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Report Shows “Highly Unequal” Outcomes in Civics Education for Low-Income Youth of Color

Wealthy, White Students 4 to 6 Times More Likely than Low-Income Black & Hispanic Students to Exceed “Proficient” Levels of Civics Ed.

Medford/Somerville, MA – Low-income students continue to receive inadequate civic education in many public schools, according to a groundbreaking report released by the [Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement \(CIRCLE\)](#) - the nationally recognized youth research center based at Tufts University's Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service. The new report notes that white, wealthy students are four to six times more likely than black or Hispanic students from low-income households to exceed the “proficient” level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in civics.¹

The report entitled, [“All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement”](#), focuses on how to educate young Americans for political participation and was written by the *Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge*. It provides recommendations for educators, parents, and national, state and local policymakers on how to engage American youth.

“The unfortunate reality in America’s schools today is that white and wealthy students are much more likely to receive recommended civic education experiences,” said Peter Levine, director of CIRCLE. **“Furthermore, the content and topics they discuss and the way these are presented are often tailored to white and middle-class students rather than students of color and poor students.”**

The *Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge* is a distinguished, bipartisan group of scholars [convened](#) by CIRCLE to investigate exclusive data collected during and after the 2012 elections on issues such as civic knowledge, voting behavior, and the educational experiences of Americans ages 25 and under—a crucial constituency in electoral politics. The report is based, in part, on data collected for the Commission from more than 6,000 young adults and 720 high school civics or government teachers, and an analysis of all states’ voting and education laws. The research was funded by the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, Robert R. McCormick Foundation, W.T. Grant Foundation, Spencer Foundation, and Youth Engagement Fund.

¹ CIRCLE tabulation of NAEP 2010 12th Grade Civics Data using NCES Data Explorer tool, available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/format.aspx>

Some highlights of the report's findings include:

- **Today's young people are diverse to an unprecedented degree.** More than one quarter of young Americans (ages 18-29) have at least one parent who was born in a country other than the United States. Thirty-eight percent of the 18-29s are people of color.
- **Attending racially diverse high schools predicted lower electoral engagement and lower levels of informed voting,** probably because it is more difficult to discuss controversial issues in diverse contexts, and individuals feel less encouragement to participate politically when others around them disagree. On the other hand, discussion of controversial current issues in school and parental support for controversial discussions diminished the negative relationship between diversity and electoral engagement.
- **Young adults who had attended college voted at almost twice the rate of their non-college-educated peers in 2012.**
- On the other hand, **young African Americans**, who are on average less engaged in most forms of civic engagement than Whites, **voted at the highest rate of any young racial/ethnic group in 2008 and 2012**, and they came close to young Whites in several previous elections before Barack Obama was a national candidate

“All young Americans should be informed and responsibly involved in politics and civic life. And engaging the next generation is the best long-term solution to problems of polarization, incivility, and dysfunction in national politics,” said Levine.

To break current patterns, the report recommends policymakers must embrace innovative and collaborative approaches to civic education. Examples of recommendations from the report include:

- Lowering the voting age to 17 in municipal or state elections so that students can be encouraged to vote while they are taking a required civics class.
- Policies that support teachers' obligation to include discussions of current, controversial political issues in the curriculum. Assigning students to read and debate news in class and encouraging them to discuss with their parents and other adults who are important in their lives.
- State standards for civics that focus on developing advanced civic skills, such as deliberation and collaboration, rather than memorizing facts.
- Badges for excellence in civics. These portable, online certificates would demonstrate advanced civic skills, knowledge, and actual contributions.

Both a full list of the commission's members and additional, detailed information about the commission, its mission and focus can be found [here](#).

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CIRCLE (www.civicyouth.org) is a nonpartisan, independent, academic research center that studies young people in politics and presents detailed data on young voters in all 50 states. CIRCLE is part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University.

The Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service (<http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/>) is a national leader whose model and research are setting the standard for higher education's role in civic engagement education. Serving every school of Tufts University, Tisch College creates an enduring culture that prepares students to be lifelong active citizens.

Tufts University (<http://www.tufts.edu/>), located on three Massachusetts campuses in Boston, Medford/Somerville and Grafton, and in Talloires, France, is recognized as one of the premier research universities in the United States. Tufts enjoys a global reputation for academic excellence and for the preparation of students as leaders in a wide range of professions. A growing number of innovative teaching and research initiatives span all Tufts campuses, and collaboration among the faculty and students in the undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs across the university's schools is widely encouraged.