

Reclaiming the Democratic Purpose of California's Public Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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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.

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.