

CIVIC EDUCATION AND DEEPER LEARNING

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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE



A Nation at Risk, the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, tends to be remembered as a stirring call to boost the rigor of the high school curriculum and provide the American economy with a stronger workforce. Few recall, though, that it made an equally stirring appeal to the civic purposes of education, too:

“Our concern . . . includes the intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people which knit together the very fabric of our society. . . . For our country to function, citizens must be able to reach some common understandings on complex issues, often on short notice and on the basis of conflicting or incomplete evidence. Education helps form these common understandings.”

In their paper, *Civic Education and Deeper Learning*, authors Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg note that these words remain as timely in 2015 as they were in 1983. While policymakers have largely not addressed civic education in the years since *A Nation at Risk*, it is, in fact, every bit as critical as preparation for college and careers. Moreover, they argue, civics education and deeper learning are well-aligned: Deeper learning improves students’ capacity to participate effectively in civic life, and high-quality civic education promotes deeper learning.

Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg observe that two current trends in American life—the growth of digital technology and the polarization of political discourse—have important implications for any new effort to emphasize civic education. Further, they point out that while many states require students to take civics classes and pass standardized civics tests, research suggests that these state policies do little, if anything, to teach students to apply civics learning across issue areas and contexts in school and in their communities.

The authors contend that required courses and tests might have some positive impact on students’ knowledge and understanding of important topics in civic life, but only if states support those courses with meaningful professional development for teachers and if they ensure that the tests are of high quality.

The authors argue that civic learning will improve when it is taught according to the principles that advocates of deeper learning recommend, including not only a focus on historical content and legal systems but also an emphasis on the inter- and intra-personal capacities that contribute to success in college, the workplace, and civic life.

There are several state and federal policy levers that can help ensure that students are well-prepared to engage in civic life by the time they graduate from high school, and that can encourage schools to teach civics in ways that promote deeper learning:

Development of Improved Civics Curricula

States can invest in the development of civics curricula aligned to high standards, and ensure that it supports students in learning to:

- Navigate and discern reliable news sources and other forms of civic engagement—both online and traditional
- Critically think about and synthesize information about civic events and history
- Harness reliable information to debate civic issues from multiple perspectives

For instance, states can revise social studies standards to encourage interdisciplinary investigations and opportunities for informed action, as recommended by the National Council for the Social Studies' recent framework for *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3)*. The Common Core State Standards also incorporate civic goals, such as learning to deliberate and investigate social problems, but the civic themes in the Common Core require more attention and support. Research shows that students perform well on the Advanced Placement American Government when they have learned the material through engaging simulations, which also teach civic skills. That means that the AP American Government course has potential for expanding deeper learning in civics, but only if teachers are encouraged to use interactive pedagogy and if federal Advanced Placement program and test-fee funds make the courses accessible for low-income students.

Improved Assessments of Civic Learning

According to the research and results cited by the authors, the temptation to mandate civics tests has not shown positive results. This is partly attributable to the quality of the civics tests offered. State assessment policy and

technical assistance could encourage the development and implementation of, and professional development for, improved assessments of civic learning that measure more than memorization, multiple-choice responses, and academic knowledge of civics. Such assessments could focus more on performance assessments and opportunities to engage with authentic civics issues.

Assessments of civic learning could be improved to align with high standards, to be embedded into the curriculum, and to encourage students to demonstrate their knowledge through authentic performance tasks such as analyzing and debating a current events issue based on texts. Civics tests should be reviewed for these features in every state that currently requires such a test for students.

Title VI federal assessment grants and state assessment grants could support the development of better assessments of civic learning, both formative (embedded in the curriculum) and summative.

Preservice and Professional Development

Improvements in civics curriculum, standards, and assessments should be paired with more dedicated attention to civic learning in preservice and professional development programs. For example, teachers and leaders can learn to better teach digital literacy skills, supervise classroom deliberations, and teach civic issues across the disciplines. Teachers, leaders, and staff can also improve the use of learning time within the school setting to ensure that elective and afterschool time encourage authentic opportunities for civic learning. Federal Title II teacher and leader preparation and professional development funds, both in the Higher Education Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, can be used to support these purposes, and state teacher and leader preparation funds can also be harnessed to this end.

Authentic Opportunities for Civic Learning

While it is important that schools offer opportunities for civic learning on campus—such as by sponsoring Model United Nations clubs, debate leagues, and school newspapers—policymakers can also support authentic opportunities for civic learning outside of school. For example, schools can encourage students to complete service learning projects outside of the school day by facilitating internships and other public service that contribute to civic learning, and by facilitating partnerships

for expanded learning time to include civic learning opportunities. Federal and state programs and policies often already support some of these activities in communities with a focus on civic learning, including federal 21st Century Learning Communities funds for expanded learning time and afterschool programs, Perkins career and technical education funds for work-based learning experiences, and state or district service learning requirements for graduation.

National service, through programs supported by the Corporation for National and Community Service, such as City Year and VISTA can also help students expand their civic learning through service learning activities across the nation.

Further Research of Civics Education and Outcomes

Lastly, it is clear from the authors' review of research that there is still much more to be known about the most effective strategies for providing civic learning to improve students' academic grasp of civic issues and also to prepare students to succeed in civic life. The Institute for Education

Sciences within the U.S. Department of Education could invest in further research on civic learning, including a focus on effective curricula or schools programs, as well as innovations such as game-based and technology assisted instruction. More research could also examine the effects of policies such as requiring statewide civics portfolios or assessments, and service learning requirements.

Conclusion

There are multiple policy levers for states to access, both at the federal level and in states' own programming, to better encourage civically prepared students. We live in a time when employers are looking for employees who can think critically about issues, work in teams, and solve problems; and civic life has the potential to become much more democratic and participatory in the digital age. Civic preparation is important to both of these changes in our daily environment; and supportive policies paired with further research can significantly increase the nation's ability to prepare the next generation for full participation in the world of work and civic life through deeper learning in the classroom and in the community.

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The full report and an executive summary are available at www.jff.org/publications/civic-education-and-deeper-learning

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