

Revitalizing K-12 Civic Learning In California: A Blueprint For Action



Executive Summary

A Report By The California Task Force On K-12 Civic Learning
August 2014



There has never been a better—or a more crucial—time to revitalize civic learning in California.

The success of our nation and state depends on educated, informed and active citizens and residents. However, we are not preparing our diverse residents with the civic knowledge, skills and values they need to succeed in college, career and civic life. A few sobering facts tell the story. The United States recently ranked 139th in voter participation of 172 democracies around the world,¹ and less than half of eligible young people ages 18-24 voted in the 2012 elections.² Just 13 percent of high school seniors showed a solid understanding of U.S. History in the same year,³ and nearly half of Americans who participated in a 2011 Pew study said states' rights, rather than slavery, was the main cause of the Civil War.⁴ In California, less than 50 percent of high school seniors surveyed viewed being actively involved in state and local issues as their responsibility.⁵

The education system has a central role in equitably cultivating the qualities that will enable our youth to mature and participate in our society. Indeed, states across the nation have long held the view that schools have a strong civic mission.⁶ And yet, in recent years this mission has been neglected. This neglect is due to a variety of factors, including decades of shifting federal and state education policies that have sought to improve education quality overall but have generally left civic learning by the wayside in the process. In spite of these factors, there are examples of high-quality civic learning in California schools, but they are the exception, not the rule. To change this, all of us can and must do our part.

We have much to gain by revitalizing civic learning. The chief benefits of civic learning are a vibrant and informed civic life and democracy and a healthy society. High quality civic learning also helps teach children skills they need for the 21st century workplace, such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, initiative and innovation.⁷ In addition, civic learning done right engages students by making what they learn at school more relevant to real life. It promotes academic achievement, as well, and prevents some students from dropping out.⁸

Civic learning is vital for our increasingly diverse California society. In 2012-2013, our 6.2 million K-12 students were 53 percent Latino, 26 percent white, 9 percent Asian and 6 percent African American, with the remaining 6 percent comprised of other ethnicities. In addition, an increasing number of our students are not native speakers of English. Almost 4 in 10 kindergarteners are English language learners. This diversity, and the attention it requires, is now acknowledged in our school funding model. The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) recognizes the necessity of investing in the reduction and ultimate removal of inequitable outcomes in California public schools. Revitalizing civic learning opportunities, in an equitable manner, can contribute to meeting these goals.

As a nation, we already know how to do civic learning well. Research has demonstrated that six core activities—known as the Six Proven Practices in Civic Learning—directly improve the quality and effectiveness of civic learning in schools.⁹ These practices are: classroom instruction in government, history, law and economics; service learning projects tied to the curriculum; simulations of democratic processes; extracurricular activities that have a strong civic dimension; student participation in school governance, and discussions of current events and controversial topics.

There has never been a better—or a more crucial—time to revitalize civic learning in California. Our state is in the midst of several major public education reforms, including implementing the Common Core State Standards in mathematics and English language arts. We are also undergoing a profound shift in the way that K-12 education is funded, via the new LCFF. As we in California implement these sweeping systemic changes, it is critical that we not leave civic learning behind. To this end, the Task Force makes the following system-wide recommendations to improve civic learning in *every* district, in *every* school, for *every* child.

- Revise the California History-Social Science Content Standards and accompanying curriculum frameworks to incorporate an emphasis on civic learning, starting in kindergarten, so *all* students acquire the civic knowledge, skills and values they need to succeed in college, career and civic life.
- Integrate civic learning into state assessment and accountability systems for students, schools and districts. Civic knowledge, skills, values and whether students are receiving learning opportunities that promote these outcomes must be assessed and linked to revised California History-Social Science Content Standards and relevant Common Core State Standards and enable periodic reporting to the legislature and the public on the state of students' civic learning.
- Improve professional learning experiences for teachers and administrators to help them implement civic learning in schools. Connect professional learning in civics to Common Core State Standards professional learning experiences.
- Develop an articulated sequence of instruction in civic learning across all of K-12, pegged to revised standards. At each grade level, civic learning should draw on the research-based Six Proven Practices listed above and include work that is action-oriented and project-based and that develops digital literacy.
- Establish a communication mechanism so community stakeholders can easily connect with teachers and students on civic education and engagement. Students need to get out of the school building to practice civic engagement, and civic leaders need to come into schools to engage students.
- Provide incentives for local school districts to fund civic learning in Local Control Accountability Plans under the new LCFF.

These recommendations constitute a comprehensive plan. The full report, available at www.powerofdemocracy.org, describes the context and rationale in more detail, elaborates on the recommendations, shares civic learning success stories from around the state and provides suggestions for actions we all can take immediately to dramatically improve the quality of civic learning in our schools.

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** School received a 2013 Civic Learning Award of Excellence or Distinction

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