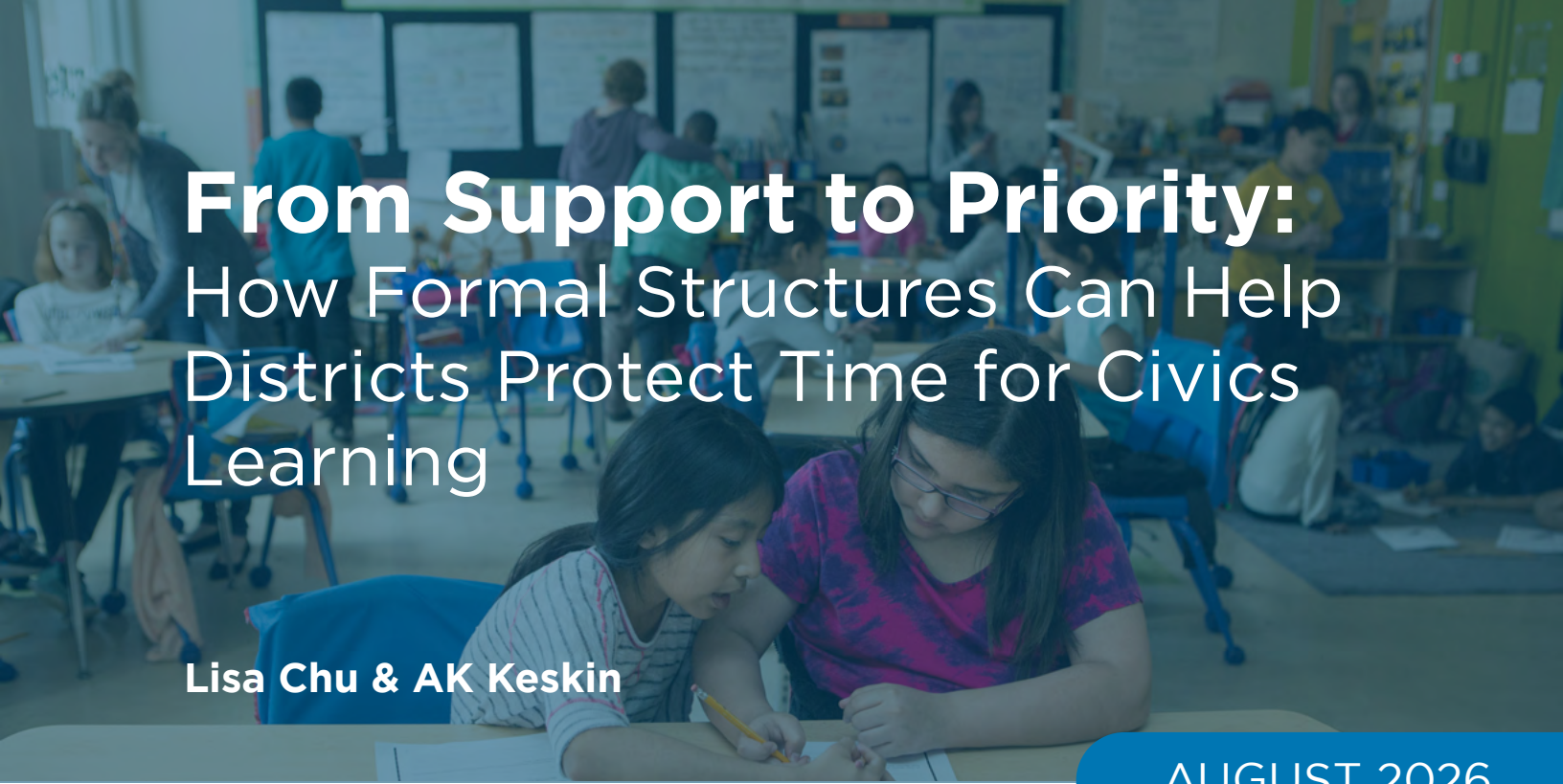




From Support to Priority: How Formal Structures Can Help Districts Protect Time for Civics Learning

Lisa Chu & AK Keskin

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As communities debate what it means to be an American and how schools should teach U.S. history, questions about how public education should prepare young people for civic life have taken on new urgency. Researchers and policymakers are exploring how to [strengthen civics education](#) and rethinking how civic knowledge and skills [are assessed](#), while educators are trying to teach students to [navigate disagreements](#) and how to approach [free speech in schools](#). These issues, and the public dialogues surrounding them, have made it more crucial than ever before to understand how districts prioritize civic learning amidst varying levels of popular support.

Survey and interview data from the [American School District Panel](#) (ASDP), a research partnership between RAND and the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), suggest that parent, community, and school board support for civic learning and district prioritization of civics increased in a small minority of districts. While most districts reported no change, in fall 2025, 8% of district leaders who participated in a national survey reported increased parent support for civics in the past year, and 11% reported increased community support for civics in the past year. In spring 2026, 20% of district leaders reported that their district had increased its prioritization of civics in the past year, and 18% also reported increased school board support for civics. Interviews with 28 leaders suggest that support for civic learning is strongest when it is grounded in local engagement, but lessens when families or communities perceive civic learning as politically charged or tied to national debates.¹ When leaders describe civic learning as a clearer district priority, they often point to formal commitments, district policies, and school board backing that make civic learning more consistent and easier to protect.

Support for civics exists, but interviews suggest that the strength of that support depends on how civic learning is framed. Embedding civic learning in district policies and practices can help districts move from the abstract (valuing civic learning) to the practical (making civic learning a priority and

¹ Because our interview findings are based on a small, selected sample of 28 district leaders, we use them to illustrate how leaders described support and prioritization, not to estimate how common these views are nationally.

making instruction more consistent). Without clearer expectations and structures in place, civic learning is likely to remain uneven across classrooms, dependent on individual educators, or crowded out by tested academic subjects and other district priorities.

Background: What is Civic Learning?

In this brief, we use civic learning to mean preparing students to participate in democratic society and engage constructively with their communities. Survey respondents were given this definition before answering questions about civic learning.

As distinguished in a [previous report](#), civic learning can include foundational civics knowledge, such as understanding government, history, rights, responsibilities, and civic institutions. It can also include civic skills and experiences, such as discussing public issues, analyzing information, connecting civic knowledge to current events, participating in community problem-solving, engaging with local government, and contributing to one's community.

In the 2025-26 school year, the ASDP set out to understand what civic learning opportunities districts offer, how those opportunities connect to districts' goals for civics, and what support for civic learning looks like. This second brief in our three-part series focuses on data collected in fall 2025 and spring 2026. Please see the Methodology section for more information.

Findings

Civic learning is gaining support and becoming more of a priority in some districts, though most districts reported no change.

In the survey, we asked district leaders whether parent, community, and school board support for civic learning or district prioritization of civics had changed in the past year.² Though most districts reported no change in levels of support, survey data indicate that support for civic learning increased in some districts over the 2025-26 school year. In fall 2025, 8% of district leaders reported increased parent support for civic learning in the past year,³ and 11% reported increased community support in the past year.⁴ In spring 2026, 20% of districts reported an

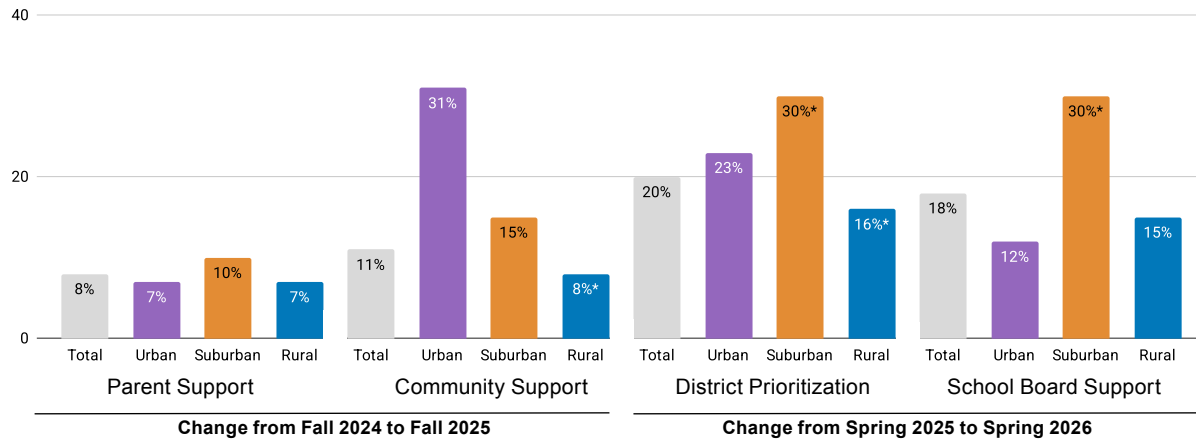
² We report these measures separately and do not examine whether the same districts reported increases across multiple forms of support or prioritization. Future research could explore whether parent, community, school board, and district support tend to move together within districts and how those patterns relate to civic learning implementation.

³ Parent support: 2% of districts reported a decrease (Urban: 0%; Suburban: 2%; Rural: 2%), and 91% reported no change (Urban: 93%; Suburban: 87%, Rural: 92%).

⁴ Community support: 2% of districts reported a decrease (Urban: 0% ; Suburban: 2%; Rural: 2%), and 87% reported no change (Urban: 69%; Suburban: 82%, Rural: 91%).

increase in their prioritization of civic learning since spring 2025,⁵ suggesting that civic learning is becoming more important to some districts. We also asked how school board support for civic learning had changed from spring 2025 to spring 2026; 18% of districts reported an increase.⁶

Figure 1: Percentage of Districts Where Support for and Prioritization of Civic Learning Reportedly Increased, by District Urbanicity



This figure depicts response data from four survey questions across two ASDP survey waves. The fall 2025 survey asked, “Has parent support for civic learning changed from fall 2024 to fall 2025?” and “Has community support for civic learning changed from fall 2024 to fall 2025?” (n = 222; Urban = 32, Suburban = 75, Rural = 115); for each, respondents selected “It has increased,” “It has not changed,” or “It has decreased.” The spring 2026 survey asked, “How has the prioritization of civic learning in your district changed from spring 2025 to spring 2026?” and “How has school board support for civic learning changed from spring 2025 to spring 2026?” (n = 370; Urban = 43, Suburban = 95, Rural = 232); for the first, respondents selected “Priority has increased,” “Priority has not changed,” or “Priority has decreased,” and for the second, “Support has increased,” “Support has not changed,” or “Support has decreased.” This figure displays only the percentage of districts that reported an increase in support or prioritization. An asterisk (*) indicates that the percentage for that subgroup is significantly different from the percentage for all other districts combined (e.g., rural versus non-rural) at the p < 0.05 level.

Though most districts reported no change in their prioritization of civics, that does not necessarily mean they saw civic learning as unimportant. Civic learning may already have been a priority for some of them, meaning no change was needed. In other districts, however, civics may have been a less central concern. For example, one leader from a small rural district said civic engagement was already “the expectation of the [community] culture,” suggesting that some districts may report no increase in their prioritization of civic learning because it is already an accepted part of local life.

Reported increases in support and prioritization also varied by urbanicity. In fall 2025, almost one-third of urban districts reported an increase in community support for civics (31%), while significantly fewer rural districts did so (8%). This difference between urban and rural districts was statistically significant. In spring 2026, suburban districts were significantly more likely than non-suburban districts to report both an increase in the prioritization of civic learning (30% of suburban districts, compared with 23% of urban and 16% of rural districts) and an increase in school board support for civic learning (30% of suburban districts, compared with

5 Prioritization of civic learning: 1% of districts reported a decrease (Urban: 0%; Suburban: 0%; Rural: 1%), and 79% reported no change (Urban: 77%; Suburban: 70%; Rural: 83%).

6 School board support: 0% of districts reported a decrease (Urban, Suburban, Rural: 0%), and 81% reported no change (Urban: 88%; Suburban: 70%; Rural: 85%).

12% of urban and 15% of rural districts). Rural districts, by contrast, were significantly less likely than other districts to report increased prioritization.

These differences may reflect how civic opportunities, community resources, district capacity, political context, or school board engagement vary across communities, though our survey data do not indicate which factors explain the patterns we observed. [Research](#) suggests that access to civic opportunities can vary by urbanicity, with urban areas offering more opportunities for civic engagement than rural areas. This may help explain why urban districts were more likely to report increased community support, as civic learning opportunities were more available and visible. However, because the survey items ask district leaders about how they perceive changes in support and prioritization from the previous year, rather than overall levels, they may also reflect different starting points.

Leaders described stronger support for civic learning when it was community-oriented and less tied to national politics.

According to the interviewed district leaders, support for civics often depended on how civic learning was framed and on the type of civic learning that communities were being asked to support. In six of 28 interviews, leaders specifically described support for civic learning as conditional and nuanced.⁷ Families and communities supported locally grounded civic learning, but were less supportive of civic learning that seemed connected to national politics or politically charged topics. District leaders reported that parents and community members were most supportive of community-oriented civic learning measures, like community service opportunities for students, school-community partnerships, and instruction on civic responsibility in a local context.

One district leader described strong community involvement in civic-related activities, such as celebrations of local government, but noted that support for civic learning varied: “The current politics at the federal level have created some instability with how our parents view civic learning.” Similarly, another district leader shared that parents were supportive of civic learning when it was tied to local experiences, such as student participation in local charity events, but that she was careful not to publicize “hot topics” discussed in civics classes due to potential pushback. On the other hand, a leader in a different district shared that parents and community members were apathetic towards civic learning unless it was connected to a politically charged issue: “It’s only [discussed] when it’s fueled by some kind of agenda.”

Some leaders reported responding to this tension by trying to make civic learning more clearly defined in scope and instruction less vulnerable to political polarization. They described taking steps to reduce political risk, such as reviewing the curriculum more carefully, limiting discussion of politically charged topics, or creating greater alignment among teachers. One leader said the political climate made them want to “do a thorough double check” of the curriculum to make sure that anything that could be perceived as controversial had not “slid in.” Another leader said their district kept teachers from discussing politically charged topics unless they were tied to

⁷ The remaining interviews did not necessarily suggest that support was unconditional; in many cases, leaders either did not specify what support looked like or did not discuss whether support varied by how civic learning was framed.

the curriculum, describing this as “limiting teachers by having to tie it to the curriculum versus having it be tied to humanity.”

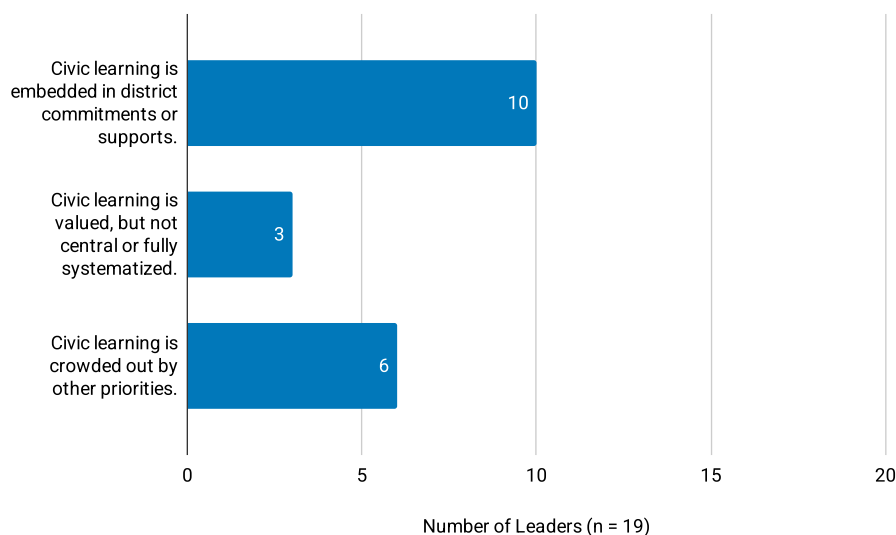
Much like parent and community support for civics, school board support also seemed tied to local, rather than national, engagement. Five of the eight leaders who discussed school board support said their boards supported community-oriented civic learning opportunities, including partnerships with local legislators and government groups, experiential learning in the community, student leadership, and student participation at board meetings. But when school board support was weaker, leaders did not describe outright opposition. Instead, three leaders noted that board members were focused on other priorities or that the district was still building out its civic learning plan.

Our interview findings suggest that support for civics was strongest when civic learning was presented as community-oriented. But while an absence of support may have been an impediment to districts’ prioritizing civics, the presence of support did not necessarily translate to increased district prioritization or consistent implementation in classrooms.

Formal commitments and policies helped leaders make civic learning a clearer district priority.

Districts sometimes struggle to prioritize civic learning, even when district leaders value it. Civics is often not tested on standardized assessments, but still has to compete for instructional time and resources with subjects that are. Compared to other content areas, civic learning has the additional disadvantage of being linked to politically charged and perhaps locally divisive topics. But our interviews suggest that leaders were more likely to describe civic learning as a priority when the district’s formal commitments and policies supported it. This may be because formal commitments and policies help leaders prioritize civic learning by incorporating it into district goals, creating shared expectations for educators, and giving it a place alongside tested subjects and other competing priorities.

Figure 2: How District Leaders Described Civic Learning Prioritization in Their Districts



Of the 28 leaders interviewed, 19 shared whether and how their districts prioritized civic learning. This came up organically in our Fall 2025 interviews, and we asked about it directly in Spring 2026 interviews. Some leaders did not answer in depth.

The ten interviewed leaders who described civic learning as a district priority pointed to commitments and supports that made it harder to sideline, such as strategic goals, portraits of a graduate, teacher collaboration time, and professional learning. One leader described how the district supported teachers by “providing space for them to meet in professional learning teams” to ensure alignment across civics classes. In some cases, these structures grew out of community values. A leader shared that the district incorporated civic learning into its strategic plan after stakeholders said they wanted students to be more civically engaged, understand their community’s history, and understand how the community had contributed to the state and the country.

In districts where civic learning was less embedded into district structures, interviewed leaders reported it as less central or consistent across the district. Three leaders said they valued civic learning or connected it to broader district goals, such as leadership, critical thinking, ownership of learning, and students’ ability to advocate for themselves, but had not yet built it into a fully established structure. Six leaders described civic learning as “crowded out” because it was not supported by written goals or policy, or was competing with tested subjects like math. One leader explained, “Civic engagement isn’t tested... so that does make it a challenge to make sure that we include it.” Another leader shared that the district did not have a mandated or adopted social studies curriculum, which affected consistency across classrooms.

Civic learning was a clearer district priority when leaders could point to formal commitments or policies that made civics visible in district practice. While these structures do not guarantee consistent student learning outcomes, they can make instruction more consistent across classrooms by clarifying expectations, supporting curriculum alignment, and giving teachers time to collaborate.

Implications

Public support matters, but districts need to translate it into expectations and guidance for educators.

In some districts, civic learning is gaining support and becoming more of a priority. Our interviews helped clarify what this support and prioritization looked like on the ground in a small number of districts: leaders described stronger support for civic learning when it was connected to local engagement, but weaker support when civics was perceived as partisan or tied to national debates. When leaders described civic learning as a clearer district priority, they often pointed to formal commitments, policies, and school board backing.

While support from families or communities can make civic learning easier for districts to pursue, this support cannot determine how civics should be taught, what the curriculum should include, or how consistently students will experience the coursework across classrooms. Formal civic learning structures can help districts translate existing support into clearer priorities and more consistent student experiences. These formal structures may also help districts navigate political sensitivity by tying civic learning more directly to state and district goals rather than to individual educators’ choices.⁸

8 In [our 2025 report](#), leaders shared that they encouraged their teachers to anchor civics instructions in state standards and requirements as a way of navigating potential political pushback.

- **State education agencies** can help districts build their commitments and policies. They can create clear standards and frameworks that define civic learning while leaving room for local adaptation. They can also give districts formal ways to recognize students' civic learning through competency frameworks and state seals of civic engagement (some examples include [California](#) and [New York](#)).
- **Civic learning advocates and partner organizations** can help leaders communicate how civic learning connects to district priorities such as literacy, school climate, student voice, and career readiness. They can also support districts in building professional learning, community partnerships, student projects, and guidance for teaching civics in politically sensitive contexts.

Support for civic learning matters, but district leaders need formal commitments, policies, and school board backing to define and implement it. When these conditions are in place, districts can move beyond just valuing civics in principle to making civic learning a clear priority in practice.

Methodology

Our methodology for analyzing survey and interview data remains relatively consistent across survey waves; therefore, the description of our methods here is text that we updated from previous publications released in [2025](#) and [2026](#). As such, much of the language used in this section aligns with language used in those previous publications and in the ASDP technical documentation for the [fall 2024](#) and [fall 2025](#) ASDP surveys.

American School District Panel (ASDP) Survey Data

This brief draws on two waves of ASDP survey data: fall 2025 and spring 2026. The fall 2025 ASDP survey was administered to K-12 public school districts between October 21, 2025, and December 16, 2025. Beginning with this wave, CRPE and RAND invited all regular U.S. public school districts to participate; we did not invite charter management organizations or districts with schools on military installations or reservations. Of the 12,274 public school districts that we invited to take our survey, 345 districts completed it (a 2.8% response rate). The spring 2026 ASDP survey was administered between March 18, 2026, and May 4, 2026. Of the 11,967 public school districts that we invited to take our survey, 481 districts completed it (a 4.0% response rate).

We design our ASDP surveys to allow multiple respondents from the same district central office to complete portions of the survey. For example, a superintendent, human resources director, or research director might answer questions about district staffing levels, while an academic director might complete questions about math instruction. We do not know which person(s) in each district completed the survey on behalf of their district.

Estimates for each survey were produced separately using cross-sectional survey weights designed specifically to provide nationally representative estimates at the time the survey was administered. To produce these weights, we obtained data on district demographics by linking survey data files to the Common Core of Data issued by the National Center for Education Statistics. We obtained data on district poverty levels from the U.S. Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates Program School District Estimates. We divided public school districts into quartiles using the family poverty rate of their 5- to 17-year-old population in the district's attendance boundary. When applied, these survey weights make the districts in our sample look similar to the national population of K-12 public school districts, at least on such observable characteristics as district locale, enrollment size, poverty level, geographic region, and student racial or ethnic composition.

Prior to fall 2025, the main analysis weights were the product of the following two interim weights: the sample selection weight (the inverse probability of selection into this survey) and the survey response weight (the inverse of the modeled probability of a district completing this survey). Starting in fall 2025, because of a change in sampling procedures to include all U.S. public school districts, only the latter of those two weights (the probability that a district responded to the survey after receiving our invitation) was applied. Because some districts completed only the first module of the fall 2025 survey, two sets of weights were created for that wave: one for the larger sample of districts that completed at least the first module ($n = 338$) and one for the smaller sample of districts that fully completed the survey ($n = 259$).

Importantly, survey responses were weighted to be representative of the national population of public school districts, not the national population of public school students. Because survey weighting was conducted at the district level, these findings reflect system-level perspectives but may not capture the nuances of civic learning access across different student populations. (For more information about the weighting procedures for ASDP surveys, see the technical documentation for the [fall 2024](#) and [fall 2025](#) surveys).

We caution readers that although we weighted our small sample of districts to make it representative of districts across the country (in terms of size, region, locale, and poverty status), the weighted survey results presented in this report may not be entirely representative of districts nationally. Districts that participate in ASDP surveys likely differ from those that do not in ways that are impossible to measure.

We analyzed differences in districts' responses to survey items by locale (urban, suburban, and rural). In each survey wave, we conducted significance testing to assess whether district subgroups were statistically different at the $p < 0.05$ level. Specifically, we tested whether the percentage of districts in one subgroup reporting a response was statistically different from the remaining districts that took the survey (e.g., urban districts versus other districts that are not urban). However, we did not conduct formal significance testing of differences across survey waves (e.g., comparing districts' responses on survey items in fall 2025 versus spring 2026) because of a lack of longitudinal survey weights that properly account for the partial overlap in respondents and changes in the representativeness of respondents across years. Differences across time points should be interpreted with caution as they may reflect uncertainty associated with survey estimates. In the text, we describe only those differences among district subgroups that are statistically significant at the 5-percent level. Furthermore, because of the exploratory nature of this study, we did not apply multiple hypothesis test corrections.

American School District Panel Qualitative Interviews

Between November 2025 and May 2026, we conducted qualitative, semistructured interviews with 28 district leaders (11 during fall 2025 and 17 during spring 2026). Given the small interview sample, qualitative findings should not be interpreted as nationally representative. Instead, interviews provide illustrative evidence about how selected district leaders described their civic learning goals, supports, and challenges. Additionally, districts that participate in ASDP interviews likely differ from those that do not in ways that are impossible to measure.

Of the 28 district leaders we interviewed, four had previously participated in spring 2025 interviews that informed our [July 2026 report](#). The remaining 24 interviewees were recruited from respondents to the fall 2025 and spring 2026 ASDP surveys. Interviewees represented a variety of school system sizes and geographic areas, including small rural and suburban districts serving fewer than 1,000 students and large, urban ones serving more than 300,000 students. The sample was composed of leaders from seven urban districts, five suburban districts, and sixteen rural districts. The interviews covered a variety of topics related to civic learning and education in K-12 school districts, including details on districts' civic learning goals, family and community support for civic learning, the supports and barriers to supporting civic learning, and leaders' visions for their districts' civic learning opportunities. These interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed. Researchers coded the data using deductive themes based on the interview protocol and employed an analytic matrix to track patterns across respondents. Interview protocols are available upon request.

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Cover photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages.

About the American School District Panel

The American School District Panel (ASDP) is a research partnership between RAND and the Center on Reinventing Public Education. The panel also collaborates with several other education organizations, including the Council of the Great City Schools and MGT, to help ensure we produce actionable results. For more information, visit americanschooldistrictpanel.org.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a K-12 education research organization at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, where transformative ideas are rigorously examined and tested, and research informs action. Since 1993, we have remained independent of any single ideology while holding firmly to our core belief that public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we study what it will take for public education to meet every student's needs and use those insights to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice. Learn more about our work at crpe.org.

CRPE's approach to quality assurance is rooted in our commitments to both evidence and impact. We write for a non-academic audience and emphasize clarity and directness, but we hold fast to high standards of rigor and excellence. Our peer review process seeks feedback on methodology and relevance to policy and practice. Peer reviews are conducted by research or policy professionals who are not members of the CRPE project team.

About RAND Education, Employment, and Infrastructure

RAND Education, Employment, and Infrastructure is a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on educational opportunity, economic prosperity, and civic life for all. More information about RAND can be found at rand.org.

