

Fulfilling the Democratic Aims of Education

A systemic approach for generating learning opportunities for students' informed participation in civic and political life

BY ERICA R. HODGIN, JOSEPH KAHNE
AND JOHN S. ROGERS

A school board member asks the superintendent how the school district is working to deepen students' literacy skills. Suppose the superintendent responds this way: "Well, that's a good question. Literacy is important. I don't want to mandate attention to literacy because teachers are asked to do so much. But it is great that some of our teachers include reading and writing opportunities in their courses."

Then he adds: "I think one thing we need to have is more extra-curricular activities for students who are interested in reading and writing. Of course, not every student will want to join these clubs, but those who do will experience valuable opportunities."

No superintendent would actually say this. However, suppose one substitutes "learning to read and write" with "learning how to participate in a democracy." Now the superintendent's



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response — “I don’t want to mandate [it] ... but it’s great that some teachers include opportunities for civic engagement in their classes” — doesn’t seem so odd.

Indeed, while school leaders’ and districts’ mission statements frequently refer to preparing all students to be thoughtful citizens, few school systems make a systemic commitment. Districts rarely ensure all students are exposed to the full range of civic learning and skills for informed participation in civic and political life. This relative neglect is not surprising given that literacy and STEM are connected to high-stakes assessments. A recent national survey of principals by *Education Week* found the biggest hurdle to promoting civics was “pressure to focus on other subjects because they are tested or emphasized.”



Of course, every four years, in the run-up to the presidential election, the desire to prepare students to become informed voters resurfaces. For the most part, though, other than perhaps a required one-semester government course or a schoolwide mock election, civic education is intermittent and idiosyncratic. As a result, not all youth are adequately or equitably supported to develop civic capacities.

Distress Signals

The impact of our failure to make a systemic commitment to robust civic education is predictable. Many signs point to a civic learning deficit and a resulting strain on democratic life.

► Civic learning outcomes are low and unequal.

Only 24 percent of all 8th graders score at or above the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress’ most recent civics assessment in 2018, and the proportion of Black and Latinx students achieving proficiency is lower still.

► Exposure to civic learning opportunities is inequitable.

Studies find that youth receive inadequate exposure to desired civic learning opportunities and that this exposure often differs by students’ race and family income. For example, Black and Latinx high school students are less likely than white students to report experiencing current event discussions, civic simulations and an open classroom climate.

Similarly, students in high socioeconomic status classrooms are twice as likely as low-income students to report participating in service learning projects.

► Many youth (and adults) can’t judge the credibility of information.

A major study from the Stanford History Education Group found fewer than one in five middle and high school students and only about one in three college students could adequately judge the accuracy of online content.

► Commitments to democracy are diminishing.

Youth are far less likely than older Americans to express that they value democracy. In one national survey, twice as many 16-24-year-olds as senior citizens (24 percent versus 12 percent) said, “Having a democratic political system was a ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’ way to run the country.”

Students from a Participate Civics class visit City Hall with LaTanya McDade, chief education officer in Chicago Public Schools, as part of a city council simulation.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Effective Measures

Civic learning practices can lead to the cultivation of desired democratic goals. When students are supported to share multiple viewpoints on controversial public issues in a respectful manner, they forge a deeper understanding of the concepts and principles of democracy, develop increased intention to participate civically and politically, and commit to being informed voters.

Also impactful are service learning, extracurricular activities and learning how to judge the credibility of online content, to create and circulate digital content related to civic and political issues and to connect learning to students' lived experiences.

Systemic Commitment

Over the past several years, we have supported several school districts in their efforts to establish a systemic commitment to advance civic and democratic learning.

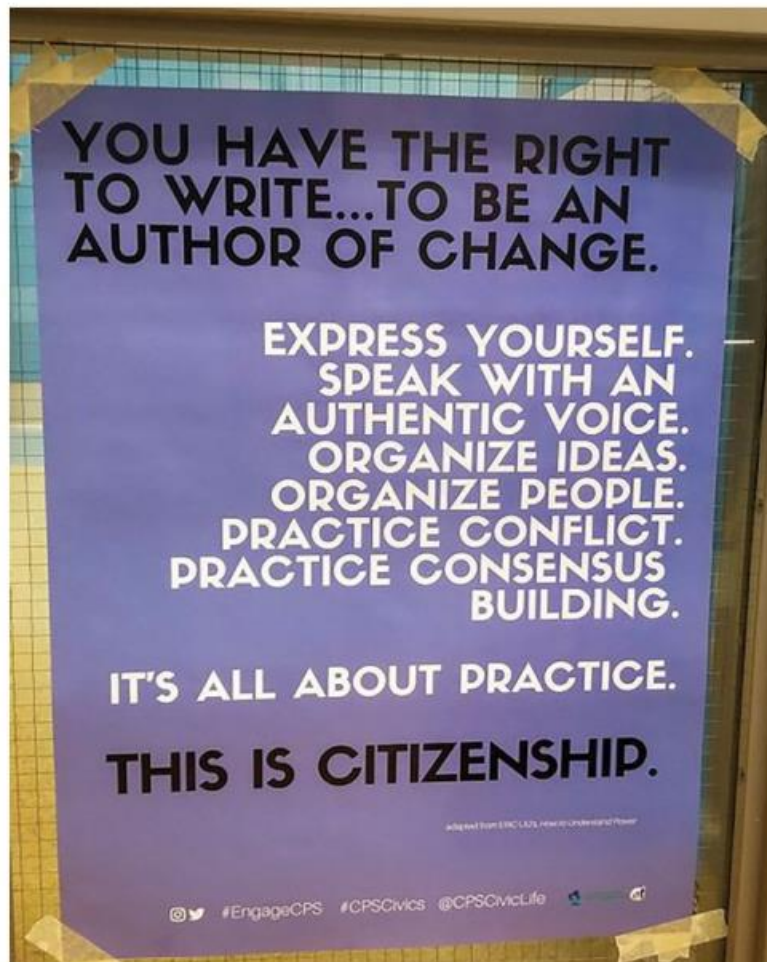
One partner, Chicago Public Schools, has used various approaches since 2012 to institutionalize a commitment to civic learning. Chicago also invested in teacher professional development about civic learning and required students to complete two community projects to graduate.

The district integrated three additional avenues for deep attention toward civics. First, the district required a civics course in high school.

Second, the district launched student voice committees, or SVCs, which bolster youth leadership, amplify student voice and promote a positive school climate. The committees are designed to create partnerships between students and adults to engage students in productive decision making. SVCs have grown significantly in Chicago — from five schools in 2012 to 75 schools in 2019.

Finally, the district's social science and civic engagement team further institutionalized civic learning by incorporating it into the district's continuous improvement process. Every two years, all schools complete a schoolwide self-assessment that now includes a section related to "student voice, engagement and civic life."

We collaborate with the district to create individual school reports highlighting the civic data from the districtwide student survey. We also provide findings about the degree to which a range of civic learning opportunities and outcomes are equitably distributed across the district with respect to student race, family socioeconomic status and student academic performance. What's particularly exciting is that analysis of civic learning in Chicago schools is not a separate endeavor,



A poster in a Participate Civics classroom quotes Eric Liu's "Ways of Power" video, an anchor concept in the civics curriculum in Chicago Public Schools.

but instead is embedded within the district's continuous improvement process.

Showcasing Civics

The Riverside Unified School District, serving a politically diverse southern California community with 42,000 students, began a districtwide civics effort in 2017. The first step was to survey middle and high school students and conduct focus groups with students and teachers to understand their access to civic learning. These surveys and focus groups now occur yearly.

Building off of what was learned, with help from a local foundation, the district has provided teachers with professional development and support to develop civic learning projects for their students. At the end of each school year, River-

A Model for Promoting Student Voting

BY JONATHAN B. PERMAR

Last fall, Guilford County Schools in Greensboro, N.C., launched a comprehensive voter education program, during which nearly 3,000 students became registered voters, a 185 percent increase.

This initiative took shape as we considered recent scholarship on voter interest and turnout among young people that suggests, contrary to popular belief, they are overwhelmingly interested in politics and voting. Yet

these young, first-time voters face barriers in understanding the process, registering and getting to a polling site. These obstacles disproportionately impact students of color and those living with poverty. Among our high school students, one of those characteristics applies to at least 66 percent.

Nearly all 28 high schools in Guilford County provide civic education and registration through courses, projects and voting drives. However, these are handled independently by individual teachers at different points during students' education. When we considered the numbers — that seven in 10 individuals under age 24 who are eligible to vote *don't* vote, and one in five who are eligible to register *won't* register — we asked what else we could do as a school system.

Alongside a nonprofit community partner known as You Can Vote, we delivered nonpartisan, unbiased, fact-based education on voter requirements, registration and elected offices and supported students through the registration process. We established optional field trips to early-voting sites for eligible students to mitigate transportation barriers.

High school students in the Chicago Public Schools show off their wristbands after voting in city elections for the first time.



Shared Lessons

After a full year of operation, we have discovered a few key considerations.

► **COMMUNITY PARTNERS.** A partner dedicated to voter education and registration can help develop content around voter eligibility, registration and government offices, which helps provide uniformity in message. A community partner's network of trained volunteers and organizations lends support in delivering the program. Our partner connected with the League of Women Voters' regional office to reach even more schools.

► **UNBIASED, NONPARTISAN AND CONSISTENT MESSAGING.** By ensuring these qualities across all schools, we accomplish three things: eliminate opportunities for unconscious bias; honor our students and families by respecting their rights to their own beliefs; and emphasize civic engagement rather than politics.

► **SCHOOL-BASED LEADS AND SUPPORT.** Principals understand the climate and culture of their buildings. School schedules vary. Administrators and teachers engage with students and families differently. They are the ones who know the ins and outs of their

side hosts an annual Civics Showcase where students present these civic learning projects to parents, community members, City Council members, teachers and fellow students. This event publicizes exemplary instances of civic learning and raises awareness about high-quality approaches.

With increasing support for this initiative and in alignment with the district's "world-ready" graduation standard, the school board in 2019 adopted civic engagement as a priority, a public commitment to ensuring all Riverside students have access to high-quality civic learning.

Eight Avenues

While school districts will pursue these goals in differing ways, our experience in Chicago, Riverside and elsewhere has led us to identify several key strategies for advancing civic education systemwide.

► **Designate a civic education champion.** Identify someone in the central office who can advance a district commitment to civic learning. This individual needs the time and standing to mobilize allies, organize and plan professional development initiatives, and communicate the district's civic learning initiatives to the broader public.

► **Integrate civic learning into core goals and priorities.** Districts can include language about civic learning in their expectations for graduation. Such formal measures assure educators that civic learning will remain a valued priority, even as changes inevitably occur in district leadership or key staff.

► **Deepen and extend aligned agendas.** Add a focus on civic learning to project-based learning, performance assessments, capstone projects, ethnic studies curricula, restorative justice and



North Carolina's Guilford County Schools transports eligible students to a polling site during early voting as part of its comprehensive voter education program.

been impossible. We faced snowstorms, road construction and busy polling sites, and their ability to coordinate logistics quickly and flexibly with schools and drivers is what got students to polls.

► **SUPPORTIVE, STRONG LEADERSHIP.**

From the school's program leader to the superintendent, supportive leadership is necessary. Recognize that helping students register to vote and eliminating barriers that obstruct them from voting can be controversial.

Without a superintendent who believes young people should engage in their communities, this initiative never would have gotten off the ground. Without a district team ready to support students in exercising civic rights and responsibilities, implementation would be impossible. Without principals and teachers who believe the voices of their students should be heard, a program like this wouldn't happen.

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buildings and can ensure classroom implementation runs smoothly.

► **EARLY VOTING.** Transporting students to vote on Election Day can be difficult, if not impossible, for students, their schools and the polling places. Early-voting windows provide multiple days and opportunities for student voting.

► **COLLABORATION WITH THE BOARD OF ELECTIONS.** The local elections body can

provide insight you might not get from others. They can suggest polling sites with more workers, larger parking lots or bigger spaces that can accommodate a school bus of students. They can help you understand and communicate regulations about voter registration and polling sites, which are important for students to follow.

► **TRANSPORTATION.** Without our transportation department, the logistics of providing travel for students to polling sites would have

social emotional learning. View civic learning as both a particular set of practices and a priority for curriculum, instruction and school culture more generally.

► **Consider professional development a key ingredient.** Educators need time and support to discover and experiment with new practices within a professional learning community. If we want teachers to address democracy, they need meaningful opportunities to learn and deliberate democratically among themselves.

► **Recognize exemplary civic learning.** Finding ways to recognize exemplary instances of civic learning by students, teachers and/or schools helps to draw attention to the importance of civic education. This can take the form of demonstration schools, a districtwide showcase, an awards ceremony or a video about civic learning across

the district — anything to raise awareness about high-quality approaches and illustrate the various avenues.

► **Finding financial backing.** Funding from local or regional foundations that believe in the democratic purpose of schools, youth voice and civic education can help advance the school district's civic education work. Philanthropic support can provide seed funding that enables professional development as well as special projects or events.

► **Solicit community support for the civic agenda.** Reach out for support from a range of advocates, including community leaders, members of youth development groups, school board members and city/county government representatives. Communities have a vested interest in encouraging youth to participate in volunteer organizations and the electoral process.



A student in the Riverside, Calif., Unified School District presents his project at the district's annual Civics Showcase.

► **Report on civic learning outcomes.** Data on civic learning opportunities and outcomes are a powerful source for reflection, deliberation and evaluation. School leaders can provide educators and community partners with a chance to examine the data in light of the initiative's goals of expanding equity and access in civic education.

Navigating Politics

As school leaders propose expanding access to civic education, undoubtedly some will point to the difficulties of navigating an appropriate instructional role for civic learning in a period of increased political polarization and divisiveness. Unfortunately, ignoring these forces will not make the problem go away. Students must learn to engage productively across differences. And, as recent pressing societal issues surrounding COVID-19, racial equity and policing make clear, the need for both understanding and engagement with societal challenges is never-ending. Schools should not sit on the sidelines.

Democracy always has been a core purpose underlying public education. Preparing students to engage in our democracy is not a luxury to be

Additional Resources

The authors of this article, along with their partners, have developed these resources, which support school districts to integrate civic learning opportunities for students.

- The Civic Engagement in the Digital Age video describes what civic engagement is and shares how the Oakland Unified School District is integrating civic learning districtwide. www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOfJCDI-Nol&feature=emb_logo
- The Civic Engagement Research Group's collection of videos highlight various civic learning and civic media literacy approaches in a range of classrooms. <https://civicsurvey.org/resources#videos>
- The Digital Civics Toolkit is a collection of resources for educators to support youth in exploring civic opportunities of digital life. www.digitalcivics toolkit.org
- Chicago Public Schools' Student Voice Committees are described in detail. <https://cps.edu/Pages/StudentVoiceCommittee.aspx>
- The Teaching for Democracy Alliance is a collection of civic education organizations working jointly to support K-12 teachers and administrators on practical democracy lessons, including ways to teach about elections and voting. www.teachingfordemocracy.org
- "High Quality Civic Education: What Is It and Who Gets It?" by Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, *Social Education*, January/February 2008. The article describes a model of high-quality civic education and the research base that supports it. www.socialstudies.org/publications/socialeducation/january-february2008/high-quality-civic-education-what-is-it-and-who-gets-it
- The Leveraging Equity and Access in Democratic Education initiative, co-managed by UCLA and UC Riverside, is a resource center for school districts on quality civic learning opportunities. <https://center.gseis.ucla.edu/leade/>

attended to if time permits. It is fundamentally important. ■

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