

## With Liberty and Justice For All



APRIL 16, 2019

By Amber Coleman-  
Mortley, iCivics  
Director of Social  
Engagement  
& Louise Dubé, iCivics  
Executive Director

For generations, millions of children have stood in grade schools across America, hands over hearts, facing our flag, reciting the pledge in unison, and ending with those sacred words: “with liberty and justice for all.” But does democracy work if those six words do not ring true for all children who say them? As a nation, this is one of the most critical questions we wrestle with today.

Realizing the promise of equality for all citizens requires youth to grow up understanding that their voice is not only valuable, but also a necessary component to a healthy and vibrant democratic republic. Our schools and community organizations must inform and empower students to be civic agents who can collaborate on civic problems at the local, state, national, and even global levels. Indeed, knowledgeable and invested citizens are critical to the stability of our nation because they are empowered to envision themselves as co-participants in our democratic system. Unfortunately, our current mode of teaching civics is not sufficient in providing this competency for all students.

Demographic breakdowns in [NAEP test scores](#) do not reflect the rich civic culture often found in Black and LatinX communities or the awareness that Black and LatinX students have about how government impacts their communities. In this way, civic achievement scores perpetuate a myth that Black and LatinX students are not as civically proficient as their White peers. This is not without consequence. The mainstream belief that Black and LatinX communities have a deficit in civic education both informs and reflects our expectation of what a high quality civic education should be.

The reality, of course, is tremendously nuanced and complex. Yes, Black and LatinX students fail to perform as well as their White peers on assessments of civic knowledge. Much more troubling, however, is our failure to connect foundational civics concepts with the lived experiences of Black and LatinX students. And so perhaps it is the measurements that are deficient, not the students.

The question of equity in civic education reaches far beyond issues of social and economic justice to the core of what Americans need to know to make the most of their experience as citizens. Equitable civics must empower students to have a voice and promote their ability to use that voice to create the communities in which they want to live. Equitable civics must provide students with access to foundational texts and the ability to interpret and understand what they mean. And equitable civics must push students to dig deep into the historical divisions of race and class in America. Although civic education cannot and should not look the same in all areas of our vastly diverse country, all students must leave school with the tools that are essential to solving our most urgent challenges.

Our democratic republic feels more fragile now than ever before. If we seek a revival of our democratic principles and even patriotic feelings, we must look to the youth. We must reevaluate our mode of teaching about our country and the responsibility young people have to preserve it. We must create spaces in which young people can find their

voices and speak them freely in the service of a country to which they are proud to belong because they proudly help shape it.

Civic education must speak to each student's experience and empower them regardless of race or class. It must take account of their unique backgrounds, leverage their lived learning experiences, and provide them with relevant and meaningful opportunities to explore what it means to be an American. It must do all of these things if we wish for all students to perceive themselves as important threads in the tapestry that makes America this beautiful picture of liberty and justice for all.