



A Mile Wide, an Inch Deep: The State of Civic Learning in U.S. School Districts

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As the United States celebrates its 250th anniversary, civic learning is in the national spotlight. But beneath this attention lies a troubling reality: civic learning is widely present in K-12 education, but often shallow in practice. New survey and interview data from the American School District Panel (ASDP), a research partnership between RAND and the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), show that although 90% of district leaders who participated in the national survey report embedding civics in a required academic class, far fewer give students structured opportunities to apply civic knowledge through hands-on learning, community engagement, or civic dialogue.

This lack of practical engagement opportunities contrasts with what district leaders say they want students to experience in civic education. In interviews, they said that they want students to become informed citizens who can analyze issues, make decisions, and participate in their communities. However, district offerings and teacher supports are not consistently built to achieve that goal. Required professional learning is more likely to focus on standards and foundational knowledge than on civic skills, assessment, instructional materials, or complex public issues.

The result is a civic learning landscape that is a mile wide and an inch deep: most districts offer something, but fewer have created the conditions for students to practice the skills that democratic participation requires. Prior research suggests that well-designed civic education can shape young people's civic engagement, but this depends on a combination of classroom instruction, extracurricular activities, service learning, and a school's ethos, rather than on classroom instruction alone. Districts, states, and civic learning advocates should focus on making deeper civic learning possible by providing clearer goals, stronger professional learning, shared instructional resources, and more consistent opportunities for students to practice civic skill

The challenge is not simply getting civic learning into more schools: it is ensuring that civic learning gives students regular opportunities to apply what they have learned in real-world contexts.

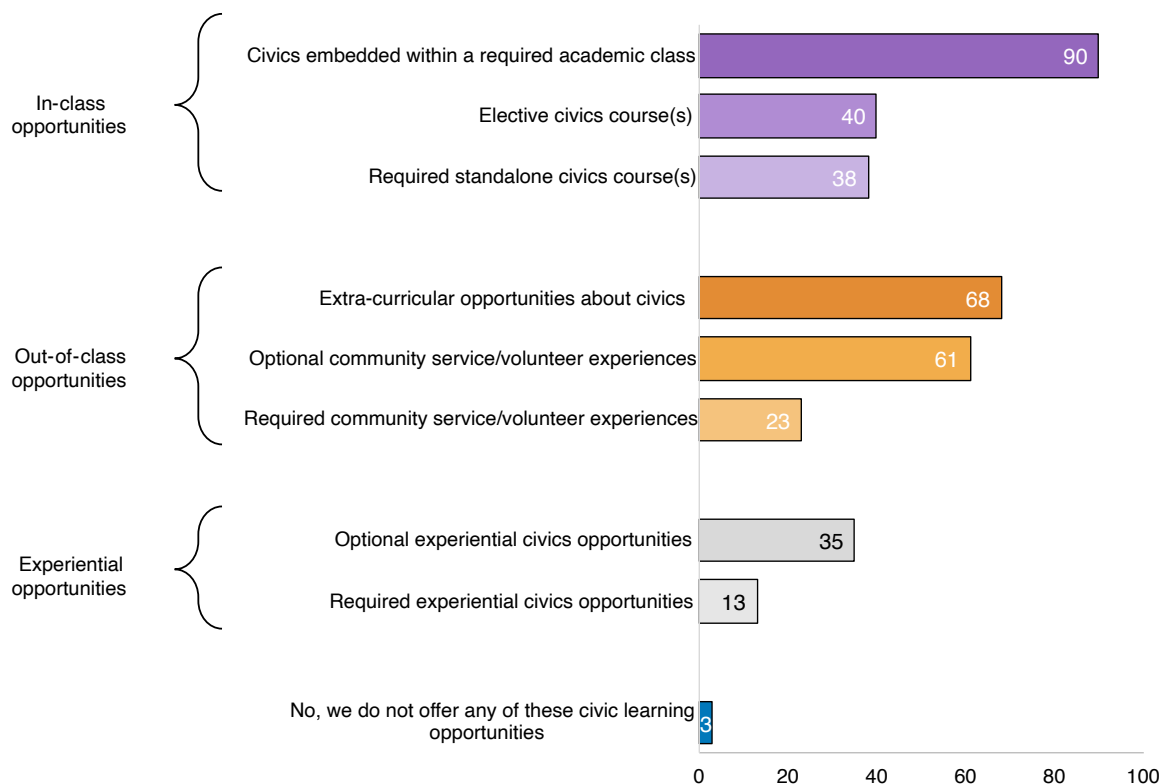
Background

This brief builds on our [prior work](#) distinguishing between foundational civics knowledge and civics skills and experiences. Foundational civics knowledge refers to students’ understanding of government, history, rights, responsibilities, and civic institutions, which is typically taught through government or civics courses and extracurricular activities. Civics skills and experiences, on the other hand, refer to opportunities for students to discuss public issues, analyze information, connect civic knowledge to current events, participate in community problem-solving, and practice civic engagement, both in and outside of the classroom.

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 first brief in our three-part series focuses on data collected in fall 2025. Please see our full Methodology section for more information.

Civics instruction is common, but opportunities for students to engage in civic experiences are less available.

Figure 1: Types of Civic Learning Opportunities Districts Provided to Students



Notes: This figure shows response data from the following survey question: “During the 2025–2026 school year, do one or more schools in your district offer any of the following civic learning opportunities to students?” (n = 224). Respondents were instructed to select all that apply; therefore, percentages do not add to 100. For brevity, response option labels in the figure exclude the parenthetical examples provided to respondents in the survey instrument. The response option “Other” has been omitted from the figure, as it was selected by less than 1% of districts.

When we asked districts about the civic learning opportunities they provided to students in 2025–26, their responses revealed a pattern of civic learning that emphasizes academic instruction rather than out-of-class opportunities and experiential opportunities. As shown in Figure 1, 90% of districts reported civics embedded in a required academic class, up from 81% in [spring 2025](#). However, far fewer districts reported providing opportunities that ask students to apply civic knowledge. Just 35% of districts offered optional experiential civics opportunities, and only 13% required them. Required community service or volunteer experiences were also rare—only 23% of districts mandated them. These gaps suggest that many districts have made foundational civics knowledge available, but civic practice is not consistently part of students’ experiences.

District leaders say civics skills and experiences matter—they do not see imparting foundational civics knowledge as the end goal.

While our survey results show that civic learning is primarily embedded in academic classes, the interviewed district leaders did not describe foundational civics knowledge as an end goal. Instead, they viewed it as the base for civic participation, engagement, and decision-making. One leader shared that her district’s civic learning goal is to “prepare our students to be informed citizens... who are encouraged in being a part of a democracy.” Another leader said, “Our goal is to give our kids the information [about civics] so they can be better prepared to make objective decisions.” A third leader reported that his district is shifting from covering content alone toward emphasizing analysis and evaluation: “The learning aspect comes in during the class time, but the application is everything that’s outside of the class.”

Leaders’ reported goals suggest that they want students to connect foundational civics knowledge to the world beyond the classroom. One leader described helping students “bring some of the historical things from the past and connect [them] more intentionally to the things that are happening presently.” In another district, the leader described partnering with a local civic organization to pair coursework with civic engagement projects aligned to state standards and district curriculum maps. Through this partnership, students learned about local government, met with community organizations, and completed projects that applied classroom skills to local issues, such as expanding library services and pedestrian safety.

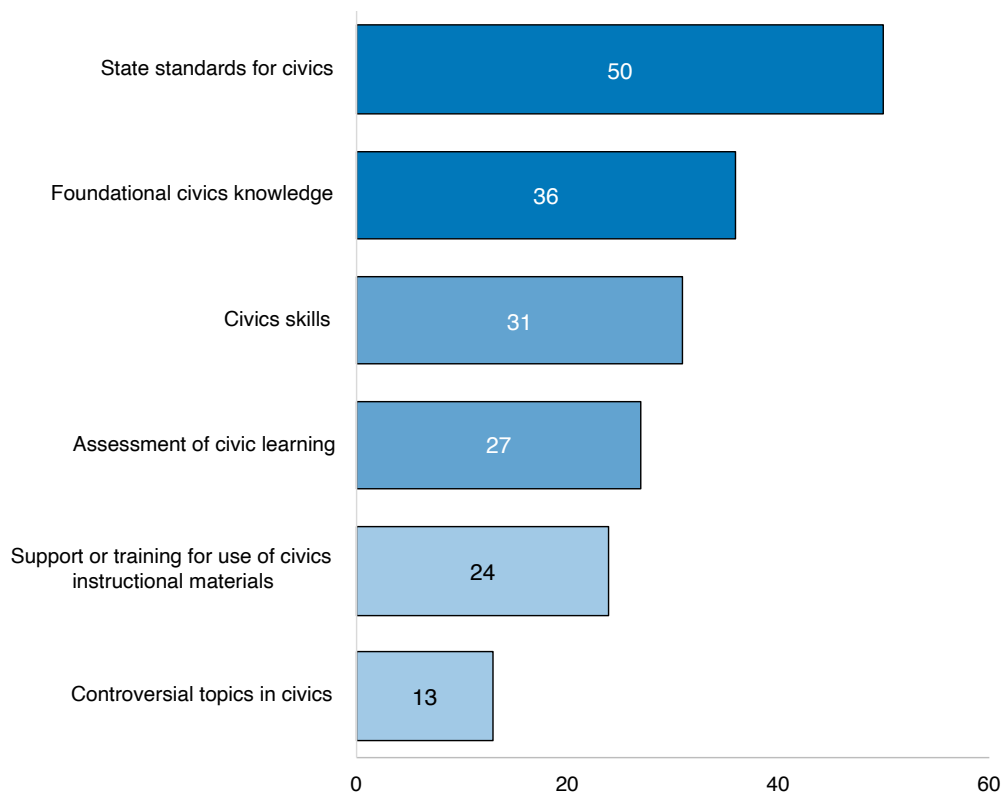
Districts need stronger support for teachers to move from foundational civics knowledge to civics skills and experiences.

In interviews, leaders described professional learning for teachers as essential to helping their student learning goals advance from gaining foundational civics knowledge toward having civic skills and experiences. Leaders reported that teachers need support with not only understanding civics standards or curriculum, but also translating those standards into meaningful learning experiences for students. This was especially important in districts without a set civic learning curriculum or shared definition of civic learning, where implementation may depend heavily on individual teachers.

Despite the importance of professional learning around civics, leaders noted teacher-training gaps in the following areas:

- **Access to professional learning and resources:** Though not all interviewed districts offered professional development focused on civic learning, leaders described teacher training as necessary for reaching their civic learning goals. As one leader explained, it “starts with [teacher] training” and making sure teachers have “equal access to information... because they don’t all have equal access to all the resources.” Similarly, another leader said that districts may put too much responsibility on teachers by assuming they already know how to teach civics. In his district, teachers still need help identifying resources “outside of the classroom,” such as community partners and experiential learning opportunities. “My concerns are how well [we are] taking care of our teachers and providing clarity for our teachers so that they can have the opportunities to support our students adequately the way they need.”
- **Alignment on civic learning goals:** In some districts, civic learning does not come with a set curriculum or shared resources, which introduces ambiguity around what teachers should teach. Leaders said this can lead to variation in how civic learning is taught across classrooms and inconsistencies in when certain topics are introduced. One leader said professional learning could help by developing “standardized definitions and working definitions” of civic learning, noting that teachers may support the idea of civic learning but still wonder exactly what it is. This leader believes shared definitions and base knowledge could help more teachers incorporate civic learning into their lessons.
- **Support for facilitating civic dialogue and difficult topics:** Leaders also said teachers need more support in facilitating civic dialogue, especially when topics are complex or controversial. One leader described the need for training on “how to conduct civic conversations where things are difficult,” which students may need help practicing. She also noted that helping teachers mediate difficult conversations also requires supporting teachers’ well-being so they can be “that steady voice of a facilitator and a supporter.”

Our survey data echo these interview findings and underline leaders’ desire for more professional learning for teachers.

Figure 2: Mandatory Professional Learning Topics Districts Offered to Civics Teachers

NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “Has your district offered civics teachers any of the following professional learning topics in the 2025–2026 school year? Include teachers who either (a) teach standalone civics courses during the school day, or (b) teach civics that is embedded in an academic class” (n = 220–222). For each topic, respondents selected one of three response options: No (1); Yes, and it is mandatory (2); or Yes, and it is optional (3). This figure displays only the percentage of districts that selected “Yes, and it is mandatory” for each topic. For brevity, topic labels exclude the parenthetical examples provided in some response options. The response option “Other” has been omitted from this figure (n = 37; 8% mandatory).

According to the surveyed leaders, most district-offered professional learning they receive focuses primarily on civics standards rather than on how to support students’ practice of civic engagement (e.g., skills, discussing controversial topics). As shown in Figure 2, when districts required professional learning for civics teachers, it was most commonly focused on state standards for civics (50%) and foundational civics knowledge (36%). Fewer districts required professional learning on civics skills (31%), support and training for using civics instructional materials (24%), or assessment of civic learning (27%). Notably, only 13% of districts required professional learning on controversial topics in civics, suggesting that teachers may have limited formal support for facilitating the kinds of civic dialogue and discussion that are central to deeper civic engagement.

This gap in professional learning is particularly important because civic dialogue is not politically neutral in many communities. Teachers may be asked to help students discuss current events, democracy, rights, identity, conflict, or public policy in environments where adults disagree sharply about what belongs in the classroom. Professional learning should not treat this as only a classroom facilitation challenge. Instead, it should prepare teachers and school leaders to set norms, communicate with families, align lessons to standards, and respond when controversy arises.

Deeper civic learning requires stronger systems and support.

The current civic learning push will fall short if districts simply add civics content to existing courses or treat superficial standards alignment as the only goal. If districts want students to apply civic knowledge and demonstrate civic skills, then they must build the conditions to support deeper engagement and alignment with standards: clear goals, shared instructional materials, teacher training, and structured opportunities for students to practice civic skills. The national spotlight may help districts prioritize civic learning, but the depth of that learning will depend on whether local systems move beyond mere exposure to actual practice

States can help make that shift possible. Although state civics standards establish expectations for student learning, standards alone do not equip teachers to facilitate public issue discussions, connect civic knowledge to civic skills and experiences, or support meaningful community engagement. State leaders can address this by providing guidance, instructional resources, and professional learning that help educators translate standards into high-quality civic learning experiences.

Civic learning advocates have helped bring attention to the importance of high-quality civic learning opportunities in districts. The next challenge is ensuring that this momentum translates into deeper student experiences, not just broader access to civics. Advocates can help districts move toward that goal by strengthening community partnerships, identifying strong instructional models, and expanding access to experiential opportunities that allow students to practice the skills democratic participation requires.

If the goal is to prepare students for democratic participation, then success cannot be measured only by whether civic learning is offered. It should be measured by whether students have opportunities to use civic knowledge, practice civic skills, and engage with the issues and communities around them.

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 [a previous publication](#).

American School District Panel (ASDP) Survey Data

The Fall 2025 ASDP survey was administered to K–12 public school districts between October 21, 2025, and December 16, 2025. This survey wave was the first time that 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 were invited to take our survey, 345 districts completed it (a 2.8% 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 when the survey was administered. Because some districts completed only the first module of the survey, two sets of weights were created: 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 ($n = 259$). 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.

Unlike prior survey waves, because we invited all public school districts 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 and 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. 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.

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 RAND's [technical documentation](#).)

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 January 2026, we conducted qualitative, semistructured interviews with 11 district leaders. 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 11 district leaders we interviewed, four had previously participated in spring 2025 interviews that informed [our previous report](#). The remaining eight interviewees were recruited from respondents to the fall 2025 ASDP survey. 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 40,000 students. The sample was composed of leaders from three urban districts, four suburban districts, and four 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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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.

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