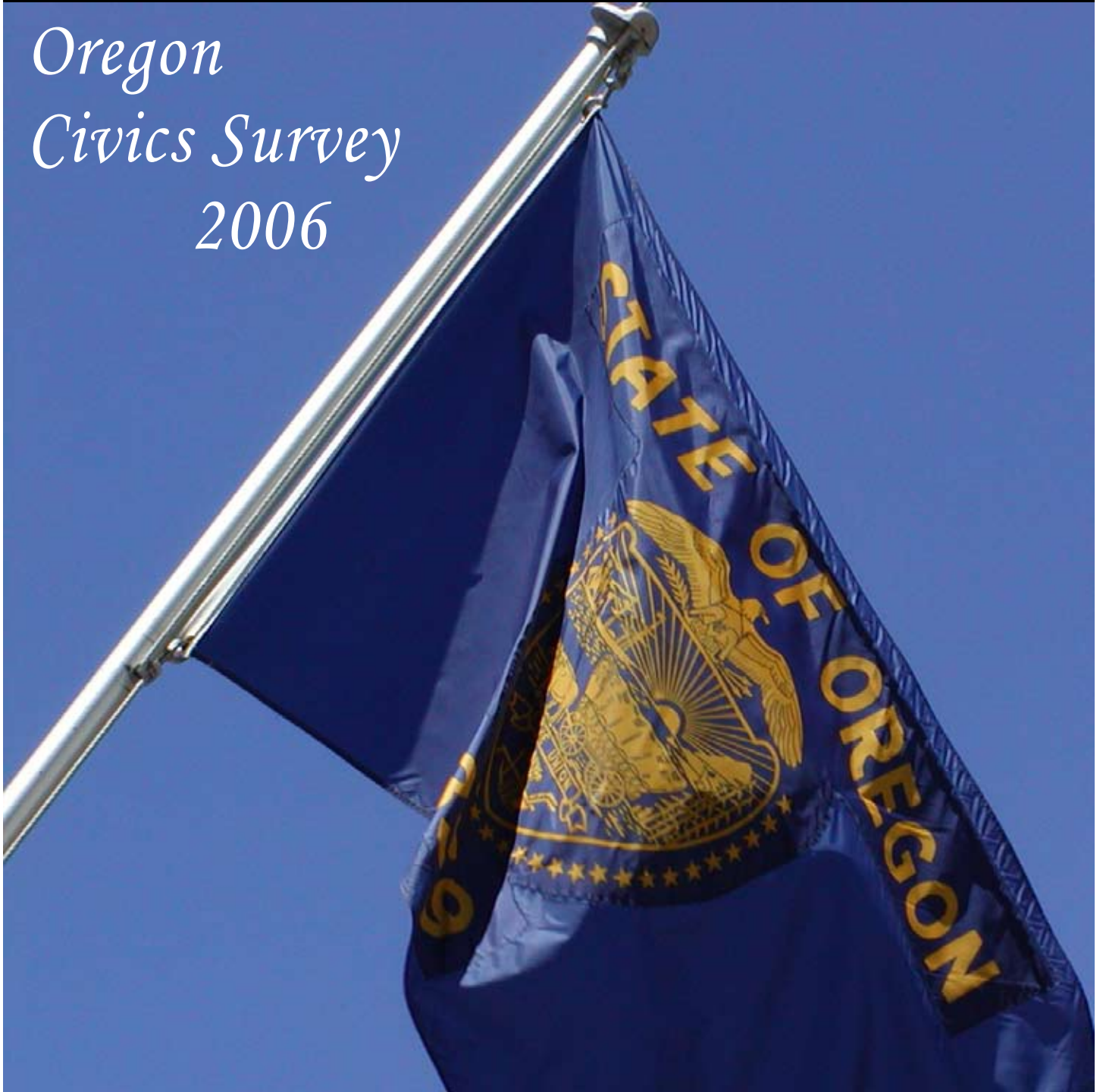


EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY

OREGON COALITION FOR THE CIVIC MISSION OF SCHOOLS

*Oregon
Civics Survey
2006*



CLASSROOM LAW PROJECT

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Oregon Civics Survey 2006

Classroom Law Project

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Oregon Civics Survey Executive Summary

Background

Many eligible voters do not vote and increasing numbers of Americans avoid political participation. Voluntary associations of civic life are in decline. Fewer people stay informed about critical political issues. Those between 18 and 25 vote at lower rates than any other age group. Polls show that the vast majority of young people distrust political institutions and processes. Studies find that most students lack a proficient understanding of civics, U.S. history, or our Constitution.¹

Yet, civic education is no longer a priority in Oregon's overburdened public schools. Civics has all but disappeared in many elementary grades as educators concentrate on teaching reading and math. In high school, few students even have social studies in the ninth grade. Entrance requirements to the public university system call for 3 years of social studies – 1 year of history, 1 of global or world history, and a year of elective social studies with American government strongly recommended – while requiring four years of English and three years of math.

In 2001, the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) convened a distinguished panel to study the decline of civic education. The report of this study, titled *The Civic Mission of Schools*, identified six promising approaches that research shows can improve civic education. Every school should:

1. Provide high-quality, formal instruction in government, history, law, and democracy.
2. Incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom.
3. Have students apply what they learn through community service linked to the curriculum and classroom instruction.
4. Offer extracurricular activities that involve students in their schools and communities.
5. Encourage student participation in school governance.
6. Encourage student participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.



The Oregon Coalition represents concerned individuals and organizations seeking to enlist support of

government, education, business, law, parent, and service groups to renew civic education in Oregon. Convened by Classroom Law Project, the Coalition currently includes representatives from the governor's office, Oregon Education Association, Oregon Department of Education, Oregon Legislature, Lewis & Clark College Graduate School, Oregon Community Foundation, Confederation of Oregon Schools Association, Multnomah Education Service District, plus retired administrators and teachers.

The goals of the Coalition are to:

- Research the effect of current educational practices in Oregon on young peoples' civic competencies.
- Work with schools statewide to assess and strengthen their current civic education programs.
- Build public support and promote policies to make effective civic education a greater priority in Oregon public schools.



Classroom Law Project promoting civic education policies at a House Education Committee hearing.

Oregon Civics Survey 2006

At the request of Rep. Linda Flores, chair of Oregon’s House Education Committee, the Oregon Civics Survey was launched. Under the direction of Classroom Law Project Executive Director Marilyn Cover, the survey was given to 794 high school students from different parts of the state. Participating schools represented varied geographic areas and socio-economic backgrounds. The survey was designed to collect information on the civic knowledge, skills, and commitments of high school seniors and to assess the prevalence and impact of various educational practices as identified in *The Civic Mission of Schools* report.

The Oregon Civics Survey was adapted from the California Survey of Civic Education developed by Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh, and Kristen Schutjer Mance. Adapting it for use in Oregon were Janet Bixby, Carol Doyle and Cherilyn Ronningen from Lewis & Clark College, School of Education. They worked with Ellen Middaugh and Joe Kahne on analysis of the data presented below.

Survey Findings

- Young people have a strong desire to help their communities as evidenced by their involvement as volunteers and their commitment to charity work.
- Young people express considerably less of a commitment to other forms of civic and political engagement that relate to the policies and practices of schools and government. Less than half (only 46%) of high school students in the sample agreed that, “being actively involved in state and local issues is my responsibility.”
- Despite taking a course in U.S. government in their senior year, students’ knowledge of structures and functions of government and of current political issues is modest, at best. High school seniors in the sample only averaged 67% correct on the commonly used survey items designed to test civics content knowledge, a high “D” on common grading scales.
- The survey also indicates that there is much schools can do. School and classroom practices emphasized in *The Civic Mission of Schools* report and related strategies can significantly improve students’ civic capacities and commitments.
- Yet, access to school-based opportunities to develop civic commitments and capacities are uneven. Those intending to go to four-year colleges have significantly more access to these opportunities than others.

Recommendations

All Oregon schools should be encouraged to assess their current civic education practices and identify ways to strengthen them. The survey demonstrates that the promising approaches contained in *The Civic Mission of Schools* report strengthen civic outcomes.

A state-funded teacher professional development program for civic education should be developed and implemented. The program should help teachers and schools throughout Oregon incorporate the research-based promising approaches described in the Carnegie/CIRCLE report.

Further research should be conducted. We need to better define the effects of various promising approaches on desired civic education outcomes through the use of a pre/post design and a larger state sample. Such data will enable educational leaders and policy makers to make evidence-based decisions regarding policy and practices. In addition, research should be conducted to determine teacher and administrator perspectives on these practices.

Democracy's Health at Risk

Since its founding over 200 years ago, the United States has been a model for democracy around the world. Its founders, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and others recognized that for democracy to endure, each generation of Americans must be educated about their constitutional heritage and the rights and duties of enlightened citizenship.

The qualifications for self-government are not innate. They are the result of habit and long training.

~ Thomas Jefferson

Throughout the history of our country's public education system, a primary mission has been the civic education of young people to prepare them to be informed, committed, and participatory citizens. In recent years, this central purpose has received increasingly less attention. Yet, the need for civic education is as great as ever.

On the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in civics, only a quarter of high school students were judged to be proficient and

only 4% scored at the advanced level. A third of the students failed to demonstrate even a basic level of understanding. In the NAEP for U.S. history, only 11% scored at the proficient or advanced levels.²

In a recent study conducted by the National Constitution Center, only 1.8% of students could identify James Madison as the father of our Constitution compared to the 58.3% who could name Bill Gates as the father of Microsoft.³

A recent national survey of secondary students conducted by CIRCLE found that 57% were disengaged from civic life and found that only 5% of entering college freshmen regularly followed public affairs.⁴

Unfortunately, as the civic knowledge and commitments of young people decline, so has the emphasis on civic education in America's schools. Although the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* mentions social studies as a core subject area, its current testing in reading and math has put pressure on school districts to give emphasis to these subjects often to the detriment of civics and history. Many states' "high stake" testing programs do not include or adequately emphasize civics, further exacerbating the problem.

In short, many of today's young people lack the basic knowledge and skills to effectively participate as citizens, and they often lack the dispositions to do so. Great international and domestic challenges face the United States today and in the future. Only with strong democratic institutions, wise leadership, and a thorough and intelligent debate on crucial issues can these challenges be met. All of them require the participation of an enlightened citizenry. Without this, the health of our democracy is truly at risk.

These realities have galvanized action around the country for a renewal of civic education in our nation's schools. The Alliance for Representative Democracy, a national partnership, has launched efforts in all 50 states. In 2003, the Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE issued *The Civic Mission of Schools* report describing the problem and identifying research-based promising practices that educators can employ to increase student civic knowledge, skills, and commitments to engagement. The Carnegie Corporation is funding efforts Oregon as well as fifteen other states.

The Survey

In 2004, the Oregon Coalition for the Civic Mission of Schools was convened by Classroom Law Project in collaboration with a statewide coalition of non-profit educational, business, governmental, and civic groups. Funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the goals of the coalition are to strengthen civic education throughout the state by working with schools, building public support, and conducting research to determine the effects of current educational practices.

To advance these goals, Classroom Law Project distributed the Oregon Civics Survey to a cross-section of 794 high school students from across the state of Oregon. The sample of students in this pilot year of data collection was ethnically similar to the state as a whole, with a slight over-representation of Asian-identified students and a slight under-representation of white-identified students. Students came primarily from schools that rated in the middle of the achievement scale used by the Oregon Department of Education and varied in socio-economic distribution (as measured by percent of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch).

The survey was adapted from the California Survey of Civic Education. It enables assessment of the prevalence and impact of civic education practices on graduating seniors. The survey examines students' civic knowledge, skills, and commitments. It also identifies opportunities schools have provided to promote these outcomes and the impact of these opportunities. The study establishes a baseline for comparison with national findings and facilitates identification of particularly effective civic education practices, especially those contained in the Carnegie/CIRCLE report titled *The Civic Mission of the Schools*.



Oregon's Emerging Citizens

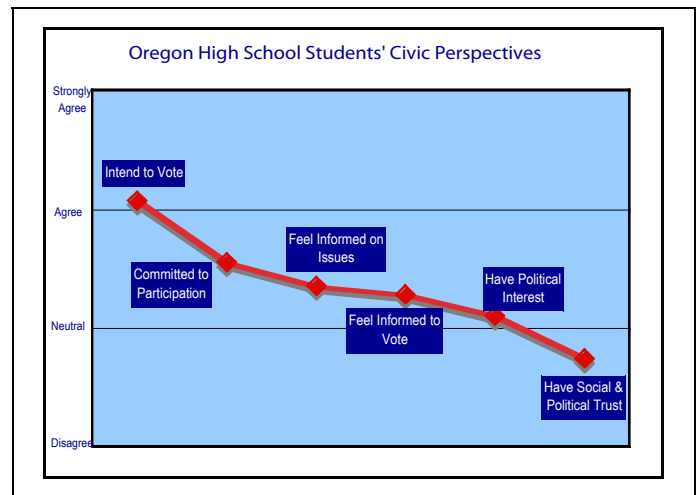
What level of civic knowledge and attitudes toward civic engagement do Oregon's young people possess as they begin to assume the rights and responsibilities of adult citizenship? Among the major findings of the study are:

Oregon high school seniors care about those in need and are willing to help. Eighty-seven percent of the students surveyed agreed with the statement, "I try to help when I see people in need." Only 2% disagreed. Also, 84% of the students reported volunteering while in high school.

Students are not well prepared for effective citizenship. Although a high percentage of students reported that they intended to vote (78%), they were less likely to say they felt informed to vote (49%). They also reported being uncertain as to whether they knew enough to follow discussions about current issues: Iraq, the economy, taxes, education, health care, etc.

Among the seniors in the sample, one third could not correctly identify the function of the Supreme Court, and only 22% could correctly identify both US Senators representing Oregon. In fact, overall Seniors in our sample only averaged a 67% correct on the commonly used survey items designed to test civics content knowledge, a high "D" on most grading scales.

Oregon students also show limited commitment or capacity to become politically involved. For example, less than half (only 46%) of students agreed that, "Being actively involved in state and local issues is my responsibility."



Similar patterns emerge in students' views on patriotism. Like older generations, the clear majority (68%) agree that "the US is a great country." Only 7% disagree. However, less than half (36%) agree that "In order to be patriotic, one must be involved in the civic and political life of the country."

Oregon high school students express very little trust in government. Only 29% of the high school students surveyed agreed with the statement, "I trust the people in the government to do what is right for the country." Only 20% agreed with the statement, "I think that people in government care about what people like me and my family need."

Volunteering does not translate to other forms of civic and political life. While those surveyed were willing to volunteer or do charity work, they did not engage in more formal forms of civic and political life. Sixty-two% of all students said they volunteered more than once during their four years in high school, but only 13% could say the same thing when asked how often they had worked to change a policy or law in their community, the state, or the nation. Even when asked how often they had worked to change a school policy or school rule, only 15% responded "more than once" – with 57% saying not at all.

These results are consistent with national findings demonstrating that rates of volunteering are up dramatically from previous decades. Unfortunately, in Oregon at least, these experiences have not led to greater commitments to civic and political participation.

Oregon Schools Can Make a Difference

To determine the effect of various school and classroom practices on the development of civic competencies, we asked students about what happened in their high schools and classrooms. We then analyzed the relationship of these opportunities to various outcomes.⁵ What we found was quite heartening. Numerous opportunities in classrooms, schools, and in after-school settings were related to desired civic outcomes even controlling for demographic factors. The full range of statistically significant relationships between opportunities and outcomes is detailed in the chart on this page.⁶

Classroom Practices Associated with Desired Civic Outcomes		Commitment to Participate	Intend to Vote	Informed to Vote	Civic Skills	Social & Political Trust	Political Knowledge	Political Interest
CMS Promising Approaches	Instruction in Govt, History, Law	★	★	★			★	
	Discussion of Current Events				★			★
	Service Learning				★			
	Extra-Curricular Activities	★	★		★			
	Student Voice in School/Class Governance	★				★		
	Simulations/Interactive Methods			★	★			★
Other Practices	Discuss Politics with Parents	★	★	★	★	★	★	★
	Parents are Active in Community/Politics	★			★	★		
	Analyzing Different Perspectives on Issues	★	★		★			★
	Exposure to Role Models	★				★		★
	Exposure to Diversity	★	★	★				★
	Opportunities to Practice Civic Skills				★			★

Classroom content and practices matter. A curricular emphasis on the importance of civic engagement and relevant content regarding civic and political structures and functions help students develop the skills and knowledge they need for effective citizenship. In addition, as students develop knowledge and interest in issues, their commitment to participate grows. For example, 50% of students in government classes emphasized how important it is to be informed and to get involved in political issues also agreed that they should be actively involved in state and local issues. For those students who disagreed that their teachers had emphasized the importance of being informed, only 28% agreed they should be involved in this way.

Similarly, discussing current events is important – particularly when such discussions are tied to students’ interests. In classes where students frequently talked about current events, 47% reported they were interested in politics compared to only 36% in classes with no discussion of current events.

Meeting civic role models was related to a number of important outcomes as well. For example, 57% of those who reported meeting people who work to make society better as part of their school activities also agreed that it was important to be involved in state and local activities compared to 28% of those who disagreed that they had the same

opportunities.

In addition to what is studied, how it is studied also matters. Indeed, 51% of students who had opportunities in classes to take part in role-plays or simulations modeling democratic processes reported being involved in politics, compared to only 32% of students who had not had these classroom opportunities.

Extracurricular activities matter. Participation in extracurricular activities is also very important. We found, for example, that students who participated often in extracurricular activities such as an ethnic or cultural club, a drama club, student government, or a school newspaper were 22% more likely to agree that they were interested in politics.

Student voice in the school matters. Students who reported having a chance to voice their opinions about school policies were more committed to participate than those who said they had few opportunities to voice their opinions about school policies.

Multiple opportunities matter. No one experience can provide all that is needed. And while some aspects of a schools' curriculum, such as the high school government course, clearly have the potential to significantly support goals such as political knowledge and commitment to participation, it's also clear that educating for democracy should not rely on a one-semester course taken during the senior year. Rather, opportunities to educate for democracy exist throughout the high school curriculum and they build upon each other. A school-wide commitment is therefore necessary.

The promising approaches we've identified occur in Oregon schools, but not often enough. When we asked students how often they'd had the kinds of opportunities that supported the development of committed, informed, and effective citizens, the most common answer fell between "neither agree nor disagree" and "slightly agree". This finding is consistent with the recent International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement study (IEA), which found that 90% of U.S. students said that they most commonly spent time reading textbooks and doing worksheets.⁷

Sometimes, for some students, these desired opportunities don't occur at all. For example, when asked if students in their school had a say how they think the school should be run, 27% disagreed. Twenty-four percent also disagreed that they had the opportunity to participate in civic simulations or role-plays during high school. And 25% disagreed that they had the opportunity to meet civic role models. Clearly, one need not have these experiences as part of every class, but sizable numbers of students are not getting these opportunities at all.

Bright spots. Many students are getting some of these valuable opportunities. Seventy-two percent agreed their government class taught them information about the structure of government and how it works. Eighty-one percent agreed they discussed current events. Forty-six percent said that they often worked in classrooms where a wide-range of student views was discussed. And 70% agreed they worked in groups or on projects with people who have backgrounds very different than their own.

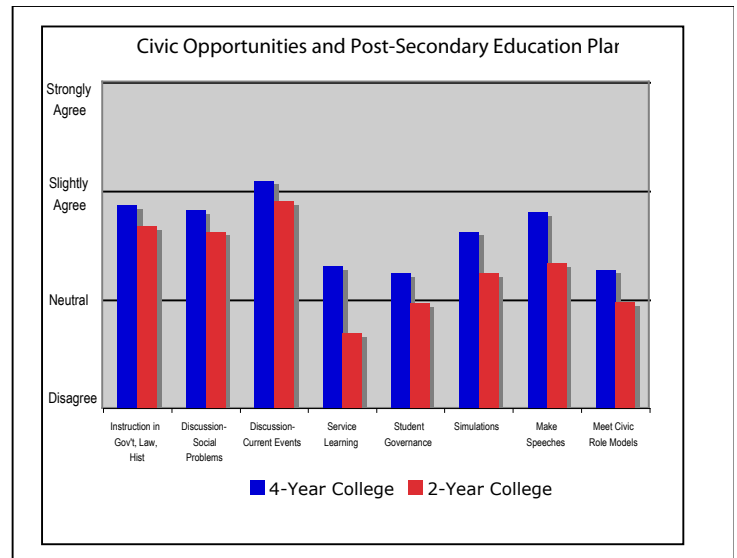
Civic Mission of Schools Promising Approaches

- **Instruction in Government, History, Law and Democracy** – Students learn about the structure and function of the U.S. Government as well as learning about the role of individual citizens.
- **Discuss Personally Relevant Current Events** – Students discuss current events and analyze social problems that are personally relevant.
- **Community Service** – Students participate in service-learning activities linked to the curriculum.
- **Extracurricular Activities** – Students participate in clubs, student council, school newspaper, etc.
- **Student Governance** – Students have a chance to participate in school and classroom governance through formal and informal means.
- **Simulations** – Students participate in political, civic, or legal role-plays as part of their classroom activities.
- **Discuss Politics With Parents** – Students discuss community and political issues at home.
- **Parents are Active in Community and/or Politics** – Parents are active participants in the community and/or political processes.

Other Valuable Practices

- **Open School/Classroom Climate** – Students are permitted to voice their opinions freely.
- **Analyzing Perspectives on Issues** – Students learn to find sources with varying perspectives on issues.
- **Exposure to Role Models** – Students meet and/or learn about people who work to make society better.
- **Exposure to Diversity** – Students discuss issues of diversity and work with groups of students who are different from them.
- **Opportunities to Practice Civic Skills** – Students are given opportunities to develop skills important to working on civic problems including planning meetings, writing letters, recruiting others to work, etc.

Unequal access to opportunities. It is inevitable that students will have different experiences depending on the teachers they happen to have for particular subjects. Unfortunately, some systemic inequalities also appear to exist, particularly with respect to students' academic trajectories. Students who did not expect to go to a 4-year college were less likely to receive opportunities than were those who did. This may well mean that students in higher track classes get more opportunities to develop civic knowledge, skills, and commitments than those in lower track classrooms. For example, 72% of students who were planning to attend a four-year college reported that they had an opportunity to make speeches in their classrooms; only 57% of students who planned on 2-year vocational or community college could say the same things.



Finally, it should be noted that parents have a significant positive effect on the civic capacities of young people. When parents or guardians talk with their children about politics, they develop greater civic commitments and capacities. It is important to note that this was the only factor that positively affected every one of our desired outcomes.



Recommendations

Are Oregon's public schools fulfilling their civic mission? Do graduating seniors have the knowledge, skills, and commitments they will need to be informed and engaged participants in our democracy?

The Oregon Civics Survey cannot fully answer these questions, but the portrait it paints of students and schools is worthy of attention. Most important, the survey provides indicators of students' civic and political commitments, of their capacities, and of the prevalence of related school-based opportunities. It also gives us an evidence base from which to assess the efficacy of varied educational strategies. Specifically, analysis of findings indicate:

- Young people have a strong desire to help their communities as evidenced by their involvement as volunteers and their commitment to charity work.
- Young people express considerably less of a commitment to other forms of civic and political engagement that relate to the policies and practices of schools and government.
- By their senior year, students' knowledge of structures and functions of government and of current political issues is modest, at best.
- The survey also indicates that there is much schools can do. Our survey indicated that the school and classroom practices emphasized in *The Civic Mission of Schools* report and related strategies can significantly improve students' civic capacities and commitments.
- Yet, access to school-based opportunities to develop civic commitments and capacities are uneven. Moreover, those intending to go to four-year colleges have significantly more access to these opportunities than others.





The findings of the survey prompt and support specific recommendations for further action.

All Oregon schools should be encouraged to assess their current civic education practices and identify ways to strengthen them. The survey demonstrates that the research-based promising approaches contained in Carnegie/CIRCLE's *The Civic Mission of Schools* report strengthen civic outcomes. This recommendation corresponds with efforts of the Oregon Coalition for the Civic Mission of Schools. It urges the State Board of Education and all local school governing bodies to examine current practice and develop plans to increase and broaden emphasis on principles and practices of democracy. To assist governing bodies carry out this task, the Coalition has materials that may be used by districts and schools.

A state-funded teacher professional development program for civic education should be developed and implemented. The program should support teachers and schools throughout Oregon in incorporating the research-based promising approaches described in the Carnegie/CIRCLE report. The Oregon Coalition for the Civic Mission of Schools is advocating the creation of such a program to strengthen instruction.

Further research should be conducted. We need to better define the effects of various promising approaches on desired civic education outcomes through the use of a pre/post design and a larger state sample. Such data will enable educational leaders and policy makers to make evidence-based decisions regarding policy and practices. In addition, research should be conducted to determine teacher and administrator perspectives on these practices. The Oregon Coalition is committed to continuing the research for at least one more year and will seek additional funding to support it into the future.

End Notes

¹The Civic Mission of Schools, a report of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2003, <http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/campaign/documents/CivicMissionofSchools.pdf>.

²Ibid, p. 19.

³National Constitution Center, "New Survey Shows Wide Gap Between Teens' Knowledge of Constitution and Knowledge of Pop Culture: More Teens Can Name Three Stooges Than Can Name Three Branches of Government, September 2, 1998, <http://www.constitutioncenter.org/CitizenAction/CivicResearchResults/NCCTeens'Poll.shtml> (accessed October 24, 2005).

⁴Keeter, Scott, Cliff Zukin, Molly Andolina, and Krista Jenkins, The Civic and Political health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait, Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, September 19, 2002, p. 25, http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/Civic_Political_Health.pdf (accessed October 24, 2005).

⁵Regressions were performed to assess the relationship between the civic outcomes and classroom/school opportunities described in the report. In addition to including all relevant classroom/school opportunities in these regressions, we also included various demographic controls (race/ethnicity, gender, mothers' education, and post-secondary educational plans). All of the relationships described in this section were found to be statistically significant $p < .05$. Readers interested in the specific regression results can contact Joseph Kahne at jkahne@mills.edu or may write or call him at Mills College.

⁶Since tables with regression results are not easily interpretable by a lay audience, in the text we report the civic capacities and commitments of students who reported agreeing that they had received various classroom/school opportunities and compare them with the capacities and commitments of those students who disagreed that they had received these opportunities.

⁷Baldi, S., Perie, M., Skidmore, D., Greenberg, E. & Hahn, C. (2001). What democracy means to ninth graders: U.S. results from the International IEA Civic Education Study. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.



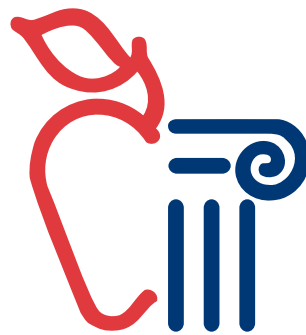
Students deliberating controversial issues



Participating in community problem solving

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This project is made possible by generous grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Oregon Community Foundation and The Center for Democracy & Citizenship at the Council for Excellence in Government.

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