An Equitable Approach to Strengthening Civic Education

Joe Rogers
Director of Public Engagement and Government Affairs
Center for Educational Equity at Teachers College, Columbia University

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There is no democracy without educational equity. There is no educational equity without equity in civic education.

There is no equity in efforts to improve civic education—the preparation of students to play active and effective roles in shaping society today and in the future—without an equitable and inclusive commitment to centering the authentic expertise and leadership of students; people living in poverty; Black and Brown people; people from rural backgrounds and urban backgrounds, and everywhere in between; immigrants; and all other groups disproportionately and routinely excluded from conference rooms, conferences, and halls of civic power.

And there will be no civic-readiness equity until we accept and honor the fact that the building blocks of effective civic participation include access for all to the full range of high-quality educational opportunities, beyond the narrow band of learning opportunities that many currently associate with civic education.

For over 25 years, our team at the Center for Educational Equity at Teachers College, Columbia University, has led and partnered in research, lawsuits, advocacy, and public engagement on students' educational rights. In the past few years, in particular, our legal, policy, and school-based research has highlighted the importance of preparing students for civic participation and has revealed new possibilities for promoting major improvements in civic participation through a rights-based approach. And today, our coalition-building initiatives strategically mobilize a wide range of voices—including those of both traditional civic-education experts and key stakeholders with strong personal and professional investments in educational equity—toward developing well-informed, practical solutions.

Building on that work, the following essay explores the crossroads of civic education and educational equity in the interest of promoting more honest, inclusive, and effective approaches to solving civic-learning problems. Individually, the questions and observations presented here probably don't break new ground; taken together, however, they may inform and elevate public dialogue and decision making, including our own, on these issues.

The ideas are organized around four key themes:

1. Equitable Civic Education as a Means to an Equitable Society

2. A Call to Recognize and Include the Civic-Education Leaders We've Been Waiting For

3. Shifting from "Civic Gaps" to an Equitable, Goal-Oriented Approach to Civic-Learning Measurement

4. Educational Rights as a Foundation and Catalyst for Equity in Civic Education

Read on. See if you agree or disagree. Engage your friends, classmates, and colleagues in wrestling with the questions and recommendations. And contribute your own definition of equity in civic education to the exciting and promising efforts to expand, deepen, and properly resource civic learning in schools across the nation.

1. Equitable Civic Education as a Means to an Equitable Society

Most civic-education enthusiasts will tell you that better civic learning will lead to a stronger, healthier democracy. It's hard to knock the goal of a stronger, healthier democracy. But it gets a little more complicated when we begin to discuss civic education, and democracy itself, as tools to correct some of the fundamental inequities and injustices baked into certain aspects of our society; for example, to help us live up to our common ideals of equal opportunity that we've never achieved. While sidestepping the real-world implications of this work may make for safer and more polite conversations in civic-education spaces, civic-education agendas centered on simply boosting civic participation for all in the current system, without adjusting the power dynamics, only sustains the conditions that keep some from achieving their full educational, civic, and economic potential and keep *all* of us from enjoying the shared benefits of those achievements.

When we say we're going to improve civic education and, ultimately, improve our democracy, an equity lens requires that we ask ourselves and each other, "improve *for whom,* and *how much*"? How one answers that question will drive the solutions one proposes and how and whether the necessary resources will be allocated to fund those solutions.

For some, civic-education problem solving is somewhat abstract. The system is working relatively well for them. They make a good living, have good health care, and enjoy quality housing. Their children attend (or attended) well-resourced, well-regarded schools, public or private, and they themselves apply the educational advantages they were afforded as young people toward holding their elected officials accountable for maintaining the quality of life in their communities. The thought of being confronted by law enforcement because they "fit the description," or otherwise getting swept up into the criminal justice system, never crosses their minds—such things never happen to them or to anyone in their families or social circles.

For other families and communities, whether a student receives an excellent education, including adequate preparation for the type of civic participation that would equip a young person to change policies that affect them and their neighborhoods, may determine whether affordable housing is available so that they can pay the rent *and* serve all family members good, healthy food; whether one is excluded or rejected because of one's accent, national origin, skin color, or other markers of difference; whether one can find a job with, and ultimately work to improve, a governmental institution or some other employer; and sometimes whether one is condemned to spend the rest of one's life behind bars—or lives or dies. Our identities influence our sense of our stake in civic-education decision making, to what extent we structure civic education to shift power, and whether we can afford to invest in conversations about civic education that don't speak clearly and forcefully to these issues.

Consider for a moment the polite consideration of opposing views, and the act of compromise— two fundamental civic-education skills or dispositions. Certainly, there are social and political issues on which we're willing to listen carefully in order to maintain professional, personal, or neighborly

relationships with those who hold views that conflict sharply with our own. And all children and teens, like adults, *should* be taught to seek out and consider multiple perspectives on important public and personal issues.

But whose purpose does it serve for women to consider politely arguments they've heard many times before, by those who say women shouldn't assume leadership positions or be paid the same as men for doing similar work? One certainly *could* discuss politely whether it makes sense to create good jobs for rural folks living in poverty by attracting and developing new industries in rural and agricultural communities that corporations have left in search of cheap labor elsewhere. And let's not forget the racially and economically discriminatory laws and policies that spin low-level, non-violent offenses into long-term incarceration for Black and Brown people and folks living in poverty, tearing families and communities apart—we *could* politely discuss those as well. We *could* be on our best manners as we weigh the possibility of cutting taxes—or maintaining tax breaks—for multimillionaires and billionaires while, for a lack of adequate funding and oversight, students living in poverty continue to be denied the basic educational opportunities guaranteed by state law. Some civic-education scholars and advocates would even encourage us to engage in polite discussion with those who would use hate speech against us.

It's easy for those who don't experience those types of hardship, marginalization, and discrimination personally and frequently to encourage those of us who do to "chill out." When one's "polite" argument questions the worthiness, intelligence, basic rights, or very humanity of another, however, it's not enough simply to prepare students to engage in debates on those topics; most of us need one side or the other to *win* the argument and *win* the related policy battles that determine how society operates. In other words, we don't want *equal* civic preparation for all students; we want *equitable* civic learning that prepares one side to be civically better equipped, more persuasive, and more powerful toward correcting social injustices and helping this nation live up to its enormous potential.

While this vision of equity *does* require that groups that have been disproportionately sidelined in civic and political affairs receive the type and level of education that prepares them to win policy battles that advance the civic interests of their communities in unprecedented ways, equity *does not* dictate that schools indoctrinate students into a specific policy position or into supporting a particular candidate or joining one political party or another. Instead, young people whose communities have not been well served by the status quo need to be supported in exploring, critiquing, and developing policies. History and current circumstances in cities and towns governed by officials with strong ties to one political party or another have shown us, for example, that none of the partisan tribes has a shiny track record in addressing longstanding and pervasive inequities in public education. Teachers or school leaders who chose to impose their own political biases on their students, even in the interest of preparing those students to win policy battles, would be doing those young people a serious disservice and also fuel the suspicions of those who see the renewed activity around civic education as a Trojan horse for advancing the interests of particular political parties.

At its core, democracy is about values and power. The goal of equity in civic education requires us to acknowledge, discuss, and address head-on the long-term, real-world implications of our reform efforts and whether the changes we make today will make a significant and lasting difference for those among us who have been civically marginalized but who yet have so much to contribute to the uplift and advancement of their communities and our nation. How many of us who are working to improve civic education see it as a tool to remedy social injustice, to rebalance the scale so that everyone in our society has a clear stake and so that everyone reaps a fair share of the rewards? And how many would be equally satisfied with more polite civic dialogue, whatever the ultimate social outcomes? The answers to these questions have enormous implications for the type of civic-education agenda we develop and whether it will produce equity at the school level and far beyond.

2. A Call to Recognize and Center the Civic-Education Leaders We've Been Waiting For

Civic-education leaders often name teachers' reluctance to encourage classroom discussion and debate on hot-button social issues, examining multiple perspectives, as a major barrier to civic learning. Judging from conversations at some recent civic-education convenings I've attended, many civic-education leaders themselves may benefit from additional professional development and guidance on how to include diverse voices and engage in productive and meaningful conversations about race, class, youth leadership in education decision making, and other important equity dimensions of this work.

It's the strangest thing to be at a large civic-education conference, policy meeting, or gathering of advocates where folks are discussing the systematic marginalization of people living in poverty, of Black and Brown people, and of young people—and the potential of civic education to fix that—but not have more than one or two people around the table from those demographics. Equally troubling are civic-education deliberations where historical and current civic marginalization, oppression, racism, sexism, adultism, and various other '-isms' aren't raised at all.

Because the outcomes of a decision-making process—that is, the policy, instructional, and resource-allocation decisions tend to reflect the interests of the process participants, now is the time to center the voices, experiences, and expertise of civic participants beyond those who've dominated the public dialogue and decision making in traditional civic-education spaces.

The token inclusion of a few Black and Brown people—students or parents, for example—for bragging rights on how "inclusive" and "authentic" your process is, doesn't do it. Numbers are important, of course, but equally important are the quality and tone of the engagement, including the willingness of those with traditional power over funding, programs, and messaging, to hear, respect, and *center* the voices so often excluded, as well as the willingness of those typically excluded leaders to speak truth to power, to tell it like it is (which, let's be honest, carries risks).

Who is in the room when civic-learning concepts, goals, and standards are being defined and spun into policy? And whose voices, priorities, cultures, and experiences are reflected in the related curricula and assessments?

Civic education should not be constructed *for* or thrust upon people any more than democracy should be envisioned or constructed *for* others. When the United States was established, a room full of White and wealthy men envisioned a democracy that would benefit themselves and those most like them. Their process excluded Black men and women, Native American men and women, White women, those without certain levels of wealth or property, and assorted others who were oppressed and disenfranchised. It certainly didn't include young people. Those who read history know how that turned out: they rigged the "democracy" so that only elite White men could vote and so that states with slavery were awarded more seats in the House of Representatives—a slaveowner "bonus" of sorts—while enslaved people themselves were denied the right to vote. (Notably, five of the first seven U.S. presidents, including several framers of the Constitution, enslaved Black men, women, and children . . . while holding the office of president.)

All that is to say that you can't successfully define and strengthen civic preparation, not equitably and democratically, without including those who are typically underrepresented in education decision making. Instead of adult-only decision making, we need youth voice and youth leadership at the table. Instead of overwhelmingly White groups making decisions that may determine the educational fate of all, including Black and Brown communities, we need significant numbers of Black and Brown people at the table. Instead of urbanites deciding what civic participation should look like for people in rural communities, we need plenty of rural stakeholders at the table. Instead of groups dominated by upper-middle-class people

defining "civic ready" for everyone, we need to include and center the experiences and expertise of people living in poverty.

For guidance and answers on achieving relevance and equity in equitable civic-learning opportunities, we need to challenge assumptions that phrases like "civic education," "civic readiness," or "action civics" reflect recent conceptual breakthroughs. While some would have you believe they invented the idea of having students analyze community issues, develop solutions, and take action, that work has been done for ages—by educators and youth-development experts of color, especially, and by other educator leaders, such as those who championed experiential, democratic education in the early 1900s.

There's a long and well-documented history of schools and community-organizations helping young people prepare to participate and lead in civic life by supporting their analysis of social and political issues, sharing their ideas with a broader audience, and taking informed action to solve civic problems. For guidance, we can look to civil-rights organizations (old and new), movement leaders, and local and national civic associations, many of which have education and youth-development branches. In the field of education, we need to partner with experts in Youth Participatory Action Research—educators, researchers, and young people themselves—who have long been doing this work, in schools and communities. The same goes for culturally relevant, or culturally responsive-sustaining, education (CRSE), which focuses on helping students develop and sustain an awareness of, and a commitment to, using their cultural knowledge, skills, and other strengths to view the world and to address social issues that affect them, their communities, and the broader society. Developing a healthy cultural and racial identity is key to developing a healthy civic identity. To help shape our society, we must know who we are and where we come from, as well as the similarities and differences between our identities and others' cultural frames of reference. Thus, to develop an equitable civic-education system, we must ensure that leading CRSE thinkers, educators, researchers, and activists are at the table, front and center, when we convene meetings, conferences, and strategy sessions to envision and advance civic-education frameworks.

3. Shifting from "Civic Gaps" to an Equitable, Goal-Oriented Approach to Civic-Learning Measurement

An equity approach to civic education requires closing the book on White-norming in describing race-based differences and disparities in civic views, styles, and outcomes. I'm referring to the so-called civic-participation or civic-engagement "gap."

Mobilizing attention and resources to meet the civic-learning needs of Black and Brown children does *not* require centering White-student achievement, White civic participation, or White [fill in the blank]. It doesn't require pretending as though children and communities of color have no civic knowledge, skills, agency, or traditions worth acknowledging or from which their White counterparts could benefit—as difficult as that is to admit for those who see primarily deficits in Black and Brown children and communities.

This White-norming trend seems to stem from two equally unacceptable positions adopted by what I call "Team Gap":

(1) Members of "Team Gap" assume that White students' level of achievement—rather than some common achievement goal (the standard of excellence that we believe is attainable for all students and for which we should encourage all students to strive)—should be considered the gold standard for students of color, especially for students of color who live in poverty.

Why, for example, if only 60% of White students are presently proficient in a particular academic subject (or on a civic indicator), and 45% of Black and Brown students are proficient—but we believe that *95%* of students have the ability to achieve proficiency—would we focus the bulk of our time and equity energy on centering the so-called racial achievement gap instead of the more shocking difference between each group and the ultimate standard?

Why? Because the myth of White supremacy—conscious or unconscious, systemic or individually perpetrated—leads to the establishment of White norms as the pinnacle, as the highest level of achievement for Black and Brown people, even when White people's performance falls far short of the ultimate goal. The gap framing is so seductive that self-described social-justice warriors, liberals, and progressives use this framework to demonstrate their concern for the plight of Black and Brown children, unconscious of their role in lowering expectations for children of color and all other children.

(2) An equally problematic source of White-normed civic-education language is that it requires far more courage—for politicians, policymakers, and education leaders—to draw public attention and devote the necessary resources to eliminating the difference between where far too many of our children are now and the commonly shared standards that *all* children will meet when we finally decide to provide the opportunities to which they're entitled.

There's a subtle but essential distinction between, on the one hand, setting White-student outcomes as the "promised land" for Black and Brown children and, on the other, monitoring and addressing the distance that Black and Brown children must travel to reach the *ultimate* standard with the distance that White children must travel to reach the *ultimate* standard. Both ways of framing the problem can and should drive our attention and resources to address the needs of any child not meeting the ultimate standard, but only the second mindset avoids the poisonous trap of White-norming. This is particularly important when White achievement levels—in civic learning, civic participation, and beyond—are nothing to write home about, as they say.

To make this shift, we have to acknowledge that this country has a long tradition of White-norming in education, and many well-intentioned crusaders of all colors have used "gap" data and frameworks to win legal and policy battles, so this shift will require real work and may not happen overnight. Recognizing that our current legal system and policy landscape are deeply structured in a way that sometimes forces advocates to use the old framework, we'll need courageous leadership to facilitate the transition strategically and creatively so as to shape, rather than undermine, ongoing advocacy efforts.

In short, if we're sincerely concerned about civic-learning differences and disparities in inputs and/or outcomes and are committed to doing this work equitably, let's pay closer attention to the gaps between individual and group-based performance levels and what we want *all* young people to achieve, where we decide it is equitable and desirable for all children to achieve the same outcomes.

4. Educational Rights as a Foundation and Catalyst for Equity in Civic Education

The highest courts in at least 32 states have interpreted their state constitutions to declare civic preparation the primary purpose (or one of the key purposes) of public education. Over the past two years' conversations with and presentations to civic-education colleagues across the nation, many of those top civic-education experts have been surprised and encouraged to learn of these rights. They understand how the rights framework shifts the conversation about students' civic-learning needs from the aspirational ("it would be *good* if all students had a high-quality civic education" or all children *should* be prepared for civic roles) to we have a *legal obligation* to prepare students to exercise their civic rights and fulfill their civic responsibilities.

Imagine, then, just how few students and parents whose schools are poorly equipped to fulfill that obligation, never mind prepare our young people for college and careers, are informed of those rights and of the specific related resources and supports that pave the way for students to succeed in civic life. Now imagine the democratizing influence of sharing that information, making it accessible and useful to families living in poverty and then supporting their leadership in defining and holding officials accountable for delivering on this obligation. That would be a civics lesson in and of itself . . . and a game changer in civic education and education more broadly.

In New York State, for example, students have a constitutional right to preparation that will "prepare them to function productively as civic participants." The judge in *CFE vs. State of New York*, the lawsuit that defined that right, outlined seven categories of educational resources that must be available in all schools in order to ensure adequate civic preparation. Those resources include additional instructional support and services (tutoring, for example) for students who are "at risk" of not meeting academic requirements or of graduating; New York State law has interpreted this to mean that students not meeting proficiency targets, not just in ELA and math, but also in science and in social studies or civics, have a right to additional supports and services. The constitutional civic-preparation right also includes well-prepared, supported, and effective teachers across the subject areas, appropriate class sizes, appropriate and up-to-date facilities and technology, and the necessary supports to allow English-language learners and students with disabilities full access to the learning opportunities enjoyed by their peers.

Although many other states have similar requirements, these mandated learning resources and supports are often overlooked in today's popular discussions about improving civic education, and yet it is impossible to achieve equity in civic learning and civic outcomes without them. It's also important that our local and state governments follow their own education laws that guarantee those kind of opportunities as they seek to help young people understand that, in a healthy democracy, laws and rights matter.

A glaring example of how educational-rights violations perpetuate inequities in access to civic-learning resources is that students in largely White, middle-class, and wealthy districts have access to school library media specialists (otherwise known as school librarians), the professional educators specially trained to help students analyze and evaluate the daily barrage of media messages, conduct online research for school papers and projects, distinguish reliable information from heavily biased sources and/or advertisements. Most schools in many predominantly Black and Brown communities, however, do not provide such access (see [Harlem](#) and [Philadelphia](#), for example). In New York, this failure to provide students in these schools specifically violates a state education regulation that requires students to have access to and instruction from certified school librarians. In Pennsylvania, prisons are required to have librarians, but schools aren't.

Also, in a recent pilot study examining the levels of civic-preparation-related resources in high schools in New York City and in the nearby suburbs, our team found that economic pressures were for many students a major impediment to participation in the types of extracurricular opportunities associated with positive civic-learning outcomes. Educators at one school reported that roughly half of their high school seniors worked fast-food-type jobs in order to help their families pay rent or to be able to afford cell phones, sneakers, and food that middle-class, and upper-middle-class, students generally obtain from their parents as a matter of course. Given what we know about the positive impact of civic-oriented extracurricular activities, students' right to civic preparation, and these socioeconomic barriers to civic practice, how do we ensure equitable access to those opportunities?

To many education stakeholders, accountability has become a dirty word, as it's usually used to describe the practice of using standardized test scores to evaluate and punish students, teachers, schools, and

districts for not achieving learning goals. So, I introduce the word here with some caution. Know that, for present purposes, I'm primarily referring to resource accountability—accountability for delivering the learning opportunities and supports associated with civic development, and a system that allows us to better understand the relationships between inputs (or opportunities) and student outcomes (or learning).

Someone must be accountable for maintaining the level of resources and supports that schools need in order to provide the required and necessary opportunities that serve as a foundation for effective civic preparation. Indeed, as educators and families, school districts, and state policymakers work to improve and expand civic-learning opportunities equitably, accountability will need to be at the center of the conversation. Policymakers should want to know if their efforts are successful or unsuccessful, and we'll want to know if they're equitable or work only for some students. We'll have to *account* for those outcomes—for the levels of learning achieved by various approaches and various types of resources—in order to inform ongoing improvement and adaptation in the civic education of our children.

I've talked to stakeholders and decision makers in three states—district officials, educators, and philanthropists—who have passed civic-education legislation or created strong civics-education standards and pathways, who say schools serving students in poverty don't have the staff capacity to apply for one of the new opportunities and help their students meet the new standards. It's on paper, it looks good, it made the headlines, and those who developed the plans are celebrated as heroes, but it's not happening meaningfully and equitably in the schools serving society's most marginalized.

If a state or district is creating a new initiative—whether it involves a mandate or a new optional path to distinction for a student or a school—it is only perpetuating inequity, in schools and in society, if it does not undertake its due diligence to ensure that all schools are equipped to provide that opportunity to all students at a level that ensures all students a meaningful opportunity to reach the bar. Equity-based accountability can't be an afterthought. It has to be central to the visioning and planning process for improving civic learning. Policymakers and politicians rolling out new pathways with no concrete and rationale mechanism for ensuring equity are just perpetuating the status quo. "Equity" can prop up a speech, but until officials are held accountable for following the law and delivering on the opportunities that line the road to equity, the same groups of young people will continue to be denied the chance to fulfill their civic potential and be shut out of civic life.

Conclusion

In sum, equity in civic education can be achieved only by (1) adopting a bold vision of civic education as means to a more equitable, more just democracy; (2) reaching beyond the latest wave of civic-education players to respect and include key stakeholder leaders and experts in applying longstanding traditions of civic teaching, learning, and activism to today's challenges and opportunities; (3) using equitable and non-racist language and concepts that reflect the full civic potential, and acknowledge the typically ignored strengths, of our children and communities, and (4) and providing educational-rights information and advocacy support for and *with* young people, parents, and educators to help them hold local and state governments accountable for fully honoring students' civic-learning rights. We can—and we will—do better.

(Views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Teachers College or of the Center for Educational Equity.)