

WHY SCHOOLS ARE IMPORTANT VENUES FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

- It is crucial for the future health of our democracy that all young people, including those who are usually marginalized, be knowledgeable, engaged in their communities and in politics, and committed to the public good.
- Encouraging the development of civic skills and attitudes among young people has been an important goal of education and was the primary impetus for originally establishing public schools.
- Schools are the only institutions with the capacity and mandate to reach virtually every young person in the country. Of all institutions, schools are the most systematically and directly responsible for imparting citizen norms.
- Schools are best equipped to address the cognitive aspects of good citizenship — civic and political knowledge and related skills such as critical thinking and deliberation.
- Schools are communities in which young people learn to interact, argue, and work together with others, an important foundation for future citizenship.
- Many non-school institutions that used to provide venues for young people to participate in civic and political affairs (such as political parties, unions, nonprofit associations, and activist religious denominations) have lost the capacity or will to engage young people. Schools, as major community institutions, can help reverse this trend and have an impact on other institutions (political, economic, religious, and family), by providing quality education that improves young people's civic knowledge, skills, and intentions to vote and volunteer.
- Forty state constitutions mention the importance of civic literacy among citizens, and 13 of them state that a central purpose of their educational system is to promote good citizenship, democracy and free government.

WHY THIS IS AN IMPORTANT TIME FOR SCHOOLS TO FOCUS ON CIVIC EDUCATION

- **Schools can capitalize on several positive trends related to youth civic engagement**, including an increase in the number of young people involved in community service and volunteering and in the percentage of young people who are tolerant and committed to free speech.
- **Schools can help address disturbing trends related to youth civic engagement**, including a decrease in young people's interest in political discussion and public issues; their tendency to be more cynical and alienated from formal politics, more materialistic, and less trusting; and a decline in their voter participation rates.
- **School-based civic education is in decline.** Most formal civic education today comprises only a single semester course on government — compared to as many as three courses in democracy, civics, and government that were common until the 1960s.
- **Numerous factors work against even the best intentions educators may have to promote civic engagement among young people.** These obstacles include fear of criticism and litigation if educators address topics that may be considered controversial or political in nature; pressures to meet the goals of high-stakes testing, which now measures reading and mathematics skills (civic education is rarely included); and budget cutbacks in extracurricular programs that help children gain civic skills and attitudes.