



# CivXNow

A PROJECT OF iCIVICS 



## COALITION POLICY MENU

A Guide for state  
and local policymakers,  
with options to strengthen  
and improve civic learning  
for all students



## Executive Summary

Today, only nine states require a full year of civic education in high school. Ten states don't require it at all. In 31 states, students only have to learn about our democracy for one semester. That's about three and a half months of instruction to learn about something as important as our democracy. Time afforded civics in the elementary grades has significantly declined since 2000. Clearly this is inadequate to meet the essential and historic civic mission of our nation's schools.

The [CivXNow Coalition](#) has united the civic learning community in a nationwide movement to improve and strengthen state level policies and practice in civic education. The Coalition has established a Policy Taskforce that will work with state level advocates in each state to bring about needed improvements in policy and practice.

To restore the Civic Mission of Schools, the CivXNow Coalition urges state and local education policymakers to focus and build on these policy goals:

- **State Learning Standards** – As states undertake periodic revision of their standards for learning in the social studies, they should build on the [‘College, Career and Civic \(C3\) Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards,’](#) developed by a consortium of 20 states. Drawing on the concepts in the Framework, states should work to make their standards, fewer, clearer and more rigorous, emphasizing the role of the citizen in our constitutional republic and offer opportunities for students to learn to make informed civic decisions.
- **Assessment and Accountability** – States should ensure that assessments include end of course objective assessments as well as performance-based assessments or other alternative assessments. States should ensure the testing instruments (objective and alternative) offer a comprehensive measure of civic learning and will permit the reporting of results disaggregated by subgroup. States should include appropriate assessment in civics in their accountability systems.
- **Course and Time Requirements** – States should work to strengthen their course requirements in civic education. Based on existing research and recognized best practices, strengthened course requirements should include:
  1. More time devoted to civic learning in the elementary grades with a common upper elementary assessment to ensure that students acquire foundational knowledge and concepts;

2. A full semester civics course in middle school, that utilizes the Proven Practices of the [‘Civic Mission of Schools’ reports](#), with an opportunity for students to learn through a real-world civic policy project and common end of course assessment; and
  3. A full year high school civics course, utilizing the Proven Practices of the [‘Civic Mission of Schools’ reports](#), with an opportunity for students to learn through a real-world civic policy project and common end of course assessment using a traditional objective paper/pencil or online test as well as an alternative form of assessment (portfolio, classroom based) with passage linked to high school graduation.
- **Pre-Service Requirements** – States should strengthen pre-service requirements for civics teachers by requiring undergraduate courses in U.S. Government and American History as well as undergraduate course work in the unique pedagogy of civics, including use of experiential learning, use of simulations, guided classroom discussion of controversial issues, service learning linked to classroom learning, student projects and differentiated instruction. Certification tests should be adapted to assess pre-service teacher achievement in these areas.
  - **Professional Development** – States should provide adequate resources for ongoing civics teacher professional development, on par with the professional development provided to math, literacy and science teachers.
  - **Equity** – States, districts and schools should work together to develop strategies and devote resources that will reduce racial and economic disparities in civic learning opportunities and achievement.
  - **Implementation** – Policies do not implement themselves. States should establish or empower an in-state entity to help schools and districts implement new policies.
  - **Youth Voice** – Each state should ensure youth voice and participation is included in education and community decision making by including meaningful student representation on local boards, commissions and other governmental bodies. Student representatives should be accountable to their peers.
  - **School Climate, Culture and Leadership** – School climate matters. Schools and districts should take the necessary actions to ensure that policies and practices related to school discipline, school safety and culture reflect democratic ideals, and that students experience democratic practices throughout the school day.
  - **Democracy Schools** – States should establish a recognition program to encourage educational excellence, continuous improvement and replication of effective programs.



## **The Vital Importance of Improving Civic Education**

Since the early days of the nation, our leaders have understood that a democratic republic depends on a citizenry and electorate that is informed about the issues and challenges of the day and about the mechanisms of its government – however slow, awkward and complicated – that are available to address those issues and challenges. That understanding informed the movement for free public education in general and the more particular idea that the public schools teach our people about their history and government. The slide into civic illiteracy that we have experienced for two generations goes a long way toward explaining the dysfunction in our politics and government institutions. When most Americans do not appreciate the wisdom and inherent inefficiency, for example, of separation of powers and checks and balances and bicameralism and minority rights and due process, they fall easy prey to demagoguery that would have them believe there’s no need for compromise with others to fashion sustainable policy or that government ought to be run “like a business.” That’s the “fix” in which we find ourselves and for which better civic education is a big part of the solution. It will take time and patience. The civic challenges that we face did not develop overnight, neither will solutions. This menu of policy options, taken separately, or, better yet, together, gives those at the state and local level guidance on what can be done to ensure that schools truly prepare students for informed, active participation in civic life.

## **The Results of a Lack of Effective Civic Education**

While time attention and resources for civic education have been in decline for decades, that decline dramatically accelerated during the “No Child Left Behind’ era. Well-meaning decisions by education policymakers at all levels, have narrowed the curriculum and reduced civics to an afterthought in all too many schools. Significant disparities in opportunities to experience effective civic education exist throughout the nation.

The results are predictable. A mere 23 percent of high school students achieved a grade of proficient on the last national civics assessment test.<sup>1</sup> Black and Latinx students from low-income

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<sup>1</sup> The National Assessment of Educational Progress tests in civics and government, available at: <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/civics/>



households do significantly worse on the test than their White, middle-class peers. Leaving many youth unprepared to advocate for themselves and their communities. This lack of education can translate into a lack of political engagement. But for a few elections, youth voter turnout has steadily declined over the last 30 years. With the exceptions of the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, Black and Latinx youth vote at lower rates than non-Latinx White youth. In local elections, the lack of youth participation is even starker. In 2016 in 50 mayoral elections, the median voter age was 57.

Disinformation campaigns are successful to a large degree due to the American public's lack of basic civic knowledge and skills. Efforts to divide Americans prey on this lack of understanding of how our system of government works and of the critical role of the citizen in our constitutional republic. In these increasingly connected, complex times, strengthening and improving civic education is a national security imperative.

The responsibility for poor student achievement in civics lies not with teachers, principals, school boards, the superintendents or the school districts. It lies with those who sit at our state capitals, and to a degree, those in Washington, education policymakers who at best, focus on a few curricular subjects over all others, and don't yet appreciate the unintended consequences of their decisions. As testing for writing, reading, science and math have put increasing pressure on schools already suffering from budget cuts, teacher shortages, and dilapidated buildings, civic education — once seen as the very reason for public education — has been all but tossed out.

## Our Charge and Mission

The [CivXNow Coalition](#) has united the civic learning field in a common purpose:

- To restore civic learning to its rightful and necessary place of prominence in American education;
- To spread the innovation in civic learning, largely brought about by the supplemental civic learning programming community<sup>2</sup> (comprised of over two dozen nonprofits providing supplemental civics programs and lessons to schools), to every school in the nation;
- To change, strengthen and improve the policies that affect civic learning in every state;

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<sup>2</sup> For the past two decades, innovation in civic education has been brought about by the approximately two dozen non-profit supplemental civic education program providers, with some limited support from the philanthropic community. There has been very little governmental funding for civic learning innovation. This innovation, with new teaching strategies and modalities, needs to be brought to scale and used in every school in the nation.



- To overcome inequities in civic learning opportunities; to ensure student centered civic learning and authentic student voice and engagement are the reality in every school; and
- To ensure every K-12 student in the nation has the opportunity to gain civic knowledge, acquire civic skills and to understand that civic engagement is critical to the health and future of our Republic.

No principle is more firmly ingrained in American education than that of local control. State legislatures, governors, school boards and school administrators have all worked together to fashion solutions – often unique – to local conditions and challenges. That principle will assuredly govern the ways in which states and communities come together to restore the civic mission of their own schools. With that understanding, the CivXNow Coalition proposes that, drawing on research and best-practices, states work to improve civic learning across a set of critical areas that comprise a menu of policy options for use in each state.

## Policy Menu to Restore the Civic Mission of Schools

### State Learning Standards

#### *Background:*

Comprehensive civics teaching, and learning must address four main domains of learning:

1. **Civic knowledge**, to gain an understanding of the history and heritage of our civic life and the functions of our civic institutions;
2. **Civic skills**, to gain skills such as the ability to analyze text and determine the reliability of sources and to gain an understanding of the ways in which civic institutions operate and how individuals may be involved in civic life;
3. **Civic dispositions**, to gain values such as appreciation for free speech, civil discourse and understanding perspectives that differ from one’s own as well as a disposition to be civically engaged; and
4. **Civic behaviors**, to develop civic and political habits and behaviors include voting, engagement in deliberative discussions, volunteering, attending public meetings, and other activities related to civic life.

While there has been some improvement over the past decade, many state standards in the social studies remain overly detailed and focused solely on the first domain.



### *Recommendations:*

The CivXNow Coalition recommends that, as states revise and update their state social studies standards, they draw upon the [College, Career and Civic \(C3\) Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards](#)<sup>3</sup> with its emphasis on deepening conceptual understanding by developing compelling questions for further investigation, pursuing other steps to engage in inquiry and encouraging students to take “informed action” that connects projects or other assignments to contemporary issues, in their standards revision process. The C3 Framework is not a fully developed set of standards; it requires the addition of content to provide a balance of content and skills. However, it provides a guide to producing fewer, clearer and more rigorous state standards. Examples of states that have, to varying degrees, incorporated elements of the C3 Framework with content include Massachusetts, Colorado, Maryland, Florida and New York.

### **Assessment and Accountability**

#### *Background:*

In this era of accountability-based education, the fact that civic learning is not meaningfully included in most states’ assessment and accountability systems is arguably the greatest cause of the erosion of time and attention to civic education. Simply put, ‘if it isn’t tested, it isn’t taught,’ is the reality in far too many schools today. The Coalition believes that civics is just as important to the health and future of our Republic as Math, English and Science and must be assessed in a similar, if not as frequent, manner.

Many educators, parents and some policy makers are calling for less testing, not more and there are also concerns that developing and implementing a new assessment is an expensive undertaking for any state. At the same time, the 2015 “Every Student Succeeds Act” (ESSA) calls on the states to ease the existing testing burdens on schools and to explore offering testing in currently untested areas (such as civics).

Teaching and learning in civics involve several domains of knowledge and skills. Assessing all of them calls for different approaches. Assessment of civic knowledge, to address students’ understanding of the history and heritage of our civic life and the functions of our civic institutions, can be assessed with a traditional objective paper/pencil or on-line test. Students’

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<sup>3</sup> For more information see: <https://www.socialstudies.org/c3>



acquisition of civic skills, in contrast, is most often and most effectively assessed through a performance-based assessment that may take the form of a portfolio, reflection, oral, classroom based or other type of assessment to judge student learning.

We recognize that the ‘New Citizens’ Test of the Immigration Service has some appeal as an assessment of student civics attainment, but the test can drive instruction to dry-rope memorization. In addition, it only covers a small portion of the civic knowledge students need to know as it does not measure student attainment of civic skills, behaviors and dispositions. Adoption of the test can lead policymakers to believe they have ‘fixed’ the problems in civic education, when in reality the problems require broader solutions than what the test provides.

*Recommendations:*

The CivXNow Coalition calls on the states to include appropriate assessment in civics in their accountability systems.

- States should have specific civics courses at upper elementary, middle and high school levels with an end of course objective test;
- States should require that students develop a real-world public policy project with an alternative form of assessment, such as performance-based, portfolio or reflection, at the middle and high school levels. These public policy projects may be thought of as a “civics lab”, similar to laboratory work in science classes;
- Students achievement on civics assessments should have consequences for course grades. Beyond student accountability for their own grades, schools and school districts also should be held accountable for overall student performance, through public release of assessment results and including results in school and district improvement plans;
- States should ensure the testing instruments (objective and alternative) offer a comprehensive measure of civic learning and will permit the reporting of results disaggregated by subgroup; and
- States should include civics assessments in the ESSA plans they submit to the US Department of Education.



## **Course and Time Requirements, A full K-12 Civic Learning Experience**

### *Background:*

Most states require only a one semester high school civics course, allotting just three-and one-half months of instruction to acquire essential civic knowledge and skills, a marked decline from requirements that once called for as many as three courses. Many middle schools lack course work in civics. At elementary levels, research has shown that over the last decade, the nation has seen a significant decrease in time devoted to civics and the social studies. This decline in the frequency and depth of instruction in civics poses a threat to the foundation of our Republic.

### *Recommendations:*

The CivXNow Coalition recommends that:

- Every state establish at least a one semester civics stand-alone course at middle school and a full year stand-alone civics course in high school. While a traditional civics and government course alone is not enough to ensure comprehensive civics education without the other recommendations contained in this menu, it is an important anchor for middle and high school civic education;
- These courses be structured to include the Six Proven Practices of the [“Civic Mission of Schools” reports](#), including intensive classroom instruction, the use of simulations, experiential learning, discussions of controversial issues, service learning – linked to classroom learning, media literacy and student policy projects;<sup>4</sup>
- These middle and high school courses include assessments that are part of the state’s accountability system; and
- States take advantage of the interdisciplinary possibilities of civics and thoughtfully include civic content in other courses, such as English and science classes, while still providing standalone civics courses at middle and high school. Civics can play a valuable role in the elementary grades, as students gain their first introduction to informational text, to build both important content knowledge and literacy skills that will serve them throughout their lives.

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://civxnow.org/mission> “Guardian of Democracy” report for full description of ‘Six Proven Practices’



## **Teacher Preparation and Professional Development**

### *Background – Pre-Service Requirements:*

In most states, all that is required to become a civics teacher is a bachelor's degree and passage of a basic content knowledge test (usually the PRAXIS II social studies exam); The lack of undergraduate pre-service requirements in civics, law, history, government, and political science means that many teachers assigned to civics classes may be ill-equipped to help students master the knowledge and skills that are essential for informed and engaged citizenship.

### *Recommendations – Pre-Service:*

The CivXNow Coalition strongly recommends that each state strengthen their pre-service requirements for civics/social studies teachers as follows:

- Require, at a minimum, undergraduate courses in American Government and United States History;
- Revise the current certification examination to ensure that each prospective teacher has the fundamental knowledge of civics to teach the subject competently;
- Include undergraduate work on the unique pedagogy of civics, including use of experiential learning, use of simulations, guided classroom discussion of controversial issues, service learning linked to classroom learning, student projects and differentiated instruction. Include racial and ethnic studies and work on understanding the differing needs of school populations from rural, suburban and urban areas; and
- Develop programs to recruit teachers who reflect the populations they will serve as well as measures by states, colleges and universities, and districts to address the marked lack of diversity of the teaching force.

### *Background – Professional Development:*

Teachers need ongoing professional development to hone their craft and to learn about new innovative teaching strategies and programs. Civics related professional development funding in the states has undergone sharp cuts for nearly two decades. The Great Recession (2008-2010) decimated state education spending, and professional development for civics and the social studies has not recovered.



*Recommendations – Professional Development:*

The CivXNow Coalition calls on each state to provide adequate funding to ensure on-going, comprehensive, research-based teacher professional development, on par with the professional development provided to math, literacy and science teachers.

**Equity**

*Background:*

As noted in the Charge and Mission Statement at the beginning of this document, persistent inequities in civic learning and empowerment afflict our nation. Students attending schools serving majority Black and Brown school populations, communities with high concentrations of poverty, those schools performing poorly on standardized tests and those serving rural populations receive fewer civic learning opportunities than students attending schools serving wealthier communities, suburban and White students. Similar inequities exist within schools as well as between them. Research indicates that even at well-resourced, majority-White schools, Black and Brown students have less access to instruction based on proven civic learning practices when compared to their White peers. Likewise, by some measures, students of color demonstrate lower levels of current and prospective civic engagement. All these inequities threaten to disenfranchise sectors of our populace. All states, districts and schools should develop strategies to examine inequities in opportunities for civic learning for the demographics of their respective student populations and act to end any inequities.



### *Recommendations:*

The CivXNow Coalition recommends that:

- States take the actions outlined under the Assessment and Accountability section of this document to ensure that all districts and schools provide opportunities for civic learning across the grades to all students;
- State policy establishes a comprehensive means to assess student understanding across the domains of civic learning - with results disaggregated by subgroup, reported to the public and incorporated into school improvement plans;
- States provide funding and technical assistance to support schools in assessing inequities in opportunities for high quality civics instruction and developing plans to eliminate disparities in access and outcomes; and
- States ensure equitable funding for currently under-served rural and inner-city school populations.

### **Implementation**

#### *Background:*

Policies do not implement themselves. They may well fall short if necessary implementation oversight and support is not available. States that have made progress in improving civic education have, in most cases, benefited from the presence of an entity that helps policymakers and school officials effectively implement the new policies. Examples include the Lou Frey Institute and Florida Joint Center for Citizenship in Florida; the Washington Council for Public Legal Education in Washington and the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation with iCivics in Massachusetts.

#### *Recommendations:*

The CivXNow Coalition recommends that each state establish or empower an existing in-state entity to help districts and schools implement new policies in civic learning. The responsibilities of these in-state civic education entities may include providing technical assistance, professional development, models of best practice and a comprehensive database of civic education resources. Funding for these in-state entities may come from the public or private sectors or a combination of public and private sources.



## **Youth Voice**

### *Background:*

As with learning in any other content area, students need frequent practice to build civic competence. To believe in the underlying values of democracy and to become proficient with the knowledge and skills required to be informed and active participants in our democratic system, students need opportunities to exercise them. Offering students a meaningful role in decision making and the planning and management of their schools and issues that affect them, including policies governing civic education, provides a powerful and particularly relevant means to do so.

### *Recommendations:*

The CivXNow Coalition recommends that:

- Students be afforded opportunities to share their views and to act on issues related to the conduct of school operations and that each student council be empowered to have a meaningful voice in school operations and management;
- Every local school board and each state Board of Education include at least one student representative;
- Schools and districts work with units of local government to create opportunities for student participation in public decision making, by including youth representation and youth voice on the myriad of local boards, commissions and similar decision-making bodies;
- State and local policy makers as well as non-governmental entities should ensure substantial and meaningful youth participation and leadership in updating and strengthening civic-related learning standards, assessments, and curricular frameworks; and
- Students should work with local government representatives and make presentations on issues of concern. Students selected to serve in these roles should fully reflect the diversity, academic and otherwise, of their schools and have an established means for clear communication between student representatives and the students whose interests they represent.



## **School Climate, Culture and Leadership**

### *Background:*

Civic learning is a school wide endeavor and represents one of the foundations of our educational system. It plays a role in every discipline and should not be relegated to instruction solely in a single content area. Further, the daily operation of schools is a primary means through which students gain their first experience with democracy and their roles as keepers of our republic. Schools must establish a welcoming environment, open to students taking democracy out for a test drive, through models and simulations of democratic practices and through authentic appropriate student participation in school decision making processes. School discipline must, of course, be authoritative. However, disciplinary policies should encourage self-regulation rather than modeling authoritarian systems that are the antithesis of democracy. Democratic learning environments are those in which students feel valued and respected. Establishing such environments – using, for example, peer mediation and non-punitive solutions for minor behavioral incidents - is a crucial step towards reversing harsh school disciplinary policies, which disproportionately affect students of color, and are correlated with decreased community engagement, voter turnout, and trust in government.

### *Recommendations:*

The CivXNow Coalition recommends that:

- Schools and districts ensure that policies and daily practices related to school culture and student discipline reflect democratic ideals and principles; and
- States provide adequate funding for training district and school officials on strategies and techniques to ensure a healthy, democratic and inclusive school climate in all schools.



## **Democracy Schools**

### *Background:*

School recognition programs are an effective means to encourage educational excellence, continuous improvement and peer replication. The Illinois Civic Mission Coalition established such a program, known as the 'Illinois Democracy Schools,' that has gained national recognition for supporting schools in establishing high quality civics education programs and helping schools already recognized to build on their success. The Democracy Schools program also has played a significant role in initiating policy changes at the state level. Arizona, California, Connecticut and Kansas have adopted similar school recognition programs in civics. Information on the Illinois Democracy School Program may be found at: <https://www.illinoiscivics.org/resources/illinois-democracy-schools>

### *Recommendations:*

The CivXNow Coalition recommends that:

- States adopt a 'Democracy Schools' or similar school recognition program, using the indicators or rubrics established by the Illinois program; and
- Each state officially sanctions a 'Democracy Schools' or similar school recognition program, either through administration of the program by a state entity or through state recognition of a program administered by a private sector entity.

# CivXNow

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