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**We recommend that schools work with policymakers at the local, district, and state levels to develop programs, curricula, and materials that:**

**Provide instruction in government, history, law, and democracy.** The NAEP results indicate that students perform better on tests of civic knowledge and skills if they have studied a range of relevant subjects, such as the Constitution, U.S. history, the structure and processes of government and elections, and the legal system. In particular, the breadth and amount of such instruction correlates with improved knowledge of citizens' rights, of state and local government and of the structures and functions of government.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, evaluations of specific programs (such as the “We the People” curriculum of the Center for Civic Education) clearly show that such approaches can have a positive impact on students' tolerance, civic knowledge, and skills.<sup>48</sup> “If you teach them, they will learn” seems to be the lesson of modern research on civic education.

Formal instruction in U.S. government, history, or democracy is most promising as a way to increase civic knowledge. Knowledge is a valuable civic outcome, quite apart from any relationships it may have with other forms of engagement. Americans should grasp a body of facts and concepts such as the fundamental principles of our democracy and Constitution; the tensions among fundamental goods and rights; the major themes in the history of the United States; the structure of our government, the powers and limitations of its various branches and levels; the diverse values, opinions, and interests of Americans and the ways in which they are represented by elected officials, interest groups, and political parties; and the relationship between government and the other sectors of society. Studying these concepts should be seen not as “rote education” but as intellectually challenging and beneficial. Many of us recall being profoundly moved and motivated as children when we read biographies of political and civic heroes and narrative histories of dramatic events.

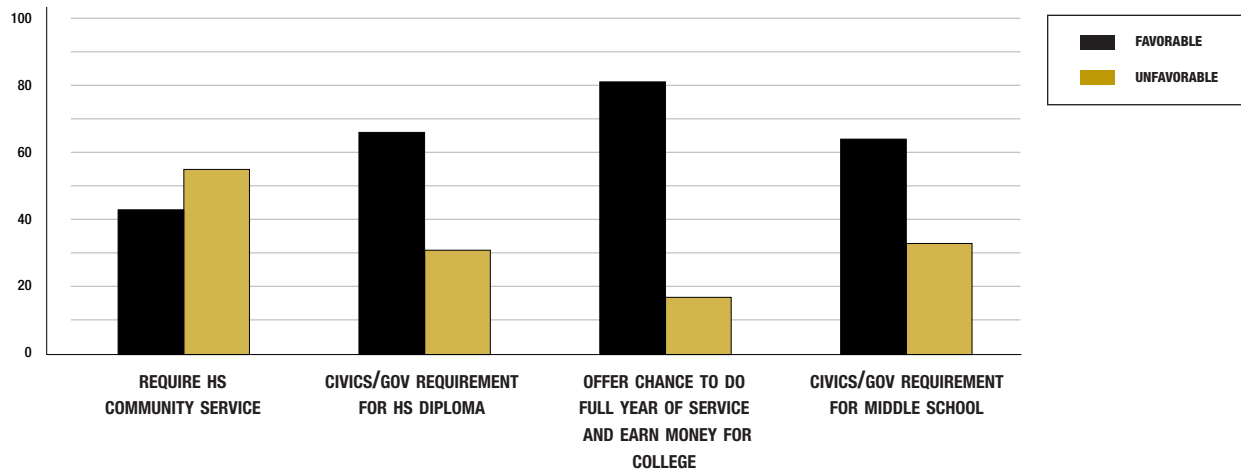
Knowledge also helps people to engage politically.<sup>49</sup> If knowledge obtained in the classroom is retained into adulthood, then formal instruction may lead to more political involvement (such as voting) later in life. More knowledgeable adults are more likely to vote on the basis of issues than on perceived personalities; they vote more consistently; and they distinguish better between substantive debates and personal attacks.<sup>50</sup> There is little evidence, however, that political knowledge correlates with volunteering or group membership.

The effects of formal instruction on behavior appear to be greater when teachers make explicit connections between academic material and concrete actions. IEA data, for example, suggest that it is not enough to point out that the right to vote was won after long struggles in the past. Only when teachers explicitly teach about the importance of voting in the present, and convey that voting is a citizen's duty, are students likely to say that they will vote. Likewise, when teachers explicitly discuss ways of addressing community problems, more students say that they expect to volunteer.<sup>51</sup>

Civic education courses are also opportunities to demystify the naturalization process for legal immigrants. In-class sessions on filling out the naturalization forms, as well as highlighting the typical questions asked in a naturalization exam and explaining the swearing-in ceremony for U.S. citizenship and its significance, are natural study topics for school districts with large numbers of immigrant students.

As is the case with social studies education in general, civic education instruction works better when it involves active discussion and debate and makes connections to current issues that affect students' lives in their communities and at all levels of government, rather than rote study of abstract principles or dry procedures.<sup>52</sup>

## ATTITUDES TOWARD CIVIC EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY SERVICE REQUIREMENTS



AMERICANS, AGES 15-25. SOURCE: CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government National Youth Survey, 2002

In a 2002 survey, young people supported mandatory civics classes in high school and in middle school by very large margins. This result suggests that students and recent graduates do not view their own civics classes as boring or alienating.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, a wider variety of teaching methods and resources is being used in civics classes today than ten years ago.<sup>54</sup>

According to the 1998 NAEP, most students in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades had been asked to memorize material from their social studies textbooks. Memorization can be worthwhile if the material is important and students learn how to interpret and apply what they learn. However, in all grades, more students said they had memorized than had 1) read material not contained in a textbook; 2) taken part in role-playing exercises, mock trials, or dramas; 3) experienced visits from people in the community to learn about important events and ideas; or 4) written letters to give opinions or to help solve community problems. Students of color and students from low-education families were the least likely to experience such enrichment activities.<sup>55</sup>

In almost all schools, textbooks are crucial in social studies education. Some scholars criticize the leading high school government textbooks for saying too little about the diverse values, opinions, and interests of citizens and for presenting inadequate or inaccurate information about state and local governments, although these texts do provide detailed information about the structure of the federal government.<sup>56</sup>

There is a need for more data and analysis of social studies pedagogy, curricula, and texts from kindergarten to high school. Furthermore, additional research is needed about what specific subject areas (e.g., law, history, or governmental processes) are most beneficial.

**Incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events in the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.** Studies that ask young people whether they had opportunities to discuss current issues in a classroom setting have consistently found that those who did participate in such discussions have a greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communications skills, more civic knowledge, and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school.<sup>57</sup> Compared to other students, they also are more likely to say that they will vote and volunteer as adults.

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These findings stand to reason, since one must have at least a basic awareness of important current issues in order to want to become involved with them. Furthermore, discussion is an active learning method that produces good results for many students. Students also say that they appreciate being exposed to a variety of views because it helps them to clarify their own thinking.<sup>58</sup>

Discussion of current events appears to be reasonably common in schools today, although teachers may be steering clear of more controversial issues. On the 1998 NAEP Civics Assessment, 68 percent of fourth-grade social studies teachers reported that they held discussions at least weekly (although just 56 percent of fourth-grade students remembered ever having experienced such conversations). Eighty-eight percent of high school seniors said that they discussed current issues in class. Discussion of current events became more common between 1988 and 1998 at the fourth- and twelfth-grade levels.<sup>59</sup>

Much depends on the quality of discussion. Just as we oppose rote instruction on the minutiae of legislative procedure, so we object to unstructured, uninformed, or uncivil discussions of current issues. Conversations should be carefully moderated so that students feel welcome to speak from a variety of perspectives, with mutual respect and civility. Teachers should also use discussions as an opportunity to stimulate students to read and to address distinctions among facts, opinions, and values, while taking care not to indoctrinate students into particular ideologies. Teachers, however, need support in broaching controversial issues in classrooms, since they may risk criticism or even sanctions if they do so.

Although there have been few rigorous studies of the use of newspapers and other high-quality news media in connection with classes on current issues, small-scale evaluations, as well as an analysis of the IEA data for upper secondary students, show good results.<sup>60</sup> Surveys of adults have long shown a powerful correlation between newspaper readership and most measures of civic and political participation. This correlation does not prove that newspapers (and other news sources) cause civic engagement, but they may contribute to it, especially if used in connection with class discussions.

**Provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.** Service-learning is an approach to education that uses community service to advance curricular objectives through written assignments and/or discussions that promote reflection on the service experience and connect it to classroom studies. Initial research shows that service-learning may be more effective at instilling civic skills and values among young people than community service or volunteering that is unconnected to the curriculum. Nevertheless, the majority of schools continue to offer community service as a “stand-alone” program rather than linking it to curriculum. In 1999, for example, while 64 percent of schools offered community services, only 32 percent provided service-learning opportunities. (Among high schools, 83 percent offered service and 46 percent offered service-learning.)<sup>61</sup>

The service-learning programs that are most effective for civic education are known to be ones that:

- *encourage teachers and administrators to use them as a way to consciously pursue civic outcomes and not merely to seek improved academic performance or higher self-esteem.*
- *allow students to engage in meaningful work on serious public issues, with a chance of seeing positive results within a reasonable time.*
- *give students a role in choosing and designing their projects and strategies.*
- *provide students with opportunities to reflect on the service work.*

- *link service with academic lessons and the broader curriculum.*
- *allow students—especially older students—to pursue political responses to problems (e.g., contacting local officials), consistent with laws that require public schools to be nonpartisan.*
- *help teachers to address potentially negative attitudes that can arise in service projects, such as a sense of superiority over those served.*
- *see this approach as part of a broader philosophy toward education, not just a program that is adopted for a finite period in a particular course.*

Most research on service-learning has been short-term, focused on non-civic outcomes (such as academic performance), and produced ambiguous results because of the possibility of self-selection bias. That is, students enrolled in service-learning courses may show high levels of civic interest and involvement because energetic and talented teachers and students tend to choose these courses. What role personality and self-selection plays in service-learning is not yet determined because few studies using random assignment that would help to measure such selection effects have been conducted.

Despite these methodological limitations, there is no doubt that students in excellent service-learning programs become more civically engaged during the experience.<sup>62</sup> In general, the research suggests that students who participate in quality service-learning programs tend to exhibit improved civic skills and attitudes, especially responsibility for helping others, tolerance, acceptance of diversity, and a lasting commitment to volunteering and other forms of community participation. Benefits for political participation are less well substantiated. However, one study found that students who were involved in service projects in high school remained more likely to vote and to participate in community organizations 15 years later.<sup>63</sup>

At its best, service-learning can be a transformative experience for educators and students alike. However, existing research has not settled several other questions. First, how does service-learning compare to other approaches in terms of the outcomes achieved, the costs, and the risks? Second, how common are the best service-learning programs, and how many are unsatisfactory? And third, could policies (such as mandates or financial incentives) increase the amount of high-quality service-learning at a reasonable cost? We do not yet know the answers to these questions, but we could learn a great deal from research that:

- *compares service-learning to other forms of civic education (including combinations of approaches).*
- *randomly assigns students to these alternative approaches, or at least compares statistically similar groups of students in various programs.*
- *follows the students involved in these programs for years after graduation to assess whether any observed changes last.*
- *asks questions both before and after the program about a wide range of specifically civic and political skills, attitudes, and behaviors.*

One criticism of service-learning programs is that they can be decidedly nonpolitical, to the extent that some scholars fear they may send an antipolitical message, encouraging students to volunteer in place of political participation.

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A number of programs (such as Public Achievement and Student Voices) do encourage students to address local problems in an explicitly political way, and some research suggests that these programs tend to produce different outcomes from typical service-learning. Because of the rules and norms that discourage political activities in education connected to the public schools, instituting such programs is difficult. But they should be assessed further and encouraged if they lead to desired outcomes, especially if there are ways to address the constraints on such programs through public education and changes in policy.

**Offer extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities.** Long-term studies of Americans show that those who participate in extracurricular activities in high school remain more civically engaged than their contemporaries even decades later. Several studies have found that extracurricular participation is a better predictor of adult community engagement than education or income.<sup>64</sup>

Again, self-selection may play a role in this process: some people may simply be prone to participate both in high school and in adulthood.<sup>65</sup> However, given the strong correlation between adolescent and adult participation, it is likely that membership in school groups at least reinforces tendencies to participate in civil society and also teaches participation skills. Thus, opportunities to join high school groups should be made available to everyone, and such participation should be valued.

One point of controversy and uncertainty is the degree to which the type of extracurricular group matters. The positive correlation between high school group membership and later civic engagement could arise because a few valuable groups produce major benefits while other groups have no civic effects at all, or are even harmful. Some research finds a strong correlation between participation in student government and journalism (on the one hand) and positive attitudes toward voting and other forms of political engagement (on the other). But the same research finds only a small positive correlation for vocational clubs and a negative relationship for sports.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, many doubts have been raised about the civic effects of athletic participation (which is one of the few extracurricular activities that have become more common since 1965). But “sports” may be too broad a category. Depending on how athletics is handled, it may either promote confidence, fair play, and teamwork, or else suggest that athletes are above the rules and that competition is more important than cooperation. Further research is needed to examine the types and styles of extracurricular activity that produce the most benefits.

**Encourage student participation in school governance.** Students have good ideas about how to improve their schools and communities as places for civic life and learning, and their input needs to be considered as a way of modeling democratic practice and improving school management, according to some endorsers of this report. They point to a tradition of research (some dating to the early 1900s) that suggests that giving students a voice in the management of their own classrooms and schools also helps to build their civic skills and attitudes. Recently, for example, the IEA study found that 14-year-olds who believe they can make a difference in the way their own school is run — and those who believe their student council has an impact on school policies — are more knowledgeable about politics and interested in current events than other youth. This finding holds true for adolescents who attend schools where most students are not college-bound. Thus, giving students a voice in school governance can be a promising way to encourage all young people to engage civically.

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According to some research findings, when all students are seen to be treated equally in school, and adults make sure that all views are respected, students show more commitment to serving the public good, more willingness to work for equality in society, more tolerance, and more ability to think about social issues critically.<sup>67</sup> Opportunities to discuss school policies, to be heard respectfully, and to work with others to address school problems may also enhance civic skills, such as public speaking and leadership.

It is important to note, however, that not all of the endorsers of this report support this recommendation. We all favor student voice and participation in schools, and we all recognize that ultimate educational authority must rest with teachers, school boards, and administrators. But some experts and practitioners, while believing that students, faculty, and parents should exercise more voice and responsibility in education, disagree in principle with the democratization in schools argument. Others believe that, given little systemic evidence of the effectiveness of democratizing schools, it may be undesirable—and will certainly be difficult—to implement such reforms in today’s schools.

Despite this important and ongoing debate, we all agree that building a more civil and democratic climate in schools would not imply a *laissez-faire* attitude or the need to relax discipline and adult leadership. In fact, teachers and administrators may have to intervene to encourage peaceful deliberation and to prevent violence, bullying, social ostracism, and other behaviors that undermine democratic norms.

Many contemporary educational reformers advocate smaller schools that are structured as communities and oriented toward explicit purposes or values.<sup>68</sup> Some experiment with dividing large schools into several academies that share the same building; holding deliberative meetings to discuss school issues and policies; reserving blocks of time for intensive, collaborative projects; placing student members on administrative committees and school boards; and enacting school constitutions. Such reforms often aim to improve academic performance and reduce behavioral problems, but they clearly have civic potential as well. For example, many more students have opportunities to participate in school governance and extracurricular activities if they attend small schools or academies rather than large, unitary schools.

**Encourage students’ participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.** There is less empirical support for simulations than for the other approaches listed so far, and many experts feel there can be no substitute for actual civic and political participation. Nevertheless, empirical evidence indicates that simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberation, and diplomacy in schools lead to more political knowledge and interest. Role playing, mock trials, and dramas are reasonably common approaches in social studies classes, reported by 25 percent of fourth-graders, 32 percent of eighth-graders, and 34 percent of high school seniors who were surveyed as part of the 1998 NAEP Civics Assessment.

Kids Voting USA, for example, is a school-based program that combines mock voting with lessons about issues and the history of the franchise. Rigorous evaluations show positive effects on students’ attention to news, discussion of current events with their families, and knowledge, especially among low-income participants. Parents of students involved in Kids Voting programs vote at significantly higher rates than other adults.<sup>69</sup>

Students who participated in a classroom simulation of an imaginary society run by majority rule became more tolerant.<sup>70</sup> An evaluation of the ICONS (International Communication and Negotiation Simulations) Project found that computer-based simulations of diplomatic negotiations increased the complexity and sophistication of adolescents’ thinking about political issues.<sup>71</sup> And an evaluation of the Constitutional Rights Foundation City Works curriculum indicated that simulations were important to fostering interest in politics, service, and local government; social networks, social trust, and sense of increased civic capacity and commitment to participate.

Computer technology makes it much easier and more affordable to conduct elaborate simulations in classrooms—similar to role-playing exercises that once would have been conducted only by governments or research centers.<sup>72</sup> Initial results suggest that such simulations may often be valuable, although more research is needed.

**Other Approaches:** Schools and nonprofit organizations are experimenting with a range of other approaches to school-based civic education. While many seem intuitively promising (and some have been positively evaluated), we do not know of existing data and research that is adequate to recommend them at this time. They include the following:

- *After-school programs with a civic component.*
- *Civic education using materials from the mass media and popular culture.*
- *Classroom interaction with elected officials or other community members.*
- *Community asset-mapping projects (in which students canvass and describe the resources of their neighborhoods).*
- *Community service or volunteering without a curricular connection.*
- *Community service requirements.<sup>73</sup>*
- *Competitions (such as quiz bowl, geography bowl, model UN, mock trial, history day, or essay contests on civic or political themes).*
- *Classrooms in which students have a say in curricular choices.*
- *Courses devoted to the use of newspapers and other news sources.*
- *Comprehensive and thoughtfully developed high-stakes civic education exams that go beyond testing rote memorization of facts.*
- *Internships in government offices or in nonprofits.*
- *Mentors (either youth tutors or mentors for other youth or adult mentors for K-12 students).*
- *Reading programs with civic education content.*
- *Participation in neighborhood activism.*
- *Participation in social movements (such as environmentalism, Christian conservatism, or the disabilities rights movement).*