



California's Commitment to K-12 Civic Learning

A 2022 Assessment



**By Erica Hodgins, Samia Alkam,
Yvette Conde, and Joseph Kahne**

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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/>

Introduction

California has taken important steps to reclaim the democratic purpose of the state’s public schools. However, further progress is needed to ensure all students in California have access to high-quality democratic education and to meet the continuing challenges of today. Throughout American history, public schools have been charged with preparing youth for participation in our democracy. In fact, the California constitution highlights public education as “essential to the preservation of rights and liberties” (Article IX).

Across California, there are many stresses on societal well-being and democracy. Young people and communities are suffering from the deep and lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate crises, social inequality, growth in expressions of racism and hate, and highly politicized attacks on public schools.

In this landscape, engaging young people in learning about, discussing, and responding to societal issues is more important than ever. Research has demonstrated that a variety of civic learning opportunities, delivered both in and out of school, can foster greater and more informed civic and political engagement.ⁱ Research has also shown that civic education raises young people’s knowledge, skills, and dispositions and supports them in becoming active citizens as adults.ⁱⁱ However, the civic education necessary to support informed and active participation in civic and political life is not available to all young people.ⁱⁱⁱ This inequitable distribution of civic learning opportunities is particularly common in schools serving low-income communities, communities of color, and immigrant communities.^{iv}

In 2020, a group of scholars from the Leveraging Equity and Access in Democratic Education (LEADE) initiative—a collaboration between the University of California, Riverside and the University of California, Los Angeles—assessed the degree to which school districts in California focused on and devoted resources to civic priorities. We surveyed and interviewed district officials, examined Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs), and analyzed a representative sample of mission statements from district websites. We found the following:

- ▶ **Civic and democratic goals are marginal to districts’ mission statements.** More than five million of California’s approximately six million students attend schools in districts that do not articulate a substantial focus on civic education.
- ▶ **Civic and democratic commitments are absent from districts’ LCAPs.** Only 13% of all districts in the state referenced civic(s), citizen(s), citizenship, or democracy in their LCAP. Fewer still specifically mention civics when discussing learning goals or specified investments for civic education.
- ▶ **Little staffing and infrastructure exists to support this civic agenda.** 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. According to district websites, schools employed more than twice the staffing for each of the other major disciplines of math, English language arts, and science.^v

Findings from *Reclaiming the Democratic Purpose of California’s Public Schools*

This research brief examines the extent to which California has made progress in supporting the democratic purpose of its public schools since our previous study. To do so, we conducted the following analyses:

- 1. We examined the Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) and mission statements** from a representative sample of districts to determine the extent to which civic priorities were included.
- 2. We also compared 2020 and 2022 LCAP plans of districts** in the same representative sample to see whether a larger or smaller number of districts prioritized civics.
- 3. Finally, we assessed the features of the California districts that adopted the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE)** in its first two years of implementation in comparison to the rest of the state.

The California State Board of Education approved the SSCE—an initiative awarding students who have demonstrated excellence in civics with a seal on their diploma—in 2020 after our original study was complete. The analysis we completed in this study helps shed light on the extent to which this new civic initiative is accessible throughout the state and how the landscape has changed since it was approved. We also propose several important steps the state of California can take to further commit to civic and democratic goals and critical questions that districts can consider when implementing civic engagement efforts in order to fully promote high-quality and equitable civic learning.

Representative Sample of Districts

We analyzed an equally representative sample of 46 public school districts in California, and we weighted the districts based on size as follows:

- ▶ 10,000+ students: all districts
- ▶ 5,000–10,000 students: every other district
- ▶ 2,500–5,000 students: every 4th district
- ▶ 1,000–2,500 students: every 10th district
- ▶ 100–1,000 students: every 25th district
- ▶ 0–100 students: did not include



KEY FINDING #1: The priority placed on civic and democratic goals in California districts' mission statements appears to have increased slightly.

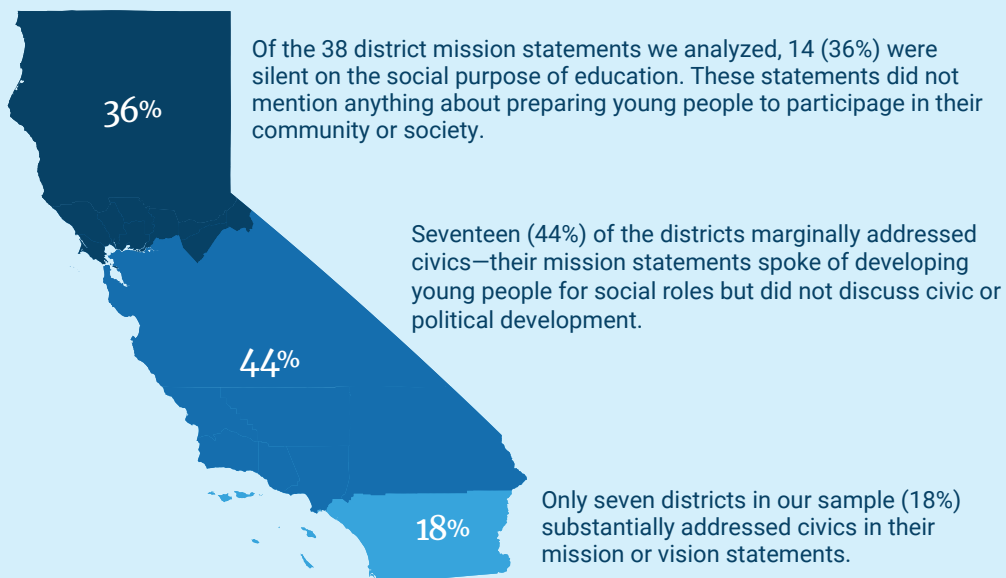
Local education agencies (LEAs) or school districts play a central role in public school governance. They are tasked with shaping priorities, making budget decisions and staffing allocations, as well as disseminating important educational information to the wider community. As such, we sought to explore the priorities that were emphasized within California school districts' mission and vision statements found on district websites, to aid our understanding of the democratic purpose of schooling.

Mission statements convey district goals for student learning, and within these statements, we identified the extent to which democratic learning was emphasized. Of our representative sample of 46 school districts in California, we found that 38 posted a mission and/or vision statement on their website. Further analysis of these 38 websites revealed that districts' mention of civics varied with respect to the emphasis placed on democratic learning. Mission statements that only generally commented on the social purpose of schooling, including comments such as, "inspiring purposeful leaders" or "become a productive community member," were coded as only marginally addressing civics. Districts that explicitly spoke to preparing young people for civic and political life were coded as substantially addressing civics. For example, two districts that substantially addressed civics noted the following:

Ukiah Unified School District: "We will challenge and inspire our students to value different perspectives and become successful, contributing citizens in an increasingly interdependent world."

Anaheim Union High School District: "The Anaheim Union High School District, in partnership with the greater community, will graduate socially aware, civic-minded students who are life ready by cultivating the soft and hard skills."

Percentage of Districts in Our Sample That Made Mention of Civics in Their Mission/Vision Statements



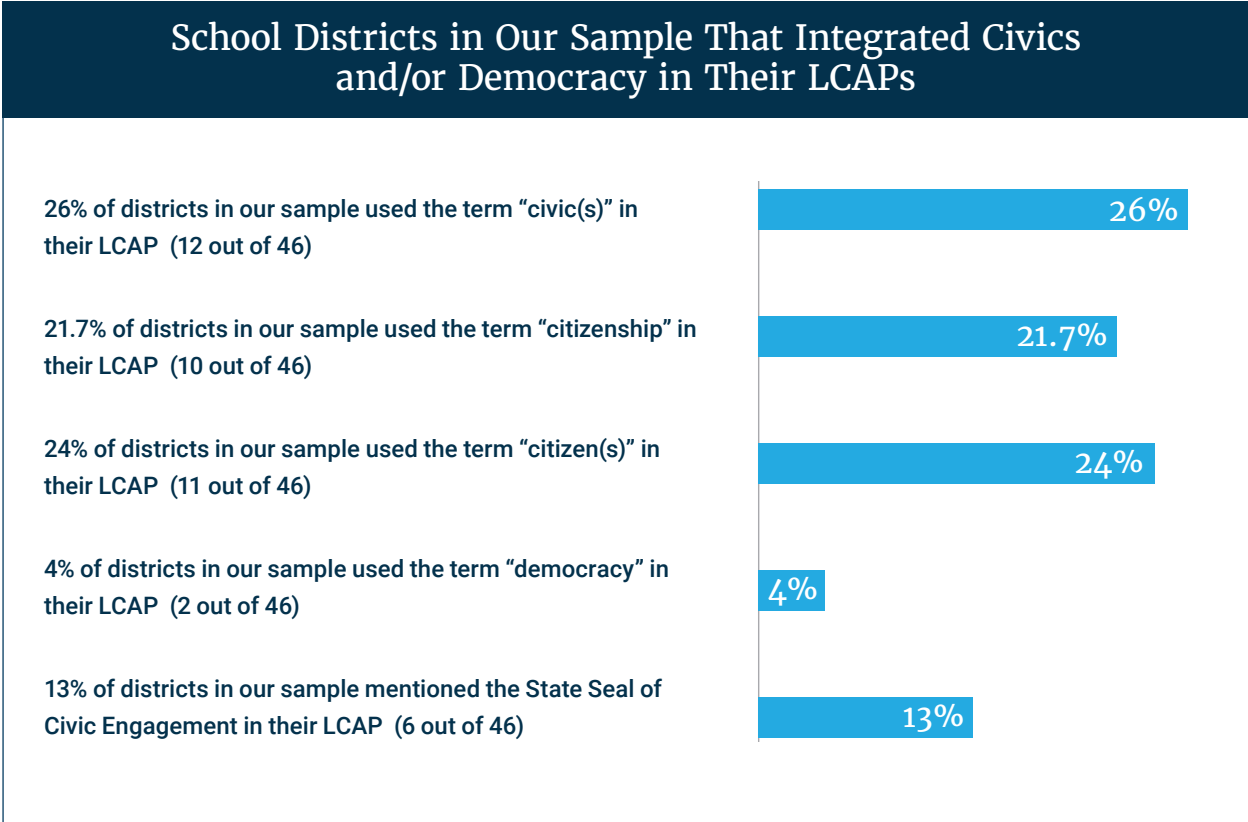
Overall, these findings indicate modest growth in attention to democratic education between 2020 and 2022. Between 2020 and 2022, the percent of districts whose mission statement included substantial attention to civics increased from 15% to 18%. At the same time, the percent of districts whose mission statement made no mention of the social purpose of schooling at all, decreased from 41% in 2020 to 36% in 2022. The percentage of districts that only marginally addressed civics remained constant from 2020 to 2022. This analysis suggests that **civic education remains a low priority within the state's public schools.**



KEY FINDING #2: Districts’ accountability plans have gradually integrated civic and democratic commitments.

Along with the analysis of district mission and vision statements, we evaluated the extent to which districts are committed to civic and democratic goals by analyzing the Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) of a representative sample of 46 California school districts. LCAPs provide insight into the priorities, values, and goals of school districts and signal the extent to which districts have invested resources, professional development, or funding to support their democratic mission. LCAPs were implemented after the state of California introduced the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) legislation in July 2013. Since then, California school districts have been required to develop three-year plans called LCAPs to indicate their goals, activities, and spending plans to address state priority areas and improve outcomes, particularly for low-income students, English language learners, and foster youth.

We searched the 2022–2023 LCAPs of the 46 school districts in our sample for the following terms: **civics, citizen, citizenship, democracy, and the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE)**. We also examined the context within which these terms were mentioned. This study serves as a follow-up to our previous analysis of California district LCAPs in 2020 where we found that civic and democratic commitments were absent from districts’ accountability plans. Two years later, we assessed the extent to which these same districts have improved their commitment to civic ideals in their schools and whether there was any indication of their support of the newly minted SSCE.



We found that there was a notable increase in the integration of civics and democracy in districts' LCAPs.¹ Since 2020, there has been more than a threefold increase (from 17% to 54%) in the proportion of districts in our sample that mention civics and democracy. Still, only around half of the districts in the sample address at least one of the civics-related terms in their LCAP. Twenty-one of the 46 districts made no mention of any of the terms that were listed.

A majority of the districts in our sample (80%) did use these terms in the context of describing a teaching or learning outcome. For example, Downey Unified School District indicated that one of their key learning goals is to “equip students with the 21st Century learning skills of creativity, communication, collaboration, critical thinking and civic responsibility.”

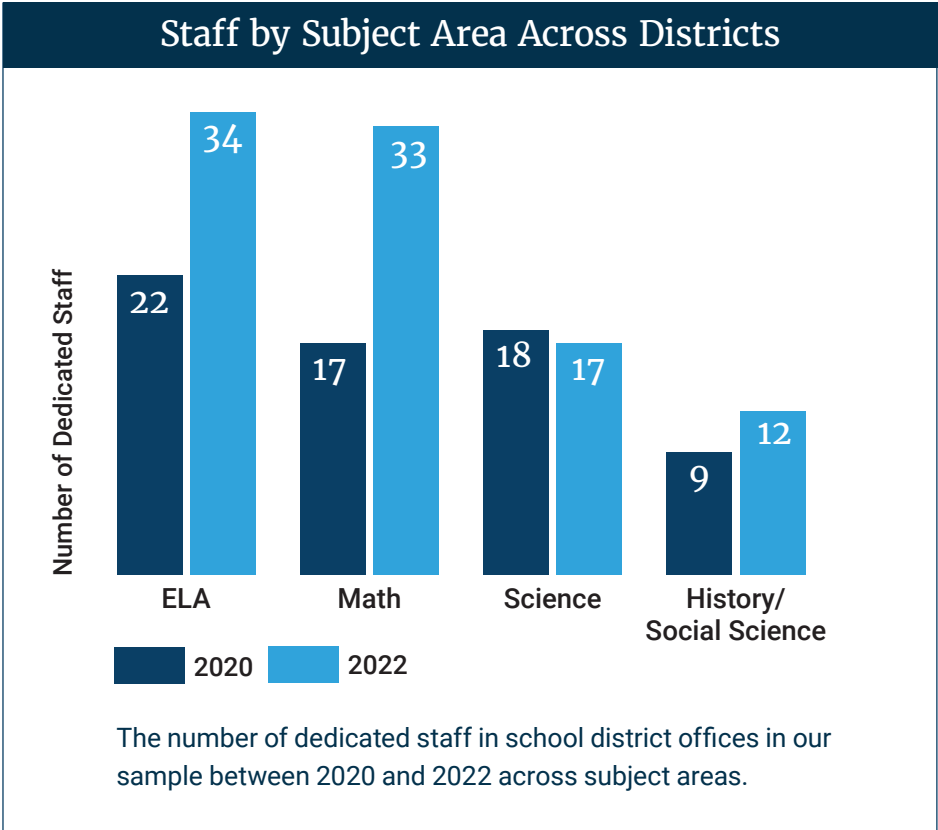
In contrast to the 2020 study, the launch of the SSCE allowed us to search for a specific civic initiative in the district LCAPs. **However, only six (13%) of the districts that referenced one of our search terms mentioned the SSCE in their LCAPs.** Two of these were in reference to a budget expenditure and the other four discussed their aim to increase the number of students who attain the SSCE. For example, Central Unified School District noted in their LCAP that, “The district will begin to structure local requirements for a student to pursue the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE) using the criteria set forward by the CDE as a foundation. Central USD will develop criteria considering its own local context to ensure maximum accessibility for all students, at all grade levels, including those in alternative school settings.” Overall, however, the small percentage of districts noting the SSCE in their LCAPs signals the need to further promote and support this opportunity.



KEY FINDING #3: There is still comparatively less staffing supporting history, social science, and civic agendas than English Language Arts, math, and science.

Understanding the staffing and infrastructure dedicated to History-Social Science (HSS) is another helpful indicator of the kind of support put toward civics in districts throughout the state. While civic learning can and should be found across content areas, HSS is most frequently a critical base of support for civic learning curriculum, programming, and professional learning. In 2020, by surveying and interviewing HSS curriculum specialists at the district and county levels, as well as examining personnel and resources dedicated to these goals on a representative sample of district websites, we found that school districts across the state provided little staffing and infrastructure support for civic learning.

In 2022, we evaluated the same representative sample of district websites again and focused on the extent to which staffing and support for civic learning changed or remained the same. We found that sizable disparities remain with respect to dedicated staff across various subject areas. Once again, most of the staff was dedicated to English Language Arts (ELA) followed by math and science. The least support was given to HSS. For example, in the chart below, we have a visual representation of the comparison between the number of dedicated staff per subject area across the entire sample of 46 school districts in 2020 compared to 2022. Since 2020, there has been an increase in the number of dedicated staff in each subject area besides science, but there remains a clear discrepancy between the number of staff dedicated to ELA, math, and science compared to History and Social Science.



Of the 46 school districts in our representative sample, 31 posted information on their website regarding the focus of district-level instructional staff. Of these districts, 51% had at least one dedicated staff person in ELA, 39% had at least one in math, and 39% had at least one in science. In many instances, districts had two or more staff members in these subject areas. In contrast, only 25% of the districts identified a dedicated district staff person in HSS.

Clearly, more resources in the form of staffing are critical to support history, social science, and civic learning, and the lack of dedicated staff in this area can signal that little support is given to the districts' civic priorities.

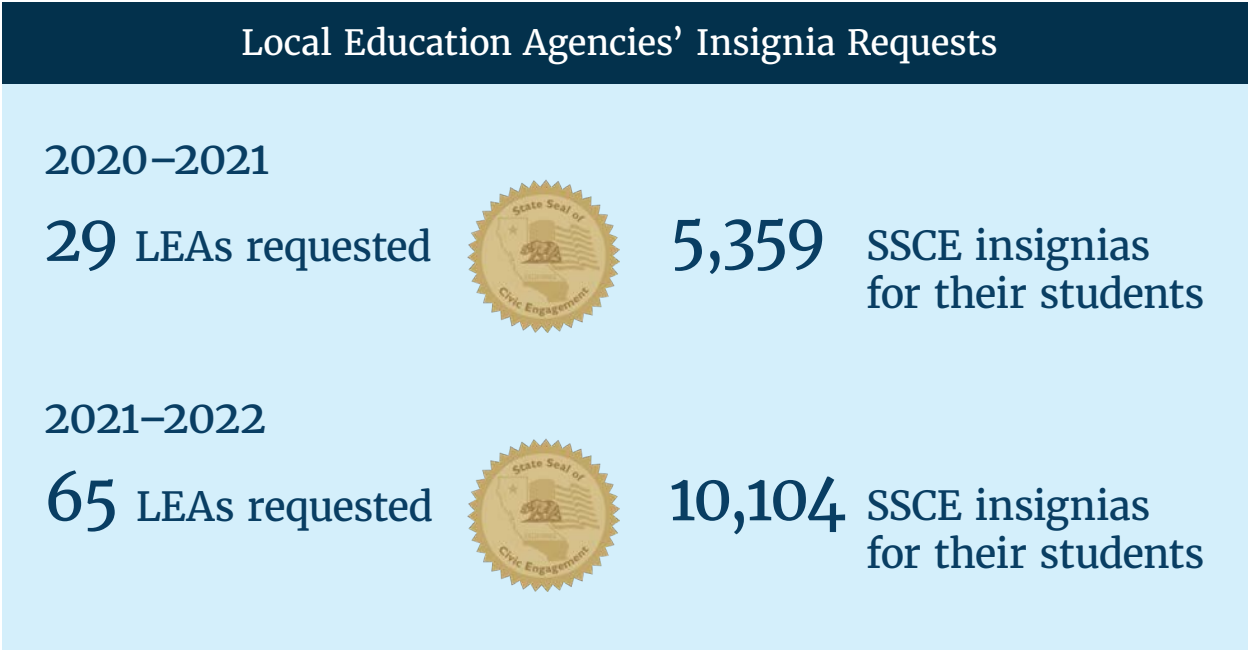


KEY FINDING #4: The State Seal of Civic Engagement is gathering momentum in California but is only reaching a small percentage of students.

After two years of implementation, the adoption of the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE) in local education agencies (LEAs) across California has increased. This encouraging momentum points to the growing recognition of the importance of preparing young people for civic life. In the first year of implementation (2020–2021 school year), 29 LEAs requested 5,359 SSCE insignias for their students. The next year (2021–2022 school year), 65 LEAs requested 10,104 SSCE insignias.^{vi} The fact that the number almost doubled in one year, despite continued challenges related to COVID-19 and returning to in-person learning, indicates that there is a real desire in many California communities to promote youth civic engagement. The state’s formal recognition and celebration of civic engagement through the SSCE has created new pathways for civic learning to be integrated into curricular and programming pursuits.



While much progress has been made in expanding access to the SSCE, the number of insignias requested in the spring of 2022 was only a little more than 2% of graduates. Thus, we believe it is important to investigate, to the extent that data permits, the characteristics of the districts where the SSCE is being distributed. It is also important to understand the demographic patterns of which students are earning the SSCE. Unfortunately, such analysis is not currently possible as the California Department of Education (CDE) only reports on the number of insignias requested from each LEA and where the insignia will be affixed (e.g. diplomas, general education development certificates, certificates of completion, or grade 11 or 12 transcripts).





<https://ccsesa.org/regions/>

What geographical regions have implemented the SSCE at the highest rates?

A majority of the SSCE insignias in Year 2 were requested by LEAs in the southern part of California, and a roughly equal number were requested from LEAs in northern and central parts of the state. However, by looking at the service regions in California and adjusting for population density, we found that Regions 3, 4, 5, 7, and 9 have the highest percentage of SSCE insignias requested as a proportion of their student enrollment. Most often these districts were adjacent to large urban areas (e.g. Sacramento, the Bay Area, San Jose, Fresno, Orange County, and San Diego), but

many of the largest city school districts did not offer the SSCE. Rural parts of the state and areas that are not near an urban center have requested the fewest insignias.

What size school districts are implementing the SSCE?

The sizes of districts offering the SSCE vary widely. Several small districts that enroll just over 1,000 students have adopted the SSCE. Of the state's 10 largest school districts, only two offered the SSCE: Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and Fresno Unified School District. However, the number of SSCE insignias ordered in these districts was low compared to their student populations. For example, LAUSD ordered 365 insignias, which is just under 1% of their 12th-grade population of 42,084 students. Clearly, it will take time for larger districts to integrate and scale such an initiative. Two of the districts that requested the most SSCE insignias relative to the size of their 12th-grade population were medium-sized districts: Anaheim Union High School District and Palo Alto Unified School District.^{vii}

What are the student demographics of the districts who have adopted the SSCE?²

The districts offering the SSCE are quite diverse in terms of race/ethnicity and the percentage of students who receive Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) or are English language learning (ELLs). For example, in California, 58% of all students are eligible for FRPL. Of the districts giving out the SSCE, 34 of the SSCE districts have less than 58% of their student population receiving FRPL and 27 have more than 58% of their population receiving FRPL.³ However, as noted above, we aren't able to determine the demographics of the individual students earning the SSCE from the currently available data.

What percentage of the 12th-grade population is likely to earn the SSCE?

By comparing the 12th-grade population of each SSCE district to the number of SSCE insignias requested, we were able to determine how many 12th-graders had the opportunity to earn the SSCE. While students can affix the SSCE to their 11th-grade transcript, we find that the majority of the insignias are requested to affix to a diploma or 12th-grade transcript. We found that on average districts only requested SSCEs

for 11% of their 12th-grade population. The four LEAs that requested the largest number of insignias relative to their 12th-grade population were Anaheim Union High School District, Palo Alto Unified School District, San Juan Unified School District, and Natomas Charter School. Of these districts that offered a large percentage of their 12th-grade population the SSCE, only one has more than 69% of their students receiving FRPL. Thus, it will be important to monitor access and equity through a number of lenses.

Is there attention being paid to and training available related to the SSCE?

Colleagues in our research group recently conducted a statewide representative survey of 148 California high school principals.^{viii} Principals were asked about the degree to which their school or district attended to the new SSCE. Thirty-two percent of principals reported that their district leadership had spoken with them about the SSCE. Nineteen percent of principals said that their school or district had provided teachers at their school with professional development related to the SSCE. Interestingly, the focus on the SSCE differed across rural, suburban, and urban areas of the state, with urban areas seeing less of an emphasis than rural or suburban areas.

Discussions Regarding the California State Seal of Civic Engagement					
In the past year has your district leadership talked with you about the California State Seal of Civic Engagement?			This past year, did your school or district provide teachers at your school professional development in any of the following areas: Preparing students to receive California’s State Seal of Civic Engagement?		
	No	Yes		No	Yes
Rural	62.73	37.27	Rural	77.07	22.93
Suburban	63.28	36.72	Suburban	78.60	21.40
Urban	74.54	25.46	Urban	85.97	14.03
State Average	67.8	32.2	State Average	81.39	18.61



In summary, we learned the following about the implementation of the SSCE in Year 2:

- ▶ The SSCE is gaining traction in the state with the number of insignias being awarded growing from 5,359 to 10,104, which represents 2% of California’s graduating seniors.
- ▶ The distribution of SSCE is largely occurring adjacent to urban areas of the state.
- ▶ The sizes of districts offering the SSCE vary widely, however a majority of the largest districts in the state are not offering the SSCE.
- ▶ The districts offering the SSCE are quite diverse demographically and are diverse in terms of the degree to which their students receive FRPL or are ELLs. However, we cannot be sure the SSCE is being equitably distributed within these districts until more precise data is collected.
- ▶ On average, districts that awarded the SSCE did so for 11% of their 12th-grade population.
- ▶ Dialogue and professional development related to the SSCE are limited across the state.

Therefore, while the SSCE is gaining traction in the state there is clearly much more to learn and do to fully promote the SSCE and support the equitable distribution of this initiative throughout the state.



Recommendations

We are excited to report the progress that has occurred between our 2020 and 2022 studies assessing the civic commitments and infrastructure in school districts in California, especially given the urgent challenges schools and communities have faced during this time period. We applaud the efforts of the State Board of Education (SBE), the California Department of Education (CDE), the district leaders and educators, the civic education organizations, the community based youth organizations, and the young people themselves who have advocated for and shepherded this work forward on the state and local level.

However, based on our evidence examining district mission statements, LCAPs, and staffing in History-Social Science and civics, the progress has been modest. While the introduction of the SSCE has been an important catalyst for efforts through the state, its implementation has also been limited to certain regions and small groups of students. As we noted above, only a little more than 2% of the graduating student body in California in 2022 earned the SSCE. Therefore, we urge the state and local education agencies to take advantage of this momentum and deepen their systemic commitment to civic learning in order to make even more significant strides for the sake of our young people and also the health of our democracy.

State Level Action



Drawing on our findings from this and other studies,^{ix} we believe four state-level actions would prove helpful.

First, **the state should relaunch its efforts to integrate civic learning and engagement indicators into the California School Dashboard and related district and school accountability systems.** The State Board of Education tasked the

California Department of Education with convening a Civic Engagement Work Group to explore various possibilities, including the inclusion of the SSCE within the state’s multi-faceted College and Career Readiness indicator, which already includes the State Seal of Biliteracy. This group began meeting in 2020 but had to delay their work due to needed improvements to the Dashboard. By relaunching this group, the state can provide more expansive evidence of students’ preparedness for college, career, and civic life after graduation via authentic indicators of students’ civic knowledge and skills in the context of meaningful practices—such as completing a capstone project or portfolio with common expectations, developing a written or multimedia demonstration of civic literacy, or fulfilling a civics performance task. This integration into the Dashboard will also encourage and support LEAs to reflect this priority in their mission and vision statements, as well as their goals and investments communicated in their LCAP plans. Finally, it will provide pathways for the state to attend to questions of access and equity with regards to the SSCE.

Second, **the state can help to ensure that the implementation of the SSCE is meeting its goals of being accessible to all students by monitoring progress with respect to equity** rather than solely monitoring the total number of SSCE insignias requested by LEAs. Asking LEAs to provide more detailed information regarding how many of the insignias requested are actually awarded to students and the characteristics of the students receiving the SSCE (for example, how many receive FRPL) may spur reflection and identification of gaps with regard to access and equity. In addition, if we can monitor the progress of the SSCE in more depth, then the state, county offices of education, and other civic organizations can offer more precise support to LEAs as this new initiative proceeds.

Third, **the state can invest in developing authentic measurement tools and resources for assessing civic learning, and, in particular, informed civic engagement projects** that are one of the cornerstones of the SSCE (Criteria #3).⁴ Currently, LEAs must determine on their own the best way to evaluate students' civic engagement projects in line with the guidance from CDE, which highlights considerations related to the duration, depth, and impact of engagements. Even though participation in informed civic engagement activities will take many forms, common tools aligned to best practice will ensure that the quality of the SSCE and aligned civic learning efforts in classrooms are high quality. With the introduction of the California Serves grant program^x in 2022, the state has an opportunity to work with a set of LEAs to develop model uniform metrics that will help to assess civic engagement activities aligned to the SSCE. We urge the state to do so in a more expansive manner that reaches beyond service learning to include a variety of forms of informed civic engagement activities in order to benefit a range of efforts in the state. California Assembly Bill 1520^{xi}—a bill that would establish an SSCE Resource Lead in the state—also has the potential to support these efforts.

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.** From 2012 to 2013, there was a [California Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning](#) established by Chief Justice Cantil-Sakauye and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson. The task force produced a report on the state of civic learning in California schools, and the Chief Justice's Office spearheaded civic learning awards that continue today and celebrate public schools' efforts to engage students in civic learning. The task force helped build an important foundation for civic learning efforts in the state. Now, a new task force is needed to survey current needs, identify goals, and develop a plan to revitalize and sustain the democratic purpose of California's public schools. Other states have had similar task forces. For example, the [Massachusetts Civic Learning Coalition](#) engages policymakers and the broader public, as well as overseeing the Civics Project Trust Fund, which is used to create a statewide civic infrastructure, provide funding for professional development to teachers, and ensure that every student in the state has access to high-quality civics education.

Local Level Action



Local education agencies (LEAs) are critical to the advancement of civic learning in the state, ranging from the mission and vision that they establish, to professional development they offer, to staff time allocated. LEAs have the ability to pave the way for the integration of high-quality civic learning experiences for all students. During the first year of implementation of the SSCE, researchers from the Leveraging Equity and Access in Democratic Education (LEADE) initiative documented the experiences of seven early adopters across the state. In their report, [Breaking New Ground with California's State Seal of Civic Engagement: Lessons from Year 1](#), Hodgins and Bueso highlight best practices for promoting a high-quality, sustainable, and equitable rollout of the SSCE, as well as for paving the way toward a systemic commitment to civic learning more broadly.^{xii} For any district to fully integrate a systemic commitment to civic learning alongside an adoption of the SSCE, it will be critical to take seriously various dimensions across the three categories discussed in the following.

1. **Student Voice**—As districts prepare to implement the SSCE, it will be critical to provide authentic and meaningful opportunities for student voice in order to model a truly democratic process. Districts can do this by recruiting a representative group of students to serve on the SSCE stakeholder committee, providing meaningful and authentic opportunities for students to co-construct SSCE curriculum, and being responsive to student input, feedback, and critiques.
2. **Equity and Accessibility**—Even though the state does not currently require that districts track equity or accessibility indicators related to the SSCE, LEAs can prioritize efforts to make earning the SSCE attainable for all of their students from the earliest phases of implementation. Districts can do this by defining civic excellence as a goal for all students, not the top few; designing equitable civic learning opportunities from the get-go (i.e., equity should not be an afterthought); and examining whether traditional eligibility measures (e.g. GPA) are serving as barriers to participation.
3. **Infrastructure**—It is also important for districts to develop new structures to support this work or deepen existing structures to expand their ability to integrate the SSCE into their schools. In particular, districts can adopt the SSCE alongside a broader commitment to democratic education, provide staff and support for the SSCE and civic learning, integrate many voices through democratic processes, and pave the way for high-quality, informed civic engagement projects.



Student Voice

- Recruit a representative group of students to serve on the SSCE stakeholder committee
- Provide meaningful and authentic opportunities for students to co-construct SSCE curriculum
- Be responsive to student input, feedback, and critiques



Equity and Accessibility

- Define civic excellence as a goal for all students, not the top few
- Design equitable civic learning opportunities from the get-go (i.e., equity should not be an afterthought)
- Examine whether traditional eligibility measures (e.g., GPA) are serving as barriers to participation



Infrastructure

- Adopt the SSCE alongside a broader commitment to democratic education
- Provide staff and support for the SSCE and civic learning
- Integrate many voices through democratic processes
- Pave the way for high-quality, informed civic engagement projects

For more information and detailed accounts, explore the profiles describing students' perspectives on the SSCE and the efforts of different early adopters across the state linked on the following page.

Students' Perspectives of and Experiences with the SSCE

Describes the role of student advocacy and leadership at the state, district, and school levels as well as the experiences of students who earned the SSCE in 2020–2021

Anaheim Union High School District

Built off of the California Democracy School Initiative that integrates inquiry-to-action projects into the curriculum

Fresno Unified School District

Used existing pathways in service learning, social emotional learning, and career technical education for civic action projects

Orange County Department of Education

Created a new SSCE curriculum accessible to students in alternative, community, and correctional education settings

Riverside Unified School District

Convened school site teams to align the SSCE with RUSD's graduation standards and district-wide civic learning plan

Salinas Union High School District

Established a stakeholder committee including students, community members, teachers, and more to develop a district-wide civic learning plan

The Shasta Region

Engaged districts and schools in the rural region in a professional learning network to plan and launch the implementation of the SSCE

County and Regional Work Promoting the SSCE

Details how five county and regional offices of education facilitated interdisciplinary professional development and provided space for educators to receive feedback on the development of their SSCE local criteria

Themes and Recommendations

Draws on the experiences of the seven early adopters to outline recommendations and guiding questions for educators that relate to three broad categories: (1) student voice, (2) equity and accessibility, and (3) infrastructure

Conclusion

California has made important strides in the last two years to reclaim the democratic purpose of its public schools. There is growing recognition amongst leaders and educators in the state of the importance of democratic education. Young people continue to be at the forefront of efforts to advocate for civic learning in their schools and communities. The introduction of the SSCE represents an important pathway to galvanize attention and support for civic education, as well as celebrate our young people and their engagement. It is also an opportunity for California to be a leading example for the rest of the country. In fact, California is one of seven states that now offer a diploma seal in recognition of students' civic learning and/or civic engagement; the other states are Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, New York, Ohio, and Virginia. And California is the only state that has opened up this opportunity to 11th-graders as well as 12th-graders.

However, we are also facing a range of challenges in the state and the country. In fact, two-thirds of people in the United States think democracy is under threat,^{xiii} and roughly 80% think that Republican and Democratic voters do not agree when it comes to basic facts.^{xiv} In addition, seven out of ten find online political discourse "stressful and frustrating."^{xv} Unfortunately, schools and classrooms are increasingly in the crosshairs of these politically divisive tensions across the nation.

This is also true in California. A recent study, [Educating for a Diverse Democracy in California: The Growing Challenges of Political Conflict and Hostile Behavior](#), found that many California public high schools are experiencing political attacks, particularly those located in politically contested communities.^{xvi} For example, 65% of California principals surveyed reported substantial local conflict over hot-button educational issues. The most contentious issues principals noted were teaching about issues of race and racism (51%); policies and practices related to LGBTQ student rights (49%); student access to books in the school library (27%); or social emotional learning (30%). Rogers and Kahne stress that "moving forward, California educators, students, parents and community members must stand up for educational approaches that can strengthen our diverse democracy" (p. 3).

Given the complex challenges our schools and communities face, we must all assert our commitment to the democratic mission of public schools. We are falling far short of this mission. This is borne out in the results of the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress where civics scores declined for the first time since 1998.^{xvii} Schools are vital to preparing young people to draw on evidence and learn about a range of issues, to engage in dialogue with others that have differing views, to voice their perspectives in thoughtful and effective ways, and to take informed action in their communities and society. We must also proceed thoughtfully and strategically with a range of supports for civic learning and the SSCE on the state and local level, in order to ensure these learning opportunities are accessible to all students in California. If we do not, civic learning may remain infrequent and inequitable, and the SSCE may only reach a small percentage of our youth. One young person we interviewed about the SSCE stated it best when they said,

Civic learning doesn't have to exist in a silo. Hopefully, it's something that can be incorporated in every class, not just in a specific civics class or a government class ... If it's possible to inculcate in educators and in students that civic learning deserves to be as much of a readiness priority as college and career, then I think that's what's going to make civic learning something that's entrenched in California education. —GenerationUp Student Leader

ENDNOTES

1. The Rogers et al. (2020) study consisted of a search of all 1,037 LCAPs from the 2017–2018 school year using a search tool developed by Education-Trust West called LCAP Watch. The LCAP Watch website has not been updated with the 2022–2023 LCAP plans. Therefore, for this comparison, we exclusively compared the LCAPs of the 46 school districts in our representative sample.
2. Currently, districts are not required to report the demographic makeup of the students who receive the SSCE, nor do we know if they are eligible for Free and Reduced Priced Lunch (FRPL) or are English language learners (ELLs).
3. Fifty-nine percent of all students in public schools in California were eligible for free and reduced lunch in the 2020–2021 school year. Data drawn from: <https://www.kidsdata.org/topic/780/school-meals-status/table>.
4. SSCE criteria 3 requires students to “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.”

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- ix See *Reclaiming the Democratic Purpose of California's Public Schools*.
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About the Authors

Erica Hodgins is the co-director of the Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG) at the University of California, Riverside. CERG partners with educational leaders and key stakeholders on state and district-wide reform efforts to promote youth voice, high-quality and equitable civic learning, and a broad vision of social studies. Erica's current research focuses on the distribution, quality, and influence of youth civic learning and digital civic learning opportunities. Before joining CERG, Erica taught English Language Arts and History-Social Science and served as an instructional coach at the middle school and high school level.

Samia Alkam is a graduate student researcher with the Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG) at the University of California, Riverside where she is also pursuing a Ph.D. in Education Policy Analysis and Leadership. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Education, Society, and Human Development from the same institution. Her research centers on the necessity to increase access to digital media literacy curricula in schools.

Yvette Conde is a graduate student researcher with the Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG) and a second-year Ph.D. student in the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Riverside. Her research focuses on the inequality of educational opportunity within the K-12 education system. In addition, she looks at the ways in which community organizations empower marginalized students as well as the communities of which they are a part. Yvette is passionate about advocating for her community and hopes that she will be able to better serve them through her research.

Joseph Kahne is the Ted and Jo Dutton Presidential Professor for Education Policy and Politics and co-director of the Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG) at the University of California, Riverside. Professor Kahne's research focuses on the influence of school practices and digital media on youth civic and political development. Additionally, Kahne and CERG are currently engaged in related studies of efforts to promote youth voice, lived civics, and a broad vision of social studies reform with school districts in California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, New Mexico, and Ohio.