

RESEARCH SUMMARY

This summary synthesizes research in the field of civic education focused on access to civic learning opportunities in K-12 schools and the kinds of outcomes that result when young people have these experiences such as an increase in civic knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviors.

Civic learning (also known as “civic education”) is the lifelong process that makes people into active, responsible, and knowledgeable members of their communities—which range from their schools and towns or neighborhoods to the whole nation and even the world. Civic learning occurs in families, in religious congregations and other associations, in political campaigns, and on news websites, among many other venues. —CivXNow

CIVIC LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Research shows that civic education raises young people’s knowledge, skills, and dispositions and leads to meaningful participation in civic and political life as adults.ⁱ For instance, the following civic learning opportunities have been found to promote these democratic outcomes:

Discussions of Current & Controversial Issues	Engaging in Digital Civic Learning	Simulations of Democratic Processes & Procedures	Participation in Service Learning and Civics Projects
Discussion of current events and controversial issues promotes students’ engagement with political issues and elections. ⁱⁱ	Instruction focused on judging the credibility of online content can develop students’ capacity and commitment to determining the trustworthiness and accuracy of online information. ⁱⁱⁱ	Simulations can lead to gains in civic knowledge and skills as well as raise student motivation and engagement through project-based learning approaches. ^{iv}	Service learning and civics projects can foster students’ sense of civic agency and an understanding of how to interact with diverse community members in productive and respectful ways. ^v

INFREQUENT & INEQUITABLE ACCESS TO CIVIC LEARNING

However, large numbers of students today are not receiving the civic education necessary to support informed and active participation in civic and political life.^{vi} Civics courses are now quite rare and students often only take a semester of “American government” in high school that doesn't fully attend to the what, how, and why of civic participation.^{vii} Inadequate provision of civic learning opportunities has been especially common in schools serving low-income communities, communities of color, and immigrant communities.^{viii} However, a recent study looking at a nationally representative sample suggests this may be shifting and instead researchers found inequitable opportunities by school and state characteristics. For example, the study found that public school students tended to have less interactive civic learning opportunities, and city students reported greater opportunities than both rural and suburban students. In addition, students received different types of civics instruction and content in various regions of the country. Several other studies have found that, due to recent political pressures, there is an overall decline in attention to civic priorities, particularly in politically diverse and conservative contexts.^{ix}

CIVIC KNOWLEDGE

Civic knowledge is an understanding of important factual information such as the structure and function of government, how our political system works, our civic rights and responsibilities, as well as a broad understanding of history, politics, economics, and other related fields. Civic knowledge is an important

component of being an informed and engaged citizen.^x Studies have consistently found that civics instruction at school can compensate for a lack of exposure to civic learning in the home or through other channels.^{xi} One best practice in the field of civic education that has been found to correlate with higher levels of knowledge is robust discussion of real-world issues, in which students are free to express their views in an environment of mutual respect.^{xii} Scholars have also noted the importance of drawing on students' own knowledge, identities, and lived experiences as an important foundation for both academic and civic learning.^{xiii} Finally, meaningful assessments of civic knowledge when integrated alongside a civics curriculum, such as a culminating course assessment, have also been found to promote student knowledge and to narrow gaps in knowledge between some demographic groups.^{xiv} Unfortunately, students' scores in civics on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have gone down since 2018, back on par with 1998, the first year of the test.^{xv} This has raised concerns about our investment in robust civic education. *To learn more, visit this link: [EAD Research Summary on Civic Knowledge](#).*

CIVIC SKILLS

Civic skills are the abilities needed to participate in civic life, such as being able to critically analyze and evaluate civic and political information, listen to others and engage in dialogue, communicate and share your point of view, and work with others to create solutions for shared problems. Civic education provides an opportunity for students to develop the skills necessary to understand, analyze, and evaluate evidence and multiple viewpoints.^{xvi} Discussions of civic and political issues can also help teach students important deliberative skills. In addition, important overlaps exist between students' civic skills and social-emotional learning (SEL). Students with a higher level of socioemotional skills are more likely to be ethical and effective civic actors, and civic learning experiences can also boost SEL outcomes. Finally, civic skills coincide with core 21st century competencies and skills that are needed to be successful in the rapidly changing world, such as: basic knowledge of economic and political processes; skills in understanding what is presented in the media; the ability to work well with others; and creativity and innovation.^{xvii} *To learn more, visit this link: [EAD Research Summary on SEL and Civics](#).*

CIVIC DISPOSITIONS

Civic dispositions are typically thought to include a concern for others' rights and welfare, an appreciation for civil discourse and engaging with those whose perspectives differ from your own, a belief that you can make a difference, and a sense of the common good. One study found that interactive civic learning significantly strengthened students' commitment to engage with their communities and participate in civic and political life.^{xviii} For example, classroom discussion has been found to boost students' concerns about the unjust treatment of others.^{xix} Similarly, a study of a SEL aligned civics curriculum found that students' had higher levels of interpersonal understanding, prosocial behavior, empathy, and civic responsibility.^{xx} Finally, teacher attitudes, such as promoting tolerance and respect, has been found to have an impact on students' sense of trust in humanity and support for our democracy.^{xxi} *To learn more, visit this link: [EAD Research Summary on Inquiry, Viewpoint Pluralism, and Student Engagement](#).*

CIVIC BEHAVIORS

Civic behaviors include the actions that are core to participating as an active member of our democracy such as following the news, communicating with elected officials, community and/or political engagement; and actual or anticipated participation in the electoral process. Based on research in the field, there is strong evidence that a variety of civic learning opportunities, delivered both in and out of school, can foster greater and more informed civic and political engagement later in life.^{xxii} Research has also shown that engaging in civic discussion and deliberation can promote engagement with political

issues and elections.^{xxiii} In addition, multiple studies have found that youth engagement in varied forms of civic experiences and projects promotes desired civic behaviors. Analysis of longitudinal data by Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, and Atkins^{xxiv} finds that school-based community service experiences promote both voting and volunteering once youth turn 18. Also, studies of youth engagement in service learning projects have shown a number of positive outcomes, such as broader social trust, respectful engagement, the development of collaborative action/engagement skills, opportunities for youth agency, social relatedness, and political-moral understanding.^{xxv}

THE NEED FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

Preparing students to be informed and to participate in society is critically important in this time of democratic decline. Political polarization has heightened with an increasing proportion of Americans reporting that they “dislike, even loathe” people who support a political party different from their own.^{xxvi} In addition, polls show that there has been a pattern of declining trust in government for the last number of decades.^{xxvii} In fact, a recent national poll found that a majority of Americans across party lines believe democracy is at risk.^{xxviii} The poll also showed that there is increased pessimism about the state of the country and growing support for authoritarianism and political violence. Despite these distressing trends, there was agreement in the same poll when it came to the critical role of educators in helping young people understand lessons from history to navigate our world today. In another poll, an overwhelming majority of likely voters reported they think it is very important for schools to teach more about civics, including encouraging vigorous debate about different points of view, even about controversial issues.^{xxix}

The need for civic education and the evidence of its positive impact is clear. Support and investment in federal and state policies that promote K-12 civic learning, teacher professional development, evidence-based curriculum, and further civic education research is imperative. For more information about civic learning and how to promote it in your community, visit [CivXNow](#).



(Compiled by Erica Hodgins, Director of Civic Education, Facing History & Ourselves and Affiliated Researcher with the Civic Engagement Research Group)

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