

# Reclaiming the Democratic Purpose of California's Public Schools

*“Essential to the preservation of  
rights and liberties...”*  
*(Article IX of CA Constitution)*

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### About LEADE

Housed at UCLA and UC Riverside, the Leveraging Equity and Access in Democratic Education (LEADE) initiative works to ensure students have access to high quality civic learning opportunities. LEADE partners with key stakeholders to identify civic learning priorities, develop tools to collect data on equity and access, contribute to public deliberation and strategic planning, support professional development efforts, and aid in district reform efforts that promote democratic education.

<https://centerx.gseis.ucla.edu/leade/>

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# Executive Summary

It is time to reclaim the democratic purposes of public education in California. The recent national election signals heightened interest in politics as well as deep fissures in our civic community. Further, the current moment—a global pandemic, the urgent need to address racial injustice, and wildfires up and down the West coast—highlights complex problems that demand public engagement and action. There is a clear need for preparing youth to engage thoughtfully and powerfully with societal issues. Promoting civic learning in a period of increased political polarization and misinformation will be challenging for public schools. But ignoring these forces is not an option for a democratic society. Students must learn to investigate pressing issues of concern, seek out trustworthy information, engage productively across differences, and take action to help respond to problems.

Our study of civic learning in California school districts assesses the degree to which districts are focused on and devoting resources to these civic priorities. During the first half of 2020 we surveyed and interviewed district officials, examined Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs), and analyzed a representative sample of mission statements from district websites. The following key findings emerge from our study.

## **KEY FINDING #1: Civic and democratic goals are marginal to districts' missions.**

- 41% of districts were silent on the social purpose of education. They did not mention anything about preparing young people to participate in their community or society.
- 44% of the districts marginally addressed civics—they spoke of developing young people for social roles, but did not talk about civic or political development.
- Only 15% of districts substantially addressed civics in their mission or vision statements.
- This analysis suggests that more than five million of California's six million students attend schools in districts that do not articulate a substantial focus on civic education.

## **KEY FINDING #2: Civic and democratic commitments are absent from districts' accountability plans.**

- 87% of all districts in the state did not mention any of the following terms in their 2017-18 LCAP: civic(s), citizen(s), citizenship, or democracy.
- A district's LCAP lays out priorities as well as plans for discretionary funding. Thus the avoidance of the terms civics, citizen, citizenship, and democracy by the vast majority of the state's districts signals widespread disinterest in the democratic purposes of schooling.

## **KEY FINDING #3: There is little staffing and infrastructure that supports this civic agenda.**

- Of the 31 districts in our sample who posted information on their website regarding instructional staff, 71% had at least one dedicated staff person in English Language Arts, 55% had at least one in math, and 58% had at least one in science. Many of these districts had more than one staff member dedicated to these subject areas. In contrast, only 29% of districts had a staff member dedicated to history and social sciences and no districts employed more than one person in this area.
- This analysis makes clear that fewer districts have staff tasked with supporting civics, history, and social science compared with staff supporting other academic areas.

**MOBILIZING CIVIC LEARNING ASSETS IN CALIFORNIA FOR CHANGE.** Whereas districts' public-facing documents demonstrate a lack of attention to and support for civic learning, there are reasons to be hopeful about the future of civic education in California. There are a range of assets that can be mobilized to expand and deepen civic education in California, such as youth themselves, families and community members, community-based youth organizations, leading school districts, intermediaries, and state coalitions.

**A NEW OPPORTUNITY FOR CALIFORNIA: THE STATE SEAL OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.** The State Seal of Civic Engagement (Seal) provides a new opportunity to expand, galvanize attention, and support civic education in California. Ideally, districts, youth organizations, labor unions, parent groups, community partners, the business community, and more will embrace the Seal as a goal for all California students and commit to supporting high-quality civic learning across the state.

**THE CURRENT MOMENT CREATES AN OBLIGATION TO ACT.** The societal problems we face create an urgent need to prepare young people for thoughtful and informed civic action. Educators can respond by gaining input from youth and community members and by forging new initiatives in civics and social science, by partnering with organizations in California's communities, and by integrating substantial attention to these issues into other aspects of the curriculum such as science education, English and Language Arts, ethnic studies, and social and emotional learning.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD.** A systemic commitment to and investment in civic learning is needed in order to reclaim the democratic purpose of public education in California, ensure that all students have access to high-quality civic learning, and open up pathways for a broad cross-section of students to attain the Seal. Clearly, advancing this agenda is a multi-year project and one that will need support from multiple sectors. And public action is needed at the state and local level. We present four recommendations for state-level action.

1. California should highlight the civic purposes of public schooling by designating democratic education as a priority area that districts address in their Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs).
2. The State Board of Education (SBE) in conjunction with the California Department of Education (CDE) should consider adopting authentic indicators of civic learning as part of the California School Dashboard.
3. Third, the state should support robust and equitable implementation of the Seal by developing a robust state clearinghouse and a process for documenting and learning from the reform.
4. The Governor and Secretary of State, in conjunction with the legislature, SBE, and CDE, should convene a task force to develop a master plan for civic learning in California.

New state policies must be paired with energetic action at the local level that ensures civic education shapes the experiences of all California students. It can't simply occur in a few innovative schools or classrooms. One important step forward for districts will be to adopt the Seal. But to realize the promise of the Seal and advance civic learning for all students, districts need a comprehensive reform strategy. We recommend four steps (or phases) for local-level action.

- **Phase #1:** Identify Civic & Democratic Goals via Public Deliberation and Input
- **Phase #2:** Dedicate Staffing & Convene Stakeholder Support
- **Phase #3:** Assess & Plan the Implementation of Civic & Democratic Goals
- **Phase #4:** Implement, Reflect, and Repeat

2020 has been an incredibly difficult year for all Californians. Public schools must support youth as they navigate these precarious times. State actors, county leaders, school districts, educators, youth, families, and communities all have an important role to play in promoting high-quality civic education. Such work is essential if we want California youth to develop the knowledge, skills, and capacities needed to participate fully and effectively in democracy. Our collective future depends upon it.

# Introduction

Throughout American history, public schools have been charged with preparing youth for participation in our democracy. As John Dewey put it, “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.”<sup>1</sup> Since the early 1900s, schools have also been expected to enhance both individual and national economic productivity, particularly through career and technical education in addition to academic preparation. However, in recent decades, the economic purposes of education have garnered more and more attention, often at the expense of civic preparation. When it comes to fulfilling the democratic purposes of schooling, we are falling far short.

Indeed, as we detail in this report, California’s school districts pay insufficient attention to the democratic purposes of education. While statements about the importance of civic responsibilities and exhortations to contribute to one’s community are a staple of high school graduation speeches, these sentiments are rarely reflected in school districts’ priorities, policies, and practices.

This neglect of civic education is all the more striking given the central role that California’s constitution places on the democratic purposes of public schools. Article IX of the state’s constitution begins by asserting that democracy is the central rationale for establishing a public school system. “A general diffusion of knowledge and intelligence being essential to the preservation of the rights and liberties of the people, the Legislature shall encourage by all suitable means the promotion of intellectual, scientific, moral, and agricultural improvement.”<sup>2</sup>

It is time to reclaim the democratic purposes of public education in California. The recent national election signals heightened interest in politics as well as deep fissures in our civic community. Further, the current moment—a global pandemic, the urgent need to address racial injustice, and wildfires up and down the West coast—highlights complex problems that demand public engagement and action. **There is a clear need to prepare youth for thoughtful and powerful engagement with these and other pressing societal issues. Promoting civic learning in a period of increased political polarization and misinformation will be challenging for public schools. But ignoring these forces is not an option for a democratic society.**



Students must learn to investigate pressing issues of concern, seek out trustworthy information, engage productively across differences, and take action to help respond to problems.

The good news is that a great deal of research backs up the value of civic learning opportunities. When youth have ongoing opportunities to discuss and learn about current issues, to engage in volunteer service or in other varied forms of civic and political action, and to reflect on the consequences of their efforts, studies show development of both civic capacities and commitments.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, there is much work ahead to realize this promise. Currently, civic learning opportunities are provided infrequently and distributed inequitably.<sup>4</sup> And there is insufficient public information about civic learning. There is no systematic data available at the state or district level in California about students' civic learning experiences and outcomes.

This report offers new empirical analyses that illuminate the extent to which California school districts prioritize democratic education. During the end of 2019 and the first half of 2020, we surveyed and interviewed district officials, examined Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs), and analyzed a representative sample of mission statements from district websites.<sup>5</sup> By analyzing websites and LCAPs, collecting surveys, and conducting interviews we were able to examine the attention and supports California school districts dedicate to civic education. As detailed below, we found that less than half of California districts make rhetorical commitments to civic education in their mission statements, and very few devote substantial resources to this agenda via staff or fiscal investments.

At the same time, there are many assets that can be leveraged to support this cause. For example, the recent adoption of the California State Seal of Civic Engagement (the Seal), presents a significant opportunity to recognize and promote these goals. Approved by the State Board of Education (SBE) on September 10th, the Seal enables districts to recognize graduating high school students who have demonstrated civic excellence. It prioritizes learning experiences that promote civic knowledge, informed civic action, and reflection. The Seal also attends to the importance of civic-mindedness and a commitment to engaging with others in the school, in the community, or in broader society.

*Civic learning is a process through which young people develop the knowledge, skills, and commitments to interact effectively with fellow community members to address shared problems. It includes preparation for both civic engagement (or practices seeking to promote the public good through non-governmental organizations and informal community work) and political engagement (or activities aiming to influence state action through formal avenues such as voting, lobbying, petitioning, or protesting).*

Reclaiming the democratic purposes of public education will require additional systemic efforts. Advancing this agenda is a multi-year project and one that will need support from multiple sectors. The legislature, the SBE, and the California Department of Education (CDE) all have an important role to play in designating democratic education as a state priority and supporting robust and equitable implementation of the Seal. School districts also will be key to advancing a systemic commitment to civic learning on a local level and ensuring that civic learning is a core part of all students' education. Below, we recommend strategies to re-center democratic goals and strengthen systems of support so that teachers, schools, and districts can enrich the civic learning opportunities for California's students.

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## Key Finding #1

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# Civic and democratic goals are marginal to districts' missions

To better understand the emphasis that California school districts place on civic education, we analyzed websites from a representative sample of the state's districts. School districts are the primary site of local educational governance, they play a central role in coordinating educational services, and they will be in charge of implementing the Seal. Websites are an important way that districts communicate with the broader public. Districts use their websites to disseminate essential information and present the public with a clear understanding of their priorities and activities. A district's mission or vision statement is often included on its website and communicates aims for student learning.

### What do California school district websites say about civic education?

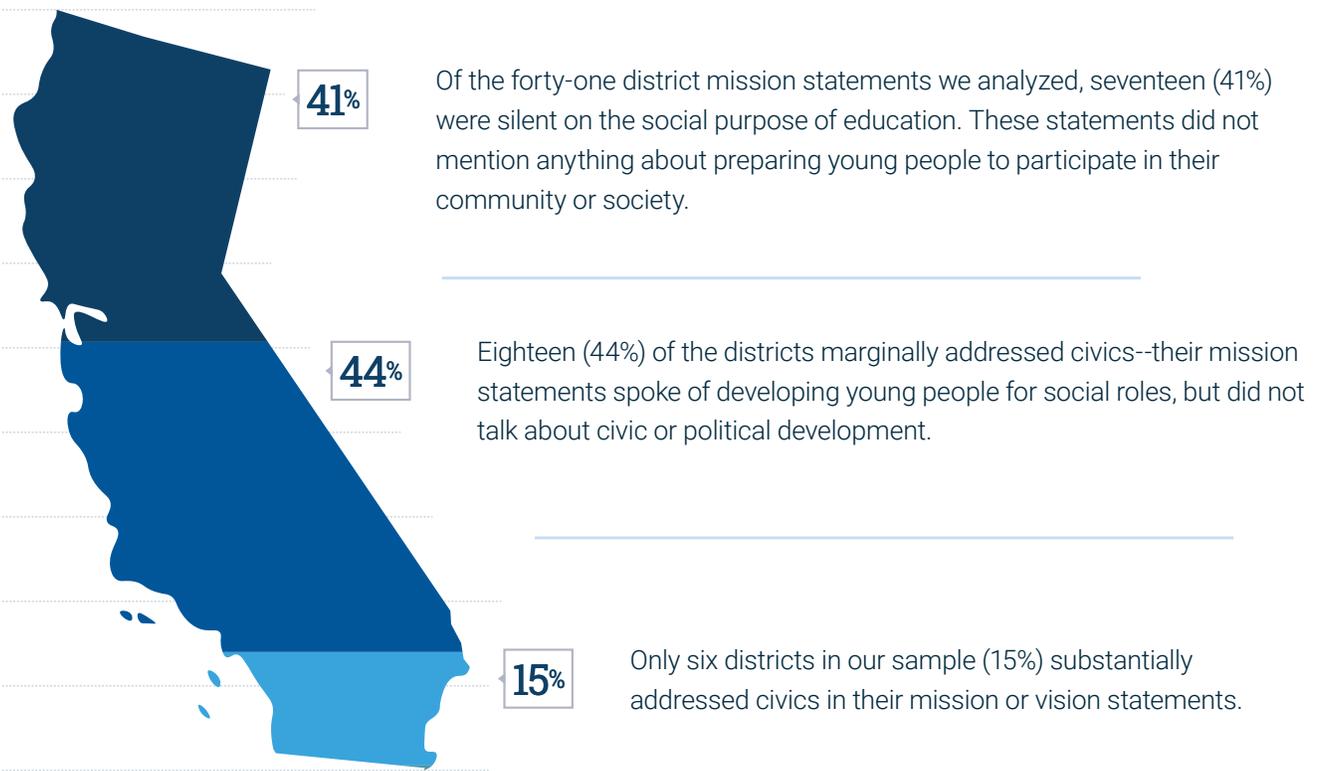
To answer this question, we used data from the National Center For Educational Statistics to identify 47 school districts that are representative in terms of district size and the percentage of students eligible for free and/or reduced price lunch. Of these 47 districts, 41 posted a mission or vision statement on their website. We analyzed these 41 statements to see whether districts acknowledged young people's role in community and society. For those districts which mentioned a societal role or purpose, we considered whether they did so in a manner that explicitly addressed civic participation and civic development. Those districts that only referred generally to "an increasingly global society" or "leadership" or "character development" were coded as marginally addressing civics. Districts that explicitly addressed preparation for participation in civic and political life were coded as substantially addressing civics.

### Websites as a Window into District Values

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One indication that school districts use their websites to communicate important ideas and information to the broader public is the array of statements that California districts posted in June 2020 in the wake of George Floyd's murder. Seventeen of the 47 school districts whose websites we analyzed, displayed messages acknowledging and responding to the tragedy. The large number of these posts is all the more noteworthy given that they came amidst a period of remote instruction and at the very end of the school year. The district statements touched on a number of topics—racism, injustice, educational equity, and more. These statements underscore that race and racism continue to require educators' attention and action. Moreover, they highlight the important role of civic education in educating students about their rights and helping students understand how to lift up their voices and take action to effect social change.





Oak Park Unified School District is one of these six. It's mission states: *"Being a good global citizen means participating in our own democracy, having a sense of social responsibility for the people around us, of our nation, and of the world, and caring for the environment we all share and will pass on to our posterity."*

As our sample is representative of the state as a whole, this analysis suggests that **more than five million of California's six million students attend schools in districts that do not articulate a substantial focus on civic education.**<sup>6</sup>

*"Creo que es lo más importante para la joven. Y en la escuela como lo veo? No lo veo . . . Veo en clubs, pero no veo a todos los chicos en clubs . . . Para mi la educación cívica debería de ser a varios niveles y debería de ser atravesada de relaciones."*

*"I think [civic education] is the most important thing for youth. And how do I see it in schools? I don't see it. I see it in clubs, but I don't see all of the children in clubs. For me civic education should happen at various levels and across relationships." [English Translation]*  
 — California parent

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## Key Finding #2

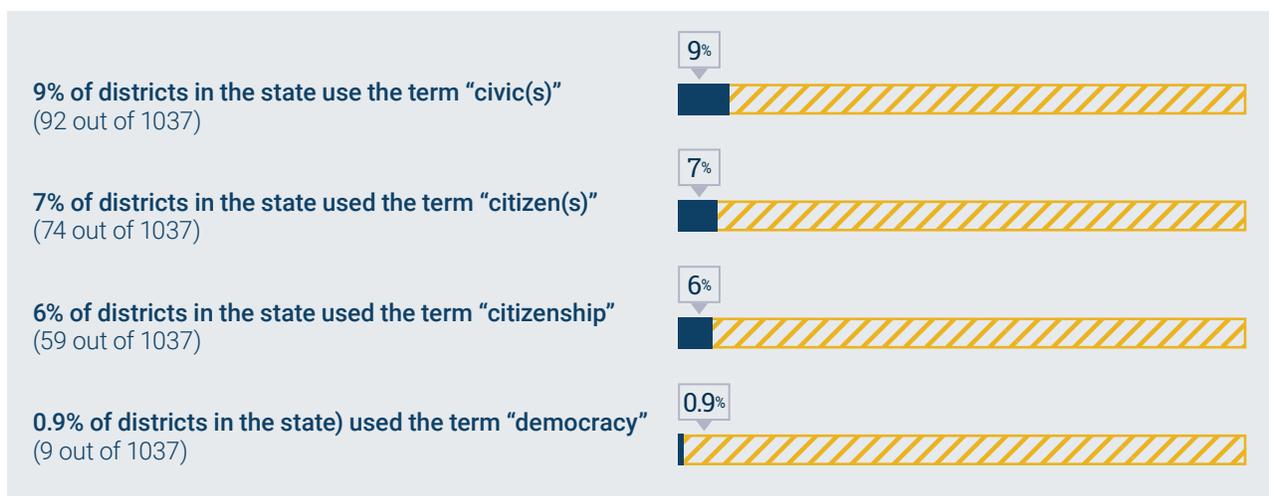
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# Civic and democratic commitments are absent from districts' accountability plans

We also assessed school districts' commitments to civic goals by analyzing Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs). Since California ushered in its Local Control Funding Formula legislation in July 2013, districts have been required to develop LCAPs that describe goals, activities, and spending plans to address state priority areas and improve outcomes, particularly for low-income students, English Language Learners, and foster youth. The LCAPs, which cover the bulk of district expenditures and most programming, are meant to be developed through ongoing public engagement with key stakeholders, including youth. LCAPs represent an important venue for districts to articulate publicly what forms of student learning and development they value, how they will advance these goals, and what investments they are making to ensure this occurs.

We were interested in how districts incorporate civic education into their LCAPs. Using a new search tool created by the Education Trust-West—what they call “LCAP Watch”—we analyzed how districts across California address civic education in their LCAPs.

**Civics or democracy is not part of LCAPs for the vast majority of districts in California.** In fact, 87% of all districts in the state did not mention any of the following terms in their 2017-18 LCAP that covered the period from 2017 through 2020: civic(s), citizen(s), citizenship, or democracy. Only 137 out of 1037 districts used at least one of these terms; in many of these 137 districts more than one of the terms was used in the LCAP.



Unfortunately, as low as these figures are, they may overstate the attention provided to these issues in LCAPs. In several instances, terms such as “democracy” and “civics” were used in ways that were not at all related to civic education or to democratic goals. For example, in two cases, districts only used the term “democracy” when referring to the name of a university research center (“UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access”) that authored a report on Linked Learning.

Some might wonder if, even though districts don't directly name civic goals, they do support practices that promote civic learning. However, we did not see much evidence of these practices in LCAPs either. For example, only 5% (58 out of 1037) of districts in the state mention service learning and 2% (21 out of 1037) mention student government in their LCAPs.

## How did districts use civic and democratic terms in their LCAPs?

**10%** of districts in the state used at least one of the terms in the context of describing *a learning goal or desired outcome* (108 out of 1037).

**8%** of districts in the state used at least one of the terms in reference to the *graduation/graduate profile or portrait* (88 out of 1037).

**5%** of districts in the state used at least one of the terms in the context of describing *a budget expenditure or investment* (i.e. curriculum, resources, staff time, PD, etc.) (52 out of 1037).

**2%** of districts in the state used at least one of the terms to note *some accomplishment, recognition, or award either for students or schools* (16 out of 1037).

**1%** of districts in the state used at least one of the terms in the context of talking about *civic learning opportunities in the classroom* (i.e. civic inquiry or research, dialogue, current events/controversial issues, action projects, community service/service learning, etc.) (12 out of 1037).

**0.8%** of districts in the state used at least one of the terms in the context of talking about *student clubs and other extracurricular activities* (8 out of 1037).

**0.6%** of districts in the state used at least one of the terms in the context of talking about *student voice and/or youth participation in decision-making* (6 out of 1037).

**0.2%** of districts in the state used at least one of the terms in the context of talking about *preparing students to participate in elections/voting* (2 out of 1037).



### In summary, it is striking that only 1 in 8 districts in California refers to civic(s), citizen(s), citizenship, or democracy in their LCAP.

And almost no districts do so in ways that touch on how young people may be prepared to participate in elections or exercise voice in their schools. What should we make of the fact that far more districts (182) use the term “cafeteria” in their LCAPS than refer to one of several terms related to preparing young people for democracy? Surely, we want our students to be healthy and well-nourished. But don't we want a healthy democracy as well?

*“We talk about [issues] and talk about doing things but we never really put our ideas into action. [Doing that] might bring a sense of community [...]. It might bring a sense of unity and obviously if we can work to fix some of the issues it will help the community or the earth.”*

— California middle school student

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## Key Finding #3

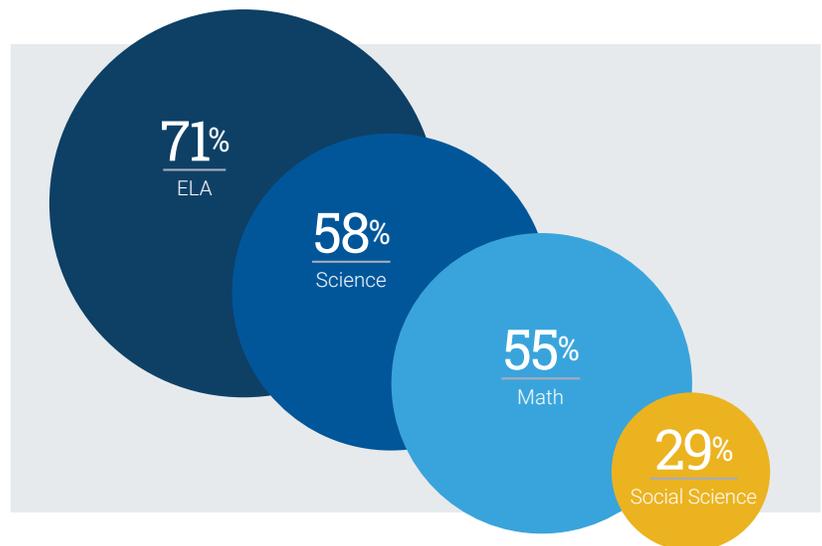
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# There is little staffing and infrastructure to support civics

Do California school districts create conditions that support democratic education? We've seen above that preparing youth for democratic engagement was rarely given substantial attention in school mission statements or in LCAPs. But do districts provide staffing and infrastructure for civic learning? To answer this question, we surveyed and interviewed 20 history-social science (HSS) curriculum specialists at both the district and county levels across California as well as examined personnel and resources dedicated to these goals on a representative sample of district websites. Clearly, civic learning reaches beyond social science and is a shared responsibility across content areas and initiatives. At the same time, social science is often the first place where investment in civic learning is made and, therefore, we explored the indications of a commitment to civics in this subject area.

In staffing and funding, school districts across the state provided little support for civic learning. One district-level HSS leader described "financial and bandwidth barriers" that constrained his ability to provide support to district teachers. Even districts that are highly regarded for civic education initiatives have limited personnel designated for this role. A social science content lead in one such district described herself as "a team of one," supporting all civic education and social science content and pedagogy support for the entire district. She also noted that other content areas in her district were supported by more substantial instructional staff: four for English Language Arts (ELA), four for math, and three for science. Multiple interview participants described folding civics into other areas that district- and county-level leadership saw as fundable priorities. As one person in a county office of education put it, "Because there's a lot of money and support for the social-emotional learning standards, [I'm] trying to tie that work in with discussing history or discussing civics." None of the district social studies leaders we interviewed said they felt fully supported in their efforts.

School districts frequently did not employ staff members whose roles were focused on supporting history, social science, or civics across the district. For example, of the 47 school districts in our representative sample, 31 posted information on their website regarding the focus of district-level instructional staff. Of these districts, 71% had at least one dedicated staff person in ELA, 55% had at least one in math, and 58% had at least one in science. In many instances, districts had two or more staff members in these subject areas. In contrast, only 29% of the districts identified a dedicated district staff person in social sciences, and no districts reported more than one staff member in this area.



**This analysis makes clear that fewer districts have staff tasked with supporting civics, history, and social science compared with staff supporting other academic areas.** The lack of district-level staff in social sciences is particularly common in small and medium-size districts. One HSS lead in a California county office of education told us that they are tasked with supporting all the HSS teachers in a very large geographic footprint because no school districts in the region had anyone providing such support. However, even county offices of education had a lower number of staff focusing on history, social science, or civics in comparison to other subject areas. By analyzing the websites for all 58 county offices of education, we found that 39 posted information regarding the focus of their instructional staff. Most of these county offices employed instructional staff across all subject areas. But, whereas more than 80% of the counties employed at least two staff in math and in science and more than 40% had two or more staff in English Language Arts, only 21% employed 2 or more staff in social sciences.

School districts across the state also did little to support professional development and curriculum related to civics. Instructional leaders indicated that few systems and structures were in place to support professional development in teaching civics or social science (especially in relation to professional development in other subject areas). Some teachers faced the additional challenge that their school administration did not provide them with release time when professional development was provided.

Our analysis of school district websites found that few had resources or links related to social science or history; some only broken links for their HSS pages. We found considerable disparities between resources available for history, social science, and civics and those available for other subject areas. Specifically, 52% of the district websites we analyzed had inferior instructional resources in HSS relative to ELA, math, and science; only 4% of districts had better instructional resources in HSS. While the absence of content on the public website alone may not necessarily indicate a parallel absence of support within the district, our analysis points to a broad pattern whereby social science is valued less than other subject areas.



*“We have a handful of teachers that are passionate about politics [...] but they only have like 150 kids. If you really want a bigger change then ...involve more teachers.” — California high school student*

# Mobilizing California's Civic Learning Assets

Whereas districts' public-facing documents demonstrate a lack of attention to and support for civic learning, there are reasons to be hopeful about the future of civic education in California. There are a range of assets -- including young people themselves, families and community members, community-based youth organizations, leading school districts, intermediaries, and state coalitions -- that can be mobilized to expand and deepen civic education in California.

## Youth

The first and most important asset is our students themselves. Young people are more politically engaged now than in recent memory. Voter turnout rates for 18-29 year olds in the 2018 midterm election grew dramatically across the county.<sup>7</sup> For example, turnout rates in California rose from 8.2% in 2014 to 30% during the 2018 midterm election.<sup>8</sup> Youth are also reporting a desire to learn about and get involved in societal issues they care about. In a districtwide survey of middle and high school students in Riverside Unified School District, for example, 77% of students agreed they would like it if their classes focused more on issues that are affecting their local community or broader society. Middle and high school students interviewed by our team in Salinas Union High School District shared a sentiment we often hear in other schools and districts: They would like opportunities to apply what they are learning to problems in everyday life. One student said, "I would say definitely try to have the students go out and participate in their community, try to make an actual difference or change. It's great that we are talking about the issues in class but I feel like we should also be doing something about it."

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*—California high school student*

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## Families And Community Members

A second vital asset is that California's public school parents and community leaders believe in the importance of civic education. For example, in the Public Policy Institute of California's spring 2020 survey, public school parents in California noted that preparing youth to be good citizens was a valued goal, comparable or higher than all other goals except preparing students for college.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, a few years ago, when we asked 50 "influential" Californians what they hope the state schools will achieve, almost every respondent spoke to the role of public schools in promoting core understandings about American civic life, preparing students to vote, and instilling civic dispositions.<sup>10</sup>

## Community-Based Youth Organizations

A third asset for civic learning is youth-serving community-based organizations (CBOs) across the state. California has a rich infrastructure of CBOs that have arisen over the last two decades. By one recent count, there are 170 such organizations in California.<sup>11</sup> There are networks of such CBOs that have deep roots in local communities and statewide presence through the support of philanthropic organizations such as The California Endowment. These CBOs represent both a critical constituency for youth civic development and a critical site for civic learning outside of school. Studies have shown that youth who participate in organizations that provide opportunities for community service, representation, speaking in public forums, and generating a communal identity are more likely to vote, perform community service, and be involved in political campaigns as adults.<sup>12</sup>

## School Districts

A fourth asset is a small number of California school districts that have made civic learning a central goal and have begun to integrate this goal throughout their programs. For example, several school districts have passed school board resolutions committing to civics. Others have integrated attention to civics in their graduate profiles, by talking about college, career, and community readiness.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, these reforming districts often view civics as interconnected with other key reform domains such as elements of the Common Core State Standards, the Next Generation Science Standards, performance assessments, Linked Learning, social-emotional learning, restorative justice, and Ethnic Studies curriculum. In these contexts, civics is not a separate pursuit but fundamentally connected with other core reform initiatives that are being advanced.

## Intermediaries

A fifth asset is nonprofit or university-based civic education organizations that serve as intermediaries, enabling districts to support school-based educators and students in civic education activities across the state. Many national nonprofit organizations, statewide groups, and community-specific organizations offer professional development, provide curricular frameworks, and/or work directly with youth on civic engagement projects. The History-Social Science Projects, located at several University of California campuses, provide professional development to social science teachers in areas including civic education.

The efforts of these intermediaries are enhanced by networks of civic education leaders within California's governmental agencies. Some county offices of education (such as in Los Angeles, Sacramento, Monterey, and many others) have organized regional or statewide civic education initiatives. In addition, the Sacramento County Office of Education has spearheaded the Content, Literacy, Inquiry, and Citizenship (CLIC) Project, which provides professional development on civic education to regional leaders. Regional CLIC Leads facilitate regional communities of practice focused on the California History-Social Science Framework within which civics is integrated.

## State Coalitions

A sixth asset is statewide coalitions or networks committed to expanding civic education in California. The California Taskforce on K-12 Civic Learning was established in 2012 by Chief Justice Cantil-Sakauye and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson. The Taskforce produced a report on the state of civic learning in California schools and the development of research-based recommendations to ensure that all California K-12 students gain the knowledge, skills, and values they need to succeed in college, career, and civic life. In addition, the Chief Justice's Office has spearheaded civic learning awards that celebrate public schools' efforts to engage students in civic learning.

The APT Working Group (formerly PACCCRAS) -- a diverse group of approximately 40 thought leaders from across the state that includes stakeholders representing PK-12, postsecondary, research, policy, advocacy, philanthropic, and educational support organizations -- has also been at the forefront of advocating for the Seal and the importance of civic readiness. These coalitions lay an important foundation in the state to support civic education efforts including the Seal.



# A New Opportunity for California: The State Seal of Civic Engagement

In addition to the assets described above, the Seal provides a new opportunity to expand civic education in California. On September 10th, 2020, the State Board of Education unanimously approved a new State Seal of Civic Engagement which local education agencies (LEAs) in California have the option to adopt starting in the 2020-2021 school year. In order to earn the Seal on their high school diploma, students will have to meet the following criteria:



1. Be engaged in academic work in a productive way;
2. Demonstrate a competent understanding of U.S. and California constitutions; functions and governance of local governments; tribal government structures and organizations; the role of the citizen in a constitutional democracy; and democratic principles, concepts, and processes;
3. Participate in one or more informed civic engagement project(s) that address real-world problems and require students to identify and inquire into civic needs or problems, consider varied responses, take action, and reflect on efforts;
4. Demonstrate civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions through self-reflection; and
5. Exhibit character traits that reflect civic-mindedness and a commitment to positively impact the classroom, school, community and/or society.

The California Department of Education has provided guidance for each of the above criteria as well as civic learning resources to support districts in determining how to implement the Seal in their local context and to ensure the Seal is accessible and inclusive. (See [www.cde.ca.gov/pd/ca/hs/hssstateseal.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/pd/ca/hs/hssstateseal.asp))

In a September 10th, 2020 press release, both State Board President Linda Darling Hammond and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond expressed the following support for the Seal:

*“The future of our democracy depends on a knowledgeable and actively engaged citizenry,” said State Board President Linda Darling-Hammond. “With this new seal, we hope to prepare all students with an empathetic concern for others, a deep understanding of democracy, and the civic engagement skills needed to contribute to the welfare of their local communities, the state, and the country.”*

*“We know that when young people activate their voices, they can be among the strongest change agents in our communities,” said State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond. “Education is the cornerstone of realizing our democratic ideals, and this new seal puts additional tools in students’ hands as they work to shape the future.”*

California students have also shared their support for the Seal. For example, a student-led organization called GenUP mobilized youth from across the state to urge the State Board of Education to approve the Seal by submitting close to 50 written public comments, producing a video, and encouraging several youth to speak during the board meeting for the verbal public comment period.

In addition, the APT Working Group has advocated for the Seal and developed a roadmap outlining four guiding principles for integrating civic learning that LEAs can draw upon. (See [www.civicseal.org](http://www.civicseal.org))

There is also reason to believe that youth-serving CBOs will be strong advocates for expanding civic learning in the context of the Seal. For example, members and leaders of several CBOs joined representatives of civic education organizations in October 2019 at a statewide convening to discuss the potential of the Seal for advancing civic education and youth civic engagement throughout California.

The Seal represents a unique opportunity to galvanize attention and support for civic education in California. Ideally, districts, youth organizations, labor unions, parent groups, community partners, the business community and more will embrace the Seal as a goal for all California students and commit to supporting high-quality civic learning across the state. Up until this point, civics has received little attention in California educational policy. Administrators are held accountable for their test scores in English Language Arts and math, and thus schools' attention is drawn to these subject areas. While we are not advocating for high stakes testing in civics, it is important to find formal mechanisms for recognizing students' civic accomplishments. Thus, the Seal provides an opportunity to move this agenda to the forefront in a more substantive way and increase students' access to high-quality civic learning.

## Taking Advantage of this New Opportunity

A majority of the HSS county and district leads who we surveyed and interviewed agreed that the Seal will help promote the importance of civic learning in their district. However, district leaders also expressed concern about the lack of support to implement the Seal in a high-quality and equitable manner. One district leader emphasized how important it will be to ensure that the Seal "doesn't turn into just another way for students who are already set up and geared to be successful—in terms of graduation and college and career readiness—to get accolades while those that are potentially struggling academically but may show some promise in the civic engagement arena might not have that same recognition."

Moreover, relatively few of those we spoke to believed that the students in their district are being exposed to a wide variety of civic learning opportunities that will enable them to earn the Seal upon graduation. When asked what kinds of supports or resources would help their district roll out the Seal in an effective way, respondents we spoke to indicated that the following would be helpful:



# Recommendations for Moving Forward

We began this report with a quote by John Dewey that spoke to the need for democracy to be born again in every generation and the central role that education plays in this process. This generation of youth face urgent challenges that demand public action -- racial injustice, climate crises, and a global pandemic. Yet our civic and political life are characterized by division and distrust in democratic institutions. There is a clear need to prepare youth to engage thoughtfully and powerfully with societal issues. Promoting civic learning in a period of increased political polarization and misinformation will be challenging for public schools. But ignoring these forces is not an option for a democratic society. California needs a concerted initiative to support the democratic aims of education.

Our data has shown that there are gaps as well as assets with regards to democratic education in K-12 districts in California. A systemic commitment and investment in civic learning is needed in order to ensure that all students have access to high-quality civic learning and open up pathways for students to attain the Seal. Clearly, advancing this agenda is a multi-year project and one that will need support from multiple sectors. Young people themselves, families, community members, community-based youth organizations, intermediaries, the business community, and civic leaders all have an important role to play in advocating and promoting civic learning in schools and community spaces. And public action is needed at the state and local level.



*“Every subject matter has an avenue to talk about civics because politics is literally everything. [...] Civic[s] is a part of us. We all have experiences to teach, the students have experiences. We have a wealth of knowledge.”*

*—California middle school teacher*

## State Level Action

We present four recommendations for state-level action.

First, California should highlight the civic purposes of public schooling by **designating democratic education as a priority area that districts address in their Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs)**. The legislature should direct the State Board of Education (SBE) to add civic learning as a core priority area for districts to consider in developing their LCAP. The principle of local control means that LEAs make their own decisions about planning and budget. But every district should consider how its schools will strengthen democracy through civic programming and investment in staffing. The state will encourage this reflection by including civic education in the LCAP template.

Second, the SBE in conjunction with the California Department of Education (CDE) should **consider adopting indicators of authentic civic learning as part of the California School Dashboard**. Civic learning indicators can provide more expansive evi-

dence of students' preparedness for college/career and likely success after graduation. Authentic indicators that assess students' civic knowledge and skills in the context of meaningful practices -- such as completing a standardized capstone project or portfolio, developing a written or multimedia demonstration of civic literacy, or fulfilling a civics performance task -- can help the public understand what students are learning and enable the state and LEA's to monitor progress over time. However, we caution the state from relying on a standardized assessment, such as a multiple choice exam like the citizenship test, that will only assess limited aspects of students' civic knowledge.

Third, the state should **support robust and equitable implementation of the Seal** by developing a robust state clearinghouse and a process for documenting and learning from the reform. CDE should establish a clearinghouse that will include resources on civic education best practices, as well as tools such as model school board resolutions and rubrics aligned

to the Seal criteria. CDE should also convene early adopter districts to share lessons learned via webinars or conferences. In addition, CDE should work with university partners to begin to document best practices in the early implementation of the Seal. Such an external evaluation—which might be supported through private philanthropy—should focus attention on identifying best practices and assessing equitable access to critical civic learning opportunities.

Fourth, the **Governor and Secretary of State, in conjunction with the legislature, SBE, and CDE, should convene a task force to develop a master plan for civic learning in California.** The task force should identify goals, develop a plan, and support professional learning. The task force will want to consider the role of existing networks for professional learning -- such as the state subject matter projects, county offices of education (COEs), as well as civic education organizations -- who are well positioned to build the civic education capacity of district leaders and educators in their respective regions.

## Local Level Action

If, as former Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neil suggests, "all politics is local," then so too is all civic education. New state policies must thus be paired with energetic action at the local level that ensures civic education shapes the experiences of all California students. It can't simply occur in a few innovative schools or classrooms.

County offices of education will play an important role in advancing local level action, lifting up the importance of this agenda, and bolstering professional development. There is a risk that civic education will be seen as the responsibility solely of the social sciences. County offices can help districts develop plans to make explicit links between civic priorities and subjects as varied as art, science, and Ethnic Studies. COEs function as key learning sites for the adults in the K-12 system and therefore can help advance not only a commitment to civic learning, but also the "know-how" needed to implement high-quality civic education. This is especially true in rural areas of the state where local school districts may not have staffing dedicated to history, social science or civics.

Of course, school districts will be central to advancing systemic attention to democratic education so all students have access. One important step forward for districts will be to adopt the Seal. But to realize the promise of the Seal and advance civic learning for all students, districts need a comprehensive reform strategy, which we describe below. We envision these steps (or phases) as iterative and informed by professional and public dialogue. For each phase, we pose a set of questions for reflection, deliberation, and action.

# Phase #1

## Identify Civic and Democratic Goals via Public Deliberation & Input

The first phase that school districts can undertake is to identify valued civic and democratic goals by drawing a range of voices into a process of public input and deliberation. This process should include students, educators, school and district leaders, school board and community members. And participants should reflect the diversity of the community. Next, these aims must be articulated in some public fashion so that the district and the community can revisit the goals and reflect upon progress. Such formal measures also assure educators that civic learning will remain a valued priority, even as leadership changes inevitably occur. While our analyses found that very few school districts have made an explicit commitment to civic education, efforts such as developing a school board resolution or including civic and democratic aims in the district mission statement or graduate profile help pave the way for this agenda to be recognized in meaningful ways.

### Phase 1 Questions

What civic and democratic goals does our community value?

What kind of civic and democratic education is important for us to provide for our students?

How will we communicate those aims via public statements such as our mission statement, vision, graduate profile, school board resolution, and/or LCAP?

Where are there overlaps and alignment with our other aims for students?

What would it take to achieve these aims in a robust and equitable manner?

# Phase #2

## Dedicate Staffing & Convene Stakeholder Support

In the second phase, we recommend that districts ensure there is staffing and stakeholder support to guide the implementation of the district's stated civic goals. Depending on the size of the district, staffing may include a civic learning champion in the central office or a team of district staff who may be situated in the social science department, Linked Learning office, or service learning/community engagement arena, for example, and can advance a district commitment to civic learning as part of their roles and responsibilities.

In addition to the civic learning champion(s), it is also helpful to establish a stakeholder or advisory committee that will advocate for and give feedback on civic plans and initiatives. Such committees can model linguistically and culturally inclusive public engagement and reflective deliberation. Our scan found that school districts across the state provided little support for civic learning via staffing, infrastructure, and funding. Without sufficient staffing and support, civic and democratic goals will remain rhetorical with no substance.

### Phase 2 Questions

How much staffing support is needed to implement the district's civic goals in a robust and equitable manner?

Which staff member or team/department in the district office is best positioned to carry forward the civic aims of the district?

Does this person or team have the capacity to add these responsibilities to their role? How might things be organized to make this manageable?

What specific role can a stakeholder or advisory committee play to advocate and move the civic goals forward in the district?

Who would be an asset to this committee and can help bolster civic efforts in the district? Whose voices should be part of the group (i.e. students, teachers, family members, community members)?

# Phase #3

## Assess & Plan the Implementation of Civic & Democratic Goals

For the third phase, we recommend districts assess the landscape of civic learning opportunities schools and the surrounding community. The civic learning champion(s), alongside the stakeholder committee, can complete an inventory of the civic learning opportunities and programs that exist, who has access to them, where inequities might arise, the quality of such programs, and what barriers or constraints stand in the way. Every district will have some civic efforts that they can recognize and build on, while, at the same time, it will be key for districts to evaluate to what degree these efforts are sufficient to reach their aims and whether all students have access to these opportunities. Next, we recommend that districts draw on this inventory to develop a districtwide civic engagement plan that will indicate strategic efforts to integrate and align civic learning with other district goals and efforts. The plan should also include steps to provide students with civic learning opportunities that will enable them to earn the Seal. Finally, students need to have a voice and a role in the process of planning and implementation.

### Phase 3 Questions

What civic learning opportunities and programs exist in the district? Who has access to them? Where might inequities exist? What is the quality of such programs?

What civic learning opportunities are most important to young people in this district?

How will students access a range of civic learning opportunities early and often that will enable them to earn the Seal of Civic Engagement?

What are the steps we will take in the next year, 3 years and 5 years to reach our districtwide civic learning goals?

What professional development and supports will be needed to build the capacity of district staff, school leaders, and educators in civic learning?

How will students, families, external partners, and community assets be an integral part of shaping and implementing our plan?

# Phase #4

## Implement, Reflect, and Repeat

In the fourth phase, districts should implement their plans and draw upon evidence to reflect on such efforts. Districts can use evidence-based tools for assessing students' exposure to civic learning opportunities and civic outcomes, as well as students' access to civic learning opportunities. Surveys, focus groups, interviews with students, teachers, families, and school leaders can provide the district with needed information to evaluate progress, gaps, challenges, as well as recommended changes to civic education efforts and the districtwide civic engagement plan. Such data will inform the civic learning champion(s), the stakeholder committee, and the broader public as they participate in a continuous improvement cycle -- gathering information, reflecting on efforts, and refining and expanding efforts moving forward. In addition, it will be important during this phase for districts to recognize exemplary instances of civic learning by students, teachers, and/or schools in order to draw attention to the importance of civic education. This can take the form of demonstration schools, a districtwide showcase, an awards ceremony, or a video about civic learning across the district -- anything to raise awareness about high-quality approaches and illustrate the various avenues. Also, celebrating the students who earn the Seal of Civic Engagement will be another way that districts can lift up inspiring examples and models of youth civic engagement.

### Phase 4 Questions

How will we know we have been successful? How will we evaluate our efforts on a regular basis and over time?

Whose voices and experiences are key to understand to determine whether we are reaching our aims in a robust and equitable manner?

Are young people developing the civic capacities, commitments, and skills we care about most?

Have all segments of our community participated in and benefited from our civic learning activities?

What evidence-based tools can we use to learn and understand the frequency, quality, and equitable distribution of civic learning in the district?

How might we embed questions about civic learning into other district-wide data collection efforts to lessen the burden?

When and how will we reflect on what we have found and refine our plans on a regular basis to continue to move the work forward?

# Conclusion

2020 has been an incredibly difficult year for all Californians. But, we see hopeful signs as well -- particularly in the civic energy of California's youth. The role of public schools in California is to create conditions that support young people, and to do so in an equitable and inclusive fashion. In the wake of an unprecedented national election and a range of crises from a global pandemic, raging wildfires, and widespread protests in response to racial injustice, schools have both an opportunity and an obligation to respond. They can play a critical role by preparing and supporting youth in navigating through these highly unstable times.

In light of these conditions, it is particularly concerning that our study highlighted both an alarming degree of inattention to the democratic mission of schools and a general lack of support for civic learning across the state. Civic and democratic goals are marginal to school districts' mission statements and civics or democracy are not part of LCAPs for the vast majority of districts in California. There is little staffing and infrastructure that supports civic learning.

At the same time, there are a range of school and community assets that we can mobilize as well as a remarkable opportunity to elevate renewed youth civic engagement through California's new Seal of Civic Engagement. State actors, county leaders, school districts, educators, youth, families, and communities all have an important role to play in reclaiming the democratic purposes of public education. Working together, we can ensure that all California youth develop the knowledge, skills, and capacities needed to participate fully and effectively in civic and political life. Our collective future depends upon it.



# Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup> Emphasis added. <https://law.justia.com/constitution/california/article-ix/section-1/>
- <sup>3</sup> Campbell, D. E. (2019) What Social Scientists Have Learned About Civic Education: A Review of the Literature. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 94:1, 32-47, DOI: 10.1080/0161956X.2019.1553601; Gould, J., Jamieson, K. H., Levine, P., McConnell, T., & Smith, D. B. (2011). *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*. Philadelphia: Lenore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center and the Civic Mission of Schools: Philadelphia.
- <sup>4</sup> Kawashima-Ginsberg, K. "Do Discussion, Debate, and Simulations Boost NAEP Civics Performance?" *Circle Fact Sheet, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)*. 2013. Kahne, J. and Middaugh, E.. "Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School." *Circle Working Paper 59, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)*. 2008.
- <sup>5</sup> This data collection spanned the period right before school closures and into shelter in place because of COVID-19 and hence our efforts to learn from districts were shaped by those limitations.
- <sup>6</sup> This pattern holds with charter schools as well. We examined a diverse set of charter school and charter management organizations websites in California and also analyzed their mission statements.
- <sup>7</sup> CIRCLE/Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University, using Census Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement data 1974-2018.
- <sup>8</sup> <https://www.kqed.org/news/10429365/californias-2014-voter-turnout-was-even-worse-than-you-thought>
- <sup>9</sup> Baldassare, M., Bonner, D., Dykman, A., and Lawler, R. (April 2020). *Californians and Education*. San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California.
- <sup>10</sup> Rogers, J., Bertrand, M., and Perez, W. (2012). *Finding Common Ground in Education Values: Influential Californians Speak On The Purpose Of Public Education*. Los Angeles: UCLA IDEA.
- <sup>11</sup> Terriquez, V. (2019). *The California Endowment's Youth Power Infrastructure: An Overview of Youth-Serving Organizations and Intermediaries It Supports*. Santa Cruz, California: Institute for Social Transformation. [https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/TCE\\_Youth\\_Infrastructure\\_Report.December\\_2019.FINAL.pdf](https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/TCE_Youth_Infrastructure_Report.December_2019.FINAL.pdf)
- <sup>12</sup> McFarland, D. and Thomas, R. "Bowling Young: How Youth Voluntary Associations Influence Adult Political Participation." *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 3 (2006): 401–425.; Also see, Smith, E. "The Effects of Investments in the Social Capital of Youth on Political and Civic Behavior in Young Adulthood: A Longitudinal Analysis." *Political Psychology* 20, no. 3 (1999).
- <sup>13</sup> You can learn more about the integration of democratic aims into Oakland Unified School District's graduate profile in this article: "[Oakland's Graduate Profile: A Spotlight on What Matters Most.](#)"

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