What counts as civics?

A look at how districts define and facilitate civic learning

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Civic learning plays a foundational role in helping students understand how their government works, develop the skills to participate in civic life, and see themselves as capable members of their communities.[1] At its best, civic learning equips all young people with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for informed and sustained democratic engagement. Despite its importance, civic learning has been deprioritized in K–12 education, crowded out by a stronger emphasis on math and reading assessments, inconsistently supported by state agencies, and hindered by outdated instructional materials and a lack of teacher training.

This lack of investment has real consequences. On the 2022 NAEP Civics Assessment, just 22% of eighth-grade students scored Proficient or above, and student performance has remained largely flat on the test since the 1990s. These results suggest that many students are not gaining the civic knowledge and competencies they need to thrive in a democratic society. Political polarization and debates over what belongs in the classroom add layers of complexity to civic learning.

In response, civic learning advocates offer several remedies. One approach emphasizes the importance of confronting difficult aspects of American history, arguing that students should engage with uncomfortable truths about injustice, inequality, and threats to democratic institutions. A second approach urges a renewed emphasis on how government actually functions, including structures, processes, and the rule of law. A third approach stresses participation through service learning, student deliberation, or community-based projects that give young people a sense of agency. Still others highlight the need for media literacy and civil-discourse skills to counter misinformation and increases in partisanship. While not mutually exclusive, these ideas animate debates and shape the options for improving civic learning outcomes.

Underlying these and other efforts to improve civic learning is a recognition that, compared to core academic subjects, civics has more potential to support educator innovation, connect learning to students' lived experiences, and model democratic engagement.

1. Throughout this report we use the term "civic learning" to refer to both "civics" and "civic education." For a nuanced discussion of a range of civic learning terms, please see "Pressing Needs in Research on K–12 Civic Learning."

There's no one approach to teaching "civics"

In today's fragmented policy and instructional environment, civic learning looks different across districts and schools. While some systems adopt comprehensive approaches, many draw from multiple frameworks or adapt them piecemeal, contributing to wide variation in how civic learning is understood and implemented.

At its core, civic learning aims to prepare young people to participate effectively and responsibly in civic life. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Framework defines this through three essential components:

- Civic knowledge (understanding democratic principles and the structure of government);
- Civic skills (such as evaluating sources, engaging in dialogue, and analyzing policy); and
- Civic dispositions (valuing democratic norms and contributing to the common good).

A range of instructional frameworks seek to support student learning in these areas. For example, the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework emphasizes disciplinary thinking and civic inquiry but provides limited guidance on specific content. The Educating for American Democracy (EAD) roadmap introduces core content themes and guiding questions designed to engage students with real civic dilemmas. Additionally, the six Proven Practices in Civic Learning promote experiential approaches like simulations, service learning, and student-led discussions to build engagement and skill (Note: These six practices were expanded to ten in 2017 to include media literacy, action civics, social and emotional learning, and school climate reform). These frameworks are not mutually exclusive, but they offer different interpretations of what civics should include and how it should be taught. Many do not map neatly onto existing history or social studies curricula, where civics is often housed, creating additional challenges for coherence and implementation.

Adding to this variation, state requirements for civics education differ considerably. Some states mandate dedicated civics courses or assessments, while others embed civic learning across content areas or grade levels. These differences lead to uneven emphasis on civic learning across the country and contribute to a landscape in which districts must navigate multiple frameworks, fragmented standards, and differing expectations for what civic readiness entails.

Against this backdrop, we set out to understand how school districts across the country are approaching civics instruction today. What are they teaching, and how? What challenges do they encounter? We surveyed 170 public school districts as part of our ongoing American School District Panel (ASDP) project and conducted in-depth interviews with district leaders from 18 systems, representing a mix of urban (8), suburban (8), and rural (2) districts of varying sizes, from fewer than 1,000 students to more than 50,000 students.[2]

Our findings paint a nuanced picture of districts trying to strike a delicate balance: Most want students to leave school with civic knowledge and the skills to engage in public life, but they must also navigate competing demands on time, uneven resources, and growing political scrutiny. Many rely heavily on state standards and requirements to guide what civics

2. 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 who do not in ways that are impossible to measure.

instruction includes, but civics offerings are also shaped locally, resulting in wide variation in what's taught, how it's taught, and who gets access. District leaders are working to protect space for civic learning and to equip teachers for the complex task of preparing students for democratic life.

These findings suggest that state education agencies (SEAs) have both an opportunity and a responsibility to do more than define content. By making civics a core priority, supporting under-resourced districts, and offering clear guidance on how to teach controversial topics well, SEAs can help ensure that civics doesn't get crowded out of classrooms. Districts, meanwhile, will need to examine how civics fits into their instructional visions and ensure that teachers are equipped with the content knowledge, as well as professional learning and curricular support, to navigate increasing levels of politicization.

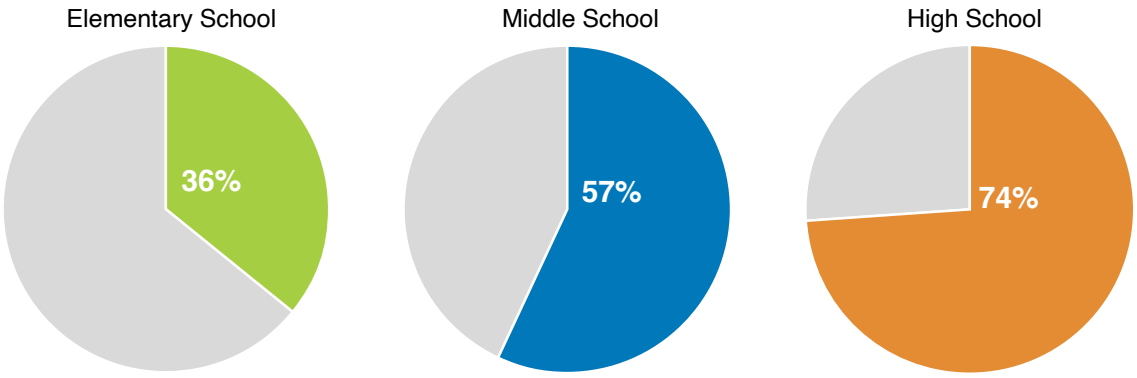
Key findings:

- **Most surveyed districts reported offering civics, typically in history or social studies classes.** While 74% of districts reported providing explicit civics instruction in high school, far fewer do so in earlier grades, and just 36% offer it in elementary school. In most cases, civics is not taught as a standalone course and is integrated into other academic subjects.
- **District leaders think a mix of civics knowledge and experiences is most important to include in civic learning.** District leaders' survey and interview responses broadly suggest that foundational knowledge—facts, structures of government, and history—continues to serve as the core instructional emphasis in most places, although some districts are leaning into broader conceptions of civics that include civics skills and experiences.
- **District leaders report relying heavily on their state's standards and requirements to shape their civics offerings**. Most leaders said their civics programs are grounded in state standards and requirements, which offer structure and resources but also limit flexibility.
- **Among those surveyed, urban districts are more likely to have civics standards, graduation requirements, assessments, and curricula.** Urban districts reported offering more instructional support for civic learning than their suburban and rural peers.
- **Time, funding, and capacity are the biggest barriers to offering more civic learning opportunities.** District leaders most often cited lack of time in the school day as the most significant obstacle to expanding civic learning. Leaders also pointed to budget constraints, teacher turnover, and gaps in staff capacity and training.
- **Local capacity shapes how districts support civic learning at the school level.** Leaders in well-resourced districts described leveraging dedicated staff, funding, and internal infrastructure to train teachers, curate materials, and build external partnerships, while leaders from resource-constrained districts relied more heavily on educators to sustain civics programs.
- **In interviews, district leaders describe teachers "tiptoeing" around discussions of controversial topics out of fear of political pushback.** Leaders described teachers feeling vulnerable to parent complaints, negative media coverage, and even threats to their jobs in today's highly polarized climate. In response, district leaders report that teachers avoid controversial topics and stick closely to state standards and requirements; leaders themselves are working to "provide cover" for teachers when needed.

Most surveyed districts reported offering civics, typically in history or social studies classes

In our spring 2025 survey, we asked district leaders whether their districts offered "explicit instruction" to students about civics in 2024–25.[3] As shown in Figure 1, the vast majority of surveyed districts (74%) reported offering explicit civics instruction to their high school students. Most of these districts (57%) said they offered explicit civics instruction to their middle school students. However, less than half of the districts (36%) indicated that they offered explicit civics instruction to their elementary school students.[4] Concerningly, 10% of districts said they did not offer explicit civics instruction at any grade level.

Figure 1. Percentage of Districts Offering Explicit Civics Instruction by Grade Level



NOTE: This figure shows response data from the following survey question: "Do your schools offer explicit instruction to students about civics this school year?" (n=174). Respondents were asked separately about each grade level and were instructed to select all that apply.

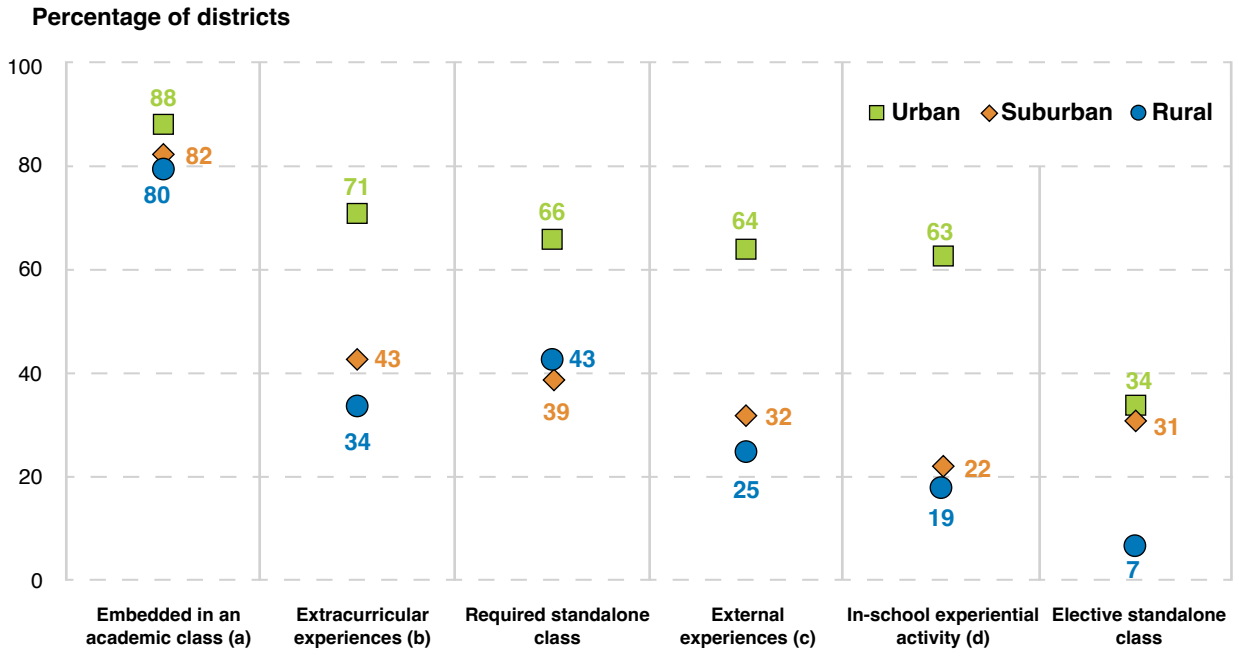
3. Our survey did not include a definition of "explicit instruction," and as a result, respondents may have interpreted this to mean content focused on civics knowledge (versus related to civics skills) or content only peripherally related to civic learning (e.g. current events, US history).

4. This pattern may reflect the fact that districts and states provide more guidance and requirements at the high school level.

Districts offering explicit civics instruction most commonly reported that civics is not a standalone course. Instead, 81% of districts said that civics is embedded in academic classes like social studies or history. Other formats of explicit civics instruction included required standalone courses (44%), extracurricular activities (38%), and in-school experiential activities (22%).

Districts' civics classes and program offerings varied across settings. Among the districts in our sample, urban districts are much more likely than suburban or rural districts (see Figure 2) to offer civics through extracurricular experiences (e.g., student government, debate club, mock trial), out-of-school experiences (e.g., community service, internships), and in-school experiential activities (e.g., project-based learning).[5] Importantly, students often don't experience civic learning just because districts offer some type of civics instruction. For example, even if a district offers a civics elective, only a small share of students might choose to take it.

Figure 2. Among Districts Offering Explicit Civics Instruction, Types of Classes and Programs in Which Civics Is Taught, by District Subgroup (% of Districts)



a Examples provided to respondents include social studies, history
b Examples provided to respondents include student government, debate club, mock trial
c Examples provided to respondents include community service, internship
d Examples provided to respondents include project-based learning.

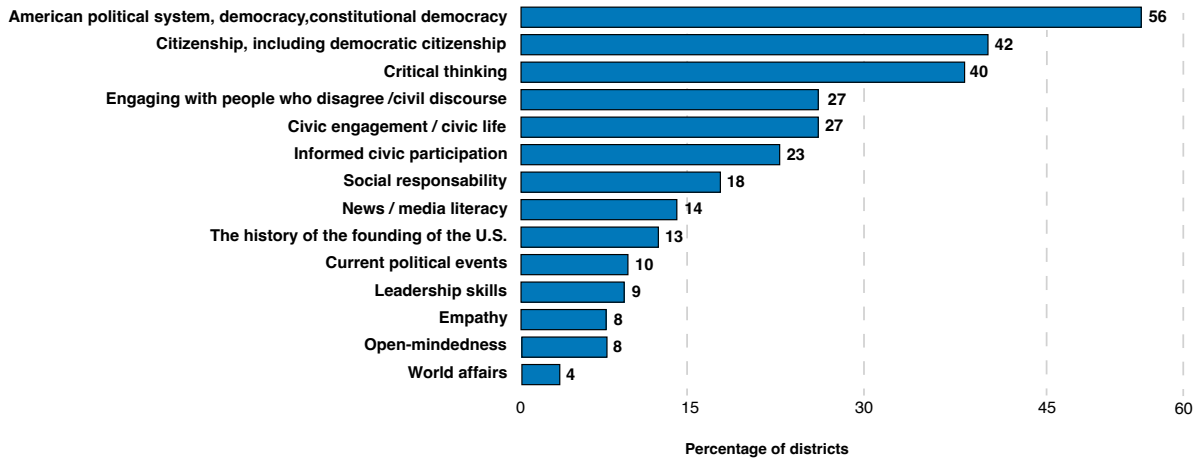
NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey question: "In which classes or programs is civics taught?" (n = 166; Urban = 32, Suburban = 48, Rural = 86). Respondents were instructed to select all that apply; therefore, percentages do not add up to 100. Only those that said yes to the question "Do your schools offer explicit instruction to students about civics this school year?" saw this question. Another response option, "other," was only selected by 1% of districts and has been omitted from this figure.

5. These differences may reflect that urban districts often have more central staffing resources devoted to social studies, a higher number of community and philanthropic partnerships, and closer proximity to government functions. Importantly, we did not ask districts how many students participated in each civics offering; rates of participation likely vary across districts and may be low.

District leaders think a mix of civics knowledge and experiences is most important to include in civic learning

To better understand how district leaders think about civic learning and what should be included when teaching the subject, we presented district leaders with a list of 14 topics and asked them to rank the top three topics for inclusion in civic learning. As shown in Figure 3, among those districts surveyed, three topics stood out as the most important from leaders' perspectives: "American political system, democracy, constitutional democracy" (56%), "Citizenship, including democratic citizenship" (42%), and "Critical thinking" (40%). After these, there was a steep drop-off. Districts' responses broadly suggest that foundational knowledge remains the core instructional emphasis in most places, although some districts are leaning into broader conceptions of civic learning.

Figure 3. Percentage of Districts That Ranked Various Topics as among Their Top Three Most Important to Include in Civic Learning



NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey question: "Rank the three topics (with a 1, 2, 3) that you think are most important to include in civic learning" (n = 172). Figure 3 displays the percentage of districts that ranked each topic as among their top three.

In interviews, district leaders' responses echoed our survey findings: nearly all districts offer civics, but course content and student experiences vary widely. Leaders described their civics offerings as composed of different strategies that fall into two broad categories, with five leaders describing civics offerings that focus on both:

- **Foundational civics knowledge:** Eight of the 18 leaders we interviewed emphasized the importance of teaching government, history, and civic processes, typically through government or civics courses. One leader said, "Civic learning to us is the foundations of government, the branches of the government, how government operates, but also the roles and responsibilities of citizens." The focus is on ensuring that students grasp key facts and how governmental structures function. In one state where students must pass a civics literacy exam modeled on the US naturalization test, a leader stressed the goal is for every graduate to leave with a solid understanding of American democracy.

- **Civics skills and experiences:** Fifteen of the 18 leaders we interviewed also described civics instruction as a way to build skills and provide real-world experiences that prepare students to engage in their communities. They promote student-centered, interdisciplinary approaches tied to real-world issues. Practices like Socratic seminars and collaborative discussion help students build empathy, discourse skills, and perspective-taking. "It's no longer about who can shout the loudest," one leader said, "but whether students can truly understand the other side and make thoughtful choices." These approaches also support hands-on learning. Students are encouraged to identify community issues, take action, and reflect—developing initiative, leadership, and collaboration. Examples included campaigning for safer pedestrian crossings near schools, raising funds for homelessness, or advocating for policy change. In one district, eighth graders concerned about healthcare access initiated a dialogue with a regional hospital. Across these efforts, districts aim to create space for exploration and student voices, helping students see themselves as civic actors today and in the future.

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District leaders report relying heavily on their state's standards and requirements to shape their civics offerings

In interviews, 15 of 18 leaders said they rely heavily on their state standards and requirements to shape their civics offerings. One administrator described how their state requires standalone civics courses in both middle and high school, along with a state-specific civics literacy exam. The state emphasizes foundational knowledge of government, the Constitution, and civic responsibilities. The administrator said, "Our program really revolves around the [state] mandates for civic learning. … We do not … deal with volunteering or participating or civic projects, and that hasn't been our focus, really, because of the constraints of the course and the standards and that piece."

In contrast, leaders in states with civics requirements that encompass both foundational civics knowledge and civics skills and experiences described how standards can support innovation. For example, one state mandates that all high schools offer at least one student-led, nonpartisan civics project focused on skills like analyzing complex issues, engaging in civil discourse, and understanding government impact. A district leader said the project, a cornerstone of their civics program, "really engages all kinds of kids" by letting them explore topics that energize them. Students have advocated for therapy dogs in a community affected by gun violence and pushed for more accessible transportation to support extracurricular participation. For students often unmotivated in class, "the civics project was the one thing that woke them up."

> **"The civics project was the one thing that woke them up."**

Leaders expressed mixed views on the limits of state standards and requirements. Several said that while the standards provide structure, they often leave little room for expansion. One leader explained that the standards "also set up parameters that have to be followed," which can challenge teachers who want to go beyond them. In these contexts, rigid or narrowly framed standards may unintentionally constrain instructional choices, limiting educators' ability to tailor civic learning to students' interests, identities, and community priorities. Others saw such standards more positively. State standards and requirements are "the groundwater for how we do the work," one leader said, adding that their district builds on those expectations thoughtfully. For these districts, strong standards serve as a foundation, providing legitimacy and direction, while still allowing room for local adaptation and depth.

Among those surveyed, urban districts are more likely to have civic learning standards, graduation requirements, assessments, and curricula

On our survey, we asked district leaders which instructional supports (e.g., curricula, learning standards, graduation requirements, and assessments) they offer for civics (see Figure 4).[6] Most surveyed districts (82%) reported having civic learning standards in place for at least some grade levels.[7] All leaders from urban districts reported having standards, compared to 87% of leaders in suburban districts and 79% in rural ones. However, all districts were more likely to have these standards for high school students than for students in the lower grade levels.

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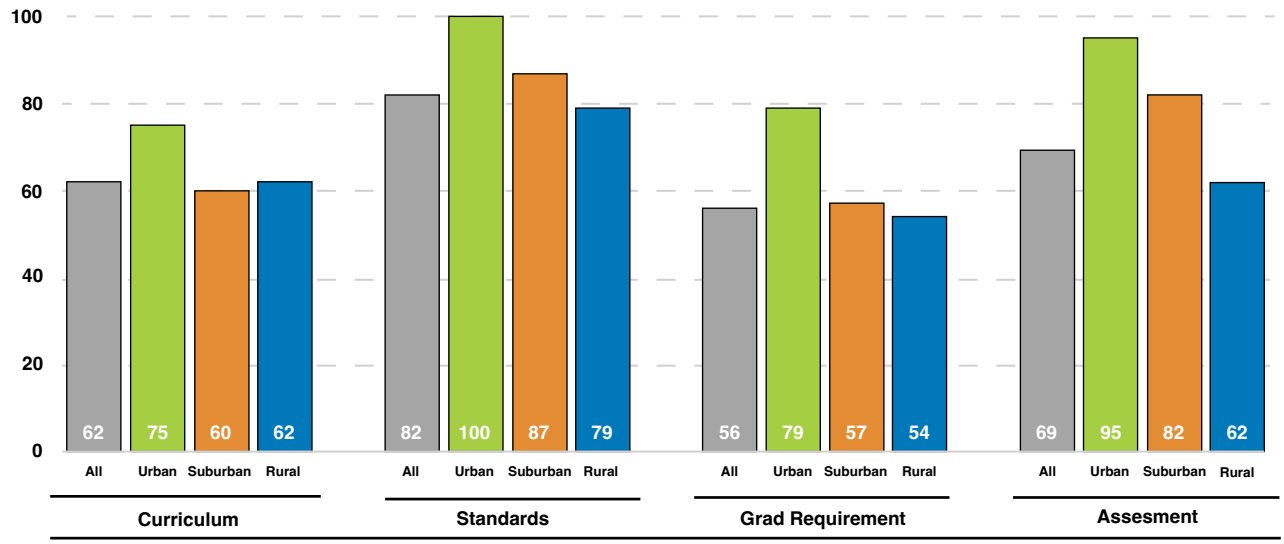
6. Because most states support districts with guidance on academic standards and graduation requirements, districts' responses to our survey items likely include both state level supports and additional supports that districts implement beyond those mandated by their state department of education.

7. Our survey did not specify between state- or district-provided standards, graduation requirements, or assessments and as a result we do not know whether respondents were referring to one or both in their responses.

Other supports for civic learning, like curriculum materials, graduation requirements, and assessments, are less uniformly adopted. For example, 62% of districts reported using a civics curriculum for at least some grade bands, and 56% reported having a graduation requirement in civics. Urban districts generally provided more supports for civics education, though differences across localities were not always statistically significant. For example, 79% of urban districts said civics was a graduation requirement, compared with 54% of rural districts and 57% of suburban districts.

When it came to measuring students' civic learning, 69% of districts reported assessing students' civic knowledge, disposition, or learning through standardized tests, portfolios or capstones, and/or through other indicators. This means that nearly one third of surveyed districts are not measuring students' civic knowledge, disposition, or learning in any formal way.

Figure 4: Use of Civics Standards, Graduation Requirements, Curriculum, and Assessments by District Subgroup

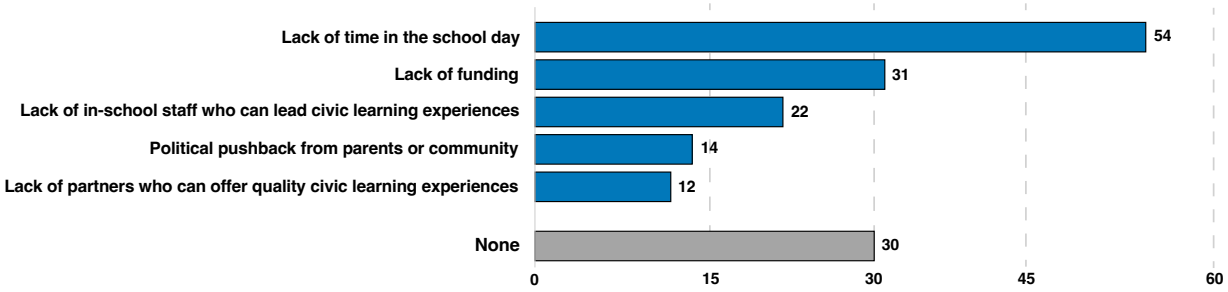


NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey questions: "Do your schools use one or more civics curriculum?" (n=174; Urban = 32, Suburban = 48, Rural = 94). "Does your district have standards about civic learning?" (n=174; Urban = 32, Suburban = 48, Rural = 94). "Does your district have graduation requirements about civic learning?" (n=173; Urban = 32, Suburban = 48, Rural = 93). "Do your schools assess students' civic knowledge, disposition or learning?" (n=173; Urban = 32, Suburban = 48, Rural = 93). For "curriculum" and "standards" questions, the figure includes districts that had these for any grade level(s). (Not all districts had these at each grade level.)

Time, funding, and capacity are the biggest barriers to offering more civic learning opportunities

To understand what limits districts from expanding civic learning opportunities, we asked districts about the barriers that their schools faced in offering more civic learning. As shown in Figure 5, while nearly a third of surveyed districts (30%) said they did not experience barriers to offering more civic learning opportunities, others said they did. A majority of district leaders across district types reported that a "lack of time in the school day" is the most significant barrier they face.

Figure 5: Types of Barriers District Leaders Say Schools Face in Offering More Civic Learning



NOTE: This figure is based on the following survey question: "What barriers, if any, do your schools face to offer more or any civic learning opportunities?" (n=173). Respondents were instructed to select all that apply; therefore, percentages do not add up to 100. Another response option, "other," was only selected by 1% of districts and has been omitted from this figure.

In our interviews, district leaders echoed survey findings and highlighted time-related challenges that constrain civic learning. In several districts, leaders said civics is crowded out by competing demands, especially in elementary grades in which English language arts and math are heavily tested and prioritized. Because social studies is not assessed in the same way and carries far less weight when it comes to state accountability measures, it often gets sidelined, making it harder to justify instructional time for civics. This imbalance is particularly acute in grades 3 to 8, where the high-stakes focus on ELA and math places intense pressure on instructional time, leaving little room for other subjects. One leader explained, "Social studies time in elementary school is spotty because testing drives so much about what happens in a schedule." Another put it more bluntly: "If you have to make a choice of cutting reading and math in the elementary school or social studies, you're going to shorten your social studies time." Across grade levels, leaders noted that civic learning lacks the policy attention and public support granted to subjects like math and reading. In most states, social studies is not part of the accountability system, and many community members may not see civic learning as essential to academic success.

Time constraints also extend beyond the school day. Several leaders described how packed schedules limit teacher participation in professional learning, especially civics-specific training. While some rely on partners who offer stipends, finding time remains a persistent barrier.

Leaders cited budget constraints as a barrier to expanding civic learning. Funding gaps limit their ability to form partnerships, invest in teacher coaching, and procure supplemental materials.

Leaders also noted staffing shortages and uneven teacher capacity. Two pointed to high turnover as a major obstacle to sustaining consistent civics instruction. Staff changes disrupt training and make it hard to embed civic learning across classrooms. Even when training is offered, new hires may miss out. Leaders also cited variations in teacher confidence and interest as a source of uneven implementation. Some district leaders shared that educators expressed hesitation about engaging multilingual learners in civic learning until students had stronger English skills. Leaders saw this mindset as a limiting belief. As one administrator put it, multilingual learners don't have to "learn all the words" before they can "do the good stuff" (i.e., engage in rigorous instruction)—in fact, participating in civic learning can strengthen their language development and deepen their connection to school and peers.

Local capacity shapes how districts support civic learning at the school level

Districts vary widely in how they support civic learning at the school level, and these differences often come down to capacity and whether districts have the staff, funding, and infrastructure to translate standards and requirements into meaningful civic learning opportunities for students. In our survey, 31% of districts cited a lack of funding as a barrier to offering more civic learning, while nearly 22% pointed to a shortage of in-school staff who can lead civics instruction (see Figure 5). These constraints influence how districts implement and sustain civics programs, particularly when it comes to training teachers, curating materials, and partnering with external organizations.

Leaders in well-resourced districts and in more resource-constrained systems described how efforts to strengthen civic learning can vary depending on local capacity. Some districts have dedicated civics staff, strong community partnerships, and funding to support teacher development and materials. Others rely more heavily on individual educators to sustain civic learning programming in the absence of centralized supports.[8] These disparities shape students' access to enrichment opportunities and teachers' access to the foundational supports needed to implement civic learning programming aligned with state and district expectations. In better-resourced districts, leaders described their day-to-day work as focused on three key areas: supporting teacher professional development, finding high-quality instructional resources, and building partnerships.

8. This is consistent with research that asked teachers directly about their approaches to teaching civics.

Teacher Professional Development. Most district leaders (11 of 18) emphasized professional development and coaching as central to strengthening civic learning. While curricula, standards, and assessments provide a foundation, leaders stressed these tools are only as effective as teachers' ability to use them. Often, this meant addressing persistent gaps in teachers' content knowledge, as well as their confidence to teach for real-world engagement. One leader, for example, noted that only 25% of social studies teachers had earned the state's Civics Seal of Excellence, an endorsement from an online course, leaving the district to "fill in the gaps through local training and coaching." Leaders also said training improved teaching quality and helped students better meet civics standards and assessment goals.[9]

Resource Curation. To help teachers navigate civics content and expectations, many district leaders are reviewing and organizing high-quality instructional materials. While standards and frameworks outline what to teach, leaders emphasized that translating those into how to teach requires accessible, well-aligned resources. Several described working hand-in-hand with teachers to sort through supplemental materials and build out grade-level folders, making it easier for educators to find what they need and stay on track with state standards and requirements and local priorities. In some cases, these curated sets also helped reduce the pressure on teachers to find materials and served as a safeguard in politically sensitive contexts.

External Partnerships. Leaders highlighted the role of partnerships in making civics more real and engaging. These collaborations offer hands-on experiences like mock trials, voter education, and discourse workshops that link classroom learning to civic life. Some districts partner with national groups like Generation Citizen and SPHERE, while others team up with local courts or government offices. One district, for instance, runs a "Teacher's Law School" with a nearby court in which educators hear directly from legal professionals. A leader from another district described how a local nonprofit filled a gap by offering nonpartisan, fact-based voter education that the district lacked capacity to create.

These partnerships also help ensure that students receive consistent, enriched civics instruction—especially in places where teachers have limited resources or work in isolation. As one rural high school educator put it, there is "no way I ever would've been able to do everything I've done" without civics-focused partners. Teaching without subject-area colleagues can feel like being "an island," she explained. That isolation makes professional networks and partnerships all the more vital. The impact of those connections, she said, is "priceless," not just for teachers but for students whose civic learning becomes more authentic, supported, and connected to the world beyond the classroom.

9. These findings mirror teacher survey research that suggest most teachers are not confident in their ability to teach the most difficult civics topics.

In interviews, district leaders describe teachers "tiptoeing" around discussions of controversial topics out of fear of political pushback

While "political pushback from parents or community" did not rise to the top of the list of barriers to offering more civic learning opportunities on our survey, it emerged as a strong theme across our interviews. Sixteen of 18 leaders raised this pushback as a key influence when it comes to how they approach certain historical events and controversial or politically sensitive topics in their district. The district leaders with whom we spoke described how the discussion of these complex and contested issues—important to students' development of critical thinking and discourse skills—has become increasingly difficult. In response, district leaders and teachers are taking steps to avoid potential backlash. But these strategies may limit opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with civic questions and result in inconsistent access to robust civic learning across and within districts.

For example, leaders told us that laws restricting instruction on race, gender identity, and sexual orientation have shaped how teachers approach topics like civil rights, social movements, and student identity. One administrator explained that, while their district doesn't want to "shy away from hard history," recent legislation has required more careful review of materials. "I would say that we have tended to be very cautious about anything related to gender identity recently because that specifically has been called out in our [state's] Parent Bill of Rights as being one of those that parents are very much not in favor of being discussed at school," the administrator said.

In red and blue districts alike, leaders said they and their teachers are adapting to a climate in which fear of community retribution has a chilling effect on classroom practice. Fifteen leaders described teachers as more cautious about lesson content and discussion, acutely aware that a misstep could trigger complaints or professional consequences. Leaders said educators are "on edge," wary of how their words or students' comments might be mischaracterized. In this climate, teachers may limit conversations central to civic reasoning. Some noted that controversy can stem from many angles, ranging from critiques that civic learning leans too heavily on progressive, action-oriented activities to concerns that it overlooks diverse histories and student identities. As a result, many students are missing opportunities to engage with the kinds of complex, real-world issues that civic education is intended to explore, leading to uneven access to meaningful civic learning across classrooms and communities.

Two leaders noted that the current political climate has broadened what counts as a "controversial" civics topic so much that even voter registration has come under scrutiny. One administrator shared that their district took "a lot of flak and a lot of heat" for offering instruction on how to register to vote and providing transportation to polling places, with some community members accusing the district of "indoctrinating children" and "stuffing the ballot box."

In response to political concerns, leaders told us that teachers are avoiding topics like immigration, race, gender identity, and abortion. Some are also more hesitant to use open-ended, inquiry-based strategies for fear that student dialogue could veer into controversy. One leader said this narrowing of approaches makes it harder for students to engage in authentic civic inquiry, a key part of civic skill-building. The result is that students' exposure to core civic learning competencies like deliberation, issue analysis, and engagement with diverse perspectives depends heavily on local context and educator discretion.

To reduce the risk of lessons being seen as biased, five district leaders said they encourage teachers to anchor civics instruction in state standards and requirements or primary sources. One administrator said this alignment provides both protection and clarity: "[E]very time a teacher is rooted in the standard and isn't … putting their own belief systems on top of how we should approach civic engagement as people, they're almost always in the right. … We're trying to be their cheerleader and their defender and their support system." In this context, leaders described state standards as a shield used to defend teachers from accusations of bias and justify lesson content to parents and the broader community.

> **"We lead with jobs. And under the hood of career preparedness is authentic student voice."**

Some leaders are also reframing civics in more neutral terms, linking it to career readiness and student inquiry rather than activism. As one put it, "We lead with jobs. And under the hood of career preparedness is authentic student voice." Others stressed the importance of teachers acting as facilitators rather than authorities. "As long as you are not the person telling students what to think or believe," one leader explained, "you can still put different content in front of them." Several leaders emphasized equipping teachers to foster inclusive, reflective classrooms, with one leader offering coaching on sensitive discussions.

District leaders also described providing "political cover" by helping educators anticipate and respond to concerns. A few districts alert families ahead of time about potentially sensitive lessons to prevent backlash. Others help teachers interpret school board policies and encourage open communication with families. As one leader explained, "[P]arents can ask some questions before they get upset. And that typically works fairly well if teachers … are very upfront about what will be discussed and why and what they're learning and how it's connected to the standards."

Implications: How to advance civic learning

Current state of civic learning. From our survey and interviews, we find that the vast majority of districts offer civics—typically in high school and often embedded in an existing history or social studies class. Districts report that foundational civics knowledge, like understanding the Constitution and the functions of government, and skills, like critical thinking and engaging in discourse, are important parts of civic learning. In interviews, district leaders also talk about the importance of using a variety of teaching approaches, such as student-led projects,

simulations, and community engagement, to help civics "come alive" for students. While some districts do provide civics-related enrichment activities like debate club, internships in local government, or participation in student government or youth advisory councils, these are not as common, especially outside of urban areas, raising questions of how widespread these deeper learning experiences are for students.

State standards and requirements provide important guidelines for districts in determining what and how to teach civics, and in interviews, district leaders told us that they primarily support civic learning instruction by helping teachers develop skills to navigate sensitive political issues in the classroom, finding resources for teachers (especially around controversial topics), and arranging community partnerships. Time is the biggest constraint districts face in offering more civic learning opportunities—leaders report pressure to focus on core academic subjects like reading and math instead of civics. This is the case with not only instructional time but also professional development time for teachers. In interviews, leaders noted that teachers may be shying away from key civics skills like critical thinking and discourse out of fear of political pushback when controversial topics arise.

Research and data to support civic learning. Our finding that urban and secondary students have more access to civic learning opportunities raises several questions that future research and state education agencies (SEAs) should consider tracking: Which students participate in the most advanced civics courses, clubs, and other elective experiences, and are any of these experiences required? Are these courses reserved for advanced students, or are struggling students also included in experience-based civics activities? How can students in remote suburban and rural areas access the opportunities more common in urban areas? How does civics knowledge and skill build from elementary grades through high school? And what do students miss out on when civic learning doesn't start until high school?

Opportunities for SEA action. That state standards and requirements loom so large in how districts approach civic learning suggests a number of ways that SEAs can provide additional support. First, states should ensure that standards themselves are high-quality and grounded in research on effective civic learning. But standards are not enough. SEAs should also ensure that districts have access to trusted third-party partners and tools that can help them evaluate and compare the quality of available materials, as well as identify and implement high-quality supplemental curricula. This includes curating and sharing vetted frameworks, curriculum exemplars, and implementation supports that help districts translate standards into meaningful, classroom-level practice.

District leaders report supporting civics instruction by curating materials that align to standards. But this work is time-consuming and uneven across districts. In less-resourced, smaller, or rural districts, civics instruction often lacks consistent instructional support. SEAs can help address this gap by investing in regional networks, coaching, and travel stipends that build teacher capacity and foster peer connection. This kind of infrastructure promotes quality and consistency while freeing up district leaders and teachers to focus on implementation

More broadly, states can help districts prioritize civics instruction by signaling that civics matters. Few states currently recognize strong civics instruction through credentials or incentives, but programs like a civics graduation seal or teacher microcredentials can spotlight quality practice and affirm civics as a priority. States may also be able to build out support for teaching civics in elementary and middle grades.

How districts could find more time for civic learning. Our finding that time is the biggest constraint on offering more civics instruction suggests that districts should consider how to balance or potentially reprioritize district learning goals beyond reading and math. Even if district leaders do not want to cut into teachers' professional development time for reading or math, teaching civics skills—such as leading discussions, handling sensitive topics, and aligning lessons with local context and standards—can be useful for instruction in other subjects. Districts might also explore ways to integrate civic content into English language arts instruction and assessments, reinforcing both literacy and critical thinking while expanding access to civic learning.

Innovating with civic learning. We also heard from district leaders that civic learning can present unique opportunities for innovation. In a moment when political polarization and testing pressures limit educators' discretion in other areas, civic learning can serve as a site for reimagining what student-centered, community-connected learning looks like. This is especially true as national attention grows, and more funders and policy leaders look to support efforts that bring systems-level coherence, culturally responsive practice, and stronger metrics to civic learning.

Managing political pushback. That leaders report that civics teachers are "tiptoeing" around controversial topics and avoiding engaging students in open and critical discourse suggests that there may be a special role for community groups, local foundations, and other advocates to help teach some civics skills. For example, civic-minded organizations could take on showing students how to discuss controversial topics or coalitions of local groups could model how to maintain civil relationships among people who hold disagreements around key issues. These partnerships may not completely alleviate political pushback at the district level but should lessen the burden on individual teachers.

METHODS APPENDIX

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 (Diliberti et al., 2024).

American School District Panel survey data

The spring 2025 ASDP survey was administered to a national sample of K–12 public school districts between March 11, 2025, and May 2, 2025. Of the 7,888 public school districts that we invited to take our survey, 245 districts completed it (a 3.1% 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. 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. 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 Grant et al. 2025.

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-% 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 March 2025 and May 2025, we conducted qualitative, semistructured interviews with 18 district leaders. Prior to these interviews, we spoke with eight leaders from national and regional civics education organizations to better understand the broader landscape of civic learning. Of the 18 district leaders we interviewed, nine were recommended during these landscape interviews, and the remaining nine responded to the spring 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 50,000 students. The sample was composed of leaders from eight urban districts, eight suburban districts, and two 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 programs (e.g., class offerings, curriculum, standards, graduation requirements, assessments), the central office's role in supporting civic learning, the extent of political polarization in civics education, and the supports and barriers to supporting civic learning. These interviews lasted between 20 and 60 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 on request.

CRPE Quality Assurance Process

Independent peer review is an integral part of all CRPE research projects. Prior to publication, this document was subjected to a quality assurance process to ensure that: the problem is well formulated; the research approach is well designed and well executed; the data and assumptions are sound; the findings are useful and advance knowledge; the implications and recommendations follow logically from the findings and are explained thoroughly; the documentation is accurate, understandable, cogent, and balanced in tone; the research demonstrates understanding of related previous studies; and the research is relevant, objective, and independent. Peer review was conducted by research or policy professionals who were not members of the project team.

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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 the ASDP website.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a nonpartisan K-12 education research center at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation. We rigorously examine and test transformative ideas, using our research to inform action. We are truth tellers who combine forward-thinking ideas with empirical rigor. Since 1993, we have been untethered to any one ideology but unwavering in a core belief: 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 work to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice that will drive the public education system to meet the needs of every student.