

FOUR YEARS AFTER THE CIVIC MISSION OF SCHOOLS REPORT: A SUMMARY OF THE LATEST CIRCLE RESEARCH ON SCHOOL-BASED CIVIC LEARNING

In February of 2003, Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE issued a major report on the state of K-12 civic education entitled *The Civic Mission of Schools* (CMS). The report drew upon the best research from several disciplines and offered “six promising approaches” for effectively providing civic education. After the publication of the CMS report, CIRCLE and Carnegie helped to organize the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, an advocacy effort. Composed of more than 40 organizations and funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Knight Foundation, the Annenberg Foundation, and the Gates Foundation, among others, the Campaign works to increase federal and state-level support for civic education. Its national advisory board is co-chaired by former Justice Sandra Day O’Connor and former Governor Roy Romer. The Campaign works closely with partners such as the Alliance for Representative Democracy, which has teams in every state, and the Education Commission of the States (ECS).

Since the initial publication of the CMS report, CIRCLE has awarded approximately 30 grants totaling more than one million dollars to support continued research into the six promising approaches for civic education.

According to the most recent policy scan of the ECS National Center for Learning and Citizenship, all 50 states and the District of Columbia now have a civics or government teaching or course requirement. Service-learning is available in about half of high schools. However, most students still lack a rich array of opportunities for learning and practicing citizenship. Other gaps include high-quality assessments of civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions and professional development opportunities for teachers.

While the Campaign advocates civic education, CIRCLE continues to provide the research base. Since the initial publication of the CMS report, CIRCLE has awarded approximately 30 grants totaling more than one million dollars to support continued research into the six promising approaches for civic education. Through these grants, scholars across the country are testing the promising approaches to see which components and designs provide the most benefit to the most students.

This article provides a summary of the latest CIRCLE-funded research on the six promising approaches.

Approach #1 Provide instruction in government, history, law, and democracy: The CMS report finds that classroom instruction in social studies increases civic and political knowledge and skills and increases political participation. Two CIRCLE Fact Sheets have provided further evidence. The first Fact Sheet, “Themes Emphasized in Social Studies and Civic Classes,” shows that young people who report that they recently chose to take a civics or government class are

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more likely than other young people to say that:

- they helped solve a community problem;
- they can make a difference in their community;
- they have volunteered recently;
- they trust other people and the government;
- they have made consumer decisions for ethical or political reasons;
- they believe in the importance of voting; and,
- they are registered to vote.

Furthermore, Melissa Comber's CIRCLE Fact Sheet "Civics Courses and Civic Skills" shows that civics related classes had a positive effect on students' ability to interpret political texts, follow the news, and discuss politics with their parents. Comber controlled for numerous observable factors.

Effects of civics instruction are likely long-lasting. CIRCLE research suggests that classroom instruction in civic topics likely produces long-term benefits. For example, an ongoing evaluation by Michael McDevitt and Spiro Kioussis found that students who participate in the Kids Voting USA (KVUSA) civics curriculum received long-lasting civic benefits. KVUSA is a curriculum that helps several million students to study and discuss politics and policy issues and then participate in mock elections. McDevitt and Kioussis used a rigorous, quasi-experimental research design to compare students exposed to Kids Voting with similar students not in the program. They found that after two years, students who participated in KVUSA were still more likely than their counterparts to discuss issues outside of class and to follow the news. In particular, three KVUSA curriculum components—frequent discussion of the election in class, teacher encouragement of opinion expression, and participation in get-out-the-vote drives—showed lasting effects on the civic development of the high school students studied. Complete findings can be found in CIRCLE Working Paper 49.

Gaps in instruction need to be addressed. While research clearly shows that there are powerful, probably long-lasting effects of civics instruction, quality and quantity of this instruction is unequal. Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh conducted a survey of over 2,000 California high school seniors who completed a U.S. government course mandated by the California History/Social Science Framework and Standards. They found that access to school-based opportunities to develop civic commitments and

capacities are uneven. Kahne and Middaugh's research (funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Annenberg Foundation, and the W. R. Hearst Foundation, not by CIRCLE) tested the six promising approaches and related strategies and found they were associated with greater civic capacities and commitments. However, college-bound students had significantly more access to these opportunities than students not planning to attend college. For more on this study see: *The California Study of Civic Education* (http://www.cms-ca.org/civic_survey_final.pdf).

Moreover, Meira Levinson's research documents evidence of a growing civic achievement gap between students of different races and socio-economic and immigration statuses in her CIRCLE Working Paper 51 "The Civic Achievement Gap." Using previous research and her own experience as a teacher in urban schools in Boston and Atlanta, Levinson shows that poor, non-white students demonstrate lower levels of civic and political knowledge, skills, positive attitudes toward the state, and participation than their wealthier and white counterparts.

Approach #2 Incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives. This recommendation was based on research that showed that when young people have opportunities to discuss current issues in a classroom setting, they tend to have greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communications skills, more civic knowledge, and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school.

An ongoing evaluation of the Kids Voting USA program by Michael McDevitt and Spiro Kioussis builds upon these findings and shows that classroom discussions of election issues can have a "trickle-up effect," benefiting not only the student but also parents and caregivers.

Using the IEA Civic Education Study, David Campbell finds that taking a civics course has a positive effect on students' civic knowledge and skills. He also finds positive results when there is an open climate for classroom discussion. In fact, once Campbell includes measures of deliberation in his statistical model, course-taking no longer has a significant impact. In other words, discussion explains the increases in civic knowledge, skills, and anticipated political participation that appear to come from taking

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a civics course. Campbell concludes, “The bottom line is...quality trumps quantity. The degree to which political and social issues are discussed openly and respectfully has a greater impact on civic proficiency than the frequency of social studies class.” For more information, see CIRCLE Working Paper 28.

Diana Hess and her colleagues are currently engaged in a four-year, mixed method study designed to investigate what high school students learn from participating in social studies courses that emphasize the discussion of highly controversial international and/or domestic issues. Preliminary findings from this research suggest that ideological diversity within the classroom is important to effective conversations. Hess notes, “It is clear to us that classes with a range of political views are more interesting spaces for discussions of issues than classes where most of the students are ideologically aligned.” Hess and colleagues have found that often classrooms include students with a fairly wide range of ideological diversity, but many times students are unaware of the range of diversity unless the teacher works to “activate” their awareness. Teachers can activate awareness by including issue-discussions in the curriculum and making sure that no single opinion or view dominates the discussion. According to Hess, “When this happens, students recognize that there is conflict, and believe that the airing of conflicting political views is normal, interesting, and productive.” Complete findings from this research are forthcoming.

Approach #3 Design and implement programs that provide students with opportunities to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction. Research has long shown that service-learning, when done well, can have a positive civic outcome on students, including increasing civic and political skills, civic attitudes and community participation. Recent research provides supportive evidence and further guidance.

Service-learning is most effective when it: lasts for at least one semester, is linked to standards, involves direct contact with service recipients, and includes cognitively challenging reflection activities among other components. In CIRCLE Working Paper 33, Shelley Billig and colleagues present findings from their survey of more than 1,000 high school students. Their findings suggest that service-learning is effective when it is implemented well, but it is no more effective than conventional

social studies classes when the conditions are not optimal. Being implemented well meant that it was of sufficient duration (at least a semester), that it was linked to standards, involved relatively close contact with service recipients, and had cognitively challenging reflection activities, among other components. The study also showed that service-learning had an effect greater than that of other active learning techniques. The study compared more than 1,000 high school students who participated in service-learning programs with those who did not participate in service-learning programs. The two groups were matched for similar demographics and student achievement profiles.

Other research shows that even average service-learning produces positive civic effects. Preliminary findings from Joseph Kahne and Susan Spote’s longitudinal study of students in the Chicago Public Schools (funded by the Spencer Foundation and the Chicago Community Trust, not CIRCLE) found that courses that provide service-learning experiences have substantial impact on students’ commitment to civic participation. Their study of over 3,800 students from 47 high schools in Chicago controlled for demographic factors, for pre-existing civic commitments, and for academic achievement. These controls allowed the researchers to make stronger claims regarding the causality of various civic learning opportunities (as opposed to most studies which merely find a relationship between civic instruction and civic outcomes). One common criticism of service-learning is that it shows positive effects because the best students “self-select” into service-learning courses. However, Kahne and Spote’s study finds that students of all academic levels can benefit from courses that provide service-learning experiences. Complete findings from this research are forthcoming.

Service-learning also produces long-term academic outcomes. Research from Alberto Dávila and Marie T. Mora found that students were more likely to finish high school and graduate from college if they participated in high school classes with mandatory community service (a rough proxy for service-learning). For example, they estimate that service experiences—when required as part of high school courses—raise the odds of graduation from college by 22 percentage points. Dávila and Mora note, “Civic activities undertaken during high school are related to significantly higher odds that individuals graduate from college in later years, when controlling for a host of socio-economic and

demographic characteristics.” Complete findings are contained in CIRCLE Working Papers 52 & 53.

Approach #4 Offer extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities. Long-term studies of Americans show that those who participate in extracurricular activities in high school remain more civically engaged than their contemporaries even decades later. The longest study that shows this pattern was begun by Kent Jennings in the 1960s. CIRCLE research finds additional benefits from extracurricular participation.

Involvement in student government increases high school academic performance and the odds of college graduation. In two CIRCLE Working Papers (52 & 53) Dávila and Mora, using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS), find that civic engagement activities raise the odds of graduation from college and improve high school students’ progress in reading, math, science and history. For example, Dávila and Mora found that “involvement in student government between 1990 and 1992 increased the odds of being a college graduate by 2000 by nearly 18 percentage points.”

Sports participation shows positive civic effects. Contrary to some previous research, CIRCLE’s analysis of a large survey of 18-to-25-year-olds found a positive relationship between participation in team sports and a variety of civic outcomes. The CIRCLE Fact Sheet, “Participation in Sports and Civic Engagement” by Mark Hugo Lopez and Kimberlee Moore finds that young people who are involved in sports report higher levels of voting, volunteering and engagement in their community than those who do not participate. In particular, the data show that young people who participated in sports activities during their high school years were more likely than non-sports participants to have: volunteered (32 percent vs. 21 percent); registered to vote (58 percent vs. 40 percent); voted (44 percent vs. 33 percent in 2000); and followed the news closely (41 percent vs. 26 percent).

“We considered that people who choose to participate in sports may also tend to choose to participate in politics and civic affairs, and sports may not be the reason for their civic engagement,” said Mark Hugo Lopez, research director at CIRCLE. “However, the relationship between sports and civic engagement remains

even when we statistically control for other factors like gender, race/ethnicity, income, other high school activities, region and educational attainment. That result suggests that sports have positive civic effects for many young people.”

Approach #5 Encourage student participation in school governance. A long tradition of research suggests that giving students more opportunities to participate in the management of their own classrooms and schools builds their civic skills and attitudes. Thus, giving students a voice in school governance is a promising way to encourage all young people to engage civically.

This finding is not based so much on program evaluations and experiments as on survey results. For example, the IEA Civic Education study found there was a positive relationship between students’ knowledge of politics and interest in current events (on the one hand) and their confidence that they could make a difference in the way their school was run and their belief that their student council had an impact on school policies (on the other hand). These effects were also found in a subsample of schools where educational outcomes were generally poor. Thus student “voice” may have important benefits for less advantaged students.

Tools to help schools measure student “voice.” CIRCLE supported the development of the *School Citizenship Education Climate Assessment* —a self-assessment tool developed to help schools evaluate their citizenship education strategies and policies. Among other things, the tool can be used by schools to measure levels of student “voice.” For example, the tool measures how much students are involved in school planning activities such as working to solve school problems as well as their level of engagement within the school governance through activities like student councils. The tool was created for the Education Commission of the States (ECS) by Gary Homana, Carolyn Barber and Judith Torney-Purta of the University of Maryland. For more information see CIRCLE Working Paper 48 and the ECS Web site (www.ecs.org/qna). The ECS Web site also contains a set of items for assessing outcomes of civic education in the areas of knowledge, skills, and dispositions across the elementary, middle, and high school grades.

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Approach #6 Encourage students' participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures. The CMS Report cited evidence that simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberation, and diplomacy in schools can lead to heightened political knowledge and interest. Civic simulations include traditional programs such as mock trials and the Model United Nations, as well as innovative computer-based games. CIRCLE has not yet sponsored original research on simulations other than the mock voting component of Kids Voting USA. ■

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