

## THE CIVIC MISSION OF SCHOOLS: A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

In February of 2003, Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE issued a major report on the state of K-12 civic education, *The Civic Mission of Schools* (CMS). Seven years later, the report continues to inspire a well defined research agenda and an advocacy campaign by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools ([www.civicmissionofschools.org](http://www.civicmissionofschools.org)) and its coalition members. New CIRCLE-supported research validates the “six promising approaches” for effectively providing K-12 civic education that were proposed in the report.

### NEW CIRCLE-SUPPORTED RESEARCH VALIDATES THE “SIX PROMISING APPROACHES” FOR EFFECTIVELY PROVIDING K-12 CIVIC EDUCATION THAT WERE PROPOSED IN THE REPORT.

Recent research suggests three additional dimensions for examining civic education. First, all the “promising practices” (which are pedagogical approaches) are strongly affected by teachers’ preparation. Second, all six promising practices are shaped by standardized testing and other requirements and incentives. Finally, preliminary research suggests that high-quality civic education can help students develop academic skills and motivations. That link gives school systems and policymakers reasons to invest in civic opportunities.

This article summarizes research published by CIRCLE since our last summary, which appeared in the April 2007 (V.4 I.3) issue of *Around the CIRCLE*. Several of the studies listed below were also published in *Engaging Young People in Civic Life*, a book edited by James Youniss and Peter Levine with a forward by Lee Hamilton (Vanderbilt University Press, 2009).

One study (“CIRCLE Working Paper #70” by Hugh McIntosh, Sheldon Berman, and James Youniss) published by CIRCLE examined some of the six promising practices in the context of a large urban school system, taking advantage of a system-wide survey. It provides support for the overall framework of *The Civic Mission of Schools* report. In particular, it suggests that community service, political discussion, and environmental conservation may be high-impact activities since they predict a wide range of civic outcomes among a diverse set of students. (For more information about this study, see the article “Evaluation of Large Urban School District Shows Schools Can Increase Civic Engagement” on page 6).

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THE RESEARCH ROUNDUP COLUMN HIGHLIGHTS RECENT RESEARCH FINDINGS COMMISSIONED OR GENERATED BY CIRCLE. ALSO INCLUDED IS AN UPDATE ON NEW CIRCLE PRODUCTS SUCH AS FACT SHEETS, RESEARCH ARTICLES, RESEARCH ABSTRACTS, BIBLIOGRAPHIES, AND DATASETS.

## APPROACH #1 PROVIDE INSTRUCTION IN GOVERNMENT, HISTORY, LAW, AND DEMOCRACY.

The CMS report finds that classroom instruction in social studies increases civic and political knowledge and skills and increases political participation. CIRCLE-supported research reinforces this approach and provides more detail on the best ways to provide instruction. From the new research, we know that:

♦**Political knowledge is an important precondition for civic participation.** Research by Henry Milner (“CIRCLE Working Paper #60”) finds that people need political knowledge to vote and engage in other forms of political participation. However, both knowledge and participation have declined among young people in many industrialized democracies. American young people show troubling gaps in political knowledge, even compared to their Canadian peers.

♦**Yet, not all students receive equal civic instruction.** In “CIRCLE Working Paper #59,” Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh find that a student’s race and academic track and a school’s average socio-economic status (SES) determine the availability of the school-based civic learning opportunities that promote voting and other broader forms of civic engagement. High school students attending higher SES schools, those who are college-bound, and white students receive more of these opportunities than low-income students, those not heading to college, and students of color.

♦**The civic engagement gap can be narrowed when the learning opportunity gap is reduced.** “CIRCLE Working Paper #64” by Britt Wilkenfeld examines the effects of several systems of influence (schools, families, and neighborhoods) on civic outcomes. The author finds that receiving a civics curriculum “appears to be more beneficial to youth attending schools in high poverty neighborhoods than to those attending schools in low-poverty neighborhoods.” Thus the paper indicates that the civic engagement gap can be narrowed when the learning opportunity gap is reduced. Schools, although implicated in the existence of a civic engagement gap, also have the potential to narrow the gaps between different groups of students.

♦**Despite research that shows benefits of civics instruction, less time is spent on social studies, but this trend began**

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**before No Child Left Behind (NCLB).** In grades one through five, the curriculum has narrowed over the last ten years, with more time devoted to reading and math and less to science, arts, and social studies. These declines, however, began in the 1990s before the passage of NCLB. The trends are the same in private and public schools and in schools with majorities of white and minority students. These were some of the findings of *Getting Narrower at the Base: The American Curriculum* after NCLB by Peter Levine, Mark Hugo Lopez, and Karlo Barrios Marcelo. If NCLB were the main cause of the narrowing, it would be expected that new teachers (influenced by current expectations and pressures to emphasize English and math) would narrow their teaching, whereas veteran teachers would more likely maintain teaching priorities from their early days in education. The study found the reverse is true, with newer teachers providing a broader curriculum. Even though the k-12 curriculum has not narrowed consistently, and even though NCLB is not mainly responsible for the narrowing that has occurred, the curriculum may still be too narrow to prepare young people for citizenship. Extracurricular activities such as music, drama, student journalism, and student government, are also too rare.

## **APPROACH #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.**

CIRCLE research supports this approach and provides research-tested strategies to help teachers incorporate discussion of controversial issues in their classroom.

♦**Planned, moderated discussions of controversial issues teach essential democratic skills and encourages students' interest in current issues.** In *Controversy in the Classroom*, Diana Hess provides research-based advice about how to define "controversial issues" and handle them in classrooms. The longitudinal study of high school students that is a major source of data for this book was partly funded by CIRCLE. Hess argues that planned, moderated discussions of controversial issues teach essential democratic skills.

Moreover, in "CIRCLE Working Paper #57," Amy K. Syvertsen, Constance A. Flanagan, and Michael D. Stout find that discussion of hotly contested issues seems to encourage students' interest in these topics. The researchers find that discussion of issues

such as the war in Iraq, the Patriot Act, civil rights, and homeland security positively predicts students' concern about the unjust treatment of others. They hypothesize that "controversy invites deliberation, thereby providing students with a forum to voice their opinions and, potentially, spark their interests."

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♦**Peer-centered, critical discussion of politics can be an effective strategy for youth political mobilization.** "CIRCLE Working Paper #68" by Michael McDevitt summarizes a study of adolescents living in red and blue counties during the 2006 midterm elections and shows a striking pattern of Democratic youth thriving in political expression and debate when exposed to Republican ideological climates. Democratic adolescents were more likely to talk with parents and friends about politics, disagree openly, test opinions, and listen to opponents if they lived in Republican counties compared with Democratic youth living in liberal or balanced counties. Compared to Republican youth residing in the same communities, Democratic youth in Republican counties were also more likely to engage in political discussion, to pay attention to news media, and to express confidence in their ability to comprehend campaign issues. The results of the report suggest that Democratic identity is frequently expressed in deliberative and conflict-seeking activities, while Republican identity is often grounded in knowledge. Overall, the study suggests the value of peer-critical discussion as a strategy for youth political mobilization.

♦**Yet, average and low-income students are less likely to receive opportunities to engage in political debates or panel discussions.** According to "CIRCLE Working Paper #59" by Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, students in higher-income school districts are more than one-and-a-half times more likely to report having political debates and panel discussions than students in average income districts.

♦**State policies do not help, although policies to encourage and support explicit discussion of the news show promise.** "CIRCLE Working Paper #56" by Mark Hugo Lopez and Peter Levine (of CIRCLE), and Kenneth Dautrich and David Yalof

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(of University of Connecticut) finds promise in state policies designed to encourage and support explicit discussion of the news media, especially if students are required to employ news sources in classrooms. The authors use multivariate analysis of data from the Knight Foundation “2005 Future of the First Amendment Survey” and other sources. They investigate the effects of courses, state educational policies, school media, and other variables on students’ attitudes toward media, attention to media, knowledge of media, and media usage. Among other results, they find that students are more likely to use the news media regularly when their teachers have required the use of news media in classes. Overall, however, the authors find very few effects of existing state policies on students’ knowledge, activities, and values. A version of this working paper has been published as, Lopez, M.H., Dautrich, K., Yalof, D., and Levine, P. (2009). Schools, Education Policy and the Future of the First Amendment. *Political Communication*, v. 26, no. 1, 84-101.

#### **APPROACH #3 DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT PROGRAMS THAT PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH OPPORTUNITIES TO APPLY WHAT THEY LEARN THROUGH PERFORMING COMMUNITY SERVICE THAT IS LINKED TO THE FORMAL CURRICULUM AND CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION.**

Research has long shown that service-learning, when done well, can have a positive civic impact on students, including increasing civic and political skills, civic attitudes and community participation. Over the past two years, our research did not yield new studies of this approach, although CIRCLE co-organized annual conferences for “emerging scholars” in k-12 service-learning, collaborating with colleagues at the University of Minnesota’s International Center for Research on Community Engagement (ICRCE) and Brandeis University’s Center for Youth and Communities. Some of the papers presented at those meetings have been collected in a forthcoming book edited by Trae Stewart and Nicole Webster. Further, CIRCLE’s current project on social networks involves service-learning.

From past CIRCLE-supported research, we know that service-learning is most effective when it lasts for at least one semester, is linked to standards, involves direct contact with service recipients, and includes cognitively challenging reflection activities among other components (see “CIRCLE Working Paper #33,” by Shelley Billig and colleagues). Findings from Joseph Kahne and Susan Sporte’s longitudinal study of students in the Chicago Public Schools (funded by the Spencer Foundation and the

Chicago Community Trust, not CIRCLE) found that courses that provide service-learning experiences have substantial impact on students’ commitment to civic participation. For more information on their research, see Kahne, J.E. and Sporte, S.E. (2008) *Developing Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning Opportunities on Students’ Commitment to Civic Participation*. *American Educational Research Journal*, 45, 738-766. Finally, Alberto Dávila and Marie Mora found that students were more likely to finish high school and graduate from college if they participated in high school classes with mandatory community service (a rough proxy for service-learning). Their complete findings are contained in “CIRCLE Working Papers #52 and #53.”

#### **APPROACH #4 OFFER EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES THAT PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO BE 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. The longest study that shows this pattern was begun by Kent Jennings in the 1960s. In the last two years, CIRCLE has not published new studies of the effects of extracurricular activities, although “CIRCLE Working Paper #69” by Hugh McIntosh and Marco A. Muñoz finds positive relationships between non-sports club participation and civic engagement in the Louisville, KY public schools.

#### **APPROACH #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. Historically, this finding is not based so much on program evaluations and experiments as on survey results. However, a recent evaluation of a high school intervention designed to encourage school-wide democratic deliberation supports this finding and provides new information on the effects of student involvement in school governance.

♦**School-wide democratic deliberation may help to increase community service participation among students of all backgrounds.** “CIRCLE Working Paper #70” describes a five-year evaluation of a high school program designed to encourage school-wide democratic deliberation.

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The intervention involved, in part, organizing the school into clusters of 100 to 150 students that met for one hour each week to discuss governance and other school-related issues, perform community service, and pursue other cluster-related activities. The researchers, Hugh McIntosh, Sheldon Berman, and James Youniss, found that over the five-year evaluation, the rate of participation in community service increased by 23 percentage points. They attribute this increase to the clustering intervention, since 17% of all seniors (28 of 169) in 2007 reported that the only service they performed was in their cluster. In addition, they note that the increase in community service participation spread widely throughout the student population, including males and females, Whites and non-Whites, high- and low-SES students, highly active students, and students who seldom get involved in non-academic school activities. The qualitative findings from this study support the idea that adult support plays an important role in building youth civic engagement.

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## THE QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FROM THIS STUDY SUPPORT THE IDEA THAT ADULT SUPPORT PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN BUILDING YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

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### APPROACH #6 ENCOURAGE STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN SIMULATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES.

Simulations of democratic processes and procedures offer students important opportunities for developing knowledge and honing civic skills. In addition to CIRCLE's work with classroom-based simulations, other civics simulations have been developed recently by Our Courts (<http://www.ourcourts.org/> founded by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor) and Ashoka's Youth Venture (<http://www.genv.net/>), but evaluations are not yet available.

### RESEARCH ON TEACHER DEVELOPMENT, STANDARDS AND TESTING, AND ACADEMIC IMPACTS

"Promising practices" are pedagogical strategies or approaches that can be adopted by a teacher or a school. The research summarized in *The Civic Mission of Schools* report and in this article suggests that six promising practices for civic education work when done well. But there are other aspects to civic education.

First, the teacher is an important factor. In their chapters for *Engaging Young People in Civic Life*, Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh and Diana Hess conclude with the recommendation that more attention be paid to professional development for teachers of civics. CIRCLE has not published research on the effects of professional development since 2005 (when a CIRCLE fact sheet by Judith Torney-Purta, Carolyn Henry Barber, and Wendy Klandl Richardson found a positive link between professional development and student achievement in civics). However, recent CIRCLE research does find significant variation in how teachers approach this subject and indicates that teachers' approaches matter.

•**Social studies teachers are using a wide variety of teaching techniques.** "CIRCLE Working Paper #57" by Amy K. Syvertsen, Constance A. Flanagan, and Michael D. Stout examines the association between activities regularly used in high school civic education courses (e.g., staging a mock election) and their impact on key student outcomes. The authors investigate a range of usual practices used by social studies teachers and assess whether various practices have a demonstrable impact on targeted civic outcomes for students. They find that teachers use a variety of teaching activities to promote civic outcomes. For example, when teaching about electoral politics the most common strategies include: discussing the presidential debate in class (99%), mock elections (90%), and acquainting students with the voting process (90%). The least common activities include: field trips to local polling sites (nine percent), mock debates (26%), and candidate visits to the class (23%). Ninety-two percent of teachers ask students to "compare/contrast candidates' positions" and 84% encourage "active listening." Activities that encourage communication skill development are more varied. While 80% of teachers report that they encourage students to "support opinions with facts" only 19% ask their students to "write elected officials."

Second, civic education takes place in schools that are profoundly affected by standards and accountability measures, such as high-stakes testing. As noted above, CIRCLE's study entitled *Getting Narrower at the Base* found that civics was shrinking in the elementary grades (although not at high school), and although the direct cause was not NCLB, broader trends in standards and accountability may have shrunk the curriculum. In a briefing paper for the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, CIRCLE researchers Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Peter Levine reviewed the literature on accountability measures. They found no clear evidence

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that any particular system of accountability would drive better instruction in civics. Additionally, Lopez, Dautrich, Yalof, and Levine (2009) had found no variation in student outcomes attributable to differences in state policies. However, Kawashima-Ginsberg and Levine did find some promise in two potential policies. Schools could be held accountable for the civic opportunities they offer to students, and students can be given tasks involving analysis, deliberation, planning, and action that assess their civic knowledge, skills, and values.

Finally, emerging research is finding that there need not be any trade-off between civic education and success in other subjects. On the contrary, high-quality, interactive civic education may be an excellent path to academic success.

♦ **Civiceducation boosts 21st century skills.** "Paths to 21st Century Competencies through Civic Education Classrooms," is a report by Judith Torney-Purta and Britt S. Wilkenfeld, commissioned by the American Bar Association Division for Public Education and the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools with some involvement by CIRCLE. They find:

*Civic education, especially when it is interactive and involves discussion of current issues, is an important way to develop the skills that young Americans need to succeed in the 21st century workforce. Students who experience interactive discussion-based civic educa-*

*tion (either by itself or in combination with lecture-based civic education) score the highest on '21st Century Competencies,' including working with others (especially in diverse groups) and knowledge of economic and political processes. Students who experience neither interactive nor lecture-based civic education have the lowest scores on all of the 21st Century competencies examined. This group, which comprises about one-quarter of all American students, shows not only low levels of knowledge but also a relatively low level of willingness to obey the law.*

♦ **Moreover, academic progress may encourage civic engagement.** In "CIRCLE Working Paper #67," Andrea Finlay and Connie Flanagan find that young adults (those between the ages of 16 and 30 at baseline) who make academic progress over a four year period are also more likely to participate in civic activities such as voting, volunteering, and accessing social media to discuss current events. This relationship holds for young adults from low-income backgrounds as well as high-income backgrounds. The authors propose several interpretations of their findings: educational progress may lead to higher levels of engagement; sustained service may link young adults to opportunities and mentors that assist them in continuing their education; and more motivated young adults may be more likely to continue their education and get engaged in civic affairs. ★



CIRCLE  
Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship  
and Public Service  
Lincoln Filene Hall  
Tufts University  
Medford, MA 02155

