



***Embargoed for 12:01 am, Wednesday, June 28***

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## California public schools remain weak on civic education that bolsters democracy, report finds

While California public schools have improved in their attention to the civic learning needed to support our democracy, much more progress still can be made, a new report by University of California, Riverside, education scholars has found.

Just a small minority of a representative sample of 46 California school districts embrace civic education in their mission statements, local accountability plans, district curriculum staffing, and by offering a state-sponsored civic program in which high school students can earn a State Seal of Civic Engagement that's affixed to their diplomas, according to the report, "[California's Commitment to K-12 Civic Learning: A 2022 Assessment](#)."

"The number is quite small in terms of the school districts in California that have made a commitment to the democratic purpose of schooling," said [Erica Hodgkin](#), lead author of the study and the co-director of the [Civic Engagement Research Group](#) at UCR.

Civic education is a process through which young people develop the knowledge, skills, and commitments to interact effectively with others, improve their communities and the broader society, and participate in democracy.

It includes learning about how federal, state, and local government is structured and functions, as well as learning how to find accurate and trustworthy information about civic and political issues. It also covers how community members can participate in democracy by voting, raising awareness about important issues, communicating with elected and appointed officials, attending public meetings and hearings, and working with community-based organizations.

The importance of educating students to better participate in democracy has gained more attention in the face of polarized politics, climate change, and contentious attacks on high schools for teaching about race and addressing LGBTQ student rights, book banning, and other hot-button issues. But most school districts in California appear to avoid making a commitment to civic education and integrating it into their preparation of students.

"We know that throughout history public schools were charged with this aim: To prepare citizens to participate in democracy. And sadly, that's been pushed aside," added Hodgkin, a former high school and junior high school teacher.

The report's findings included:

- Only about a quarter of the 46 school districts in the representative sample used the word "civics," in their required Local Control Accountability Plan, or LCAP. The researchers found roughly the same results when they reviewed the plans for the words "citizenship" and "citizen." Only two school districts used the term "democracy" in their accountability plans and just six mentioned the State Seal of Civic Engagement. While this showed substantial improvement from 2020, only about half of the districts sampled addressed 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.
- Only seven of 36 school districts that had mission or vision statements available to analyze substantially addressed civic education in the statements, while 17 marginally addressed civics by speaking of developing young people for social roles, and 14 made no mention of preparing young people to participate in their community or society. While these numbers improved somewhat from the 2020 study, the analysis suggests "civic education remains a low priority within the state's public schools," the report said.
- Implemented in 2021, the State Seal of Civic Engagement, which allows students to earn an insignia affixed to their diplomas, is gaining momentum, but is reaching only a small proportion of students. During the 2021-2022 school year, 65 school districts requested 10,104 State Seal insignias, which was nearly double the amount requested for the previous school year. Still, the number was just over 2% of the state's high school graduates.
- Only about a quarter of the districts sampled had district-level staff dedicated to support history and social sciences, which are the areas where civics is most likely to be taught. Staff resources were much higher for English language arts, math, and science.

"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," the report said.

The authors of the report recommend a range of supports for civic learning and the State Seal of Civic Engagement be promoted across the state, to ensure these learning opportunities are accessible to all students in California.

"School districts that were substantially addressing civics moved from 15% to 18% of those we sampled," Hodgin said. "Still only 18% of young people are in a district where this is a goal, and where this is important."

"So that says to us that civic education remains a low priority within the state's public schools."