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EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY: LESSONS FROM CHICAGO

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CONSORTIUM ON
CHICAGO SCHOOL RESEARCH
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

A woman in a white lab coat is pointing at a whiteboard in a classroom. The whiteboard has some faint, illegible handwriting on it. In the foreground, a young boy is looking down, possibly at a book or a piece of paper. The background shows other students and the classroom environment.

“The qualifications of self-government are not innate. They are the result of habit and long training.”

Thomas Jefferson

Introduction

If we want the grand experiment that is American democracy to survive, it is imperative that we educate students to be future citizens, leaders, and community problem solvers.

In a culture where a school's performance is defined by students' standardized test scores, civic education—one of the main reasons public schooling in America was established in the first place—has been overshadowed. Yet, if we want the grand experiment that is American democracy to survive, it is imperative that we educate students to be future citizens, leaders, and community problem solvers.

While all of us—including parents, coaches, after-school program leaders, and community members—share in this responsibility, a new empirical research study conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago shows that what happens in the classroom is vitally important in developing civically committed young people. And it's not just in history or government classes, although the skills and knowledge students gain there are of unquestionable importance. This longitudinal study of close to 4,000 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) high school juniors by Susan E. Spote and Joseph E. Kahne shows that students who experienced a focus on topics such as social issues and community improvement in any of their classes developed a stronger commitment to civic participation.





Civic Engagement

“Citizens with low or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government.”

Current Levels of Civic Engagement among Young People

Unfortunately, rates of civic involvement among Americans—especially young Americans—are lower than desirable and in some cases have been declining. For example, between 1960 and 1976, roughly 25 percent of young people ages 18 to 25 reported that they followed public affairs, but by 2000 that number had declined to 5 percent, according to annual surveys of a nationally representative sample.¹ In a 2006 survey of young people ages 15 to 25, fully 58 percent indicated participation in fewer than two forms of civic engagement or two forms of political engagement. And more than one-fourth were totally disengaged, indicating no form of political or civic activity from a list of 19 possibilities.² As one panel of experts recently concluded, “Citizens participate in public affairs less frequently, with less knowledge and enthusiasm, in fewer venues and less equitably than is healthy for a vibrant democratic polity.”³

This disengagement is especially pronounced for those with lower incomes. In fact, upper-income citizens are four times as likely to be part of campaign work, three times as likely to do informal community work, twice as likely to contact elected officials, and a full nine times as likely to contribute to campaigns as low-income citizens.⁴ Given this uneven participation, it comes as no surprise that roll call votes in the U.S. Senate disproportionately reflect the values and demands of more affluent voters.⁵ As the American Political Science Association Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy reported in 2004, “Citizens with low or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government, while the advantaged roar with the clarity and consistency that policymakers readily heed.”⁶

So, what will it take to engage young people in their own communities and to reduce these glaring inequities?



Earlier Studies on the Role of Schools in Promoting Civic Engagement

Although one of the initial purposes of public schools in the United States was to educate young people for democracy, much recent research has questioned whether they have been able to do so or whether there might be better avenues to achieve this outcome. Some researchers have found that taking civics or government classes is not related to student civic participation.⁷ Others have found that extracurricular activities, such as school clubs or student council, have a larger impact on civic commitment than classes.⁸ Furthermore, under increasing pressure to demonstrate student academic achievement, policymakers and educators have narrowed their focus, pushing for more classroom time on reading and math. More time for these subjects means less time for social studies and less attention to civic issues. In fact, a 2006 study by the Center on Education Policy found that 71 percent of districts reported cutting back on other subjects—including social studies—to increase time for reading and math instruction.⁹

However, the new research presented here shows that what happens in classrooms has an impact on the strength of students' commitment to civic participation. And if students start to see themselves as community participants, research also shows that they are more likely to act on this identity and become adult leaders and community problem solvers.¹⁰

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Classrooms in Chicago:

SERVICE LEARNING AND OTHER IN-CLASS PRACTICES

The study described in this paper looked at particular kinds of “best practices” for civic education. Along with other classroom practices, these include participating in service learning projects, engaging in open classroom discussions about topics in which people have different opinions, and working to solve community problems. Note that some of these are not specific to civic education—some are best practices for involving and engaging students in their own learning and can happen in any class, including art, English, or science, as shown below.

Service Learning Project: Reduce School Violence



What might a service learning project look like that engages students in something they care about? **JEANNE WALKER**, art teacher and service learning coach at the Excel Academy housed in the former Orr High School, asked students in her art classes to investigate and reflect on school violence. They then created a poster campaign to promote peace. Their work was exhibited around Chicago and won an award for best strategy on a school issue at the Mikva Challenge 2007 Civics Fair. Students wrote questions and observations about the root causes of school violence and then composed a full page about what the issue meant to them before creating artistic posters on the topic. “They had to think about the ‘why’ of it, not the ‘what’ of it. That’s not an easy question to answer,” Walker notes.

Sophomore Deante Partee had no idea art class could be a place to do service learning. “This was a big surprise. I didn’t know I could affect a community until [Walker] presented this,” Partee says.

Open Discussions: Potentially Controversial Topics

KENZO SHIBATA, who teaches English at Lakeview High School, says he holds many open discussions with his students. “I want them to question me, question each other, and question sources,” he says. Shibata works hard to make his classroom a safe space to express opinions freely. First of all, he leads by example. “I’ll admit it when I’m wrong. Students really appreciate it when I say, ‘OK, I was wrong about



this. Let's get together and figure out a solution.” He also has developed strategies to encourage students who are afraid to give their opinion. For example, he polls students on a topic while they have their eyes closed so no one can see how many students support a particular viewpoint. He tracks student participation with a chart to make sure everyone gets involved. As students become more comfortable, he eases up on the structure. By the time students present independent research, they are able to just sit in a circle and talk as part of a Socratic Seminar. He has found that students are uniformly respectful of each other, even when they choose to research controversial figures.

Tackling Problems Close to Home: Environmental Justice

DANIEL MORALES-DOYLE teaches environmental science at the School of Social Justice, a new small school within the Greater Lawndale/Little Village High School. When he joined the faculty at the school, he asked the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO) for help in identifying environmental justice issues in the community. Out of this collaboration, he and fellow teacher **SUE NELSON** developed a unit on electrical power generation as part of the curriculum. Students analyzed issues of race, class, and environmental science as they discovered that coal-fired power plants are too often located in or near poor or working-class communities of color. They also studied the relationship between power plants and global warming, again learning that climate change will have a disproportionate impact on poorer communities. After studying alternative forms of electricity generation, the class decided that a combination of wind and solar power would be a good replacement for the electricity currently being provided by Midwest Generation, a coal-powered plant less than a mile from the school. This class study inspired a group of students to stay after school to work with LVEJO's ongoing campaign to shut down this power plant. Morales-Doyle says that although the students understand this will be a huge task, they also recognize their efforts are part of a tradition of community struggle. He believes his role is to “continue teaching about issues of injustice related to science and [to] try to provide students with the tools to fight that injustice.”



Students became so involved in this study that a group of them have been staying after school to work with LVEJO's ongoing campaign.



The Study

Service learning experiences and in-class opportunities to learn about civic issues foster students' commitment to civic participation more than all other factors.

Educators who are especially interested in educating for democracy have known that offering or requiring a specific class in civics or government is not enough to encourage students to become active civic participants, although these classes are important in their own right. So this study looked specifically at classroom practices like those described earlier, rather than simply the results of students having taken a class in civics or government (see sidebar below).

For More Details of this Study

Those who are interested in the details of this study are encouraged to read the complete report, titled “Developing Citizens: A Longitudinal Study of School, Family, and Community Influences on Students’ Commitments to Civic Participation.” To access this working paper, visit <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu> and click on Publications.

To examine the effects of school factors on students’ civic commitments, we studied survey responses from 3,805 students in 47 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) high schools when they were freshman in 2003 and again when they were juniors in 2005 (see sidebar on page 7). We looked specifically at a set of classroom-based civic learning opportunities that are considered “best practice” by civic educators to see whether they fostered commitment to civic participation.¹¹

We also examined other factors that researchers have found promote civic commitments: after-school programs, the demographics and social capital of students’ neighborhoods, and whether students had conversations with their parents or guardians about politics and current events. In addition, we asked about varied aspects of students’ general experiences in school: whether they felt like they belonged, the quality of instruction, and supports for academic achievement from parents and



Questions from the Survey

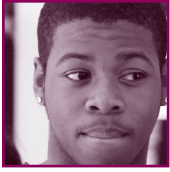
To measure commitment to civic participation, students were asked whether they felt that:

- Everyone has a responsibility to be concerned with state and local issues.
- They have a responsibility to be actively involved in community issues.
- They expect to work on at least one community project involving a government agency.
- They expect to be involved in improving their community.
- They have good ideas for programs or projects that would help solve community problems.

To measure classroom civic learning opportunities, students were asked if they had experienced the following in at least one classroom:

- Meeting civic role models
- Learning about problems in society
- Learning about ways to improve their community
- Being required to keep up with politics or government
- Open discussions of political or social topics in which students are encouraged to form their own opinions
- Teachers focusing on issues students care about
- Working on service learning projects

peers. The goal was to explore the relative degree to which these classroom, school, family, and neighborhood factors impacted students' formation of civic commitments. Because these students were questioned about their civic commitments as ninth-graders in 2003 and then again as juniors in 2005, we could examine all these influences on students' commitment to civic participation after taking into account civic commitments they had already formed two years earlier—the first large-scale study to do so.



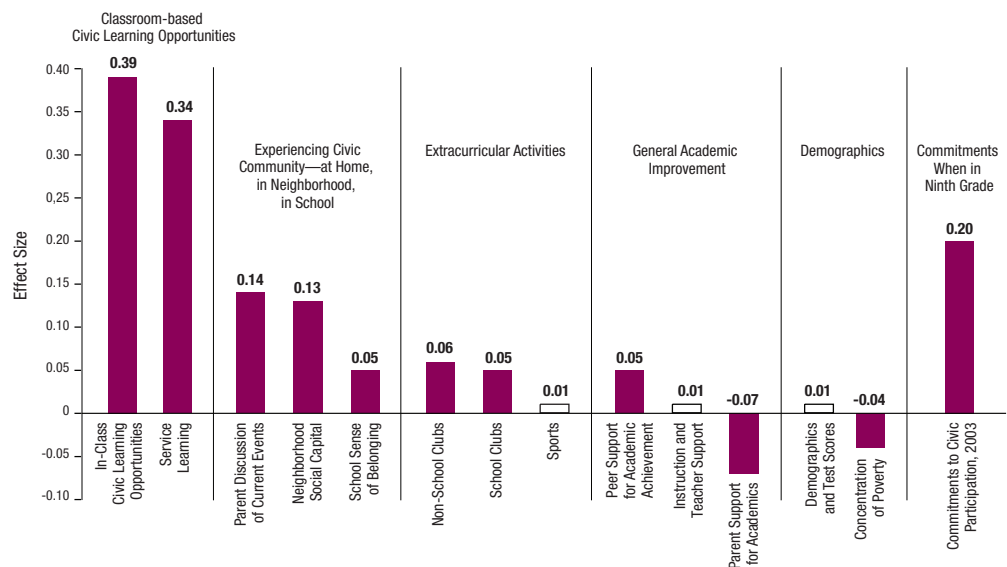
Research Findings: Schools Matter

Regardless of student demographics, academic achievement, and prior level of civic commitments, our study showed that service learning experiences and in-class opportunities to learn about civic issues have a larger impact on students' commitment to civic participation than all of the other influences included in the study—be it school, family, or community based.

Figure 1 shows the relative effects of different factors on students' commitment to civic participation. Colored bars indicate that the relationship was statistically significant. Though the survey measures students' stated commitment to civic participation, other research shows a strong positive relationship between such stated commitments and actual behavior.

As Figure 1 clearly indicates, in-class civic learning opportunities and service learning were most strongly related to students' civic commitments as juniors. Other factors strongly related to commitment to civic participation were students' prior commitment to civic participation as freshmen, conversations with parents or guardians about current events, and the level of social capital in students' neighborhoods. The concentration of poverty in students' neighborhoods had a negative effect on civic commitments. More surprisingly, parental press for academic achievement also had a negative effect on students' civic commitments.

FIGURE 1
Developing Students' Civic Commitments (Data from 2005)



What Does and Does Not Build Civic Commitment

1. CLASSROOM PRACTICES MATTER

What happens in classrooms can have a meaningful impact on students' commitment to civic participation. Although prior longitudinal studies have called into question the relationship between civic education and civic outcomes, we suspect their failure to find such a relationship was because those studies assessed the impact of offering civic education or government courses but did not assess what actually happened in those classrooms.

Activities that are positively and significantly related to students' commitment to civic participation include service learning, tracking current events, discussing problems in the community and ways to respond, frequently holding class discussions about controversial issues, making sure issues students care about are part of the curriculum, and exposing students to civic role models. These activities can take place in any class across the curriculum.

2. EXPERIENCING CIVIC COMMUNITIES HELPS

Students were more likely to express higher levels of commitment to civic participation when they saw examples of neighbors dealing with problems in the community, when they felt they could count on adults to look after children, and when they had a general sense that their neighborhood supported young people. A similar pattern emerged in the measure of belonging to a school community. Students' sense that people at school cared about them, that people at school were like family, and that they were generally part of a community also was related to the development of



commitment to civic participation. Having parents who discussed current events with them contributed to students' commitment to civic participation. In other words, students who witnessed concern for the community and current events in their home, school, or neighborhood were more likely to be committed to civic participation.



3. EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES PROVIDE ONLY MODEST SUPPORT

The depth of research showing the potential value of extracurricular activities as a means of developing commitment to civic participation, coupled with the limited impact of taking generic civics classes, has led some to suggest that extracurriculars might be the best way to foster civic participation.¹² While we do not question the civic benefits of participating in extracurricular activities, our findings lead us to question the notion that schools can focus solely on traditional academics and leave the development of civic commitment to extracurricular programs. First, not all students participate in extracurricular activities. Second, even when they do, our data suggest that the impact of participating in after-school clubs is quite modest, and, in line with previous research, our data also indicate that participating on sports teams is unrelated to the development of commitment to civic participation.

4. FOCUSING ON ACADEMIC OUTCOMES IS INSUFFICIENT

Our study indicates that merely providing educational contexts and practices that are associated with better academic outcomes will not be sufficient to foster student commitment to civic and political engagement. Being part of a community of peers who support academic achievement has nowhere near the effect of participating in service learning or being exposed to in-class civic learning opportunities; our measures of supportive teachers and quality instruction were not statistically related to students' civic commitments. Certainly, educational practices that support academic achievement are important and support civic goals by increasing young citizens' capacity to think carefully about societal issues. Still, schools also need to encourage practices that directly target civic outcomes if they want to substantially increase their students' commitment to civic participation.

5. DEMOGRAPHICS ARE NOT DESTINY

Although other research has shown that demographics are highly predictive of students' academic outcomes, our study does not show that a similar relationship exists between the demographics of Chicago public high school students and their levels of civic commitment. In fact, the associations between these factors were the smallest in the study and never reached statistical significance. Other factors, which policymakers and educators can influence, show much stronger potential to affect students' levels of civic commitment.

Signs of Progress in Chicago

Local and statewide initiatives emphasize the importance of civic commitment.



Service Learning Requirement

While Chicago schools largely have been concentrating their academic efforts on math, science, and reading, there also have been some recent policies and practices that arguably could improve students' commitment to civic participation. For example, in 1997 CPS established a service learning requirement, which made the Class of 2001 the first to have to complete 40 hours of service learning in order to graduate. The district places top priority on classroom-based experiences that identify and meet local community needs as well as provide opportunities for students to reflect on their experiences. A central office department helps schools partner with community organizations and offers training and support to school-based service learning coaches. Teachers in all subject areas—not just social science departments—are finding ways to integrate service learning into their courses.

Other Initiatives

Meanwhile, efforts to create new small high schools have yielded a number of theme-based schools, some of which have missions explicitly promoting civic learning. For example, the Bowen Environmental Studies Team (BEST) is a school where environmental and civic learning projects are woven across the curriculum. More recently, the Greater Lawndale/Little Village School of Social Justice was created to develop a new generation of community leaders to follow in the footsteps of those whose successful hunger strike prompted the district to make good on its promise to build a new high school in the neighborhood. And civic education in Chicago has benefited from the Mikva Challenge, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to providing high-quality service learning to students across the city. In the last decade the Mikva Challenge, which was founded to honor former U.S. Representative Abner Mikva and his wife, Zoe, has grown to serve more than 2,000 students a year in 40 CPS high schools.



■ ■ ■
Seed money will be available to schools that want to strengthen classroom civic learning opportunities.

State Level Change: The Illinois Civic Mission Coalition

At the state level, a growing coalition of civic educators, researchers, business leaders, and politicians is pushing for a greater focus on the civic mission of public schools. Drawing on findings from this study and related research, the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition already has developed a Civic Audit, which is a self-assessment tool that schools can use to examine their civic education practices. In spring 2007, coalition members wrote a bill to create the Illinois Civic Education Trust Fund, which would make grants of up to \$3,000 to schools that use the Civic Audit process as a way to strengthen their classroom civic learning practices. The bill passed unanimously in both houses. “We’re slowly but surely making progress,” observes Carolyn Pereira, executive director of the Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago, which founded the coalition in 2003. “It doesn’t happen overnight, but little by little, it happens.” The Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago web site has more details about this audit, which is a part of the Illinois Civic Mission of Schools campaign.

Conclusion

Classrooms where students learn about topics of their own interest, discuss controversial issues and social problems, and form their own opinions on those issues are places where the seeds of democratic participation are planted.

Our study shows that particular curricular and pedagogical practices in high school can influence students' commitment to civic participation. Requiring courses in American Government may help, but it will not guarantee students receive the kinds of learning opportunities we found to be most important. Instead, policymakers and educators need to look for ways to embed "best practices" into classrooms by highlighting the importance of these practices and related civic outcomes, as well as through curriculum and professional development opportunities. Classrooms where students learn about topics of their own interest, discuss controversial issues and social problems, and form their own opinions on those issues are places where

the seeds of democratic participation are planted. Service learning projects offer students a chance to let those seeds sprout and grow as they learn about problems in their communities and take steps to solve them.

Students who have participated in such classrooms say the experience has made them more confident and given them a sense of accomplishment. Kathleen Franklin, an Excel Academy senior, spent 115 hours of service participating in learning projects, from hospital visits to cleaning her block. "It keeps me thinking positive," she says. "It makes me feel good about myself."

Garcon Morweh, a 2006 graduate of BEST, worked for the Chicago Board of Elections in the 2007 aldermanic elections and runoff. Thanks to his school experiences, he says, "I'm into politics."

Unfortunately, not enough of Chicago's high school students are experiencing classrooms like those briefly described above. More than one-third of students report they have not discussed issues they care about in *any* of their classes over the course of the year. Furthermore, at least one-third of high school juniors said they did not





meet civic role models, they did not learn about how to improve their communities, they were not required to keep up with politics or government, and they were not encouraged to make up their own minds on political and social topics in any class during the year. And only slightly over half participated in a service learning project during their junior year.

Yet the evidence of the importance of such practices is clear. While acknowledging the challenge of incorporating these kinds of projects into their classes, teachers such as Walker and Morales-Doyle say the rewards are worth it. “It can be difficult,” says Morales-Doyle, “but if you prioritize [both] skills and student experiences, it’s incredibly effective” at both increasing academic learning and raising civic awareness.

Robert Maynard Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago from 1929 to 1951, succinctly expressed the need for schools to attend to issues of civic involvement. “The death of democracy,” he wrote, “is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.”¹³ If we are committed to a democracy in which citizens participate, this research shows that schools have a critical role to play.

Endnotes

- 1 Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE (2003).
- 2 Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Education (2006).
- 3 Macedo, et al (2005).
- 4 Verba, et al (1995).
- 5 Bartels, L. M. (2005).
- 6 American Political Science Association Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy (2004).
- 7 See, for example: Langton, K. and M. K. Jennings (1968).

- 8 See, for example: Beck, P. A. and M. K. Jennings (1982).
- 9 Center on Education Policy (2006).
- 10 Fishbein, M., I. Ajzen, and R. Hinkle (1980).
- 11 One additional “best practice” for civic learning involves students’ participation in simulations or role-plays. We found this to be a part of this construct in 2003, but we did not include the item in 2005 because of space limitations.

- 12 See, for example: Beck, P. A. and M. K. Jennings (1982).
- 13 Hutchins, R. M., as cited in D. Bok (2006).

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Online Resources

- Chicago Public Schools Service Learning servicelearning.cps.k12.il.us
Contains a calendar of service-learning events, examples of successful projects, and a database of Chicago community agencies where high school students can volunteer.
- Civic Education Research Group (CERG) civicsurvey.org
Joseph E. Kahne, coauthor of this study, directs CERG, which conducts research to inform policies and programs that promote the development of citizens for a just, humane, and democratic society.
- Constitutional Rights Foundation of Chicago www.crfc.org
Includes sample lessons; links to government, education, and legal sources; and information on Chicago-based programs and publications.
- Constitutional Rights Foundation, USA www.crf-usa.org
Offers information on national and international programs, sample lessons, research links, and publications.
- Center for Civic Education www.civiced.org
Specializes in civic/citizenship education, law-related education, and international educational exchange programs for developing democracies.
- Democratic Dialogue at the University of Ottawa www.democraticdialogue.com
International collaborative inquiry into democracy, education, and society. For educators and scholars, as well as the broader public.
- Mikva Challenge www.mikvachallenge.org
Provides information on programs, scholarships, and sample curricula.
- National Service-Learning Partnership www.service-learningpartnership.org
Offers links to research on service learning, publications, and model curricula.
- Street Law Inc. www.streetlaw.org
Provides curriculum related to law, democracy, and human rights.
- Teaching Tolerance www.tolerance.org
Supports teachers and other educators working to promote respect for differences and appreciation of diversity.
- University of Maryland Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) www.civicyouth.org
Clearinghouse for research on the civic engagement, political participation, and civic education of young Americans. Provides research, tools for practice, and a national database of youth civic engagement organizations.
- Youth Innovation Fund www.theyouthfund.org
This program funds youth-led civic action projects in eight states. Their web site offers tools for organizing youth and examples of successful projects.

INFLUENCE COMMIT CARE PERSUADE ACT VOTE SERVE VOLUNTEER
ASSERT DEBATE INSPIRE MOTIVATE SURMOUNT GUIDE BELIEVE



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President of the University of Chicago, 1929–1951



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