

RESEARCH ON THE IMPACT OF CIVIC LEARNING

By the [Leveraging Equity & Access in Democratic Education \(LEADE\) Initiative](#)

In addition to promoting informed civic and political participation, high quality civic learning opportunities have also been found to support youth's participation in their school and community. In this brief overview, we identify important youth outcomes that are fostered by particular types of civic learning experiences.

Promoting Democratic Aims and Productive Collaboration

- Engaging in Discussions of Current and Controversial Issues has been shown to **promote engagement with political issues and elections**.¹
- Curriculum tied to developing and using argumentative reasoning skills has been found to enhance the quality of students' arguments and their **awareness of the relevance of evidence**.²
- Studies show that focusing on consensus building while teaching argumentative discourse can support students in **discussing and incorporating viewpoints different than their own**.³
- And studies of youth engagement in service learning projects have shown a number of positive outcomes, such as **promoting youth taking expressive and further action in their communities**,⁴ as well as 1) **broader social trust**, 2) **respectful engagement**, 3) **the development of collaborative action/engagement skills**, 4) **opportunities for youth agency**, 5) **social relatedness**, and 6) **political-moral understanding**.⁵

Building a Positive School Climate

- The benefits of civic learning extend well beyond civic and democratic aims. Because high quality civic learning opportunities encourage teamwork, collaboration, problem-solving, and respectful dialogue with peers, we believe that instilling a culture of civic learning can support schools in building a **positive school climate**.
- School with positive school-wide civics cultures have the potential to promote norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe; support a **sense of unity and cohesion in the school** as a community; promote a **culture of respect**; and encourage students to consider themselves stakeholders in the school's success.
- Other studies have shown how students who attend schools with positive school climates can develop a **positive sense of belonging, connection to peers, trust in institutions**, and, eventually, healthier engagement in the broader society and its democratic system.⁶

Increasing Student Engagement

- Early and ongoing civic learning opportunities have also been found to **increase students' chances of both staying in school, and being more engaged whilst in school**. For example, 9th grade students who experienced an Ethnic Studies curriculum in San Francisco that emphasized many civics-oriented components such as a attention to social justice, discrimination, and social movements as well as service learning and the study of their community showed **higher GPA, better attendance rate, and more credits earned** than their peers who did not experience the curriculum.⁷

¹ Kahne, J. Crow, D., L, N-J. (2013) Different pedagogy, different politics: High school learning opportunities and youth political engagement. *Political Psychology* (34), 3, 419-441.

² Kuhn, D., & Crowell, A. (2011). Dialogic argumentation as a vehicle for developing young adolescents' thinking. *Psychological Science*, 22(4), 545-552.

³ Felton, M., Garcia-Milla, M., Villarroel, C., & Gilabert, S. (2015). Arguing collaboratively: Argumentative discourse types and their potential for knowledge building. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 85, 372-376.

⁴ Kahne, J. Crow, D., L, N-J. (2013) Different pedagogy, different politics: High school learning opportunities and youth political engagement. *Political Psychology* (34), 3, 419-441.

⁵ Youniss, J., & Yates, M. (1997). *Community service and social responsibility in youth*. University of Chicago Press.

⁶ Flanagan, C. A., Bowes, J. M., Jonsson, B., Csapo, B., & Sheblanova, E. (1998). Ties that bind. *Journal of social issues*, 54(3), 457-475.

⁷ Dee, Thomas S. and Emily K. Penner. "The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance: Evidence from an Ethnic Studies Curriculum. *American Educational Research Journal* (Published online November 24, 2016): 1-40.

- In addition, Middaugh (2015) found that when students had opportunities to learn how to become involved in politics and how to work collaboratively to research and take action on issues of interest to them, they were significantly more likely to report feeling more engaged in/with school.⁸
- Finally, taking courses that require community service and participating in student government have been found to predict **high school graduation and college attendance and success**.

Developing 21st Century Skills

- There is increased consensus among leaders in industry, education, and government that young people need to develop the following types of competencies and skills to be successful in the rapidly changing economy of the 21st century: basic knowledge of economic and political processes; skills in understanding what is presented in the media; the ability to work well with others; positive attitudes about working hard and obeying the law; creativity and innovation; the ability to engage in discussion that leads to innovative and effective civic action in the community.¹⁰

Supporting Civic Media Literacy

- According to a study by the Stanford History Education Group, the majority of middle and high school students surveyed did not know how to discern whether online media content came from reliable sources.¹¹ Given that today, most young people (and adults!) get their information about the world through online sources, including social media, it is imperative that students are taught how to evaluate the credibility and accuracy of online material.
- Teaching media literacy has been documented to promote both **increased online political engagement and exposure to diverse viewpoints**.¹²
- In addition, teaching media literacy has been found to **increase the likelihood that students will correctly distinguish between accurate and inaccurate online content**.¹³

Ultimately, enhancing the quality and equitable distribution of high-quality civic learning opportunities will have benefits that extend beyond the scope of what can be measured. However, based on research in the field, there is strong evidence that high quality civic learning opportunities will:

- **Encourage more youth to embrace a set of civic commitments** -- for example, to volunteer, follow the news, participate in community problem-solving activities, and participate in electoral politics -- as young adults.
- **Lead more youth to be participatory, reflective, informed, critical, strategic, and feel more connected to and/or responsible for their communities.**
- **Promote the holistic development of young people.** The culturally responsive, participatory, and applied nature of such experiences suggests that through these experiences, more students will be increasingly engaged in their education generally, as well as support the building of knowledge, understanding, and skills that may well carry over into other realms of academic achievement and socio-emotional learning.
- **Promote academic engagement** – and there is strong reason to believe that engagement will support improved academic performance.
- **Promote media literacy** – the ability to thoughtfully consume and produce media.

⁸ Middaugh, E. (2015). Supporting school engagement in Oakland high schools [EDDA Research Summary No. 3].

⁹ Alberto Dávila and Marie Mora, "CIRCLE Working Paper 52: Civic Engagement and High School Academic Progress: An Analysis Using NELS Data," (2007).

¹⁰ www.CivicYouth.org

¹¹ https://www.aft.org/ae/fall2017/mcgrew_ortega_breakstone_wineburg

¹² Kahne, J., Feezell, J., & Lee, N. (2012). Digital Media Literacy Education and Online Civic and Political Participation. *International Journal of Communication* 6, 1-24.

¹³ Kahne, J. & B.T. Bowyer (2017). Civic Education in a Partisan Age: Confronting the Challenges of Motivated Reasoning and Misinformation. *American Educational Research Journal*. 54(1), 3-34.