

EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY

California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools

Promising Approaches for Strengthening Civic Education

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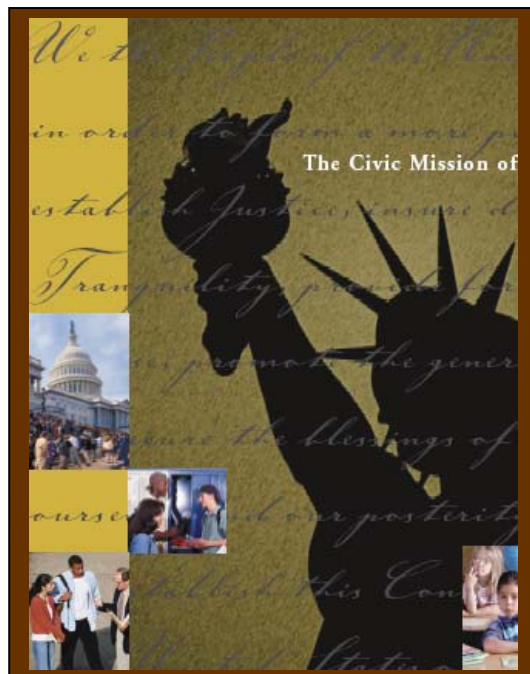
In late 2002, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and the Carnegie Corporation of New York drew together a prestigious group of scholars and practitioners who shared a common interest in the civic education (and engagement) of young people. The culminating statement was a report released in 2003 titled “The Civic Mission of Schools” (CMS).

The report:

1. provides four goals of civic education,
2. explains why schools are a critical venue for civic education and why now is an appropriate time to take action,
3. identifies six “promising approaches” to civic education, and
4. makes seven recommendations for schools, schools of education, government, researchers, and funders.

Unlike most reports, which have little follow-through, the Carnegie Corporation has provided ongoing support in an attempt to implement the recommendations contained in the report. Several states, including California, have received significant financial resources to undertake implementation of the report. Constitutional Rights Foundation, in partnership with the Center for Civic Education, has taken the lead on California’s efforts, creating the Educating for Democracy, the California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, to implement the report’s recommendations.

This white paper is designed to give educators a quick overview of each of the six promising approaches from the report, demonstrating how each practice is linked to research while also discussing any caveats to the research. The focus is on implementation of the approaches.



The Seven Recommendations and the Six Promising Approaches

The CMS report makes seven recommendations, addressed to a broad group including schools, policy makers, researchers, and funders. The recommendations range from classroom activities to federal policy changes, and the recommendations are intricately linked to the promising approaches. The table below describes the recommendations and briefly explains the relationship to the six approaches.

CMS Recommendation	Intent
1. Schools should develop curricula based on the promising approaches.	The report details six approaches to civic education that current research indicates have positive benefits for civic education.
2. School administration should encourage classroom discussions of controversial issues.	Open classroom discussion of current events is one of the six approaches.
3. The federal government should increase funding and attention to civic education.	Increased funding would allow schools to implement the six promising approaches and other civic-education efforts.
4. Standards should be implemented for civic education at the federal and state level.	Because we know the six approaches work, we should embed them and the other goals of the CMS report more deeply into the curriculum. Standards drive much current behavior so changing the standards will help schools achieve the objective.
5. Schools of education should strengthen in-service and pre-service civic-education training.	Teachers need to understand what civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes students should possess and how best to instill these.
6. Researchers should develop rigorous and richer knowledge about civic education.	We don't fully understand why the six approaches work as well as they do. Further research is needed so we can design the most effective programs.
7. Funders should support advocacy efforts for more and better civic education.	More funding means more attention!

Three themes emerge from the recommendations and the underlying intent:

First, the six approaches identified in the CMS report capture our current knowledge about what works for creating engaged citizens. To varying degrees, each of the approaches is linked to increased levels of civic knowledge, skills, or dispositions.

Second, we do not understand exactly why these approaches work, as a result, the CMS appropriately calls for more research. As will be obvious later in this paper, our knowledge is incomplete and that has ramifications for designing the approaches.

Third, new funding for both existing approaches and additional research will benefit the civic education effort.

The Campaign’s implementation efforts parallel the three themes. They include disseminating knowledge and encouraging increased use of the six promising approaches, conducting new research, and advocating for more funding for civic education. The focus of this white paper is on the first of these efforts, more fully understanding the six promising approaches so that we may share that information with broad audiences and begin to think more strategically about how to encourage systemic use of these approaches.

The balance of this white paper provides:

1. more detailed descriptions of each of the six approaches,
2. a summary of exactly what existing research tells us about the approaches (what works and what to avoid),
3. a sample of what the approaches might look like in the classroom, and
4. some caveats about the approaches.

The Six Promising Approaches

The CMS report details six approaches to civic education deemed promising because existing research demonstrates a relationship between the activity described and a higher level of civic and political participation for those who participated. Before turning to understanding the approaches, three comments are important.

1. Different benefits come from different approaches. Many researchers believe that to participate in public life, an individual needs to acquire civic and political *skills*, civic and political *knowledge*, and civic *attitudes* (sometimes called *dispositions*); possessing only one of these is insufficient for engagement. These three building blocks are the basis for the CMS report and are referred to as *benefits*.

Description of different benefits believed accrued through the promising approaches	
Civic and Political Knowledge	Information about our history, our government, democracy, and basic knowledge about institutions and important current events.
Civic and Political Skills	The skills necessary to participate in civic and political life including speaking and writing, critical thinking, understanding other perspectives, and the give-and-take process of consensus building in a democracy.
Civic Attitudes	Respect for diverse viewpoints, a belief in the importance of participation in political processes and civic life, an understanding that the common good sometimes supersedes one’s own desires, and valuing participation in public and civic life.
Political Participation	Engaging in traditionally political activities such as voting, attending public meetings, and voicing opinions through letters to elected officials or the media.
Community Participation	Active participation in voluntary organizations such as church, neighborhood associations, youth groups, etc.

2. The six approaches seem to create different skills, knowledge, and attitudes, underscoring the importance of multiple approaches being used simultaneously. For example, good classroom instruction in social studies (the catch-all term for democracy, civics, and government) can be complemented with extracurricular activities; classroom instruction can contribute to knowledge, while service learning can contribute to attitudes, and student government can contribute to civic skills. Each of the three approaches in the example adds some benefit; cumulatively the student could gain multiple benefits.

What is gained from the promising approaches?

Approach	Civic and political knowledge	Civic and political skills	Civic attitudes	Political participation	Community participation
Classroom instruction	X	X		X	
Discussion of current events	X	X	X	X	
Service Learning		X	X		X
Extracurricular activities		X		X	X
Student voice in school governance		X	X		
Simulations	X	X	X		

Adapted from *The Civic Mission of Schools* 2003

3. Many researchers have observed a “life cycle” model of political participation. It is most common for young people to have lower levels of political and civic participation, but for many that changes in their late 20s and early 30s as they buy houses, have children, and become more comfortable in their adult roles and settled in their communities. But just because civic and political participation may be delayed, it does not mean that civic education does not matter earlier. We increasingly believe that experiences during K-12 school years build a foundation of sorts, contributing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that allow individuals to participate later in life.

The following pages describe each approach, why it is promising, and when it seems to work best. Classroom examples are provided in many cases. The national CMS team has developed list of examples. These are posted on its website (www.civicmissionofschools.org), and the California Campaign is developing a resource directory (www.cms-ca.org).

- The Six Promising Approaches**
1. Instruction in government, history, law, and democracy
 2. Classroom discussion of current events
 3. Service learning
 4. Extracurricular activities
 5. Student voice in school governance
 6. Simulations of democratic processes

PROMISING APPROACH 1

Provide classroom instruction in government, history, law, and democracy.

The Approach:

Classroom-based education about our history, government, and democratic system is vital. Much of the important foundational information about our system can be taught in a classroom setting. If students learn about democratic systems, history, and current events in a well-structured curriculum, they may retain that information into adulthood. Classroom-based programs such as *We The People* and *CityWorks* provide curricula that teach students the principles of national and local government and help students understand the connection between government and their own lives.

Benefits Accrued:

Basic *knowledge* about American government, history, and institutions, such as Congress, the presidency, federal courts, and their equivalents at state and local levels, creates greater understanding and improved decision making. Civic and political *skills* may also be accrued if learning is active as in the programs mentioned above.

The Evidence:

Research tells us that classroom instruction matters. After nearly three decades of uncertainty about the benefit of government and civics courses, new research demonstrates classroom-based education does make a difference.

- Students who have had courses in government and history perform better on tests designed to measure civic knowledge (1).
- More knowledgeable adults vote more consistently and vote on issues rather than personalities (2).
- Preliminary research from *We The People* demonstrates that alumni are more likely to vote, pay attention to political issues, and work for political candidate or issues than peers who did not experience *We The People* (3).
- Evaluations of *CityWorks* show that students who participated were more committed to participatory citizenship, more interested in service, and had a greater sense of political efficacy than peers who did not participate in *CityWorks* (4).



Works Best When:

- The discussions are tied to current issues and events.
- The conversations are related to students' lives and communities, including the school community.
- Open classroom discussion of controversial issues is encouraged. A respectful tone must be established first.
- Learning is active rather than passive, engaging students in their learning.
- The learning is not simply rote memorization of facts.

Caveats:

The primary challenge with more traditional forms of civic education is making sure the learning is interesting, relevant, and interactive, engaging students in discussion and thinking as opposed to rote memorization.

PROMISING APPROACH 2

Incorporate discussion of current, local, national, and international issues and events in the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.

The Approach:

Students (like many adults) often retain information better if it is connected to real world events. Encouraging discussion of current events in the classroom allows teachers to demonstrate concepts they are discussing. It also allows students to learn about current affairs and wrestle with the complexities of making decisions about important issues.

Benefits Accrued:

Students increase their *knowledge* about current events, creating a reservoir of examples for understanding more basic concepts about the civic and political world. In addition, as students form and express opinions they gain important *skills* in articulating their own positions. Finally, as it becomes clear that others may have differing opinions, and that consensus is required to move forward, positive *civic attitudes* can be developed.

The Evidence:

Research tells us that open discussion of current events matters.

- 14 year olds in “open” classrooms around the world indicate they are more likely to plan to vote than their peers in more traditional classrooms (5).
- Oral and written communication skills are an important component for political participation (6).
- People who recall discussions of politics occurring at home when they were teenagers are more politically engaged than those who do not recall such discussions occurring (7).

Works Best When:

- The discussion is open, that is, young people are encouraged to ask questions, voice opinions, and engage in the discussion.
- Events at all levels of government are discussed, local to international. International events allow students to wrestle with large, complex problems. Discussions of local issues encourage understanding that government actions matter to individuals lives.

Caveats:

Teachers and administrators often fear discussion of political events, especially those that are controversial. It is challenging to foster open discussions allowing people to draw new conclusions, but not exposing schools to criticism from parents or community members. Doing this well necessitates teaching respect for democratic processes that naturally include differing opinions. Teachers must carefully monitor these discussions to ensure that students learn how to have challenging conversations in a civilized fashion. Without a foundation in democratic principles and processes, a discussion can easily be labeled as ideological or partisan.

PROMISING APPROACH 3

Service Learning: Provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.

The Approach:

Service learning has evolved from community service and voluntary activities to a more structured experience that includes a strong relationship between service and classroom learning objectives. Service learning allows students to venture into the community, performing work that is explicitly connected to their academic work through writing, discussions, and reflection. The process helps reinforce classroom learning and allows students to make connections between what is being learned and the world they will enter as adults.

Benefits Accrued:

Done well, service learning has the potential to increase *civic skills* such as critical-thinking and communication skills. In addition, it can contribute to a broader understanding of society and its many challenges and differing viewpoints, all of which can improve *civic attitudes*.

The Evidence:

Because civic engagement is most likely to occur during adult years, and service learning programs and research are still relatively young, we do not have the same compelling evidence about relationships to civic behaviors that we do for other promising approaches. However, research suggests that:

- Carefully structured service learning does appear to enhance civic attitudes; especially those related to tolerance and respect for others' opinions (8).
- Service learning with a more explicitly political focus appears to produce better civic engagement results than those that are more apolitical (9).
- Service learning is most effective when students have a legitimate voice in the project, supporting the point that civic skills (communication and collective decision making) can be learned through service learning (10).

Works Best When:

- The service is connected to a formal classroom curriculum.
- Sufficient time is allotted for individual reflection on the learning.
- Service projects expose students to the political world around them, engaging the people, processes, and institutions that allow government to make decisions and take action.

Caveats:

Historically, there has been a strong relationship between volunteering and political participation. However, today's young people frequently separate the two, meaning that encouraging volunteering, while a useful objective, may no longer mean you are also encouraging political participation. To be most effective at increasing civic engagement, service-learning programs need to engage students with public sector institutions and processes, not shy away from them.

PROMISING APPROACH 4

Offer extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities.

The Approach:

Traditionally, extracurricular activities are defined as after-school activities such as clubs or school governance, but excluding sports. They allow young people the chance to work toward a common interest, e.g., a school yearbook, travel, or even an interest in an academic area. The activities are usually run by schools, but can also be provided through non-profit and community organizations.

Benefits Accrued:

The most obvious benefit of extracurricular participation is the development of *civic skills*. Participation in activities such as yearbook club provides opportunities for students to voice their opinions, work with others and define and work toward the common good. In addition, habits of participation may be developed that lead to later *political and community participation*.

The Evidence:

The relationship between extracurricular activities, especially during adolescence, and later political and civic engagement is one of the most striking of all the promising approaches. Evidence about the relationship between extracurricular activities and civic engagement has a long history.

- Nearly a dozen studies have been conducted and all demonstrate strong links between certain types of extracurricular activities and civic engagement (11).
- The structure of the organization seems to matter. Organizations that involve working on a collective outcome (such as yearbook, student government, or even a chess club) have much stronger results than those that are related only to enhancing individual interests. Those with a collective focus seem to be better able to develop the civic skills mentioned above (12).
- Sports participation is negatively associated with later political and civic engagement. While sports participation has other positive benefits for young people, most sports programs are not designed in a way that focuses on civic skills development (13).

Works Best When:

- Extracurricular activities are most effective when they focus on something greater than the individuals' own interests.
- Students are genuinely interested in the issue/topic.
- Students have an active role in all aspects of the group, planning and leading activities, working out decisions with their peers, and making collective decisions.

Caveats:

Many activities can provide the types of skills and benefits that lead to civic engagement, but they must be consciously designed into programs. For example, sports programs could be re-designed for different outcomes. Civic skills could be taught by involving youth in planning and organizing events and working collectively to improve the team (as opposed to being told by an adult coach). This necessitates adults stepping into roles as facilitators rather than leaders, something that can be difficult. It means the outcome is uncertain, and the control is ceded to the young people.

PROMISING APPROACH 5

Encourage student participation in school governance.

The Approach:

For most students, school is a major part of their world. While family and other activities such as church or sports may take a portion of their time, the vast majority of their time every day is spent in school-related activities. As a result, much of their world, including friends, responsibilities, problems, and issues, is related to school. If we are interested in young people learning how to assume responsibility for their communities, simulating that experience in the community that matters most to them now, their school, is a logical step.

Myriad opportunities exist for students to understand school issues and make and execute decisions about school activities, from day-to-day planning to peer mediation, organizing, and fundraising. Encouraging student participation in school governance can extend well beyond the few who are typically involved in formal student government.

Benefits Accrued:

Civic and political skills are learned as students participate in making decisions collectively about how to run their school. Students can learn how to voice opinions, make decisions with others who might not agree, and be responsible for the outcomes. To the extent the experience is positive (that is, students feel they have a say and that what they do matters), they can also gain *civic attitudes*.

The Evidence:

- There is a strong consistent relationship between those who participate in student government and adults who are politically and civically active (14).
- Students who believe their student government matters indicate they are more likely to vote as adults, even if they are not involved in student government themselves (15).

Works Best When:

- The student voice is real, that is, students have a real say in what happens at the school and their views and decisions make a difference.
- Opportunities exist for many students to be involved, not only the popular ones or those who always self select into these activities.

Caveats:

Student governance experiences can be disheartening if decisions don't make a difference in the school environment or if opinions are ignored. School administrators need to model the types of decision making they want students to engage in, that is, open discussion of issues with compromise and consensus as hallmarks rather than taking of sides. More than any of the other promising approaches, self selection is a major problem with student government. Not only is the pool of interested students often small, the opportunities to participate are usually limited to a select few who are elected.

PROMISING APPROACH 6

Encourage students' participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.

The Approach:

Several programs exist that allow students to take on roles that simulate democratic processes and procedures. They exist in formal curricular models such as We The People and CityWorks, and through extracurricular activities such as Boys and Girls State, YMCA Youth and Government, and Model United Nations programs. Often students must research current events and persuade their peers to vote with them. Other programs model city or national governments, court proceedings, or the United Nations. In many of these simulations, youth also provide leadership for the proceedings.

Benefits Accrued:

These programs usually simulate actual processes such as the United Nations, Congress, court systems, or state legislatures. Taking on specific roles as part of the simulation, students gain *knowledge* about current issues and processes and also civic and political *skills*. As they act out their roles, they also develop and appreciation of the importance and complexity of government, leading to improved *civic attitudes*.

The Evidence:

- Research on We The People demonstrates the power of simulating government processes. Alumni are significantly more engaged in civic and political life than their peers (16).
- Research about CityWorks, a classroom-based simulation, shows that students who participated were more committed to participatory citizenship, more interested in service, and had a greater sense of political efficacy than peers who did not participate in CityWorks (4).
- Research demonstrates clear relationships between adult civic and political engagement and participation in the YMCA Model Legislature (17).



Works Best When:

- Students take on major roles in not only the simulation exercises, but in preparation of and leading conferences and major events.
- Events allow students to be exposed to multiple parts of the program, to understand relationships between different roles and actions, and to get to know their peers in the program.

Caveats:

Like most of the approaches, self selection is a significant issue. But more importantly, once engaged in these programs, students need to have positive experiences. At least one study found that many girls participating in a model UN program experienced discrimination, leading them to feel less powerful rather and more distrustful of these types of settings. Another study found that teachers routinely cull a group of “hyper-networked” young people and select them repeatedly for special opportunities, returning to the same pool of stars because they are known, but ignoring others who might benefit from the experience.

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