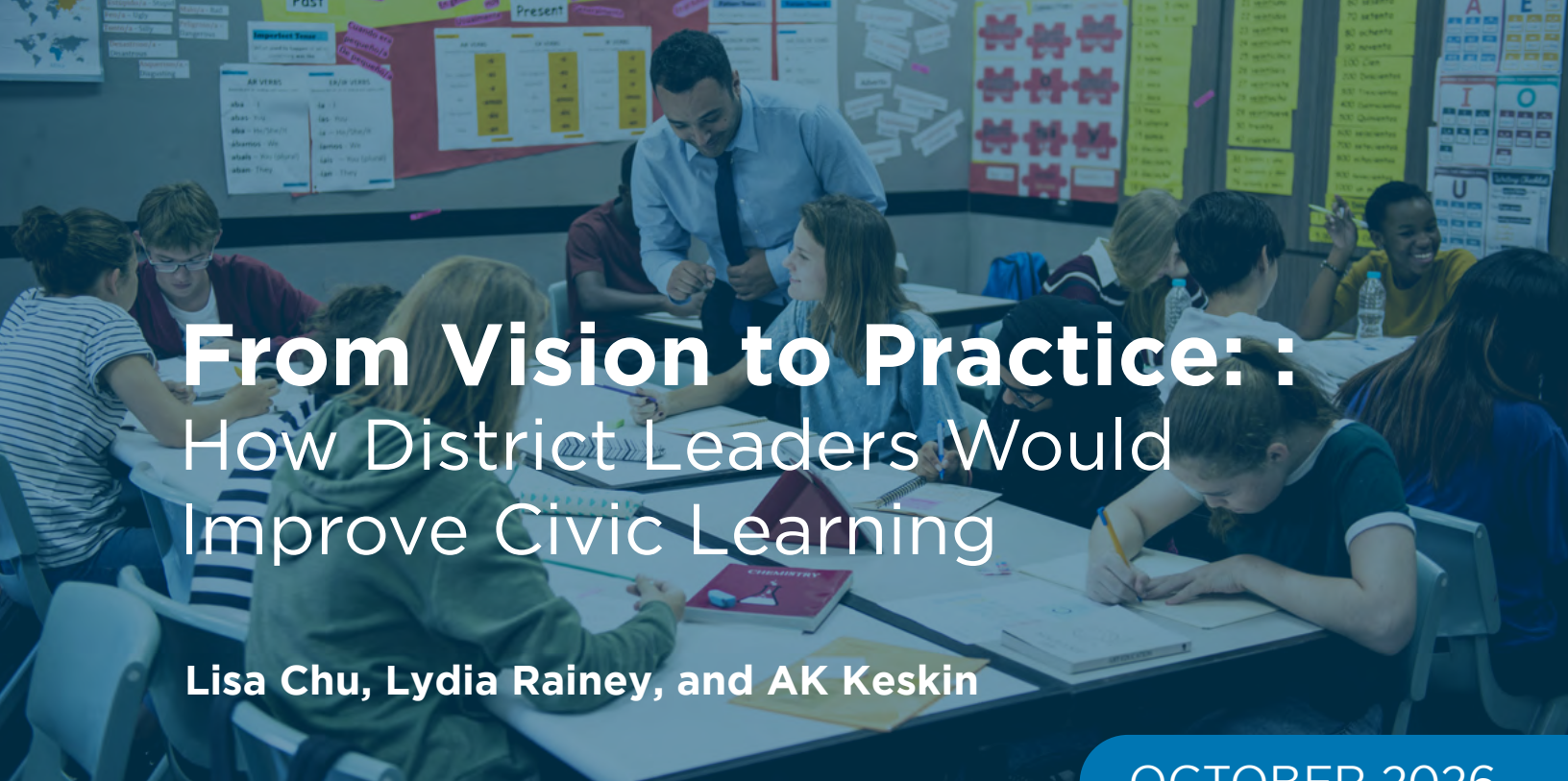


A photograph of a classroom scene. A male teacher in a light blue shirt and dark tie is leaning over a desk, interacting with a group of students. The students are seated at desks, some looking at the teacher, others at their work. The classroom walls are covered with various educational posters and charts. The text 'From Vision to Practice: : How District Leaders Would Improve Civic Learning' is overlaid in large white font on the image.

From Vision to Practice: : How District Leaders Would Improve Civic Learning

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OCTOBER 2026

As the United States' 250th anniversary slides into the rearview mirror and the 2026 midterm elections appear on the horizon, the public and policymakers alike are wondering if schools are truly preparing students to participate in civic life. Our [first brief](#) in this three-part series found that civics instruction is widespread, but opportunities for students to apply what they learn remain uneven. Our [second brief](#) revealed that support for civic learning is strongest when grounded in local engagement and reinforced by formal district commitments, policies, and school board backing, but weaker when viewed as politically charged or tied to national debates. In this third brief, we ask: **What do district leaders actually want their civics programs to accomplish, and what do they need to turn their vision into reality?**

We explored these questions using survey and interview data from the [American School District Panel](#) (ASDP), a research partnership between RAND and CRPE. We found that the leaders we interviewed wanted students to apply civics knowledge through hands-on experiences, understand current events, see through misinformation, navigate political disagreements, and remain open to dialogue and opposing views even after graduation. Some also wanted civic learning to begin in elementary school, build across the K-12 continuum, and extend into other subjects. Yet, only about one in five district leaders who participated in our national survey reported that experiential learning is an element of civic learning districtwide. These results point to a broader disconnect: most surveyed districts have not yet implemented the deeper, more interdisciplinary, and wider-ranging experiential civics learning programs that interviewed leaders say they want for students. Closing that gap will require stronger support for teachers, sufficient time and resources, and greater alignment among states, districts, and schools.

These district leaders have a vision for deeper civic learning, but realizing that vision will require more than just the effort of individual teachers or one-off civics courses. Without systemic support

at the state and district levels, student access to deeper civic learning will remain varied and unevenly distributed, depending primarily on which educators or schools choose to provide it.

Background: What is Civic Learning?

This brief is the third in our three-part series on civic learning in the US. 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 defined 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 American School District Panel 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. Because of the small number of leaders and the fact that they volunteered to be interviewed, these findings are not representative of district leaders nationally. Rather, they offer insight into the perspectives of leaders with an interest in or reputation for supporting civic learning. This third brief in our three-part series focuses on data collected in Fall 2025 and Spring 2026. Please see our full Methodology section for more information.

Findings

Leaders envision civic learning as more experiential, relevant to students’ professional skill-building and future career paths, and integrated across grade levels and subjects.

In interviews, we asked 28 district leaders what they would want their civic learning programs to look like if there weren’t any barriers. Leaders envisioned a civic learning program that would:

Create more experiential learning opportunities: Twenty out of the 28 leaders wanted students to apply civics knowledge through experiential learning opportunities, such as visiting government offices, participating in mock trials and debates, and working with community organizations. For these leaders, civics knowledge was important, but insufficient on its own. As one explained, “ [Stopping at just civics knowledge] works about as well as knowing the driver’s manual makes you a good driver. Without the experience, you don’t know how to use it.” Five leaders specifically envisioned service learning that connects academic content to community issues. One leader wanted these experiences to morph from occasions for students

to accumulate community service hours to more “action-oriented and impact-oriented” events that were more responsive to the needs of schools and communities.

Connect to practical, social, and critical thinking skills: Nine leaders wanted students to discuss current events and develop media literacy, critical thinking skills, and the ability to participate in civil discourse. Leaders viewed these skills as critical for navigating the proliferation of misinformation and AI-generated content. One noted that students need to recognize “truth versus AI versus lies [and become] responsible consumers of information.” Others wanted students to learn how to disagree, consider different perspectives, and form their own views. One leader shared, “The [current] discourse is so controversial ... [students should] be able to actually talk about local, state, [and] national politics.” Some also connected these skills to life after graduation. Another leader noted, “Career readiness requires some civic-mindedness.” They said that the skills needed to participate in a community dialogue, like communication, building consensus, critical thinking, and openness to different viewpoints, are the same skills that will help students work with others in their future careers.

Span the K-12 continuum: Eight leaders wanted civic learning to begin earlier in students’ schooling rather than in high school. They said that ideally, civics learning and opportunities would be a continuum throughout K-12. Younger students should learn foundational concepts, and older students should apply them through more complex, hands-on experiences. Some also wanted experiential learning to begin in the earlier grades so students could develop awareness of community needs. One leader envisioned a “system of learning” in which students make connections throughout their K-12 education. Another described creating “on-ramps” to more hands-on civic experiences in middle and high school, when students are beginning to form their identities and make decisions about their futures.

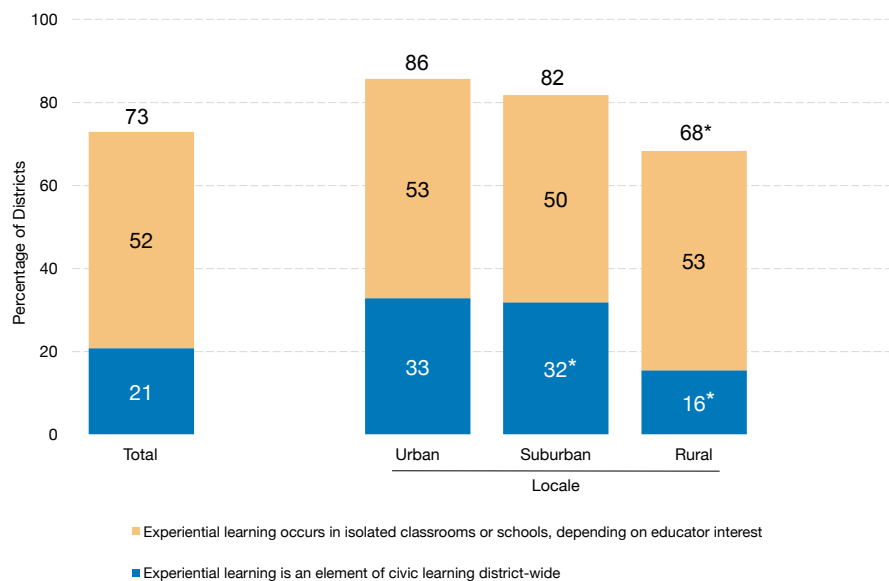
Be implemented across subjects: Four leaders envisioned interdisciplinary civic learning that would take place beyond social studies courses. For example, students might explore environmental civics issues in their science classes or examine civics topics in their English courses. These leaders wanted civic learning to take place in all classes to help students understand how civic knowledge and skills apply to other subject areas. One leader said, “Civic learning isn’t isolated in itself,” further noting that connecting ideas and competencies across subjects can lead to more authentic learning experiences.

These leaders’ visions for civic learning suggest they want to move beyond siloed courses, content, and requirements towards a more coherent approach that gives students opportunities to apply civic knowledge and skills in real-world contexts. But experiential learning, the common thread running through many leaders’ visions, is far from a consistent practice across most districts nationwide.

As part of the Spring 2026 ASDP panel survey, we asked districts to what extent they incorporated experiential learning into civics instruction (see Figure 1). The survey response data revealed that the extent to which experiential learning was included largely depended on educator interest (52%), rather than on district standards (21%).

Only around 1 in 5 districts nationwide has made experiential civic learning a district-wide practice.

Figure 1: How Districts Incorporated Experiential Learning into Civic Learning, by District Urbanicity



This figure depicts response data from the following survey question in the Spring 2026 survey: “Which of the following best describes the degree to which your district incorporated experiential learning into civic learning this school year?” ($n = 370$; Urban = 43, Suburban = 95, Rural = 232). Respondents selected one of three response options. This figure displays only the percentage of districts that selected “Experiential learning occurs in isolated classrooms or schools, depending on educator interest” and “Experiential learning is an element of civic learning district-wide.” The response option “Experiential learning is not an element of civic learning in our district” has been omitted from the figure (Total: 27%; Urban: 14%; Suburban: 18%; Rural: 32%). An asterisk (*) indicates that the percentage for that subgroup is significantly different from the percentage for all other districts combined (e.g., rural versus nonrural) at the $p < 0.05$ level.

When districts did offer some form of experiential civic learning, it occurred in isolated classrooms or schools at an educator’s discretion 71% of the time. This finding aligns with our [earlier results](#) from Fall 2025: districts reported that the most common form of civic learning occurred in a required academic class (90%), that only 35% of districts offered optional experiential civics learning opportunities, and that a mere 13% of districts required experiential learning.

These results also varied by urbanicity. Rural districts (68%) were significantly less likely to offer any form of experiential learning in civics at all than urban districts (86%) and suburban districts (82%). Also, far fewer rural districts (16%) significantly incorporated experiential learning as an element of civics learning district-wide, compared to urban (33%) and suburban (32%) districts.

While our survey does not explain which factors motivated the rural differences we observed, prior research suggests that rural communities may have [fewer civic institutions](#) and [fewer opportunities](#) for civic or political engagement.

To make civics more experiential, relevant, and grounded, interviewed district leaders say they need better support for teachers, greater alignment with state and school leaders, and more funding, time, and staff capacity.

The gap between district leaders' visions and current civic learning practices suggests that relying on individual educators will not result in deeper civic learning across the board. When asked what it would take to make their civic learning visions a reality, district leaders pointed to the following barriers:

Teachers need instructional, pedagogical, and political support: Just over half the leaders called for professional learning, coaching, and materials to help teachers provide more experiential, student-led, and discussion-based civic learning. One leader described the need for giving teachers “turnkey” resources instead of asking them to “figure out civic engagement” without support. Some leaders also reported that hands-on civic learning can require a pedagogical shift, in which teachers “really let go” and facilitate project-based learning, incorporate more experiential activities, and give students more control of their own learning in general. Lastly, leaders reported that teachers need political cover from the district when addressing current events or controversial topics. One leader explained, “[Teachers] need to know they have permission to have the hard conversations.”

State and district leaders need to align around the purpose and priority of civic learning: Eight leaders called for stronger alignment across state, district, and school leadership. Some wanted state policies and guidance to promote inquiry, critical thinking, and application rather than memorization. One leader suggested replacing the civic exam requirement with “a more inquiry-based, problem-based approach, rather than memorization of a hundred facts.” Within districts, leaders said they need clearer expectations for schools. A leader from a large, urban district said, “[We need] a unified voice saying what [civic learning] looks like, what we’re doing, and what the expectation is.” The same leader also stressed the importance of helping principals and teachers understand why civic learning matters, so it does not feel like another competing initiative.

Districts need time, resources, and staffing capacity: Thirteen leaders said their districts need stronger implementation conditions, such as dedicated instructional and planning time, flexible instructional schedules for students and teachers, funding for curricular materials and transportation, and sufficient staffing. “[Experiential learning] takes up time from traditional instruction and requires teachers to let students explore their own learning,” one leader explained. Protected time for civics learning can run up against other demands, such as mandated testing. Leaders also described funding needs. In one district, civics curriculum updates competed with other subjects because “ELA and math take precedence.” At the same time, another leader said that transportation funding would expand students’ access to experiential learning opportunities. Leaders also reported needing substitutes and other personnel to cover ongoing responsibilities while teachers are dedicating time to civics.

Implications

These district leaders want civic learning to be more experiential, relevant to students' professional skill-building and future careers, and integrated across students' education. While the sample is small and not representative, their visions shed light on ways to improve civic learning. Yet the survey findings (which are weighted to be representative) suggest that the extent to which students are exposed to experiential civic learning opportunities often depends on individual educators. Moving from vision to practice and systematizing experiential civic learning at the district level will require time, funding, staffing, instructional support, and policy alignment.

State leaders should examine whether existing requirements support the civic learning programs that districts are trying to build. Standards, assessments, and graduation requirements should encourage students to apply civic knowledge, engage in inquiry, and develop skills such as media literacy and the ability to participate in civil discourse. States can also protect instructional time for civics and invest in professional learning and resources for teachers. Clear guidance and public backing from states can give districts and teachers greater confidence to address current and politically controversial issues.

Civic learning advocates, such as civic education organizations and community partners, can continue helping districts translate their visions into practice. They can reduce the load on teachers and strengthen instructional capacity by identifying and providing ready-to-use materials, professional learning, and training that help teachers move towards experiential, student-led, and discussion-based instruction. Advocates can also connect districts with affordable experiential opportunities and provide guidance on how to facilitate politically sensitive conversations.

District leaders can continue to push their visions for civic learning. District leaders can also give teachers explicit permission and support to address current and controversial issues, and pursue community partnerships to enable more experiential civic learning. Throughout, leaders will need to consider how much of civic learning should be left up to individual teacher discretion versus what should be standardized through curriculum or policy. This decision also comes with real equity implications, since leaving too many decisions up to individual discretion means access can depend on which teacher or school a student happens to have.

Bridging the gap between leaders' visions for deeper civic learning and practice cannot depend on siloed programs or individual teachers' efforts and interests. States, districts, and advocates must work together to create the conditions that make experiential civic learning a unified and systemwide 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 the 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 data from the Spring 2026 ASDP survey. The Spring 2026 ASDP survey was administered to K-12 public school districts between March 18, 2026, and May 4, 2026. As in recent survey waves, CRPE and RAND invited all regular US public school districts to participate; we did not invite charter management organizations or districts with schools on military installations or reservations. 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 were produced 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 US 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.

Because we invited all regular US public school districts to participate rather than drawing a probability sample, these weights do not account for the probability of selection into the survey sample. Instead, we modeled the likelihood that an invited district would respond to the survey. We used the inverse of that response probability as the base weight, which we then calibrated to reproduce the population distribution of public school districts in the United States.

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 and interviews 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). 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). 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, semi-structured 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. 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 thus were limited in the depth of information they could garner on topics such as the quality of students' experiences) 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.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the district leaders who gave us invaluable insight into their civics learning practices. We also thank our peer reviewers, who helped sharpen the report's findings and conclusions. The research in this report was funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Gates Foundation, and The Wallace Foundation. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funders.

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.

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