



May 2015

Governance Brief

Why Civic Learning is Critical

One of the foremost responsibilities of schools is to train students to be future citizens—engaged and accountable members of society. While some students are systematically exposed to relevant and rigorous civic learning opportunities at school, many others are not. This disparity in learning opportunities likely has a devastating long-term impact. As a result, some students emerge from our education system better prepared to be citizens within their communities than others. Notably, those students who are exposed to relevant and rigorous civic learning opportunities are better prepared than their peers to be participatory citizens. They are more apt to vote, more likely to be engaged in their communities, more capable of adapting to civic rules and norms, and thus, more able to shape their future to their wishes.

The implications of a race- and ethnicity-based civic learning achievement gap are troubling. We often talk about the achievement gap in terms of reading and math. This conception, while accurate, is incomplete. There is also a civics learning achievement gap that is equally stark and puts our democracy at risk. On average, African American and Latino students scored far lower on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment¹ than their white and Asian American peers. A simplistic, yet likely accurate interpretation of this data is that, on average, White and Asian American citizens are being trained by our schools to be more participatory and effective citizens than African Americans and Latinos.

Additionally, the lack of rigor and relevancy of civic education in the United States extends beyond race and ethnicity. Scholars and late night talk show hosts alike have shown that Americans do not know basic civics. Markedly, data indicates that this is getting worse, not better. The most recent NAEP civics assessment was given in 2010. On this exam, 12th-graders scored lower on average than did 12th-graders who took the test in 2006.

Do all students have civic learning opportunities that are relevant to their lives?

Civic learning happens best when it is relevant to the lives of the students. What is the purpose of learning something that feels to be of little or no use? This point is of particular importance for African American and Latino youth. According to NAEP civic assessment data, African Americans and Latinos score far below their White and Asian American peers. There are many factors for why this occurs, such as reading ability and enrichment opportunities, but relevance may also be a key factor.

In a notable study, *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics*, political scientist Cathy Cohen looked at how African American youth relate to society.² Through national surveys of Black, White, and Latino youth, focus groups, and intensive interviews with Black youth, Cohen painted a vibrant picture of the experience of being an African American youth.

Cohen's analysis suggested that being African American is a very powerful identity and the marginalization that many African Americans feel has serious repercussions on the education they seek and the life choices they make. According to her data, African American youth registered higher levels of political alienation than young people who identify as White, Latino, or Asian American. We must think carefully as educators about how we create learning environments where all students can find relevance in the learning material and feel comfortable exploring their identities.

On the bright side, the Common Core State Standards are likely to increase civic learning opportunities for all students through cross-curricular learning, emphasis on critical thinking, and prospects for project-based learning. Furthermore, in California, the Supreme Court and the Department of Education jointly formed the California Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning to assess the civic learning landscape across the state and craft recommendations to ensure that civic learning opportunities are plentiful and equal. The Task Force compiled an energetic report, *Revitalizing K-12 Civic Learning in California: A Blueprint for Action*. California's Local Control Funding Formula and its requirements for community engagement also provide an excellent opportunity to put relevant civic learning into action for students.

Board member's role in civic learning

Given the importance of civic education and schools' responsibility for training future citizens, board members have a role to play in ensuring that all students are provided with rigorous civic learning opportunities that are relevant to their lives. The following are guidelines and questions for boards to consider when supporting civic education policy:

» **Boards can model exemplary civic behavior**

As community leaders and elected representatives of the public, school boards are uniquely situated to model good civic behavior for students. Board members should be thoughtful about building trust and mutual respect for one another and establish norms for civil discourse. It is imperative for effective governance that boards build processes and relationships that allow them to carefully consider complex issues, civilly disagree, and provide a clear vision for the district. For more on effective governance, see the [CSBA Defining Governance Series](#).

» **Boards can empower student voices**

Especially for districts that educate high school students, creating an opportunity for a student or students to have official representation on the board can provide a critical mechanism for considering student needs and wishes in governing decisions. (see CSBA's sample board bylaws BB 9150—Student Board Members). CSBA believes that engaging the student body and seeking its input and feedback regarding the district's educational programs and activities are vital to achieving the district's mission of educating students.

» **Boards can make civic learning a priority by putting it on the board agenda**

The formality of putting civic education on a board agenda can signal the issue's importance. While the superintendent develops the specifics of the educational programs, boards can support their superintendent by setting a clear guiding vision and providing him or her with the resources needed to effectively carry it out. Boards can be clear about setting their vision by passing a board resolution similar to the California Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning [using CSBA's template](#). When it comes time to discuss civic learning, board members can also ask thoughtful questions of the superintendent and staff.

How do boards know their district is providing effective civic education?

Of course, there is no substitute for good teaching, and research agrees that teachers have a large effect on student achievement.³ Teachers who feel supported by their district, have access to appropriate professional development and connect with their students are key to promoting excellent civic learning opportunities for *all* students.

In addition to supporting teachers and promoting teaching excellence, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools laid out six "proven practices" for teaching civics. The California Task Force On K-12 Civic Learning called out these proven practices as:

- » **Classroom instruction in government, history, geography, law, democracy, and economics**, striking a balance between teaching important facts and documents—such as the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights—and demonstrating their relevance to today's society;
- » **Discussion of current events and controversial issues**, including their relevance to young people's lives;
- » **Service-learning experiences that are directly linked to curriculum and instruction** and that give students a chance to apply what they are learning through informed civic action;
- » **Extracurricular activities** that give students opportunities to get involved in their schools, communities, and local government and to work together toward common goals.

- » **Student participation in school governance**, to cultivate a sense of responsibility and give young people a real voice in how their classrooms, schools, and district are run; and
- » **Simulations of democratic processes**, such as formal debates, voting, mock trials, Model United Nations, and simulations of legislative deliberation.

It is notable that only one of the six proven practices is explicitly classroom based. While a class on government may provide an important foundation for civic learning, the nuances of civic learning cannot be fully appreciated in the classroom alone.

Questions for board members

1. Has the board discussed our vision for civic learning in the district?
2. Has the board developed a board governance handbook and are we modeling good civic behavior for our students and communities?
3. Are we partnering with other local governments in appropriate and effective ways to support our mission?

Other Resources

Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools
<http://bit.ly/1HeXCrx>

Revitalizing K-12 Civic Learning in California: A Blueprint for Action <http://bit.ly/1FxFMP>

iCivics <https://www.icivics.org>

Endnotes

- 1 The NAEP is commonly referred to as “The Nation’s Report Card” and is a congressionally authorized project of the National Center for Educational Statistics within the Institute of Educational Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education. NAEP is not taken by a nationwide sample of students that is geographically, racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse of the schools and students in the United States. The civics assessment is administered every four years.
- 2 Cohen, C. J. (2012). *Democracy remixed: Black youth and the future of American politics* (Transgressing boundaries: Studies in black politics and black communities). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- 3 Hanushek, Erik A. and Steven G. Rivkin. (2010). Generalizations about using value-added measures of teacher quality. *American Economic Review*, 100.2.