

# The New Civics

## ▶ Civic learning is not flat learning

Preparing students to be engaged, productive citizens is one of the foundational purposes of public education in the United States. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Horace Mann—to name a few—all espoused free, universal public education as the key element that was necessary to maintain the integrity of the American republic over time. Public schools remain as the best avenue to ensure that citizens possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for productive participation in civic and political life.

While the role that civic education plays in public schools has been reduced somewhat in the last 50 years, the civic education field has continued to make significant strides in identifying best practices for civic education. Today's best practices for civic learning are widely divergent from the textbook-based high school civics classes that were dominant 25 years ago. We now know that active civic learning—as opposed to flat civic learning—is essential to meeting the civic purposes of public education.

### What's Inside

- ▶ What's changed in civic education in the last 25 years? How are today's best practices different from those of yesterday?
- ▶ What are the six proven practices of the new civics?
- ▶ How does recent research support the implementation of the "new civics" in P-12 schools?
- ▶ How can policy better support educators' adoption of the "new civics"?

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* provides a close look at the new civics—how it differs from previous practices, what it includes, how it is supported by research, and its implications for policy.



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## From Memorization to Mock Legislature – Why Civic Knowledge Alone is Not Enough

From the late nineteenth century to the 1960s, civic education was a central element of K-12 curricula.<sup>1</sup> American schools typically required students to complete multiple courses in civics and government.<sup>2</sup> Today, students generally take one course in civics with a curriculum focused more on facts about the structure of American government and less on how to be an informed and engaged citizen. Every state cites the importance of civic learning in policy; however, in recent decades “civic education as a formal part of the curriculum that is translated into effective instruction just does not exist in many schools.”<sup>3</sup>

Although civic education received more of a focus in the pre-1960s K-12 curriculum, instruction during this period was primarily delivered through textbook-based classroom lectures centered on civic knowledge. This is the “old civics” and while it is an effective means through which to teach knowledge about citizenship, it is not an effective means through which to teach students how to participate in American democracy.<sup>4</sup> A growing body of research supports active civics—the “new civics”—where in addition to civic knowledge, students also learn the skills and dispositions necessary to engage civically.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for each generation of students to understand how to be an educated and engaged American citizen, they must possess civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions.<sup>6</sup>

### Civic Knowledge

The fundamental understanding of the structure of government and the processes by which government passes laws and makes policy

### Civic Skills

The abilities necessary to participate as active and responsible citizens in a democracy

### Civic Dispositions

The characteristics and outlooks supportive of responsible political engagement and active civic participation.<sup>7</sup>



**Table 1: What the New Civics Looks Like In Practice – The Six Proven Practices of Civic Learning That Promote Student Civic Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions<sup>8</sup>**

Proven Practice	Old Civics	New Civics	Programs
<b>Classroom Instruction</b>	High-quality instruction is the foundation of civic learning, but students are unlikely to view tedious facts about dull procedures as essential to their future role as engaged, informed citizens.	Classroom instruction is relevant and interesting to students.	<b>We The People<sup>9</sup></b> - Promotes civic competence and responsibility among upper elementary and secondary students through interactive strategies, and a simulated congressional hearing.  <b>Project Citizen<sup>10</sup></b> - Teaches middle school students how to identify, research, draft, and present solutions for local problems.
<b>Discussion of Current Events and Controversial Issues</b>	Political controversy is a natural part of the democratic process; however, civic learning often fails to address or include such controversy. Consequently, students may not learn how to engage constructively with political issues and events that affect them.	Classroom discussions center on current local, national, and international issues and events, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.	<b>Facing History and Ourselves<sup>11</sup></b> - Requires students to investigate the events that led to the Holocaust and other recent examples of genocide and mass violence, in order for students to learn to fight prejudice with compassion, indifference with engagement, and misinformation with knowledge.  <b>Deliberating in a Democracy<sup>12</sup></b> - Teaches students how to deliberate controversial public issues.
<b>Service-Learning</b>	Past civic education typically required students to complete a number of service hours that were unrelated to course work. This was volunteerism, not service-learning.	Active civics encourages the design and implementation of programs that provide students with opportunities to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom activities.	<b>Chicago Public Schools Service-Learning Initiative<sup>13</sup></b> - Chicago uses service-learning to deepen and extend the classroom for high school students across subject areas to improve academic achievement, build social skills, and develop civic skills and dispositions.  <b>Guilford County Schools, NC Character Education Initiative<sup>14</sup></b> - Through Guilford County's Character Development Initiative (developed to address a district strategic plan goal of providing students "the tools and motivation necessary to positively impact [the] world") students may earn a Service-Learning Diploma.
<b>Extracurricular Activities</b>	Historically, extracurricular activities were viewed as peripheral to high-quality civic learning and instruction in general.	Active civics supports extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities. These activities must be viewed as indispensable to well-rounded civic education.	<b>Mikva Challenge<sup>15</sup></b> - Engages high school students in school and community issues through programs in youth policymaking, community problem solving, and electoral participation.  <b>Mock Trials</b> - Many state bar associations collaborate with schools to engage students of all levels in mock trial projects.
<b>School Governance</b>	In the past, student councils generally made inconsequential decisions on social matters rather than dealing with true governance issues and addressing student concerns.	Student councils and other school governance opportunities are viewed as laboratories for students to gain practical experience in civics and democracy.	<b>The California Association of Student Councils<sup>16</sup></b> - Involves students in activities and programs outside the classroom that build citizenship and encourage self-esteem.  <b>The Colorado Youth Advisory Council<sup>17</sup></b> - Supports students in examining, evaluating, and discussing the issues affecting Colorado youth. Through the Council, students formally advise and make recommendations to elected officials on such issues.
<b>Simulations of Democratic Processes</b>	Most civics courses were designed around textbook-heavy curriculums where students only read about civics.	Simulations of democratic processes and policymaking teach students 21st century skills such as public speaking, teamwork, close reading, analytical thinking, and the ability to argue both sides of a topic.	<b>Kids Voting USA<sup>18</sup></b> - Teaches students about democracy through a combination of classroom activities, family dialogue, and an authentic voting experience.  <b>iCivics<sup>19</sup></b> - Prepares students to become knowledgeable, engaged 21st century citizens through educational video games and other materials.

## Informing Practice with Research

Research continues to support the six promising practices of the new civics, and the need for civic education in schools generally.

### Why do we need active civic education in schools?

In 2008, Kahne and Sporte conducted a groundbreaking study of civic education at 52 high schools in Chicago that shows why school-based civic education is crucial. Using a district-administered survey, Kahne and Sporte examined the relationship between 11th graders' commitment to civic participation and various student factors, such as demographic characteristics, family context, school-related activities, etc. The authors used the data to create four statistical models, each of which includes progressively more factors and students' commitment to civic participation. Table 2 displays the percent of variance in commitment to civic participation explained in each model.

**Table 2: Statistical Models Predicting 11th Graders' Commitment to Civic Participation: Percent of Variance Explained<sup>20</sup>**

	Model 1: Includes demographic and academic characteristics	Model 2: Includes Model 1 plus neighborhood and family context	Model 3: Includes Model 2 plus curricular and extracurricular opportunities	Model 4: Includes Model 3 plus prior commitments to civic participation
Percent of variance in students' commitment to civic participation explained in model	1%	27%	59%	63%

**Table 3: Positive Predictors of Youth Civic Engagement by Level of Importance<sup>21</sup>**

This research shows that school-related activities, which are first added in Model 3, account for the largest portion of students' commitment to civic participation. Neighborhood and family context also account for a sizeable portion of students' civic commitment. This suggests that what happens in school is considerably important to the development of students' civic commitment.

Kahne and Sporte's research is reinforced by a study by McIntosh and Muñoz. These researchers surveyed over 37,000 high school students in Jefferson County, Kentucky to determine the relative importance of various predictors of youth civic engagement. Table 3 illustrates the results of this research.

<b>TOP LEVEL</b>
Community Service
Political Discussion
Environmental Conservation
<b>INTERMEDIATE LEVEL</b>
Personal Efficacy
Willingness to Contact Officials
Intention to Vote
Nonsport Extracurricular Activities
Conflict Resolution Skills
Positive Character
<b>BASIC LEVEL</b>
School Engagement
School Discussion Climate
School Belonging
Sport Extracurricular Activities
School Support
Academic Grades
Grades in School

The three top level predictors of youth civic engagement are concrete, direct forms of civic action in which students do civic work in school. Intermediate and basic level predictors were not as strongly related to students' civic engagement. These findings suggest that in order to best develop students' civic engagement, schools need to involve students in direct civic action.

### What Are the Benefits of Active Civic Learning for Students?

In addition to reinforcing the case for civic education in schools, recent research has helped to clarify the benefits of specific civic learning activities for students.

Kahne, Crow, and Lee sought to identify how open discussion of societal issues and service-learning are related to student engagement in community-based politics and expressive action (what the authors call "little p" politics) and student engagement in political issues and elections (what the authors call "Big P" Politics). As shown in Table 4, the authors found that open discussion of societal issues has a positive and statistically significant relationship with student engagement in "Big P" Politics, while service-learning has a positive and statistically significant relationship with student engagement in "little p" politics.

**Table 4: Differential Effects of Civic Learning Opportunities on Student Outcomes Related to "little p" and "Big P" Politics<sup>22</sup>**

Student Outcomes →	Student Engagement in "little p" Politics (Community-based Politics and Expressive Action)		Student Engagement in both "little p" and "Big P" Politics		Student Engagement in "Big P" Politics (Political Issues and Elections)	
	Expressive and Youth-Centered Action	Voluntary Activity	Participatory Citizenship	Interest in Politics	Interest in Diverse Perspectives	Intent to Vote
Civic Learning Opportunities ↓						
Open Discussion of Societal Issues	-.06	.01	.11**	.24**	.18**	.26***
Service-Learning	.12***	.28***	.06**	.07#	.01	-.01

Note: Values are unstandardized regression coefficients; #  $p \leq .10$ ; \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

These findings show that civic learning opportunities promote civic and political engagement, and that different civic learning opportunities promote different types of civic engagement. The authors state that the type of civic learning outcome for students "do not depend on whether students take a U.S. government course but instead depend on the kinds of civic learning opportunities students have in their civic classes and elsewhere in the curriculum."<sup>23</sup> Students need a variety of civic learning opportunities in order to develop understanding of and engagement in the full spectrum of civic and political issues.

Vercellotti and Matto examined the relationship between at-home and classroom discussion of controversial current events and students' political knowledge and political efficacy (sense of being able to understand influence politics). Students participated in one of three groups: control (received no treatment), treatment group 1 (discussed selected Time articles at school only), or treatment group 2 (discussed selected Time articles with parents at home and at school), and completed a survey at three different times (pre-test, post-test, and post-test plus six weeks). Table 5 shows the analyses of the survey results.

Table 5: Changes in Political Knowledge and Internal Political Efficacy Over Time<sup>24</sup>

	Survey 1 (pre-test)	Survey 2 (post-test)	Survey 3 (post-test plus six weeks)	N
<b>Changes in Political Knowledge</b>				
Control (No treatment)	2.46	3.04**	3.08**	134
Treatment 1 (Discuss articles at school only)	1.97	2.40**	2.52**	106
Treatment 2 (Discuss articles both at home and at school)	2.93	3.87**	3.97**	121
<b>Changes in Internal Political Efficacy</b>				
Control (No treatment)	8.94	9.1	9.54**	134
Treatment 1 (Discuss articles at school only)	9.27	9.33	9.3	106
Treatment 2 (Discuss articles both at home and at school)	9.33	10.02**	10.07**	121

Note: Entries are means of scales of political knowledge or internal political efficacy; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ .

All students in the study experienced some growth in political knowledge for two likely reasons: all were enrolled in social studies classes, and the experiment took place during the 2008 presidential primary. Both factors heightened all students' awareness of current political issues. Students who discussed articles at home and school, however, received the largest growth in political knowledge and efficacy. Additional data in this study show that the advantage Treatment 2 provided to students fell exclusively to those students who did not take AP or honors classes. Thus, discussion of current events can help students who are at a relative academic disadvantage to make up ground in comparison to their higher achieving peers.

## Implications For Policy and Conclusion

The new civics holds promise for promoting all students' acquisition of the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for a lifetime of civic engagement. The six proven practices of civic education and the research that supports them have several implications for state education policy, including:

- ▶ Civic learning is not flat learning; it must address students' civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions through active learning strategies.
- ▶ Each civic education practice has a unique impact on students' civic learning and engagement. For this reason, a varied course of all six proven practices across a broad set of political and civic issues is needed to ensure that students adequately prepared for the multifaceted nature of civic life.
- ▶ The quality of civic education is critical: "the requirement of a course and test is less important than their effectiveness."<sup>25</sup> For states to require that students take a civics course or pass a civics exam is insufficient. Some boundaries must be established to ensure that the civics education that students receive is in line with accepted best practices in the field.
- ▶ Short-term interventions are insufficient for preparing students for a lifetime of civic participation. Rather than a single course in civics in their senior year, students need to engage in civic learning activities from preschool through college. A sustained, integrated, and intentional approach to civic learning is needed for schools to foster students' lasting commitment to civic participation.

The civic mission of schools is no less important now than it was when the first public schools were established in the United States. The new civics includes an array of research-based strategies that can help educators ensure that this mission is met, for the benefit of individual students, their communities, and the health of the American Republic.

## ECS Resources

### The National Center for Learning and Citizenship

This site assists education leaders to promote, support and reward citizenship education and service-learning as essential components of America's education system.

[www.ecs.org/nclc](http://www.ecs.org/nclc)

### The Progress of Education Reform

Issues on Service-Learning ([www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/84/95/8495.pdf](http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/84/95/8495.pdf)), Citizenship Education ([www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/87/95/8795.pdf](http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/87/95/8795.pdf)), and Digital Citizenship ([www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/00/30/10030.pdf](http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/00/30/10030.pdf)) provide concise review of other research relevant for civics and civic engagement in general.

### Citizenship Education: Online Database

This database allows users to generate profiles of the state policies for citizenship education in individual states and view 50-state reports on state policies for citizenship education.

[www.ecs.org/html/educationIssues/CitizenshipEducation/CitEdDB\\_intro.asp](http://www.ecs.org/html/educationIssues/CitizenshipEducation/CitEdDB_intro.asp)

### Citizenship and Service Learning Issue Sites

Includes links to a rich set of resources from other organizations, states, and experts.

[www.ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueID=19](http://www.ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueID=19) and [www.ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueid=109&subissueid=0](http://www.ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueid=109&subissueid=0)

### Civics Assessment Database

This database contains questions categorized by national civics standards that have been juried by civic learning experts for their clarity and meaningfulness in relation to the competencies of civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. This database is intended to help users assess how schools are performing in terms of developing students' civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

[www.ecs.org/9na/splash\\_new.asp](http://www.ecs.org/9na/splash_new.asp)

## Other Resources

### The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools

([www.civicmissionofschools.org](http://www.civicmissionofschools.org)) This is a coalition of 40 organizations committed to improving the quality and quantity of civic learning in American schools. The Campaign's goal is to increase and improve civic learning in grades K-12 by working for policies that implement the recommendations of the Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools report.

<http://civicmission.s3.amazonaws.com/118/f0/5/171/1/Guardian-of-Democracy-report.pdf>

### CIRCLE

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) conducts research on civic education in schools, colleges, and community settings and on young Americans' voting and political participation, service, activism, media use, and other forms of civic engagement. It is based at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University.

[www.civicyouth.org/](http://www.civicyouth.org/)

### The Center for Civic Education

A nonprofit, nonpartisan organization based in California, the Center's programs are implemented with the assistance of a network of public- and private-sector organizations and educational leaders in every state and congressional district in the country and in more than 80 other countries, many of which are emerging and advanced democracies. The Center is dedicated to promoting an enlightened and responsible citizenry committed to democratic principles and actively engaged in the practice of democracy in the United States and other countries.

<http://new.civiced.org/>

## Endnotes

- 1 *The Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*, (Silver Spring: Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2011) p. 12, <http://civicmission.s3.amazonaws.com/118/fo/5/171/1/Guardian-of-Democracy-report.pdf> (accessed February 21, 2013).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Charles N. Quigley, *Civic Education: Recent History, Current Status, and the Future*, *American Bar Association Symposium*, February, 1999, p. 1, [http://www.civiced.org/papers/papers\\_quigley99.html](http://www.civiced.org/papers/papers_quigley99.html) (accessed February 28, 2013).
- 4 Peter Levine, "Education for a Civic Society," in *Making Civics Count: Citizenship Education for a New Generation*, eds. David E. Campbell, Meira Levinson, and Frederick M. Hess, p. 135 (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2012).
- 5 *The Guardian of Democracy*, p. 6.
- 6 New civic education also expands civic equality, increases 21st century skills, and may reduce the high school dropout rate and improve the school climate. *The Guardian of Democracy*, p.4.
- 7 Ibid, 16-17.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 <http://new.civiced.org/programs/wtp>, (accessed February 28, 2013).
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- 21 Hugh McIntosh and Marco A. Muñoz, *Predicting Civic Engagement in Urban High School Students (CIRCLE Working Paper #69)*, (Medford: The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, Tufts University, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service,; December, 2009).
- 22 Adapted from: Joseph Kahne, David Crow, and Nam-Jin Lee, "Different Pedagogy, Different Politics: High School Learning Opportunities and Youth Political Engagement," *Political Psychology (In Press)*.
- 23 Ibid. 26.
- 24 Adapted from: Tim Vercellotti and Elizabeth C. Matto, *The Classroom-Kitchen Table Connection: The Effects of Political Discussion on Youth Knowledge and Efficacy (CIRCLE Working Paper #72)* (Medford: The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, Tufts University, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, December 2009).
- 25 Peter Levine, "Education for a Civic Society," in *Making Civics Count: Citizenship Education for a New Generation*, eds. David E. Campbell, Meira Levinson, and Frederick M. Hess, p. 56. (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2012).

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