

## EVALUATION OF LARGE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT SHOWS SCHOOLS CAN INCREASE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In "CIRCLE Working Paper #69," Hugh McIntosh and Marco A. Muñoz examine the civic engagement outcomes that the Jefferson County Public School System (JCPS) in Louisville, KY, has chosen to promote in its students. Using a large sample in an urban school district, the study finds that the most important predictors of youth civic engagement are community service, political discussion, and environmental conservation.

This study reinforces other research that shows community service, discussion of politics, and extracurricular activities (other than sports) boost civic engagement. Moreover, the findings provide new evidence for the potential value of environmental conservation, conflict resolution, and character education as pathways to civic engagement.

The findings presented in "CIRCLE Working Paper #69" are based on a survey of students in Jefferson County's 21 high schools during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 school years. Almost 40,000 surveys were completed over the two years of the study. To download "CIRCLE Working Paper #69: Predicting Civic Engagement in Urban High School Students" please visit <http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=366>.

### FIRST STEP TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: OFFER COMMUNITY SERVICE, POLITICAL DISCUSSION AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION OPPORTUNITIES

As outlined in *The Civic Mission of Schools* report, schools can use "six promising practices" to encourage civic engagement among their students. Using the six approaches as a starting point, the JCPS developed its own conceptual framework (see Table 1) to measure the civic outcomes that the school district desires to promote now and in the future. McIntosh and Muñoz tested the model to see which student actions and activities predicted civic engagement in the Louisville public school population. Variables in the model tested included six civic outcomes (shown in Table 1) as well as "positive predictors" such as non-sport extracurricular activities, conflict resolution skills, and academic grades.

**Table 1: JCPS Conceptual Framework for Measures of Civic Engagement**

	Indicator		
	Civic Activity	Political Activity	Problem-Solving Activity
Individual Action	Environmental Conservation	Intention to Vote	Willingness to Contact Public Official
Social Action	Community Service	Political Discussion	Personal Efficacy

The researchers conclude that community service, political discussion and environmental conservation are the "basic first steps towards well-rounded citizenship." While all six outcome variables predicted civic engagement, the authors divided the variables into levels of higher and lower importance based on whether they "represent actual civic behavior or a disposition toward civic behavior." Community service, political discussion and environmental conservation ranked on the higher level because they were "real, direct forms of civic action" and each behavior was positively associated with four or more of the civic outcomes. The researchers note, "Schools that arrange for these activities not only provide students with opportunities for civic action but also give them experience in politics and civil society."

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### NEXT STEP: NON-SPORT EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES, CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILL BUILDING, AND POSITIVE CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Schools can also encourage civic engagement by providing extracurricular activities other than sports, by teaching conflict resolution skills, and by promoting positive character development. However, the research suggests that these activities should be considered an "intermediate level of importance." These three activities as well as civic outcomes that measure dispositions as opposed to actual behavior (intention to vote,





willingness to contact an official, and personal efficacy) were consistently and positively associated with four or five of the civic outcomes (see Table 2). While conflict resolution skills are not traditionally associated with civic education, the authors note that resolving conflict could be considered a civic skill. They note, “Conflict resolution skill may enable youth to engage in difficult civic issues, whereas youth without that skill may avoid getting involved.”

tunities, political discussions and environmental conservation activities as a first step to encouraging the development of well-rounded citizens. Non-sport extracurricular activities, conflict resolution skill building, and character education may also provide pathways to civic engagement. ★

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**Table 2: Positive Predictors of Youth Civic Engagement by Level of Importance**

Top Level
Community service*
Political discussion*
Environmental discussion*

  

Intermediate Level
Personal efficacy*
Willingness to contact official*
Intention to vote*
Non-sport extracurricular activities
Conflict resolution skill
Positive character

  

Basic Level
School engagement
School discussion climate
School belonging
Sport extracurricular activities
School support
Academic grades
Grade in school

\* outcomes

The research provides evidence that many common civic education practices do indeed promote civic engagement. Schools with limited resources should consider incorporating community service oppor-