

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

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CLASSROOMS PRODUCE POSITIVE CIVIC OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS: RESULTS FROM A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS

Joseph Kahne and Susan Sparte investigate civic outcomes among high school students in Chicago in their forthcoming article entitled, “Developing Citizens: A Longitudinal Study of School, Family, and Community Influences on Students’ Commitments to Civic Participation” (funded by the Spencer Foundation and the Chicago Community Trust). The most important finding is that what happens in classrooms has a meaningful impact on students’ commitment to civic participation.

The study simultaneously compares numerous influences on the development of civic commitments in the Chicago public schools, where “85% of students come from low-income backgrounds and 91% are students of color.” No other large-scale study has examined civic commitments at more than one point in time during high school while also collecting detailed information about exposure to a broad range of school-based practices that are believed to help develop civic outcomes. The Kahne and Sparte study follows 3,805 students from a total of 47 Chicago high schools. It controls for demographic factors, pre-existing civic commitments, and academic achievement and focuses on civic commitments as the chief outcome.

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CLASSROOM-BASED CIVIC LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES MATTER

Kahne and Sparte find that students’ racial and ethnic backgrounds have very little impact on their civic commitments, once other factors are taken into account. The civic engagement of their families and neighborhoods do matter, but the impact of service-learning and other classroom-based civic learning opportunities is substantially larger. Being required by teachers to keep up with politics and government and learning how to improve the community, for example, are highly effective forms of civic education. There are also statistically significant effects from other teaching methods, such as exposing students to civic role models.

Kahne and Sparte find positive effects from participating in after-school programs, but the effect sizes are smaller than those attributed to civically oriented classroom activities such as service-learning and classroom discussions of current issues. These findings indicate, however, that extracurricular activities that focus directly on civic and political issues and on ways to act both civically and politically would likely be more consequential.

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Similarly, the study finds that measures of the school context—whether students generally feel supported or like they belong to the school community—have only modest links to civic commitments.

CLASSROOMS HOLD GREAT PROMISE FOR DEMOCRACY, YET ATTENTION TO CIVIC EDUCATION DECLINING

The authors argue that healthy democracies need citizens with civic skills and knowledge. Late adolescence is a critical time for the formation of identity, in general, and for civic development, in particular. The current state of youth civic participation and knowledge is troubling, and low-income students are particularly disadvantaged when it comes to democratic institutions. Overall, attention to the civic mission of schools is declining as most research and policy focuses on the development of “human capital”: resources that make individuals more competitive in the labor market.

Drs. Kahne and Sparte conclude, “By providing particular kinds of classroom-based civic learning opportunities, it appears that schools—including those in very large and challenged public school systems—can support the development of students’ commitments to civic participation.” To learn more about this research please visit www.civicsurvey.org. ■