

# The LEADE Initiative

## What Is Civic Learning?

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, or petitioning).<sup>1</sup> There are many practices that directly improve the quality and effectiveness of civic learning in schools,<sup>2</sup> including civic action projects; digital literacy education and engagement; classroom instruction in government, history, law and democracy; discussion of current events; service-learning; extra-curricular or co-curricular activities; student voice in school governance; and simulations of democratic processes.

## The LEADE Framework

Drawing on these practices and research in the field, the Leveraging Equity and Access in Democratic Education (LEADE) framework of civic learning aims to promote ***civic knowledge, civic associations, and civic action***. The LEADE framework also posits that high-quality civic learning is ***information rich, critical and strategic, participatory, culturally responsive, and reflective***.

### Core Civic Learning Domains

#### **Civic Knowledge:**

Principles of American democracy, substantive information about important policy issues, procedural information about how to effect social and political change, and the operation and distribution of influence. Development of civic knowledge can foster the understanding necessary for informed participation in public deliberation, community problem solving, voting, participation on juries, etc.

#### **Civic Associations:**

Membership in voluntary groups in which people share information, deepen relationships, and take action to address common concerns. In a pluralistic society, civic associations are formed through mutual interests or shared identities but at times also foster connections with diverse community members. Civic Associations can promote the ability to work jointly with others to identify, investigate, and represent shared interests and concerns.

#### **Civic Action:**

Work to improve and/or transform public policies, prevailing institutions, and social practices. Such engagement can expand commitments to and understandings of how to participate strategically in changing social and political conditions. In addition, civic action can also help develop one's efficacy and sense of civic agency.

<sup>1</sup> Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Gould, Jonathan, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Peter Levine, Ted McConnell, and David B. Smith, eds. *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, 2011.

## Key Qualities of Civic Learning

**Information Rich.** Powerful civic learning presents youth with knowledge to deepen their understanding of the structure and function of American political institutions, social and political issues, and civil rights and responsibilities. To be informed civic actors, young people need to develop the skills and capacities to access information from a range of sources, assess the credibility and reliability of claims and evidence, examine data regarding societal problems, acquire historical understanding, and seek out and consider multiple perspectives.

**Critical & Strategic.** Robust civic learning also enables youth to critically analyze the information and evidence they gather as well as determine strategic ways to go about responding to the issues at hand. These include opportunities to analyze root causes of problems, ask questions about morality and fairness, explore issues of inequality and injustice, assess sources of power and influence, and weigh the strategies and tactics a group or collective can enact.

**Participatory.** High-quality civic learning opportunities are participatory in that they encourage youth to: identify issues that matter to them, take ownership over their learning, be part of a group or collective endeavor, shape the course of action, take on leadership roles, and engage in meaningful decision making in partnership with others.

**Culturally Responsive.** Civic learning that is “culturally responsive” attends to the ways in which history, social context, culture, religion, and identity shape the experience of civic life. Civic learning opportunities should draw on young people’s lived experiences, funds of knowledge, and interests in order to incorporate a wide-range of civic experiences and to motivate a diverse cross-section of youth.

**Reflective.** High-quality civic learning experiences also include ongoing opportunities for young people to reevaluate their thinking and beliefs, consider civic and political issues in new and different ways, contemplate their role in a group or collective, and explore their own identity and agency as civic actors.

### Where Does Civic Learning Occur?

Civic learning takes place in a range of settings. LEADE works with districts and communities to collect data about students’ civic learning opportunities inside and outside of school.

### Why Civic Learning?

Research shows that a variety of civic learning opportunities, delivered both in and out of school, can foster greater and more informed civic and political engagement among all youth, and in particular among youth from low-income families, youth of color, and immigrant youth. Indeed, high-quality approaches to civic learning also appear likely to promote the skills needed for the 21st century workplace, such as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, initiative, and innovation. In addition, it can improve school climate and safety, lower schools’ dropout rates, and promote academic achievement aligned with the Common Core State Standards.