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K-12 Civic Education: The New Civics

Molly Ryan

**Associate Policy Analyst
National Center for Learning and Citizenship
at the
Education Commission of the States**



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The Decline of Civic Education

Former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor :

“Knowledge of our system of government is not handed down through a gene pool. It must be learned by each new generation.”



Call to Reinvigorate the Civic Mission of Schools

The *Old Civics*: Textbook-based classroom lectures centered on civic knowledge

The *New Civics*: In addition to civic knowledge, students also learn the skills and dispositions necessary to engage civically.

ACTIVE civic learning, as opposed to flat civic learning, is essential to meetings the civic purposed of public education



Call to Reinvigorate the Civic Mission of Schools

A growing body of research shows that civic education not only increases citizen knowledge and engagement, but also:

- Expands civic equality
- Improves 21st century skills, and
- May reduce the dropout rate and improve the school climate



Six Proven Practices for Effective Civic Learning

1. Classroom Instruction
2. Discussion of Current Events and Controversial Issues
3. Service-Learning
4. Extracurricular Activities
5. School Governance
6. Simulations of Democratic Processes



Proven Practice #1 Provide instruction in government, history, law, and democracy

“High-quality classroom instruction must remain at the foundation of civic learning.”

Examples:

- Civic Action Project– Constitutional Rights Foundation
- We the People– Center for Civic Education
- Integrated Civic Curriculum– Community West High School, Chicago



Proven Practice #2
Discuss current local, national, and international issues and events in the classroom particularly those that young people view as important to their lives

Civic learning often fails to include controversial issues. As a result, young people may not learn how to engage productively with the issues and events that animate our political system...

Examples:

- Facing History and Ourselves
- Deliberating in a Democracy – Constitutional Rights Foundation
- Teaching Tolerance – Southern Poverty Law Center



Proven Practice #3
Design and implement programs that provide students with opportunities to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the curriculum and classroom activities

“Service-learning helps to make education real, connecting academic skills and knowledge to issues that matter to young people.”

Examples:

- Service-Learning Initiative – Chicago Public Schools
- Character Education Initiative – Guilford County Schools, NC
- Service-Learning Initiative – Montpelier High School, Montpelier, VT



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Proven Practice #4

Offer extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities

“Extracurricular activities should not be viewed as peripheral to high-quality civic learning, but rather as indispensable to well-rounded civic learning.”

Examples:

- Mikva Challenge Programs— Mikva Challenge
- Mock Trial Programs— Various State Bar Associations
- Colorado Youth Advisory Council



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Proven Practice #5

Encourage student participation in school governance

Student councils are “laboratories for practical experience in civics and the principles of democracy.”

Examples:

- Mikva Challenge Youth Governance Council— Mikva Challenge
- The California Association of Student Councils
- Service-Learning



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Proven Practice #6

Encourage students' participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures

"In addition to the obvious benefit of increased civic knowledge...students learn skills with clear applicability to both civic and non-civic contexts, such as public speaking, teamwork, close reading, analytical thinking, and the ability to argue both sides of a topic."

Examples:

- Kids Voting USA – kidsvotingusa.org
- iCivics – www.icivics.org
- Legislative Semester – Community High School, Chicago, Illinois



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State Policy Overview

- 49 states require at least one course in American government or civics.
- 21 states require a state-designed social studies test (in 2001, 34 states required such a test).
- 9 states require students to pass a social studies test in order to graduate from high school.
- 8 states have statewide, standardized tests specifically in civics/American government; of those only 2 require students to pass that test to graduate from high school.
- Since 2000, social studies assessments have shifted from a combo of multiple-choice and performance tasks to almost exclusively multiple-choice exams.



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Colorado State Statute

C.R.S. 22-1-104. Teaching of history, culture, and civil government

- Public schools are required to teach a course on the history and civil government of the state of Colorado and the U.S., to include the history, culture, and contributions of minorities.
- Satisfactory completion of this course is required for high school graduation.



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Recent State Civic Education Policy

Florida – Justice Sandra Day O’Connor Civics Education Act

- Chapter No. 2010-48
- High stakes test

Maryland – Assessment Required for Graduation

- 2012 Md. Laws 476 and 477
- High school seniors must pass an assessment in government in order to graduate, starting with the class of 2017

Tennessee – Project-based Assessment

- Pub. Ch. 1036
- Beginning with the 2012-13 year, districts must implement a project-based assessment in civics at least once in grades 4-8 and once in grades 9-12



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Implications for Policy

The 6 proven practices of civic education and the supporting research hold the following implications for policy:

- Civic learning is not flat. It must address students' civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions through active learning strategies.
- Each practice has a unique impact on students. A varied course of all 6 proven practices across a broad set of political/civic issues is necessary to adequately prepare students for civic life.
- The quality of civic education is critical; requiring a civics course or exam is insufficient.
- Short-term interventions are insufficient for preparing students for a lifetime of civic participation. Students need to engage in civic learning activities from preschool through college.



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NCLC
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Denver, CO

www.ecs.org/nclc

mryan@ecs.org