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Educating for Democracy: Policy Recommendations for the Revitalization of Civic Learning in the United States

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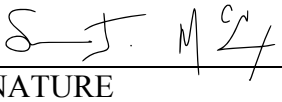
Sean McCarthy, Ed.D.		5/14/2021
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Abstract

The recent decades have brought upon a dramatic shift in the United States' political and social climate. Increases in ideological polarization and extremism have taken hold as individual trust, knowledge, and participation in democratic processes has declined (Gould et al., 2011). These trends have contributed to the rising severity of social issues facing the United States - climate change, income inequality, systemic racism - as well as an inability to collectively address these issues. The need for a solution to these trends has never been greater as the nation struggles to perfect a democratic structure in which citizens are equitably represented within its processes and its outcomes are truly reflective of citizens' needs and interests. Revitalizing civic education in our nation's K-12 schools has grown in popularity as a potential antidote for these social issues. Civic education, when implemented properly, can build a sense of agency, responsibility, and identity in our youth, propelling them towards active and meaningful engagement within their communities for decades to come. However, the current state of civic education nationwide is failing to equitably distribute these civic learning opportunities across state lines and across social groups. With unequal access to these opportunities, there is unequal access to democratic and community involvement, effectively disenfranchising a sector of our population. It is imperative that a multi-faceted response across levels of government address the state of civic education in order to prepare the next generation of citizens to take on the world's most pressing issues. This report will examine the historical foundations of civic education, evaluate curricular and policy approaches to the subject, and, finally, produce a set of recommendations for the consideration of federal, state, and local policy makers.

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Educating for Democracy: Policy Recommendations for the Revitalization of Civic Learning in the United States.

The United States has witnessed an increasing number of threats to its democracy in recent years, reaching a peak on January 6, 2021. On this day, a violent mob stormed the steps of the United States Capitol in attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. Their actions were incited by the words of the sitting president, who, despite a lack of evidence, spread lies of a fraudulent election and encouraged his supporters to "fight like hell" to correct it (Mascaro et al., 2021). In the end, democracy prevailed; the next president was certified and the peaceful transfer of power began (Naylor, 2021). This event marked a grim day that history will not soon forget. The fear and uncertainty raised by the incident woke the American public up to the fragile state of a democracy hanging in the balance. The United States' current social and political climate undoubtedly played a role in the event; online disinformation campaigns and the hyperpolarized nature of political discourse are notable contributors. However, underlying this volatile climate, are declining trends in civic knowledge, trust, and engagement that threaten individuals' agency in democratic life.

These declining trends affect the everyday attitudes, behaviors, and actions of citizens. Individuals' level of civic knowledge has remained remarkably low over the past few decades, with many citizens struggling to understand basic democratic rights and processes (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2019; Gould et al., 2011; Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017). Similarly, levels of civic engagement in local and national communities have declined as the 20th century's widely connected civic associations, including church groups and sports leagues, have largely disappeared. Membership in these organizations provided citizens with opportunities to build a sense of belonging with others, to discuss important social issues, and to

contribute to their community's wellbeing (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017; Putnam, 1995). Amidst these changes, levels of civic trust amongst citizens have also declined significantly. In 2017, one in five Americans stated that they were willing to trust the federal government while just one in three were willing to trust fellow citizens to make political decisions on their behalf (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017). While these factors alone are not indicators of a healthy democracy, they are important to consider as Americans are asked to participate in democratic processes through voting and similar civic duties.

The result of these individual changes is an American populace so disengaged, distrustful, and cynical in its own government's ability to support the most basic needs of its citizens. This environment allows for these broader, more visible changes to our social and political climate to occur. For instance, the United States has seen a rise in ideological polarization amongst its citizens; individuals are not only holding more divergent opinions, but they are also becoming less tolerant of those with opposing ones (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017). This has resulted in more uncivil discourse across the partisan divide amongst not only private citizens but also those legislators charged with passing laws on their behalf. As the partisan divide has grown, a small yet significant group of individuals have gravitated towards ideological extremes. Most notably, a rise of right-wing extremists has emerged, seeking to gain racial, ethnic, or religious supremacy and to end inclusive and democratic practices. This extremism has taken the form of large-scale protests and rallies as well as violence against citizens and public officials (Glaun, 2021; Jones, 2018). All the while, access to participation in and knowledge of democratic processes remains varied across social groups. Persons of color and of low socioeconomic status remain largely disconnected from these processes due to

centuries-long struggles against systemic racism, classism, and its impact on our institutions (Putnam, 2015).

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly why these changes – both at the individual and societal levels – have occurred within the United States. The complexity and scale of this issue makes exacting a primary source a near impossible task. It is instead likely due to an intricate web of factors interacting with one another: rapid technological advancements, globalization, economic growth and decline. These trends have worked to undermine democratic principles in subtle yet significant ways. A propensity for and trust in democracy is not innate to the individual, but developed and acquired through experience (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017). Without it, democratic systems are susceptible to the influence of power and greed - two traits in contest with American principles of equality and fairness (Dewey, 1976).

There is a sense of urgency in addressing these trends; Thomas and Brower (2017) suggest that the years following the 2016 presidential election may have awakened the country to the "ongoing global challenges to democratic principles: freedom of the press and speech, the right to dissent, equal opportunity, respect for new populations, public reason, and the rule of law." The preservation of these principles is essential to the health and vitality of our communities, warranting a widespread response from various actors: government, businesses, academics, and, most importantly, everyday Americans. However, in order to preserve and to perfect our nation's commitment to these principles, individuals must know just *how* to interact with these democratic processes and in everyday community life. With that proper preparation, citizens can take on the most pressing issues of today to secure an equitable, safe, and sustainable future for generations to come.

A Future for Democracy

The present challenge we face is how to provide a populace so diverse with the knowledge and skill sets necessary for democratic engagement within an increasingly more complex society. Revitalizing civic education in K-12 schools has emerged as a potential antidote to this challenge, an approach that would have both a protective and promotive impact in our efforts to preserve and perfect the United States' democracy (Gould et al., 2011; Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Civic education prepares individuals for active, informed democratic engagement by building their knowledge of the history and principles of American government and by providing opportunities for the application of this knowledge to community life (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). Civic learning opportunities that seek not to indoctrinate youth with a particular ideology, but rather to instill a sense of personal agency, identity, and civic responsibility can inform a lifetime of civic engagement. Our nation's K-12 schools provide a uniquely accessible location for this learning to occur during youth's formative years.

The need for the improvement of civic education comes as a result of its long, often neglected, history in our schools. The subject began as a core force behind the formation of a public school system in the United States, as there was a need to educate the citizenry to uphold the principles and duties of a newly minted democracy. However, over the past century or so, civic education has slowly fallen to the wayside as laws and mandates across levels of government have prioritized STEM and English/Language Arts proficiencies, as well as career-readiness training (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017). Disinvestment into civic education has resulted in the widespread use of outdated, narrow curriculum that prioritizes the memorization of facts about the United States' government rather than the acquisition of

essential civic skills (Gould et al., 2011). It is important to note that civic education goes beyond just preparation for political engagement instead provides preparation for broader community engagement. Continued disinvestment in civics risks disenfranchising and disempowering youth in everyday community processes, further impacting their democratic engagement (Rogers et al., 2012).

Despite this often neglected history, civic education has tremendous capacity to positively impact both youth and democratic development within the United States. Traditional approaches to civic education have treated democracy as an external, self-generating structure that is a permanent fixture to American life (Dewey, 1976). However, as current events have exemplified, our democracy is not as impermeable as was once thought therefore providing clear evidence that this perspective cannot be supported. We must shift our perspective on democracy to adapt to the challenges that we currently face. John Dewey, a prominent 20th century American philosopher, proposed nearly a century ago that democracy should be viewed as an individual way of life, something personal to the individual's actions, behaviors, and attitudes (Dewey, 1976). Democracy is therefore a projection, an expression of citizens' habits and dispositions. When this perspective is adopted, democracy inherently becomes more accessible and more accountable to the individual as they are personally responsible for its longevity and stability. By adopting this perspective, schools can prepare the next generation of leaders to take accountability for the health and wellbeing of their communities - local, national, or global.

However, traditional approaches to civic education alone - ones that emphasize fact memorization and retention - are not enough to support this perspective on democracy. Instead, students must learn to think critically, reflect, and act on the knowledge acquired in schooling through active learning experiences (Dewey, 1976; Freire, 2000; hooks, 2013; LeCompte &

Blevins, 2015; Levinson, 2014). This can result in the development of skills, confidence, and commitments essential to effective and meaningful engagement within their communities. There has been a wealth of research into best practices in civic education that support this vision of democracy; state governments and schools across the country are beginning to take notice and action to adopt these evidence-based practices (CivXNow, n.d.; Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017; Gould et al., 2011). However, these high quality civic learning opportunities are generally only accessible to youth from historically privileged groups; youth of color and of lower socioeconomic status are less likely to receive these same opportunities. Without equitable access to these civic learning opportunities, the United States' principles of equality and fairness can never truly be realized.

Therefore, a key task before us is to not only increase the prevalence of these evidence-based practices in schools, but also ensure that they are equitably distributed amongst youth. It is imperative that federal, state, and local policy address the current state of civic education in order to effectively respond to these concerning social trends in the United States' political and social climate and, ultimately, preserve a functioning democracy. This paper seeks to address how curriculum and policy approaches to civic education can meet that goal.

Literature Review

Civic education has the potential to improve the troublesome political trends facing the nation today. Our nation's K-12 schools are uniquely positioned to impart on youth the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions for lifelong civic engagement through a commitment to integrating effective civic education across the curriculum. For this reason, Gould et al. (2011) has coined our nation's schools as the "guardians of democracy." This literature review will outline traditional and contemporary approaches to civic education, as well as their impact on

youth and democratic development. Additionally, this literature review will consider potential goals and approaches to social policies supporting the equitable civic learning across the United States.

What is a Citizen?

In order to fully understand civic education and its intended outcomes, it is important to first define the key concepts relating to civic and democratic life. The term "civics," though typically associated with formal political and democratic processes, refers more broadly to an individual's interactions with their communities around matters of shared interest or concern; though, this may include involvement with those formal processes. The term "civic development" then refers to the process through which an individual gains the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively engage with these communities (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Rogers et al., 2012). These definitions help contextualize civic education as a subject separate from any political ideology or party, but rather one that encompasses an individual's participation in their local, national, or global communities.

Another important, and perhaps more difficult, term to define is the term "citizen." At its most literal level, the term refers to an inhabitant of a defined locality. However, when used to consider an individual's interactions within that locality, the term can refer to concepts much more complex. The diversity of the American experience inherently makes this concept difficult to capture in a singular definition (Malin, 2011). Previous literature provides varying, yet similar, concepts of citizenship. Westheimer and Kahne (2002) define three different types of citizen: the personally-responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen. The personally-responsible citizen values honesty, integrity, hard work, often exhibiting their civic duty through volunteerism though they often fail to recognize the systemic issues causing the

need for service. The same goes for the participatory citizen, who is actively engaged with both social and democratic institutions as well as volunteer service. The justice-oriented citizen, on the other hand, critically assesses social, political, and economic structures to address systemic injustices through collective action. While these typologies represent very different notions of citizenship, they may in fact intersect: individuals who hold the values of a personally-responsible citizen can, at the same time, critically reflect on and organize around systemic social issues. Youth education strategies may therefore focus on the development of the qualities of all these definitions rather than just one.

Rubin (2007) takes a different approach to defining citizenship by outlining four typologies through which individuals present their civic identities: aware, empowered, complacent, and discouraged. These typologies represent a spectrum of individuals who take active and passive attitudes towards social problems, as well as those who feel or do not feel that the United States' democratic ideals match their own experiences. These typologies are represented in the figure below:

Students' experiences in relation to the learned ideals of the United States			
		CONGRUENCE	DISJUNCTURE
Students' attitudes toward civic participation	ACTIVE	Quadrant I: Aware *Change is needed for equity and fairness* These students — have experienced congruence recognize their privilege and are aware that disjunctures exist for others — have learned about injustice in school or from family, but not through personal experiences	Quadrant II: Empowered *Change is a personal and community necessity* These students — have experienced disjuncture — believe in their ability to use the system to bring about justice — know about civic rights and processes — have been encouraged to critique
	PASSIVE	Quadrant III: Complacent *No change is necessary, all is well in the U.S.* These students — have experienced congruence — support preservation of the status quo	Quadrant IV: Discouraged *No change is possible, life in the U.S. is unfair* These students — have experienced disjuncture — express deep cynicism about the

Figure 1

Rubin, B.C. (2007). There's still not justice: Youth civic identity development amid distinct school and community contexts.

Rubin's definition of citizenship extends that of Westheimer and Kahne (2002) as it considers *how* and *why* citizenship manifests differently in individuals based on their past experiences. Understanding these concepts helps consider how civic education strategies may require variation based on an individual's experiences, perspectives, and attitudes.

A final relevant, and more narrow, definition of citizenship comes from the *Civic Mission of Schools,* a report by the Carnegie Corporation and the Center for Information and Research in Civic Learning and Engagement (2003). The report's authors define a "competent and responsible citizen" as one who understands history, democratic processes, and root causes of current social problems. This type of citizen can think critically about and engage in constructive dialogue with others about issues of common concern. They participate in their communities by acting politically and organizing with others to affect political and social change by use of their knowledge and skills. Finally, they demonstrate morality by expressing concern for the rights and general welfare of others in their community. While this definition of citizenship is more specific than those of Westheimer and Kahne (2002) and Rubin (2007), it incorporates similar ideas of citizenship. Together, these accounts define citizenship without prescribing a specific identity or construct onto individuals who share very different experiences.

Furthermore, these definitions of citizenship help to conceptualize the meaning of the term "civic education." Civic education thus becomes a subject not only for the education of United States history and government, but also one in which students develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions for meaningful interaction with that government. This preparation is essential to a healthy and functioning democracy. Policymakers, educators, and civic professionals can use this understanding of civic education's contribution to our democracy in order to construct

effective policy and curricular solutions for the subject's equitable improvement across our nation's K-12 schools.

The Development of Civic Education in the United States

Civic education has long been recognized as essential to an American democracy (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017). Despite this, the subject's relevance within American education system has declined in recent decades. This section will follow civic education's path throughout history, with a particular focus on current curricular and policy approaches to the subject and their impact.

A Historic Foundation

The nation's founding leaders expressed a deep commitment to the ideals of a functioning democracy within the United States Constitution by committing to a form of self-government: a government for the people, by the people. Though not explicitly expressed in the document itself, its drafters, amongst many others, recognized the need for an educated citizenry to fulfill that promise. They acknowledged that inclinations towards a democratic system were not innate to the individual, but instead acquired through meaningful educational experiences (Gould et al., 2011; Quigley, 1999). Early writings from these leaders expressed the idea that liberty and learning are virtually inseparable. Thomas Jefferson, as an example, is quoted to have said that the surest way to prevent tyranny was "to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large" (Ziegler, 2008). George Washington and John Adams similarly noted that a truly free constitution could only be sustained by a citizenry that was educated on the rights and duties required of a democracy, as well as the distinctions between just and oppressive authority (Ziegler, 2008). However, it should be noted that these ideas were far from perfect in the sense that, at the time, they generally only applied to white male landowners. A truly just democracy

extends these ideas to *all* members of the community. These early connections between democracy and education provided some inspiration for the creation of a public education system, spurring state governments across the country to establish provisions for education within their constitutions; early adopters included Massachusetts and Connecticut. The civic mission of schools lay at the heart of many of these provisions (Gould et al., 2011; Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017).

By the early 1900s, almost every American child ages five to thirteen attended school regularly, where traditional methods of civic education were already in place (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2015). Extracurricular activities, such as student government and school newspapers, became regular spaces for youth to practice their civic skills and knowledge. Additionally, a set of three civic courses became standard across the nation: "Civics," "Problems of Democracy," and "American Government." "Civics" primarily discussed the roles that citizens play in local and state communities, while "Problems of Democracy" encouraged students to discuss the current issues and events of the day. The latter course generally required students to read and discuss the daily newspaper, engaging in critical reflection and thought about the current social issues (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2015). Finally, "American Government," focused on the structures and the function of the federal government (Gould et al., 2011). This final course looked similar to the civic education that youth receive today. Though civics courses were plentiful, they were often whitewashed and painted idealized, overly patriotic versions of American history (Mirel, 2002; Quigley, 1999).

These three courses remained common in American public schools until the 1960s, when their prevalence in states' core curriculums began to decline. While it was common in the early 20th century for students to take all three of these courses, students today generally only take

one-semester long course of American government. This course is more likely to focus on the academic study of the government, rather than a students' role within it (Gould et al., 2011; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2015). In regards to this matter, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), administered by the United States Department of Education, regularly assesses students' civic knowledge and access to civic education. Their 2018 survey of approximately 13,400 eighth-graders found that just 51% of students reported having a class that mainly focused on civics while 31% reported having a class with some civics. Just 22% of students reported having a teacher who was dedicated solely to civics instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Additionally, students are seeing less opportunities to engage in civic-oriented extracurricular activities than their peers over a century ago. This indicates that there is a significant lack of quantity and quality of civic education across school district and state lines.

It is difficult to know for sure why this shift in the relevance of civic education has occurred. Several events in the post-1960 era shook the nation's faith in government; assassinations of government leaders, controversial wars, and presidential scandals, to name a few. These events helped drive deep distrust in and cynicism of the government into Americans across the country (Gould et al., 2011). A shift in the culture of youth education is also a likely contributor. The American education system became increasingly more competitive in the late 20th century, shifting its focus from preparing youth for democratic citizenship to preparing youth for the ever competitive job market and college application process (LeCompte & Blevins, 2015). This is likely the result of a longstanding, often tenuous debate over the true purpose of education: democratic engagement or workforce development. In most recent cases, the latter opinion has won out. Education policy and curriculum thus has prioritized STEM and

English/Language Arts subjects and relegated civics to second class status (Gould et al., 2011). Finally, the partisan divide in our country's governance extends to how civics should be taught in schools. Liberal policy makers often argue that civics provides a narrow view of American traditions and values, while conservative policy makers argue that schools express a liberal bias towards social justice and activism (Gould et al., 2011; Quigley, 1999). The desire to make classrooms politically neutral often results in avoidance and, ultimately, limited investment into civics curriculum and policy (Mirel, 2002).

Current Approaches to Civic Education

History shows that an intersection of politics, policy, and instruction play a role in the development and implementation of civic education in K-12 classrooms. Policy interventions generally include a combination of local, state, and federal government laws and mandates. The decentralized nature of education policy, as well as the normal variations in curriculum and instruction, has resulted in varying approaches to civic education across school district and state lines. However, curricular and policy approaches to the subject have generally followed similar patterns throughout history. The following section will describe these trends and their impact on youth civic development.

Classroom Instruction. Curricular approaches to civic education have followed the same general patterns across the country and throughout history. As mentioned briefly above, youth today generally receive just one semester-long course in civics that is largely academic in nature, focused more on the study of politics and governmental structures than the role of the everyday citizen within their communities. Instruction most often takes the form of unengaging lectures and frequent assessments, where students are asked to memorize and retain factual information about the world around them without being asked to practice the skills required to be

a part of it (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2015; Quigley, 1999). This model of education can be compared to prominent Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire's notion of the "banking concept of education." This concept postulates that teachers simply deposit information unto students without actively engaging them in an active process of inquiry and reflection. Freire warns that this type of education can be harmful because it limits students' ability to develop a critical consciousness about the world around them (Freire, 2000). A critical mind about civic concepts is essential to effective engagement and dialogue about community issues, for participating in democratic processes, and to challenging existing norms that defy principles of equality and fairness.

Narrowed Curriculum. Civics instruction also tends to portray a narrow vision of American history, one inconsistent with the views and experiences of its diverse population. Common topics of study include history of wars, military battles, and American heroes, subjects that tend to portray a narrow and one-sided representation of American history. These subjects are often ridden with ideas of American exceptionalism and are disconnected from the reality students face in a modern day democracy (Mirel, 2002; Rogers et al., 2012). This poses several issues to the development of both youth and democracy in America. The perception of the world that individuals form early on in their life impacts how they view and interact with the world as an adult (Malin, 2011). This is not to say that youth are receiving the "wrong" picture of American history, but rather a selective and incomplete one.

This narrow portrayal of American history most significantly impacts low-income youth and youth of color in their short-term and long-term futures, as they are those most often underrepresented or misrepresented in traditional American narratives. In the short-term, this creates a cultural disconnect between the story of America that is presented within the classroom

and the reality of the America in which they live. Course content generally shows little relevance to their interests and experiences, therefore leaving them wholly unprepared to address the most pressing issues in their lives in effective and meaningful ways (Rogers et al., 2012). This disconnect can also leave individuals feeling discouraged and disenfranchised, potentially setting them up for a lifetime of disengagement and distrust (Malin, 2011). Students from historically privileged groups may also receive the false idea that racism and classism, amongst other issues, no longer exist in modern day society when in reality they still permeate through our institutions and culture. While American history is intricate and complex, it is important to understand that there are *multiple narratives* in American history. Favoring the history of the historically privileged group through curriculum and practice does nothing to reverse the long-standing power differentials amongst social groups; instead, it only perpetuates them (Anyon, 1980; Wang, 2006). Classrooms should instead work to effectively prepare students to live in and positively engage with the complexities of an increasingly multicultural, diverse, and interconnected world.

Policy Approaches. A combination of federal, state, and local laws and mandates have contributed to a public policy foundation for civic education in K-12 classrooms. The federal government has limited influence on this foundation as education is primarily considered as the responsibility of state and local governments. The 10th Amendment of the United States Constitution directs all "powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people" (National Constitution Center, n.d.). Education policy plays a role in determining which subjects take priority in schools, how these subjects are taught, and how funding is allocated to schools each

year. The following section will discuss the history of United States education policy in relation to civics, as well as patterns of modern day policy across state lines.

Federal Legislation. As noted above, the federal government has limited influence on education policy. Its primary responsibilities involve collecting and distributing information about current best teaching practices to states, spreading awareness about current challenges to education, and ensuring equity in education across the country. It additionally funds about 8% of elementary and secondary education around the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The federal government's first major foray into education policy came in 1965 with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) by President Lyndon B. Johnson. A civil rights law at its core, the act set out to ensure equitable access to education for all American children. The act provided grants to low-income students and schools, funded special education centers, and supplemented funding in state education agencies for the improvement of education quality. This act has been reauthorized periodically since 1965 and serves as the foundation for federal intervention in education reform (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Though the ESEA saw many changes its following decades, the first major reiteration of the act came in 2001 with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) by President George Bush. This reauthorization significantly expanded the role of the federal government in education with the goal of improving its declining educational outcomes. This was largely in response to the landmark report *A Nation at Risk* (1986), which warned that, without significant reform in educational practices, the average American would "effectively be disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life" (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The NCLB increased funding for students in high poverty schools, imposed

stricter guidelines for teaching (including the possession of bachelor's degree, certification/licensure to teach, and proven knowledge of their subject), and expanded options for school choice. However, the most consequential aspect of the NCLB was the inclusion of new accountability standards for schools. Under this provision, every state was required to set standards for grade-level achievement in math, science, and English/literacy, as well as accountability systems to measure their progress towards those standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Despite its well intentions, the provision inadvertently led to some states setting low academic standards and stifling innovation in teaching and learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The law's narrowed curriculum significantly impacted civic education; the exclusion of the subject from accountability systems contributed to its designation as a second class subject. The act showed little regard for social studies and civics, among other subjects, as the act favored career readiness over civic outcomes (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008).

After growing calls for reform, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 into law just a decade and a half after the NCLB's passage. This most recent iteration of the ESEA upholds many of the successful provisions of the NCLB: protections for disadvantaged and high-need students, assistance in fostering local evidence-based innovation in teaching, and continued focus on assessment and accountability. However, the act vastly expands the curriculum from what was defined in the NCLB by establishing seventeen subjects as essential to a "well-rounded education" - including civics and government (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). While the act still only requires the assessment of math, science, and English/literacy, it allows state education agencies to assess any of these seventeen subjects given the interests and needs of their population. Many states have taken advantage of this flexibility and have set into place statewide civics assessment of some form, described in further

detail below (Brennan, 2017). The law is too recent to assess its long-term impacts. However, while the ESSA is far from a coordinated effort to improve youth civic outcomes, the act has at the very least moved the conversation forward by allowing some flexibility for investment into the subject.

State/Local Legislation. State and local governments are primarily responsible for the creation and implementation of education policy. They develop academic curriculum and standards, determine requirements for graduation, and provide most funding for schools, amongst other responsibilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Given the flexibility of the ESSA, there are significant interpretations on how state and local governments address civic education across the country. Almost every state addresses the subject in some capacity, though statutes vary significantly in their expressed commitment to the civic mission of schools. Some states, such as Tennessee, establish the purpose and goals of civic education in their state law in addition to specific course requirements (Railey & Brennan, 2016). Their law states that "providing civic education and promoting good citizenship and understanding fundamental democratic principles should be core missions of Tennessee secondary schools" (Education Commission of the States, 2016b). This is just an example of how states can not only require specific courses and assessments, but also set a precedent for their schools to embrace a civic mission and responsibility in their operations. On the other end of the spectrum, states such as Hawaii and South Carolina simply establish a course requirement and allow their local districts to take control of its implementation (Education Commission of the States, 2016b; Railey & Brennan, 2016).

States also differ in their requirements for civics assessment and accountability. Most states have taken advantage of the flexibility granted by the ESSA and have started requiring assessments for civics. Most states simply require youth to pass a standardized test; many, such as Idaho and Arizona, use the United States citizenship exam, or an identical version of it, as their assessment tool (Education Commission of the States, 2016a; Railey & Brennan, 2016). Standardized tests are useful in the sense that they are reliable and invulnerable to an educator's bias. However, they are limited in their efficacy as they generally focus on a set of common facts rather than current events and issues, are unequally relevant across communities, and prioritize the memorization of facts rather than development of civic skills (Levine, 2012; Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2015). This tends to drive curriculum towards outdated facts and abstract concepts rather than the world's most pressing issues (Levine, 2012). A limited number of states require, or at least give the option to, students to complete project-based assessments, an arguably more equitable and effective measurement of civic development (Railey & Brennan, 2016). Massachusetts, for example, requires that eighth grade students must complete a non-partisan civics project that is designed to develop important civic skills such as critical thinking, media literacy, and constructive dialogue across differences (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2018). Additionally, most states do not tie their civics assessment to their greater educational accountability systems, meaning that the assessments are not being used for a greater purpose (Railey & Brennan, 2016).

A final area in which states differ in regards to policies supporting civic education is their commitment to a set of curriculum standards for the subject. Every state requires social studies in their core curriculum; though, most simply require basic instruction of the United States government and history. More robust state social studies standards outline civic learning goals,

prioritizing the development of the skills, attitudes, and dispositions through an "understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, responsible and effective civic participation, democratic beliefs and principles, political and legal processes, appreciation for diversity and commitment to the common good" (Railey & Brennan, 2016). Additionally, states differ on how their civics standards are developed; some are developed by state education agencies, some use local or national third party organizations (Railey & Brennan, 2016).

Impact. Traditional curricular and policy approaches to civic education have slowly marginalized the subject, carrying the American education system far away from its original intended civic mission. This does not go without consequence to both our youth and our democracy's development. This decline in the availability of civic learning opportunities may serve as a contributor to some of the concerning trends in the United States' current social and political climate, though there are too many confounding variables to prove this causation. The following section will describe how this decline has had a direct effect on youth's civic development.

Low Civic Knowledge. Despite the intended civic mission of schools, Americans exhibit remarkably low civic knowledge, an important measure of the civic health of the United States' democracy. A base level knowledge of American history and government, current issues, and a citizen's role in a democracy is essential to effective engagement within civic and social communities. Youth use their civic knowledge to express their skills, interests, and dispositions and to engage with and understand current events and issues. Research shows that youth that are less informed about their roles as citizens are less likely to be civically engaged, to vote, and to participate in their community's affairs (Gould et al., 2011). This opens the door for a narrow representation of interests in democratic and community processes, thus leading to even further

distrust, cynicism, and engagement with civic life, furthering cycles of inequity (Dewey, 1976; Gould et al., 2011).

An indicator of this trend comes from the United States Department of Education's NAEP Civics Assessment. In 2018, a majority of their approximately 13,4000 eighth-grade respondents were not proficient in civics; just 24% scored at or above proficient level while 73% scored at the basic level (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The assessment also revealed that civic knowledge vastly differed across social groups. White students with higher socioeconomic statuses, with no disability, and strong English language proficiency consistently reported higher levels of civic knowledge (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). These civic knowledge outcomes have remained consistent for decades so, while they do not indicate a sudden crisis, they *do* indicate a failing system. While these results are troublesome, it is important to consider the research methods used to capture this knowledge. This assessment prioritizes the retention of facts and figures rather than civic skills, arguably a more effective expression of civic knowledge. Additionally, they are subject to various confounding variables that can significantly alter the results including lack of motivation and subpar test-taking skills (Levine, 2012). Though not solely indicative of a failing civic education system, low levels of civic knowledge are important to consider when evaluating current approaches to the teaching of the subject.

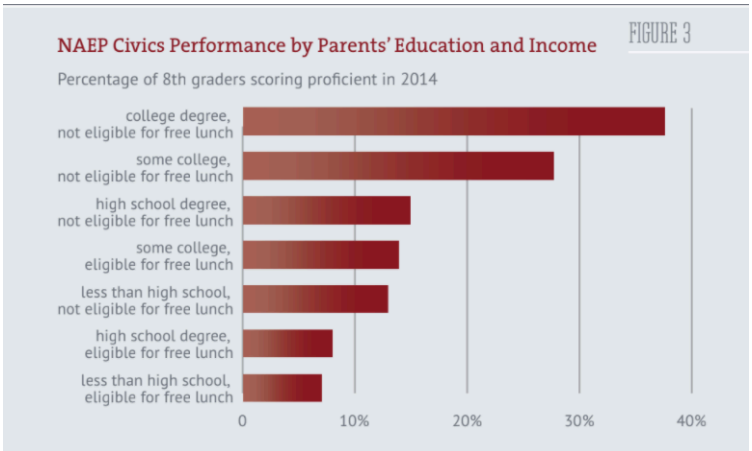

Figure 2

Levine, P., & Kawashima-Ginsberg, K. (2017). The republic is (still) at risk – and civics is part of the solution. Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University. https://www.civicnow.org/sites/default/files/resources/SummitWhitePaper.pdf

Low Civic Engagement. The nation is also experiencing historically low levels of civic engagement, as described in the above problem statement. Youth civic engagement is particularly important because individuals who are civically engaged in their adolescence tend to be civically engaged in their adulthood. Out-of-school civic engagement opportunities are important to youth development as they provide opportunities to apply civic knowledge to their lives as well as a space for personal growth and identity formation in their transition to adulthood (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). The most basic measure of youth civic engagement is voting levels in elections. Voting rates for individuals under twenty-five have steadily declined since 1972 (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017). The 2014 congressional midterms saw the lowest youth voter turnout in American history with just an estimated 19.9% of individuals ages 18-29 years old casting a ballot (Center for Information and Research in Civic Learning and Engagement, 2015). It is significant to note that the most recent Presidential Election in 2020 saw a dramatic uptick in youth voter turnout, with an estimated 52-56% of individuals ages 18-29 years casting ballots (Center for Information and Research in Civic Learning and Engagement, 2020). This significant rise in voting rates is likely due to the moment's highly contentious political and social climate. It is difficult to predict whether these levels will be sustained over time. However, this may indicate that many Americans are recognizing the need for an educated citizenry and therefore for a strong civic education system. This moment of renewed enthusiasm for the United States' democracy serves as an important opportunity for proponents of civic education reform to push their agenda forward.

Though youth voting levels are dismal, they cannot be considered the primary measure of an individual's involvement with their civic and social communities. If not for the fact that strict voter ID laws continue to disenfranchise millions of voters each year, other avenues of

engagement may be more telling indicators of a healthy democracy. Civic engagement is expressed when individuals participate in their communities through avenues such as belonging to a civic association, reading newspapers, working on a community project, conversing with neighbors, contacting elected officials, volunteering, and more (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Studies show that youth participate in these civic activities less frequently, with less knowledge, enthusiasm, and diversity of options, than ever before (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). However, it should be noted that means of civic engagement are rapidly changing with the advent of social media, amongst other technological advancements. Studies are showing that youth are engaging with their communities through online means now more than ever, indicating that the increased accessibility of technology may in fact have democratizing effects for the American public. Future research should consider whether or not civic engagement has truly declined in recent decades or if it has instead been expressed through alternative means.

Unequal Access to Democracy. Lastly, perhaps the most significant impact that traditional approaches to civic education has caused is the unequal access to democracy for youth across the United States. Inequitable distribution of civic learning opportunities creates gaps in civic development, and therefore access to knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to civic participation (Putnam, 2015). Low-income youth and youth of color are less likely to be exposed to civic education opportunities of any kind, even in schools of mixed demographics (Anyon, 1980; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Gould et al., 2011; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levine, 2012; Rogers et al., 2012). This civic opportunity gap extends past the school walls and into after school hours. Low-income students and students of color see less civic engagement and learning opportunities outside of school due to a variety of factors, including, but not limited to, a general

lack of awareness of these programs or lack of resources to access these programs (time, money, transportation, etc.) (Rogers et al., 2012). Additionally, these programs are generally staffed by adult volunteers, making it difficult for low-income communities with high numbers of children to properly staff these programs if at all (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Putnam, 2015).

This gap is consequential because it inherently disenfranchises and disempowers entire populations of American youth. Civic learning opportunities are generally viewed as pathways to better individual and community outcomes by low-income youth and youth of color (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). High quality civic education is more than just another school subject; it is connected to the civic health and longevity of the United States. It is often perceived by individuals as a way to break cycles of inequity and to make lasting social change. When some individuals have more access to those opportunities than others, it inherently provides some individuals with more access to democracy, undermining democratic ideals. This highlights that a key priority for civic education policy initiatives should not only focus on the general improvement of civic curriculum, but also the equitable distribution of civic learning opportunities to *all* youth.

The Capacity of Civic Education

This paper has focused on general trends in civic education in the United States thus far, most notably those that are insufficient in creating the civic outcomes needed for proper civic development and a healthy democracy. However, the recent decades have seen a wealth of research on best practices in civic education. These practices emphasize the development of civic agency, responsibility, and identity through active learning experiences. Several states across the United States have designed comprehensive policy approaches to support these evidence-based practices to great success. This section will shift the focus of this paper to the future of civic

education and to how equitable civic learning opportunities for youth can change the course of American history.

A Theoretical Foundation for Civic Education

Several theories central to education, social justice, and community engagement align with the civic mission of schools. These theories emphasize active learning experiences that break down power dynamics and build up social connectedness and responsibility within communities. These theories can be used to understand how school curriculum and policy can be used to improve the health of the American democracy.

John Dewey's Theory of Democracy. Dewey (1976), a prominent American philosopher, is widely known for his views on how democracy and education interact. He posits that democracy should be viewed as a personal way of life rather than an external, self-generating structure. He argues that rather than "thinking of our own dispositions and habits as accommodated to certain institutions, we have to learn to think of the latter as expressions, projects, and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes." When one adopts this perspective, democracy inherently becomes more accessible and more accountable to the individual as their actions become the foundation of a healthy democracy. While this may have been what our nation's founders had intended, our nation has drifted far from this vision. Education is central to this process as it becomes the means through which individuals learn how to embody democracy through their own actions and behaviors. Dewey suggests that constructive dialogue is central to both learning and democratic processes; speaking across differences to solve problems of shared concern is vital to a functioning democracy. This is relevant to civic education as it lays the foundation for how democracy must be taught in schools.

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy. Freire, a prominent Brazilian philosopher, is also known for his contributions to education and social justice. Freire (2000) argues against the traditional banking model of education in which teachers simply deposit information unto their students, as described in the "Current Approaches" section above. He suggests a shift away from this model towards a problem-solving and a co-intentional one, which emphasizes student voice and engagement in making choices about their education. Similar to Dewey, Freire's critical pedagogy emphasizes constructive dialogue in the learning process. However, his argument extends Dewey's in the sense that he believes that power dynamics between students and teachers should be intentionally deconstructed and that students and teachers should work to co-create knowledge with one another. This critical pedagogy, also known as liberatory pedagogy, was originally applied to the oppressed populations of his home country Brazil and was meant as a way for these groups to be liberated from their oppression. Due to this fact, many argue that it therefore cannot be applied to other contexts. However, his use of the general term "oppressed" makes the pedagogy inherently transferable, even to developed nations, such as the United States, with a long history of oppression and injustice. This pedagogy is relevant to civic education as it can help shift the traditional civics curriculum towards one that prioritizes active learning experiences and the development student voice and agency.

bell hooks' Democratic Education. bell hooks, a prominent American scholar and activist, offers additional views on democratic education that are essential to thinking about civic learning. hooks (2013) shares similar views to both Dewey and Freire in the sense that she views democracy and education as embodied experiences and sees dialogue as a central means through which this occurs. However, she expands their ideas by arguing that education should take place outside of traditional, oppressive educational structures and into everyday life. This is relevant to

civic education as civic learning must be a constant, lifelong process in order to be relevant to current issues and dialogue. Opportunities for lifelong learning occur through an individual's involvement in community activities and organizations. Given that opportunities for youth civic engagement are largely declining, it is important that schools respond adequately with the creation of new, accessible opportunities (Putnam, 1995).

McMillan and Chavis' Sense of Community. The final theory that this paper will connect to civic learning is McMillian and Chavis' Sense of Community. McMillan and Chavis (1986) define a sense of a community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together." These feelings can be applied to any group of people in any context. A sense of community is relevant to civic education in the sense that it is at its core teaching youth to be part of their local, national, and global communities (amongst many others). Civic education can prepare youth to interact with these communities, across differences and for the common good, on a smaller scale within the classroom. Ultimately, this can lead to a greater sense of civic responsibility to those around them and willingness to contribute positively for its development.

Civic Education as a Transformative Experience

These four theories, as well as our notions of citizenship, enhance our understanding of what civic education should hope to accomplish. Civic learning opportunities may instill in youth a sense of civic responsibility, develop their civic identities, and increase their sense of agency as individuals so as to enhance their participation in democratic and civic processes. Policies at the federal, state, and local level must be created to support these goals both inside and outside of the classroom. This section will describe each of these goals in further detail.

Civic Education Can Build Civic Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions. These civic learning outcomes are those most commonly addressed in K-12 schools. Building a fundamental understanding of our government, its history, and its basic processes are essential to almost all other forms of civic engagement (Gould et al., 2011). It allows individuals to meaningfully engage with communities based on their own thoughts and opinions while at the same time protecting against manipulation from outside interests (Dewey, 1976). Additionally, high quality civic education provides opportunities for students to practice civic skills, such as public speaking skills, listening to and collaborating with others, and the ability to gather and think critically about information (Gould et al., 2011). When students practice this in a safe space, such as a classroom, they are more likely to build confidence in their ability to lead, recognize the value of community involvement, and develop an affinity towards future civic participation (Bardwell, 2011).

Civic Education Can Build Civic Identities. Civic learning opportunities can also provide a space for youth to begin building their civic identities, or their sense of connection to and participation within their community (Rubin, 2007). These identities form based on individuals' background and life experiences, as well as the geographical and chronological environment that they are situated in (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Civic identity formation in adolescence is aided within school hours, as classrooms provide spaces for students of different backgrounds to come together to work towards and discuss common goals and events. Research shows that strong civic identities formed in young adulthood are highly predictive of an individual's level and form of civic engagement later in life (Beaumont & Battistoni, 2006; Flanagan & Levine, 2010). The marker for a mature civic identity is when an individual feels connected to others, feels that they can make a difference in their communities, and feels

passionate about social issues of interest (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Though not explicitly so, these are in line with the democratic ideals set forth by the Constitution. However, it is important to note that educators should not be advocating for the creation of a singular, American identity. Rather, educators should be guiding youth in finding inspiration and strength in their sense of self in relation to their communities so that they can work with others for common interests (Malin, 2011).

Civic Education Can Build Civic Responsibility. Civic learning opportunities may also build youth's sense of community and sense of responsibility to others in their community. A sense of community is essential to a positive school environment as it creates a place where students feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe. In terms of civic education, a positive school climate creates a space for students to earn respect and to think of themselves as active members of their school community (Gould et al., 2011; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Schools uniquely bring diverse individuals together. Civic educators can teach students how to listen to and ask questions of others different from themselves (Dewey, 1976; Levinson, 2012). Structured classroom settings provide a safe environment for students to have reflective discussions and moderated debates with those across differences, something that is becoming increasingly less common in communities (Dewey, 1976; hooks, 2013; Freire, 2000; Malin, 2011; Putnam, 2015). Additionally, they can teach students to put their own thoughts into words in ways respectful of others. They can even learn how to challenge their own assumptions (Levinson, 2012). While it is unrealistic to believe that these structured conversations will resolve all social issues, they at the very least are exposed to different sets of opinions and learn how to interact with these differences effectively.

Civic Education Can Build Agency. The final, though certainly not last, goal of civic education that will be discussed within the context of this paper is its ability to build a sense of civic agency in youth. This term, similar to one's external political efficacy, refers to the feeling that one's actions, individual or in a group context, makes a real difference in the world (Bernstein, 2008; Gould et al., 2011). High quality civic learning opportunities allow students to practice their skills and apply their knowledge in their school functions or in their communities (hooks, 2013; Monkman & Proweller, 2016). When these accomplishments are affirmed as having value by their teachers or classmates, students see themselves as valuable to the community and therefore gain confidence in their ability to deal with issues both inside and outside of the classroom as they arise (Levinson, 2014).

A New Way Forward for Civic Education

A thorough understanding of civic education's history, as well as its intersection with theory, paves the way for future investment in the subject. A wealth of research regarding best practices in civic learning has emerged in the recent decades, inspiring new curricular and policy approaches to the subject. Curricular and policy practice informed by this research has shown to be effective in achieving positive civic learning outcomes in youth, including informed engagement, civic identity, civic responsibility, and agency. However, these high quality learning opportunities are not yet equitably distributed to youth across district, states, and demographic divides. This final section of the literature review will discuss this new wave of research on civic learning practices as well as examples of state and local policies that have supported this research.

Curricular Approaches

Research into best curricular approaches in civic education emphasizes a shift away from "old civics," centered around static learning from a textbook, to "new civics," which involves dynamic, active experiential learning opportunities with student-centric issues. "New civics" allows students to break free of their traditional role as passive learners into a new one: the action-oriented, informed citizen (Dewey, 1976; hooks, 2013; Freire, 2000; LeCompte & Blevins, 2015). While the following sections will provide an overview of these approaches, it is important to note that these are standard descriptions and require schools' flexibility based on student and community needs (Levine, 2012).

Six Proven Practices for Civic Education. Perhaps the most widely cited research into best practices in civic learning comes from a collaborative group of civic professionals associated with the Carnegie Foundation and the Center for Information and Research in Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University. This organization has published several landmark reports that synthesize decades of research into the subject and ultimately establish six proven practices for high quality civic education (Gould et al., 2011; Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017). These six proven practices have been studied for their impact on students' civic learning and engagement - and show positive results (Bennion & Laughlin, 2018).

Classroom Instruction. The first proven practice, classroom instruction, is most similar to traditional approaches in civic education practice and can serve as an important foundation for the remaining practices. Studies show that civic-specific courses in school boosts civic knowledge (Gould et al., 2011). Not only does the structure of classroom instruction matter, but so does the content. Formal instruction of the United States' government, history, and democracy

has been shown to increase civic knowledge and long-term civic engagement (Gould et al., 2011). However, the instruction must be inclusive of America's diverse population or else it can leave students feeling disenfranchised and disempowered -- the opposite of what is intended (Rogers et al., 2012). Additionally, civics must be taught in ways that engage students or educators risk alienating students from democratic processes and politics. Student-led projects that require the application of course content community processes have shown to be effective in enhancing civic skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Bardwell, 2011; Freire, 2000; Gould et al., 2011). Classroom instruction must be supplemented by the remaining six proven practices so as to accomplish this task.

Discussion of Current Events and Controversial Issues. Classroom discussion of current events and controversial issues is also an effective civic learning practice. Studies from across the globe have concluded that when students feel they can speak openly in their classroom, they are more likely to hold and practice democratic values both inside and outside of school due to their increased civic awareness and knowledge (Latimer & Hempson, 2012; Levinson, 2012) These discussions provide important places for students to practice their civic skills, such as communicating across differences and using their civic knowledge for a purpose (Dewey, 1976; Levinson, 2012). Educators can effectively discuss current events and controversial issues by selecting issues that are important to students, linking discussions to the curriculum, and by setting firm ground rules that promote inclusive, civil, and respectful dialogue. Additionally, educators must be sure to provide students with factual information that represents a range of perspectives before these conversations so as to allow students to create their own opinions on the matter before discussing them (Gould et al., 2011).

It should be noted that this practice is understandably controversial given the hyperpolarized nature of the United States' political culture. Most educators find it safer to avoid difficult conversations about politically divisive issues and ask students to instead complete politically-neutral tasks, such as studying formal government institutions and history (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2015; Mirel, 2002). This task becomes more difficult when working with a set of diverse students because of power dynamics between students, and even teachers (Levinson, 2012; Malin, 2011). However, avoiding these conversations ultimately disserves students as it shelters them from the inherent differences involved in democratic processes and fails to prepare them for the complexity of those difficult conversations. Schools are well positioned to prepare students for these conversations as they are moderated by professionals and can be reflected on as part of the learning experience (Gould et al., 2011).

Service-Learning. Service-learning, the third proven practice identified by CIRCLE, is a form of action-oriented civic education that extends academic learning past the walls of the classroom. Service-learning is a teaching and learning pedagogy that intentionally links academic curriculum with community service experiences. Students are tasked with completing a community service project while critically reflecting on the experience in the classroom. Service-learning allows students to apply their learning to the "real world", address issues that matter to them, and generally enhance their academic learning and growth through the process (Boyte, 1991; Gould et al., 2011; hooks, 2013). However, a common problem with some service-learning initiatives is that they may unintentionally reinforce power imbalances within communities, as students may host "uninformed and potentially disrespectful notions about their relative privilege and the community members' marginal status" (Bell et al., 2007). Students generally have little opportunity to critically reflect on these power dynamics of race, gender, and class and to

practice the skills to combat them, including conflict resolution and collective action (Boyte, 1991). In order for service-learning to be effective, students must be educated on the systemic issues that brought the need for their service, aware of their own implicit biases, and aware of their impact on the community (Gould et. al, 2011). Additionally, it must be mutually beneficial to both students and the community; perhaps, garnering community input in the service-learning process would help this (Bell et al., 2007). This again exemplifies how civic learning practices are most effective when worked in combination with one another.

Extracurricular Activities. Extracurricular activities provide spaces for students to apply civic knowledge and skills meaningfully outside of their normal class time. Studies show that individuals who participate in extracurricular activities in high school are more likely to be civically engaged into adulthood (Gould et al., 2011). These spaces are more important than ever as membership and accessibility to civic organizations outside of school is in decline (Putnam, 1995). Extracurricular activities are more accessible to students given the fact that they are generally located in schools, in or around school hours, and cost little to no money. These activities are particularly effective in influencing youth's civic development when they allow students to lead alongside their peers towards issues of common concern. They allow students to be key actors in the dialogue and decision-making processes of the group. These activities can take the form of student councils, advocacy groups, and more. Too often do these activities rely on adults to establish norms, processes, and goals and provide little space for students to see themselves as valuable contributors to the experience. Moving forward, extracurricular activities must be designed with the intent to break down these traditional power dynamics (Freire, 2000; Monkman & Proweller, 2016; Rogers et al., 2012).

Student Participation in School Governance. Student participation in school governance has been shown to have a positive effect on civic learning outcomes. Participation in school governance could take place in the form of extracurricular activities, as exemplified by the paragraph above. Studies show that when students have more opportunities to make decisions about their classroom experiences, they are more likely to become and stay civically engaged (Gould et al., 2011). This is likely due to the fact that students feel the impact that school has on their lives and generally care about what decisions are made for them. This provides a perfect opportunity to provide students with the opportunity to practice organizing around issues of shared concern in a facilitated environment (Dewey, 1976; Gould et al., 2011). Additionally, it serves to break down traditional power dynamics within school structures that often perpetuate cycles of inequity and oppression (Freire, 2000).

Simulations of Democratic Processes. The final practice that CIRCLE proposes as part of their six proven practices for civic education relates to the inclusion of simulations of democratic processes within classrooms. Research shows that these activities can be effective in influencing positive civic outcomes, such as a student's ability to think critically about political information, their ability to work with others, and their interest in the subject matter (Gould et al., 2011; Bernstein, 2008). Simulations provide a dynamic way for students to actively co-create knowledge with one another, rather than passively receive information through lectures (Bernstein, 2008; Freire, 2000). Simulations can take place through classroom debates, extracurricular activities, and role playing exercises in which students imitate real life systems and processes. Within the past decade, there has been a significant expansion and push for the use of online simulation games to mimic real life democratic processes. One such platform is iCivics, created by former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. The platform hosts

games for students to practice their civic skills while working in group settings. iCivics, in addition to other video game simulations, have shown to be effective in improving civic learning outcomes. There is also some indication that video games are more equitably distributed across race and class divides than any other form of civic instruction given their highly accessible nature (Blevins et al., 2014). This may serve as an important way for students living in "civic deserts," or areas where there is little opportunity for political and civic engagement in civic organizations, to apply their learning to real world processes (Daley, 2017).

Emerging Practices. In addition to these above proven practices, emerging research is showing several additional practices may be influential in improving youth civic learning. These methods similarly emphasize action-oriented civics. However, they also consider the growing number of unique 21st century competencies, such as media literacy, that students will require for active citizenship. The nature of our social and political climate is rapidly changing, and youth must have the ability to adapt to these complexities.

Action Civics. Action civics helps students become informed and empowered citizens by "engaging in a cycle of research, action, and reflection about problems they care about personally while learning about deeper principles of effective civic and especially political action" (Levinson, 2014). Action civics is similar in principle to service-learning in that it requires students to complete a project in their community while at the same time learning and reflecting on that experience. However, action civics takes a staunch social justice orientation in that it requires students to study and challenge systemic inequities, whereas service-learning does not (Levinson, 2014). This method has been shown to increase personal and political efficacy, communication and collaboration skills, sense of civic responsibility, and levels of civic engagement in youth who participate (Levinson, 2014).

Media Literacy Education. Another significant emerging method in civic education is the incorporation of media literacy instruction into civics curriculum. Media literacy refers to the ability to think critically about media, to responsibly create media, and to understand media's role in today's society (Center for Media Literacy, n.d.). This skill is becoming increasingly more important as individuals are interacting with media more than ever before with the advent of social media and expanded access to Internet and television. This new media-centric environment has had both beneficial and detrimental impacts on the United States' democracy. Political action and community organizing is largely taking place online, increasing an individual's accessibility to activities impacting democratic processes (Bowyer & Kahne, 2020). However, at the same time, these platforms have provided space for the rapid spread of disinformation and misinformation about democratic processes to the masses. Individuals must be able to decipher the truth in what they are consuming, and be aware of the consequences of their own public mistruths. Media literacy education can enhance individuals' ability to critically interact with media sources.

Key Takeaways. In total, these curricular practices provide key opportunities for youth to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential to civic involvement. Research concludes that active, informed, and responsible community engagement during an individual's formative years can shape positive interaction with democratic and civic processes later in life. These outcomes are not as likely shared with those who do not have that same access to high quality civic learning opportunities. Thus, our ability to preserve and protect the American democracy from current social ills rests in how we are able to prepare individuals to engage with it.

Policy Approaches

Public policy must be used to increase the prevalence of these high impact curriculum practices to citizens across the United States. The goal of these policies should additionally allow for continued innovation in civic learning practices and support their equitable distribution across students of all backgrounds. As of now, there are several states that have committed themselves to these goals by use of laws and mandates. The following section will consider these examples in relation to the curricular approaches described in the section above. This section focuses solely on state civic education policies as they serve as the bridge between federal and local government; they connect and inform decisions made at either level.

Examples. Florida and Maryland, amongst several other states, have made significant efforts to improve civic education in their classrooms.

***Florida*.** In 2010, Florida legislators signed into law the Sandra Day O'Connor Civic Education Act as an attempt to improve levels of civic engagement amongst its citizens. The legislation mandates civic instruction beginning in elementary school, requires a high-stakes civics test in middle school and high school, and allocates funds to curriculum development, assessment analysis, and professional development. These measures have proven effective; since its implementation, average test scores have risen significantly for Florida students. Most students receive the first of the six proven practices (classroom instruction), but exposure to the remaining practices vary based on school district. Those who do receive those practices exhibit higher levels of civic knowledge and engagement than their peers who do not. Professional development for teachers has contributed to the law's success; those who participate see significantly higher student success rates than those who do not (CivXNow, n.d.). However, the work to improve civic education in Florida continues. In 2019, the Florida government began

implementing an updated civic literacy test for high school students (Florida Department of Education, n.d.a.). Additionally, the legislature passed a law requiring a comprehensive review of civic education course standards, the culmination of which would be a series of updated recommendations and instructional materials (Florida Department of Education, n.d.b.).

This case proves that a comprehensive package of civics-related laws *can* make an impact on youth civic learning outcomes. Florida's multiple measures to improve civics additionally show that not all changes to civic education policy have to occur immediately, but rather in a series of incremental steps as more funds and information becomes available. Lastly, the continued variation in access to best curricular practices in civic education across Florida reiterates the need to infuse equity into each policy decision. Florida's case provides several lessons for policy makers to consider in the future as they seek to improve civics in their own localities.

Maryland. Maryland has comparatively robust civic education standards. The state requires each high school student to earn three credits related to civic education (U.S. History, World History, and Local, State, National Government) and to pass a civics assessment in either a standardized test or project-based format. Beginning in 2020, middle school students are required to pass a civics assessment as well. This assessment is created by the state; however, local districts have control over all other aspects of curriculum with guidance from their state education agency. Additionally, Maryland is amongst the few states in the country that requires high school students to complete a number of community service hours by the time they graduate. The state continually updates their guidance for local districts; in 2015, the state revised their standards to reflect the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework (CivXNow, n.d.). Maryland's standards show comparatively more adherence to the six proven practices in its

education policy than Florida, with its strong commitment to both classroom instruction and experiential education clearly defined in legislation. The state has seen success in initiatives. Since implementing its civic assessment, test scores have steadily increased. As of 2018, Maryland ranked 7th nationally in voting rates amongst 18 to 24 year olds and 11th nationally in volunteerism rates (Center for American Progress, 2018). However, Maryland still faces similar challenges to Florida in that there are significant civic learning achievement gaps across demographics and school district lines.

Maryland's success shows that states can codify these best practices in civic education into law while still providing significant freedom to local governments and schools to fit the needs of their communities. Their laws encourage experiential learning through volunteerism and prioritize civic skills through project-based assessments. Maryland's case signals a shift away from traditional policy approaches to those more in line with the recent innovation in civic education practices.

Other Notable State Efforts. Other states have taken notable strides towards improving civic education in their schools: California, Illinois, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. These states' efforts share common threads. States with comparatively more robust civic standards:

- Rely on a collaborative coalition of state education agencies, school districts, and nonprofit organizations to develop their civic education policies.
- Develop comprehensive state standards that outline curriculum and offer suggestions for sequence and mode of instruction.
- Codify experiential learning opportunities by requiring volunteerism and project-based assessments for graduation.
- Provide ample professional opportunities for educators.

- Develop systems of assessment and accountability.

Finally, these states continuously strive for excellence. These states recognize that a single intervention will not entirely improve civic education, but rather a series of interventions (CivXNow, n.d.; Gould et al., 2011; Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2015). However, despite these comparatively robust approaches, there are gaps in civic learning outcomes between students who are from historically privileged groups and those who are not. This is likely due to the broader, systemic inequities at work within the American education system as whole, indicating the need for larger structural reform. Regardless, policy makers must make every effort to infuse equity into civic education so as to improve the state of our democracy today and in the future.

Recommendations

The literature reviewed in the section above is clear: civic education, when done well, is vital to the health of our communities. The need for the equitable distribution of high quality civic education has never been greater, as the United States' increasingly more turbulent civic culture threatens the journey towards an ever more equal democracy. In our efforts to combat these rising tides of social problems, it is wise to root our efforts in evidence-based practices. The literature surrounding this subject offers a clear set of proven curricular and policy approaches that can improve civic outcomes in youth. Ultimately, improving civic knowledge, trust, and informed participation may reverse these concerning trends that threaten the United States' democracy. Thus, civic education policy should aim to support the utilization of these practices while at the same time allowing for innovation to flourish and for curriculum to adapt to the diverse and changing needs of our democracy.

Just as there is not one curricular approach that can fix civic education, there is not one policy approach at one level of government that can do so as well. Providing equitable access to high quality civic education must be a collaborative effort undertaken by policymakers and professionals across various levels of government. While this issue is pressing, it is important to note that this process may take time and may need to be undertaken in a series of incremental steps spanning federal, state, and local government reforms. Additionally, these recommendations represent the culmination of the existing literature on the subject *at this point in time*. As more states implement civic education reforms, and as the nature of our democracy continues to change, more data will become available about the most effective measures and practices for youth civics instruction. Policy makers must be flexible enough to understand the dynamic nature of this issue. The remainder of this section will provide recommendations for what policies federal, state, and local governments can implement to improve equitable access to high quality civic education, and ultimately our democracy, to youth.

Federal-Level Intervention

As noted in the literature review, the federal government has limited jurisdiction over education policy as it is primarily a state and local issue. Thus, we have limited examples of what a strong, positive federal intervention on civic education may look like. However, that is not to say that the federal government has no impact on civic education. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 exemplified that the federal government's exclusion of civics from accountability, assessment, and broader reform efforts relegated the subject to second-class standing, impacting the frequency and quality of civics instruction across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 brought civic education back into the conversation with its inclusion in the

seventeen subjects for a well-rounded education (Brennan, 2017). However, this action alone is not enough to address the need for civic education to achieve civic equity.

Thus, the primary function of a federal-level intervention on civic education must be to restore and to promote the civic mission of schools through the means available. This must include increasing collaboration between states, incentivizing the use of evidence-based practices in classroom instruction and state policy, and fostering local innovation responsive to the needs of individual communities. The following table will provide an overview of the specific action steps federal policymakers and professionals can take on this matter, and the function that these steps will play in improving access to high quality civic education.

Federal-Level Intervention	
Action	***Function***
Establish the civic mission of schools in the U.S. Department of Education's mission statement.	Establishes civic education as a vital component to youth education.
Establish a commission on civic education made up of policymakers, academics, professionals, teachers, and students.	Facilitates collaboration between states and other actors Creates opportunities for continual improvement in civic education curricular and policy practices. Prioritizes the civic mission schools.
Develop nationwide civic standards through civics curriculum frameworks.	Provides either guidance or a definitive framework to ease states' civic education reform efforts. Collects and distributes current evidence-based practices in high quality civic education.

Establish grant programs that incentivize states, schools, and educators to implement evidence-based practices and promising emerging practices.	Incentivizes states to implement civic education reform. Fosters local innovation in civic education practices that is responsive to community needs.
Encourage states to assess civics and include civics in their accountability systems.	Prioritizes civic learning outcomes as essential to student learning.

State-Level Intervention

Historically, state policymakers and state education agencies have had the most important role in creating the policies that increase the utilization of and access to high quality civic education. They are uniquely positioned to create policies that address specific curricular needs that, at the same time, apply across a broad range of constituencies. This position reveals the function of a state-level intervention for civic education: to provide the structure in which high quality civic education in local schools can flourish. These policies require the support of both federal and local governments. The following table will provide an overview of the specific actions that state policymakers and state education agencies can take to influence the utilization of and access to high quality civic education in their state.

State-Level Intervention	
Action	***Function***
Establish the civic mission of schools and civic learning goals into law through a state statute.	Establishes civic education as a vital component to youth education.
Adopt a curricular framework that emphasizes evidence-based practices in high quality civic education. Update the framework every six to seven years.	Provides guidance to educators about the utilization of high quality civic education practices within the classroom.

Mandate civic instruction beginning in elementary school.	Ensures that civics instruction occurs as youth develop throughout their schooling.
Require at least two credits of dedicated civics instruction at the high school level as a condition of graduation.	Ensures that youth receive dedicated civic instruction before graduation.
Require a project-based civics assessment in middle school and/or high school as a condition for graduation.	Measures student, educator, and school district progress in meeting civic outcomes in a way that emphasizes the development of civic skills rather than the retention of facts.
Hold schools accountable in meeting civic learning outcomes by including civics assessments in existing accountability systems.	Measures school districts' progress in implementing high quality civic education. Informs future policy reform and budget allocation.
Recommend that districts include community service opportunities within their curricula.	Establishes community engagement as a vital part of youth education.
Establish a statewide Youth Council in which youth regularly participate in the governing process.	Provides opportunities for youth to affect real change in their communities by use of their newly acquired civic skills and knowledge. Reiterates state support for youth civic engagement.
Allocate funds annually to the ongoing professional development of educators in civics instruction.	Ensures that educators are up-to-date on existing and emerging practices for high quality civics instruction.
Allocate funds annually to additionally support underperforming districts.	Improves efforts to provide equitable access to high quality civics instruction across district lines.

As noted in the literature review, there are several states that have made meaningful steps to increasing the utilization of and access to high quality civic education through public policy. In fact, most states *do* address civic education in some capacity. However, most states currently offer a sample of the action steps outlined above rather than the full set. This is important to note because, based on prior experiences, we know that the comprehensiveness of civic education reform truly matters. For example, Florida's inclusion of professional development for teachers,

high-stakes civics tests, *and* mandated civics instruction in its policy reform efforts have all improved civic outcomes in recent years (CivXNow, n.d.). Each measure builds off of one another in order to create an environment conducive to the utilization of high quality civic education across school districts. Without just one or two of these action steps, this relationship between factors may be altered. Thus, it is recommended that the action steps outlined above are to be taken as a whole rather than piecemeal.

Local-Level Intervention

Finally, local policymakers and school districts play a significant role in the inclusion of high quality of civic education in K-12 classrooms. These entities are "closest" to the community in the sense that their policies are arguably those most noticeable in the everyday lives of individuals. The state or federal government can mandate or recommend certain practices, but it is ultimately up to the school districts and the administrators and educators within it to ensure their implementation. Therefore, the function of local policymakers in this matter is to ensure the implementation of these evidence-based practices for high quality civic education within the parameters that their state governments have provided them. This final table will provide an overview of the action steps that local policymakers can take to ensure the utilization of and access to high quality civic education.

Local-Level Intervention	
Action	***Function***
Include the civic mission of schools in the school district's mission statement.	Establishes civic education as a vital component to youth education.
Ensure the implementation of evidence-based practices for high quality civic education across the K-12 curriculum.	Provides youth with meaningful and effective civics instruction throughout their schooling.

Ensure that curriculum content is reflective of the community's needs.	Promotes community engagement as a vital component to youth education.
Provide opportunities for student participation in school governance.	Provides opportunities for students to apply their civic knowledge, skills, and passion in a meaningful and relevant avenue.
Establish a local Youth Council in which youth regularly participate in the governing process.	Provides opportunities for youth to affect real change in their communities by use of their newly acquired civic skills and knowledge. Reiterates public support for youth civic engagement.
Encourage access to and participation in extracurricular activities.	Provides opportunities for students to apply their civic knowledge, skills, and passion in a meaningful and relevant avenue.
Support the ongoing professional development of educators in civics instruction.	Ensures that educators are up-to-date on existing and emerging practices for high quality civics instruction.
Establish partnerships with local community organizations, colleges and universities, government, and other institutions.	Promotes community engagement as a vital component to youth education.

While these action steps may be taken without a broader state-level intervention, they will be better supported if state policy makers similarly take on this issue. It may even be that local districts across the country have already created environments conducive to high quality civic education. However, given the fact that the inclusion of these tailored civic learning practices is not incorporated across district lines, their effectiveness in achieving civic equity is limited. As noted in the literature review above, students that live in districts with a higher socioeconomic makeup are already more likely to receive high quality civic education than those who do not (Gould et al., 2011; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Rogers et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important to reiterate the importance of a state-level intervention to ensure that access to this subject, and therefore our democracy, is equitable.

Timeline of Implementation

The comprehensive nature of this educational reform will undoubtedly take some time. However, as noted at the start of this paper, the need for broad-based civic education reform is imperative to the health of our democracy. Therefore, it is suggested that the process begins as soon as possible. The action steps outlined above do not have to be taken sequentially. Instead, they can occur simultaneously as a way to make reform efforts more efficient. However, it is suggested that there is some degree of collaboration between local, state, and federal governments to ensure the swiftness and effectiveness of their creation and implementation. The creation of a federal commission on civic education, suggested in tables above, may help facilitate this collaboration amongst state and local governments. With this commission at work, it is possible that a federal-level intervention can be in force within two to three years, a state-level intervention within two years, and a local-level intervention within one year. Periodic updates to these reforms should occur every six to seven years to ensure that they are responsive to the quickly changing nature of our society while still allowing time to implement these changes and to measure progress.

Challenges to Implementation

The timeline above takes into account the expected challenges that may arise when attempting to develop and implement civic education policy across levels of government. Civic education reform is typically an issue that receives bipartisan support. However, there are certain challenges that typically occur when discussing civic education reform. Conservatives often argue that academic institutions show a liberal bias towards social justice and activism while liberals argue that civics often offers a narrow view of American traditions and values (Gould et al., 2011). While these are valid perspectives, civic education can remain ideologically neutral by

focusing on the four civic outcomes outlined in the literature review above: foundation of civic knowledge, the formation of their own civic identity, a sense of civic responsibility, and a feeling of civic agency. Additionally, finding the budget for such interventions are often the most pertinent concerns. These concerns can be countered with technical arguments: these reforms can be supported by a shift within the existing budget rather than the creation of new taxes. However, the moral argument may ultimately be the most compelling one. The urgency to address this matter truly depends on whether individuals believe in the need for an educated citizenry for the health of our democracy.

Conclusion

The events that occurred at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021 represent a grim day in America's history. History will not forget the day that the hallmark of democracy – free and fair elections – was interrupted with violence incited by a sitting president. Though the day marked the culmination of many anti-democratic trends in the United States' social and political culture, it can also mark their turning point. There can be a different future for America. Democratic principles of equality and fairness under the law can reign unimpeded and improved from its inconsistent past. This future can be created when each citizen has the knowledge, ability, and agency to constructively engage with their communities.

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