

## SIX PROMISING APPROACHES TO CIVIC EDUCATION

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Research shows that schools can help to develop competent and responsible citizens when they:

- 1 Provide instruction in government, history, law, and democracy.** Formal instruction in U.S. government, history, and democracy increases civic knowledge. This is a valuable goal in itself and may also contribute to young people's tendency to engage in civic and political activities over the long term. However, schools should avoid teaching only rote facts about dry procedures, which is unlikely to benefit students and may actually alienate them from politics.
- 2 Incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.** When young people have opportunities to discuss current issues in a classroom setting, they tend to have greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communications skills, more civic knowledge, and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school. Conversations, however, should be carefully moderated so that students feel welcome to speak from a variety of perspectives. Teachers need support in broaching controversial issues in classrooms since they may risk criticism or sanctions if they do so.
- 3 Design and implement programs that 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 programs are now common in K-12 schools. The ones that best develop engaged citizens are linked to the curriculum; consciously pursue civic outcomes, rather than seek only to improve academic performance or to promote higher self-esteem; allow students to engage in meaningful work on serious public issues; give students a role in choosing and designing their projects; provide students with opportunities to reflect on the service work; allow students—especially older ones—to pursue political responses to problems consistent with laws that require public schools to be nonpartisan; and see service-learning as part of a broader philosophy toward education, not just a program that is adopted for a finite period in a particular course.
- 4 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. Thus, everyone should have opportunities to join high school groups, and such participation should be valued.
- 5 Encourage student participation in school governance.** A long tradition of research suggests that giving students more opportunities to participate in the management of their own classrooms and schools builds their civic skills and attitudes. Thus, giving students a voice in school governance is a promising way to encourage all young people to engage civically.
- 6 Encourage students' participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.** Recent evidence indicates that simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberation, and diplomacy in schools can lead to heightened political knowledge and interest. The data are not conclusive, but these approaches show promise and should be considered when developing programs and curriculum.