup>98</sup> According to some studies, school-group membership is an even better predictor of adult engagement than more commonly recognized factors such as education and income.<sup>99</sup>

A wide range of extracurricular activities have civic benefits. Not surprisingly, explicitly civic activities such as mock trial, model congress, speech and debate, and model U.N. all have positive impacts on students' civic knowledge and engagement. There are civic benefits to a far broader set of extracurricular activities, however. Reuben Thomas and Daniel McFarland found that participation in a wide range of extracurricular groups boosted students' voting rates.<sup>100</sup> In their study, many activities that require teamwork and collaboration (such as the performing arts and some sports) were especially helpful for encouraging voting.

One study, based on their extensive review of the literature, concluded that there is “good evidence that participating

in extracurricular activities is associated with both short and long term indicators of positive development including school achievement and educational attainment.”<sup>101</sup> They go on to demonstrate that extracurricular programs are most effective if they “provide opportunities to engage in challenging tasks that promote learning of valued skills; provide opportunities to form strong social bonds with adults outside of the family and like-minded peers; and provide opportunities to develop and confirm positive personal identity.”<sup>102</sup> Finally, effective extracurricular programs must be “both intensive and long term”;<sup>103</sup> research shows diminished effects absent sustained participation in high-quality programming.

### PROVEN PRACTICE #4: OFFER EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES THAT PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO GET INVOLVED IN THEIR SCHOOLS OR COMMUNITIES.

Long-term studies of Americans show that those who participate in extracurricular activities in high school remain more civically engaged than their contemporaries even decades later. Thus, everyone should have opportunities to join high school groups, and such participation should be valued.

More specifically, research stresses the importance of three components of school-based extracurricular activities that contribute positively to school attainment. First, students should voluntarily select activities because of a genuine interest. Second, activities should be structured, organized, scheduled regularly, and led by an adult. Third,





activities should require effort on the part of the student.<sup>104</sup> Given that many existing extracurricular activities already meet these criteria, schools interested in promoting civic engagement through extracurricular activities often need only to strengthen their support for existing programs.

There are two primary threats to extracurricular programs and the civic benefits that come from them. First, as funding for extracurricular programs is reduced, we should anticipate reductions in effectiveness with schools and other service providers unable to afford the full commitment that such programs require. Second, the literature suggests that the positive impact of extracurricular and after-school experiences may be undermined by policies that place low-performing students in after-school tutoring or focus on an experience that replicates or closely aligns with the traditional school program are less effective.

Given that the goal of civic learning on the whole is to prepare students for knowledgeable, engaged citizenship, extracurricular activities can serve as a vital bridge between classroom learning and the world at large. Once students have the essential knowledge that comes from classroom instruction, extracurricular activities can show them how their newly acquired knowledge is relevant in broader contexts. “The relationship between citizen and society is essential,” notes an American Bar Association report, and the goal of extracurricular activities should be to “illustrate significant connections between students and larger communities, such as town, nation, and world.”<sup>105</sup> In focusing on this goal, extracurricular activities are a vital part of well-rounded civic learning.

## Proven Practice #5: Student Participation in School Governance

One of the ways in which schools can prepare students for a lifetime of democratic participation is to train them in self-government within the school context. Students often have good ideas about how to improve their schools and communities as places for civic life and learning, and formal structures for considering students’ views are a valuable way of modeling democratic practices and teaching students civic skills.

**PROVEN PRACTICE #5: ENCOURAGE STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE.** A long tradition of research suggests that giving students more opportunities to participate in the management of their own classrooms and schools builds their civic skills and attitudes. Thus, giving students a voice in school governance is a promising way to encourage all young people to engage civically.


Perhaps the most common form of student participation in school governance, student councils, are laboratories for practical experiences in civics and the principles of democracy. Student councils should be far more than the social planners of the school; they should instead stimulate and engage large numbers of students in school and community service activities and provide a forum for student voice on questions that impact the students

themselves. In addition to civic skills and dispositions, student councils and other forums for students to participate in school government should self-consciously promote a wide range of skills and dispositions—including twenty-first century skills, financial literacy, and environmental literacy.

Research from the National Association of Student Councils notes that student participation in school governance should meet several basic tenets: Activities must be structured, students must make a substantial time commitment to activities, activities must engage student interest, and students’ decisions must have real effects. These parameters leave room for a wide range of student governance programs, but all successful programs will provide students with civic skills and dispositions that, once students graduate, will be transferrable to our democracy at large.

Beyond conventional student government (involving a few elected representatives), programs should facilitate schoolwide democratic deliberation as a way of fostering civic skills and dispositions among all students. A wide variety of programs, such as those that divide students into clusters to participate in democratic deliberation and community projects, have been shown to have positive implications on students’ civic health.

Participation in school governance has benefits for the students directly involved—such as those elected to a council—and also for their fellow students. Those who directly participate show better academic success and higher likelihood of civic participation later on, including



voting.<sup>106</sup> Data from the National Education Longitudinal Study demonstrates that participants in student governance have higher test scores and are more likely to volunteer and participate in campaigns and other political activities.<sup>107</sup> Meanwhile, as noted above (see “Benefit of Civic Learning: Improving School Climate,” page 24), students who attend schools where they feel student voice is honored are more likely to be trusting and civically engaged later.

Student participation in school governance provides students with civic skills that will serve them well beyond their time in school. Students who know how to make their voice heard at school will be best equipped to be active and effective in their communities at large.

## Proven Practice #6: Simulations of Democratic Processes

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In addition to the above practices, young people can also practice citizenship by playing roles in simulations. Games and other simulations contribute to civic learning by allowing young people to act in fictional environments in ways that would be impossible for them in the real world; for example, they can play the role of president of the United States or an ambassador to the United Nations. Games and simulations can be constructed so as to be highly engaging and motivating while also requiring advanced academic skills and constructive interaction with other students under challenging circumstances.

Simulations are not new, and traditional examples include mock trial and model congress—programs that continue to be popular and effective among many high school students. In addition to the obvious benefit of increased civic knowledge (about judicial and legislative processes, respectively, as well as more particular content), students learn skills with clear applicability to both civic and noncivic contexts, such as public speaking, teamwork, close reading, analytical thinking, and the ability to argue both sides of a topic. All of these are skills that prepare students both for active citizenship and for future academic and career success. Simulations that contribute to civic learning are applicable widely in the curriculum. In a history class, for example, a model constitutional convention or a mock trial based on a historically significant Supreme Court case teaches students both historical content and civic skills. In a multiplayer game called *Urban Science*, students play the role of city planners in their actual city. An evaluation of that program found substantial gains in knowledge, skills, and values relevant to civic engagement.<sup>108</sup>

Simulations of democratic processes in the classroom enrich civics courses (as well as other courses) and ensure that the maximum number of students reap the benefits of those simulations. Simulations as extracurricular activities, such as a competitive debate team or a model congress after-school program, reach fewer students but provide the opportunity for a greater time investment and deeper learning.

In addition to the many effective types of simulations that have existed for decades, technology can also be a powerful tool for teaching students about democratic processes. In the “epistemic games” developed by David Williamson Shaffer and colleagues, computers are used to model the work environments of professionals. Students write emails, organize meetings, and do other adult tasks in pursuit of civic goals.<sup>109</sup> In *ICONS*, students from several countries negotiate international issues.<sup>110</sup> *iCivics*, an organization founded by Justice O’Connor, provides a whole suite of games for civic learning as well as curriculum and professional development for teachers. Some of the most recent simulations bridge the virtual and real worlds by requiring players to complete missions offline. Examples include *Nuvana’s* game *Interobang*, in which students complete service missions, and *Legislative Aide* from *Community Knowledge Base*, in which students play aides to a fictional congresswoman in their real district and conduct real field research.<sup>111</sup>

### PROVEN PRACTICE #6: ENCOURAGE STUDENTS’ PARTICIPATION IN SIMULATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES.

Recent evidence indicates that simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberation, and diplomacy in schools can lead to heightened political knowledge and interest.

New research suggests that game narratives are beneficial to students in their ability to provide motivation and real-time feedback.<sup>112</sup> Games and simulations teach both civic skills and skills that are broadly applicable. As school and district leaders look to provide their students with well-rounded civic learning, simulations of democratic processes are powerful tools.

## PROMOTING CIVIC LEARNING

While we include a full menu of policy recommendations for a variety of stakeholders on page 41, we first spotlight three specific ways of bringing the above proven practices into broader use in every classroom.

### Promoting Civic Learning: Assessment

This report, consistent with current research, endorses a broad version of civic learning that encompasses the six proven practices as inputs and three main categories of outcomes: knowledge, skills, dispositions. Existing assessments required of students and schools are usually much narrower and are largely limited to pencil-and-paper tests of civic knowledge alone.

Proponents of civic learning face a trade-off in the realm of testing. If a broad version of civic learning is not included in assessment systems, the six proven practices can easily be forgotten or neglected—as they too often are. As was noted earlier in this report, only 16 states require meaningful assessment in the social studies, and that number has declined in the past five years as states eliminated civics assessments.<sup>113</sup> The total absence of civic content from the Title I assessment provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act relegates civic learning to a secondary status and pushes it out of many curricula—especially those serving the underprivileged students who most need civic learning and empowerment.

On the other hand, new high-stakes tests in civics are unlikely the solution, partly because civic outcomes are difficult to measure, and partly because students and schools already face many (sometime unhelpful) mandatory evaluations. Available evidence suggests that existing state testing and assessment policies do *not* boost students' civics skills or knowledge.<sup>114</sup> In an age in which assessment is among the dominant tropes in education policy discourse, this finding should lead not to abandonment of civic learning assessments, but to new research into which assessment regimes would be most effective and accompanying reforms to current testing regimes.

The central component of effective standards should be a focus on civic outcomes—knowledge, skills, and

dispositions. The majority of state civics standards place an emphasis on the rote memorization of a laundry list of historical facts and dates rather than a holistic view of civic engagement encompassing all three desired outputs.

There is no panacea, and different assessment mechanisms may be appropriate in different settings; the ideal combination of assessments may differ for teachers, local school boards, state education policymakers, and the federal government.

The following page presents a table outlining the advantages and disadvantages of four different types of civic learning assessments. The first two, *multiple-choice tests* and *short-answer/essay tests*, are at present the most common types of civic learning assessments. The other two, *performance tests* and *portfolio assessments*, are newer and less common. Research shows, however, that these sorts of “alternative assessments” hold benefits for students that more traditional assessments do not.<sup>115</sup>

Closely related to the debate over assessments is another question: What is the optimal use of assessments? Once civic opportunities or outcomes are measured, the results can be used to diagnose strengths and weaknesses in individual students or student populations guide educators; help evaluate the effects of programs and curricula; identify and reward success; allocate resources where the need is greatest; sanction administrators, educators, or students who perform poorly; or grade students and determine their eligibility for promotion or graduation. Each of these purposes presents a range of advantages and disadvantages. Having considered the issue closely, we present recommendations on how policymakers should treat civic learning assessments in the final section of this report (page 41).

## CIVIC LEARNING ASSESSMENT: ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF FOUR ASSESSMENT SCHEMES

MULTIPLE-CHOICE TESTS	SHORT-ANSWER/ESSAY TESTS
<p><b>Advantages</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simplicity and transparency in grading</li> <li>• Easier to align curriculum with tests</li> <li>• Relatively low cost, though development and validation may be expensive</li> <li>• If the test uses national norms, ability to compare school/district/state to others</li> <li>• Appropriate for evaluation of basic civic knowledge, and in some cases, civic climate</li> </ul> <p><b>Disadvantages</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These tests may not be valid assessment tools for students' understanding of the concepts (i.e., beyond memorizing concrete facts)</li> <li>• Quality of instructions may be compromised (i.e., teaching to the test)</li> <li>• Potential bias against socioeconomically disadvantaged</li> <li>• May be inappropriate for civic skills/dispositions</li> </ul>	<p><b>Advantages</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can evaluate students' thought processes and in-depth understanding of important concepts</li> <li>• Can be designed so that students' integrated knowledge, skills, and disposition may be tested at the same time</li> <li>• May guide curriculum reform toward applied skills and knowledge, beyond concrete facts</li> <li>• Can assess each student's strengths and weaknesses</li> </ul> <p><b>Disadvantages</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant resources (time/money) required to grade</li> <li>• Standardization of grading rubric and definition of "proficiency" may be difficult</li> <li>• Some concerns about reliability and validity of grading and test contents</li> <li>• Grading and scoring may not be as transparent and understandable to consumers such as parents and stakeholders</li> </ul>
PERFORMANCE TESTS	PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENTS
<p><b>Advantages</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some researchers argue that performance evaluation is the best way to assess students' true acquisition of skills founded on solid knowledge</li> <li>• Performance evaluation can easily be integrated into instructions and curriculum</li> <li>• Performance evaluations may be particularly useful in predicting students' future behaviors</li> <li>• Research evidence suggests ultimately a link between performance-based testing and higher test scores</li> <li>• May enhance civic climate of classrooms</li> </ul> <p><b>Disadvantages</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty with standardization and reliable grading, although exceptions exist</li> <li>• Teachers/observers may be biased raters, depending on their motivations and roles</li> <li>• Cannot provide a measurement of student engagement and civic behaviors outside of school</li> </ul>	<p><b>Advantages</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be tailored to each student's needs</li> <li>• Gives students who perform lower on traditional tests a chance to demonstrate authentic civic proficiency</li> <li>• Can assess civic learning and engagement outside of school</li> <li>• Promotes student involvement in learning process</li> <li>• May improve school-community relation, depending on the nature of student and schoolwide projects</li> <li>• This method seeks to identify strengths in each student rather than weaknesses</li> </ul> <p><b>Disadvantages</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time-consuming for teachers, making implementation difficult</li> <li>• The "strength" approach may not be useful if the purpose of assessment is to identify students who are in need of additional instructions</li> <li>• Some question usefulness, since course grades are based partly on students' progress and collection of projects and classroom work</li> <li>• No clear standards/guidelines about how to integrate portfolio evaluation results with other testing results</li> <li>• No consensus on what should be included, how they should be graded, and used in future instructions</li> </ul>



## Promoting Civic Learning: Teacher Training and Professional Development

High-quality professional development (the education of teachers, both before and during their careers) is a central component for improving education for students. Noted education scholar Thomas Guskey defines professional development as “systematic efforts to bring about change in the classroom practices of teachers, in their attitudes and beliefs, and in the learning outcomes of students.”<sup>116</sup> Just as excellent civic learning is interactive and involves students in discussion and collaboration, the best professional development is not a matter of transmitting facts and concepts to prospective or actual teachers, but rather of encouraging them to learn through study, reflection, and experience. Research substantiates that high-quality professional development is required for effective implementation of any policies and practices.<sup>117</sup> Simply put, teacher professional development is an investment in student learning.

.....

One of the most promising approaches to increase young people’s informed engagement in our national life is school-based civic education. After all, understanding and actively participating in our civic life was one of the principal missions given to American schools from the very beginning. In creating our nation, the founders realized that they had brought something new into the world in which all citizens were meant to play a vital role.

**DR. VARTAN GREGORIAN, PRESIDENT,  
CARNEGIE CORPORATION OF NEW YORK**

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Given our vision of high-quality civic learning, it is necessary to ensure that teachers are prepared to provide that sort of education to their students. Well-trained teachers are indispensable to making the six proven practices an integral part of every student’s experience. As such, a high-quality professional development program in civics must focus on engaging teachers in these practices to help build a deeper understanding of the knowledge and skills they need to incorporate these practices in the classroom. Teachers must have a clear understanding of both the “what” and the “how” of civics in order to help students gain mastery of the content and skills necessary to be engaged citizens.<sup>118</sup>

### **EVIDENCE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIC LEARNING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

The need could hardly be clearer: There are specific classroom practices identified with positive civic outcomes, and professional development has been shown to increase the chances teachers will use those practices effectively in their classrooms.<sup>119</sup> Given this connection, it should not be surprising that a teacher’s professional development in civics is predictive of students’ civic knowledge and attitudes.<sup>120</sup> Reflecting on their own education and teacher preparation programs, 51 percent of public school civics teachers report that programs “fell short” in “preparing social studies teachers to teach in real-world classrooms.”<sup>121</sup>

Currently teachers are sporadically using the six practices of effective civic learning in their classrooms. A study conducted in 2004 by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) demonstrates the need for professional development in the specific areas of the promising practices. In surveying 80 teachers from across the nation, the study shows a large amount of variation in teachers’ classroom practices with



regard to instructional practices around civic skills, civic engagement, and awareness of civic issues and concepts.<sup>122</sup> Training teachers in both content and skills, through pre-service, in-service, and other programming, is required to ensure that civics instruction is both consistent and high-quality. Only effective teacher professional development can cultivate effective civics teaching, guaranteeing that a solid grounding in civics is a reality for every child and not dependent on variables specific to a given teacher, school, or community.

## COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN CIVIC LEARNING

Professional development programs in civics should be grounded in what has been shown to impact teachers' knowledge, skills and practices. An analysis of research on current professional development practices<sup>123</sup> demonstrates the necessary components required for professional development to be effective:

- **Content-focused:** Several studies demonstrate that teachers' skills and understandings are directly related to the degree that professional development experiences focus on subject-matter content. It has been found that when teachers have a deep knowledge of content, they are more comfortable and likely to engage students in discussions and inquiry.<sup>124</sup>
- **Active:** Research suggests effective professional development should engage participants with the content and practices in order to help them understand how to incorporate these components into their own instruction. "Active learning encourages teachers to become engaged in meaningful discussion, planning, and practice as part of the professional development activity."<sup>125</sup>
- **Ongoing:** Various studies suggest that effective professional development needs to include continuous follow-up and support that allow for more substantive engagement with subject matter, more opportunities for active learning, and development of coherent connections to teachers' daily work.<sup>126</sup>
- **Connected to Curriculum and Standards:** Professional development should be aligned with national and state standards and connected to what the teachers do with students in the classroom. This requires professional development programs to include time for teachers to think through the context of their communities and schools.<sup>127</sup>



- **Collaborative:** Research has shown that giving teachers the opportunity to build collaborative relationships around common content, skills, and issues of implementation can highly impact the implementation of best practices in a classroom. "Professional development activities that include collective participation—that is, the participation of teachers from the same department, subject, or grade—are more likely to afford opportunities for active learning and are more likely to be coherent with teachers' other experiences."<sup>128</sup>

## CONCLUSION

These aspects of professional development have been proven to improve teaching and should be adopted by civic learning professional development programs nationwide. Yet they do not occur in a vacuum, and programs should take into account the wide variety of contexts that shape teaching and learning, including state and district policies, curriculum, and community values.

Teaching the content and skills necessary to realize the civic mission of our schools requires professional development. To give all students the sort of education that prepares them for democratic citizenship, educators need to understand and be able to teach civic content and skills in-depth and with the flexibility to employ the proven practices in their classrooms. Sustained, high-quality professional development, as defined in this section, is critical to ensuring that teachers are prepared to incorporate the promising practices on a consistent basis in all classrooms.

# Promoting Civic Learning: A Presidents' Award for Civic Engagement

As those concerned about civic learning work to increase the availability of quality learning materials and protect time for in-class teaching, research makes clear that extracurricular activities—which are among the six proven practices set out in this report—are an additional means of increasing civics knowledge, skills, and participation.

The 2003 *Civic Mission of Schools* report documented the beneficial effects of student participation in some forms of co-curricular and extracurricular activities: “Simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberation, and diplomacy in schools can lead to heightened political knowledge and interest [...] and] several studies have found that extracurricular participation is a better predictor of adult community engagement than education or income.”<sup>129</sup> Additional data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health confirms that young people who participate in certain extracurricular activities—ones that demand student time commitments and that involve community service, representation of the views of others, speaking in public forums, and generating a communal identity—are much more likely to participate politically as adults. They also found that the greater the number of these activities a school makes available to its students, the greater the whole student population’s level of future political engagement.<sup>130</sup>

Although some of the extracurricular activities that promote civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions are based primarily in individual schools, most are provided by organizations that

are national in scope, with local chapters. Examples of these organizations are listed below and placed in the four broad categories in which they cluster:

- 1. Youth Leadership**
  - YMCA of the USA
  - Close Up
  - Girl Scouts of America
  - Boy Scouts of America
  - Freedoms Foundation
- 2. Student Participation in Governance Structures**
  - United Nations Association—Model United Nations
  - National Association of Secondary School Principals—National Association of Student Councils
- 3. Communication and Representation of the Views of Others**
  - National Forensic League
  - National Scholastic Press Association
  - National History Day
  - American Bar Association
- 4. Community Service**
  - Kiwanis—Key Club
  - Rotary—Interact Clubs
  - Ruritan—Ruri-teens
  - Civitan—Junior Civitan





The structures of these organizations suggest that a national awards program could be used to increase student participation in the desirable activities. Therefore, the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania and the National Constitution Center recommend the creation of a national recognition program to increase youth participation in the activities of certain school-related clubs and community organizations. The creation of this program would be a part of an overall strategy to strengthen the civic health of our nation. The program—the *Presidents’ Award for Civic Engagement*—would build on several of the proven practices listed in this report, including service-learning, simulations, and extracurricular activities. Framed in terms of these principles, the goal of the *Presidents’ Award for Civic Engagement* would be to increase opportunities for students to apply what they have learned in formal classroom study through leadership activities, participation in governance structures, communication and representation of the views of others, and community service.

The program would be constructed along the lines of the President’s Volunteer Service Award (PVSA) and would provide recognition to middle and high school students who participate at various levels in the civic engagement activities of the aforementioned clubs and organizations.

The program would also provide recognition to schools that are successful in encouraging their students to participate in these activities.

Awards might include a congratulatory letter, lapel pin and certificate from the living presidents of the United States, and (for schools) banners to be hung publicly. The award program would be administered by the National Constitution Center and offered to students and schools through a select few of the national and international organizations that make the activities available. Currently, the Annenberg Public Policy Center and the National Constitution Center are bringing leadership organizations on board, and we are encouraged by the fact that so many have already seen this program as an excellent step in the direction of national civic health.

The *Presidents’ Award for Civic Engagement* has strong research behind it, is a successful administrative model in the PVSA, and has already been embraced by a number of the organizations that would provide many of the high-quality activities that lead to heightened civic knowledge, interest, and participation. It is time we as a nation encourage students and schools to take part in these activities that, together with high-quality classroom instruction, will prepare them well for active and informed citizenship.





# CIVIC LEARNING POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These policy recommendations are vital steps in ensuring the proliferation of high-quality civic learning nationwide. By implementing these recommendations, we can revitalize our democracy by providing high-quality civic learning opportunities to all students.

*These recommendations have been developed for a variety of education policymaking audiences, in consultation with leading civic learning scholars, researchers, and practitioners from across the nation. We call on each of these key audiences to act on these recommendations expeditiously in order to restore the essential civic mission of America's schools:*

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS AND ADMINISTRATORS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

- Integrate the civic mission of schools into each school's mission statement and act on it.
- Revitalize civic learning from the dry facts of history and the structure of government to a focus on the ways citizens can and must be engaged participants in civic life. Focus instruction on a vibrant discussion of historical facts and their underlying values.
- Promote all of the proven practices of this report, ensuring students have the opportunity to receive or participate in all of these effective practices.
- Ensure that all social studies/civics teachers participate in ongoing professional development activities and support high-quality professional development.
- View civic learning as an interdisciplinary subject that can and should be employed across the curriculum.
- Use civic learning to build twenty-first century skills, help prevent dropouts, and improve school climate.
- Create partnerships with colleges and universities to strengthen schools' and districts' civic learning programs.
- Include civic learning in school/district "report cards" and measure progress in each of the proven practices in this report.
- Encourage student participation in in-school and out-of-school civic learning experiences.
- Integrate the use of technology and innovative practices into classroom instruction to create a more interactive civic learning environment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS

- Send a strong message that preparation for active, informed citizenship is the co-equal purpose of education along with preparation for higher education and career (as is stated in most states' constitutions or education establishment codes). State policies should be aligned accordingly.
- States should work together to develop common state standards and assessments in the social studies through a state-led effort.
- Hold schools and districts accountable for student civic learning achievement by including civic learning in state assessments and accountability measures.
- Combat the narrowing of the curriculum that reduces civic learning, especially in low-performing schools.
- Include civic learning in broader education reform efforts.
- Review existing standards in the social studies to ensure they are meaningful, focused, realistic, and reflect thoughtful priorities for civic learning.
- Ensure the inclusion of the proven practices in this report in all schools in the state.
- Identify and include indicators/metrics for state longitudinal data systems specific to civic learning.
- Include social studies/civic learning in district and school "report cards" and other public reports of school achievement.
- Utilize alternative forms of assessment, such as group projects or portfolio assessments, that are better suited to demonstrate student achievement in civic learning than more traditional tests.
- Strengthen pre-service and licensure/ accreditation requirements for social studies/civic learning teachers to ensure mastery of subject matter and confidence in use of the proven practices in this report.



- Require and support high-quality ongoing professional development for all social studies/civic learning teachers.
- Ensure that civic learning is taught at each grade level, utilizing an interdisciplinary approach.
- Fully fund civic learning, even if that means reallocating other resources if necessary to meet the essential civic mission of schools.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FEDERAL POLICYMAKERS**

- Ensure that the civic mission of our nation's schools is enhanced and strengthened by any education reform efforts (including the re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) promulgated at the federal level.
- Support the development of common state standards in civic learning (civics, history, geography, and economics). Support the states

in the development of common assessments tied to the standards. Encourage assessments that go beyond measurement of student attainment of factual knowledge (group projects or portfolio assessments that can assess students' civic skills attainment). Common state standards and assessments should be developed by the states, for the states, with a portion reserved for state-specific content.

- Add promoting civic literacy to the U.S. Department of Education's mission statement and act upon it.
- Establish a competitive grant program for civic learning within the U.S. Department of Education that would fund innovation in civic learning, provide research on effective civic learning strategies, allow for the replication of successful programs that are proven by research, and support currently underserved school populations.





- Provide state-level data from the National Assessments of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests in Civics and History so that state policymakers and the public can judge how well their schools are performing in providing effective civic learning.
- Support the establishment of an award program for students and schools recognizing civic learning achievement modeled on the “Blue Ribbon Schools” program to increase attention paid to civic learning at the school level.
- Hold a national summit on the civic mission of our nation’s schools to bring needed attention to civic learning and to allow the sharing of successful, research-backed programs and teaching strategies and policies.
- Make documents held at the National Archives and the Library of Congress more readily available (digitally and replicas) to teachers and students so they can learn about and debate the original record of American history.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS**

- Require all students, regardless of major, take at least one engaging civic learning course.
- Strengthen teacher preparation by including all of the proven practices in this report, and ensure that every prospective civic learning/social studies teacher has competencies in the use of each practice.
- Ensure that all graduates of each school of education possess civic knowledge and skills.
- Help K–12 schools in their areas develop and implement civic learning programs through partnerships with K–12 schools and by encouraging postsecondary students to volunteer as “civics mentors,” especially in disadvantaged K–12 schools.
- Provide work-study credits for civic learning or community service activities.
- Encourage meaningful student participation in school governance to build student civic competencies. This can occur through organizations such as student senates, student-led courts, and campus-wide referenda on major issues of concern to students.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOLARS AND RESEARCHERS**

- Develop and implement rigorous studies on innovative civic learning approaches that produce data-backed evidence of the effectiveness of teaching strategies, civic learning programs, and approaches.
- Expand research on civic learning standards and assessments as well as district and state policies.
- Promote research alliances among and between researchers, practitioners, policymakers, institutions, and organizations and across disciplines, including political science, psychology, and education.
- Develop research that both documents the extent of and offers solutions to the disparity of civic learning opportunities in schools.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS**

- At this time of diminished public resources, we call on foundations and other private funders to form a consortium to fund high-quality civic learning. This consortium should spur innovation and generate evidence-based proof of best practices.
- Include civic learning in education reform funding, remembering that civic learning is cross-curricular and helps build skills for college and career readiness.
- Provide funding for civic learning professional development programs.
- Corporate foundations need to become more engaged in funding civic learning and recognize that high-quality civic learning helps build the twenty-first century workplace skills the business community needs in the future workforce.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS, THE MEDIA, AND ALL CITIZENS**

- Parents should encourage their children to develop an interest in keeping themselves informed about current events; encourage their children to take an interest in and volunteer in their community; and help their children develop civic knowledge, skills, and habits.



- Parents should review the civic learning opportunities in children’s schools. If parents are not satisfied their children are receiving adequate civic learning, parents should demand improvements from their local education policymakers.
- The media should highlight successful civic learning opportunities and point out areas of needed improvement and urge policymakers to improve.
- The media should recognize schools as an ideal venue for reading/watching news outlets and should support schools through programs such as “Newspapers in Education” and PBS’s “the.News.”
- All citizens should demand that the schools they help support provide effective civic learning for all students.
- All citizens should volunteer time and resources to help schools provide effective civic learning.





## Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools

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### STEERING COMMITTEE

American Association of Colleges and Universities	Junior Statesman Foundation
American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education	Kid's Voting USA
American Association of School Administrators	League of Women Voters of the United States
American Bar Association, Division for Public Education	Lou Frey Institute for Politics and Government, Florida Joint Center for Citizenship
American Enterprise Institute	Mikva Challenge
American Federation of Teachers	National Alliance for Civic Education
American Historical Association	National Association of Secondary Principals
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development	National Association of State Boards of Education
Bill of Rights Institute	National Catholic Educational Association
Center for Civic Education	National Center for Learning & Citizenship, Education Commission of the States
Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE)	National Conference of State Legislatures
Center for the Study of the American Electorate	National Conference on Citizenship
Cesar Chavez School for Public Policy, Washington, DC	National Constitution Center
Character Education Partnership	National Council for the Social Studies
The Choices Program	National Education Association
City Year	National Education Knowledge Industry Association
Close-Up Foundation	National History Day
Coalition for Community Schools	National School Boards Association
Committee for Economic Development	National Service-Learning Partnership
Constitutional Rights Foundation	Netter Center for Community Partnerships, University of Pennsylvania
Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago	Partnership for twenty-first Century Skills
Corporation for National & Community Service Council of Chief State School Officers	Public Education Network
Earth Force, Inc.	RMC Research, Inc.
First Amendment Center	Rock the Vote
Forum for Education and Democracy	Rural School and Community Trust
Future Civic Leaders	Street Law, Inc.
Generation Citizen	State Education Agencies Service Learning Provider Network (SEA-Net)
iCivics	
Innovations in Civic Participation	



## Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools

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### STEERING COMMITTEE

Doug Bailey, Founder, “The Hotline” and American’s Elect	Ted McConnell, Executive Director, Civic Mission of Schools
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Sheldon Berman, Superintendent of Schools, Eugene, OR	Edward O’Brien, Street Law, Retired
David Evans, former Committee Staff Director, United States Senate	Carolyn Pereira, Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago, Retired
Honorable Les Francis, Washington Media Group, former White House Deputy Chief of Staff	Patrick Phillips, Superintendent of Schools, MSAD #61, Maine
Jonathan Gould, Deputy Director, Civic Mission of Schools	Terry Pickeral, Cascade Educational Consultants
Honorable Trey Grayson, former Secretary of State of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, Director, Harvard University Institute of Politics	Honorable Suellen Reed, former Superintendent of Public Instruction of Indiana
Diana Hess, Professor of Education, University of Wisconsin	Honorable David Skaggs, former member, United States House of Representatives
Honorable Marilyn Howard, former Superintendent of Public Instruction of Idaho	Honorable Jeri Thomson, former Secretary of the United States Senate
Joseph Kahne, Dean of the School of Education, Mills College	Judith Torney-Purta, Professor, University of Maryland
Meira Levinson, Harvard University, Graduate School of Education	Joseph Viteritti, Hunter College
Honorable Deborah Markowitz, former Secretary of State of Vermont	Honorable James Ziglar, former Sergeant at Arms, U.S. Senate, Senior Fellow Migration Policy Institute



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## CAMPAIGN FOR THE CIVIC MISSION OF SCHOOLS



The **Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools** is a coalition of over sixty organizations, scholars and researchers; dedicated to strengthening and improving civic learning for every student in the nation. The Campaign serves as the public advocacy and policy arm of the national civic learning community. For more information please visit: [www.civicmissionofschools.org](http://www.civicmissionofschools.org)



The **Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)** conducts research on the civic and political engagement of young Americans. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 and is based at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University. A national leader in civic education and research, Tisch College is setting a standard for higher education's role in civic engagement. Engaging students and faculty from all Tufts schools, Tisch College supports a wide range of interdisciplinary, community-based research and generates an enduring culture of active citizenship across the university. For more information please visit: [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)



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