

High School Civics Education

2014 POLICY GUIDE



State and Local Policy

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Thorough civics education makes students more likely to be active participants in the democratic process.

The Problem: In a 1996 study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, 37% of American adults said that they believed that politics and government are too complicated to understand. Since this study, however, civics assessment scores have remained the same or declined in the 8th and 12th grades respectively. Additionally, there is a persistent gap in civics knowledge among students of different socioeconomic statuses, with more affluent students significantly out-performing less affluent students.

The Solution: Increasing access to civics education will improve youth engagement in our political system. Students who are given a thorough civics education are more likely to become active participants in the democratic process. By the time students graduate from high school, many of their political participation habits are already formed. Students who have had at least one year of civics education in high school are much more likely to vote in elections. One California

survey found students who participated in civics were almost twice as likely to report interest in politics.

Many groups have developed civics lesson plans. For example, FairVote is currently updating a comprehensive civics curriculum. Students could also be engaged in the political process through more interactive activities outside the classroom, such as holding mock elections or participating in mock legislative sessions in visits to their state capitals. For specific ideas, see our policy briefs on:

- Civ. Ed. - Mock elections
- Civ. Ed. - Mock legislatures
- Civ. Ed. - Grades 5-12 civic education curriculum

Success story: Voter turnout rates in Scandinavian nations are among the world's highest, in part due to their highly developed civics education initiatives. As one example, every Norwegian high school student visits the nation's capital to see the legislature and participate in a mock legislative session.

Key Facts

Research suggests that participating in civics education in high school promotes lifelong engagement in politics, especially when coupled with civic engagement-focused extracurricular activities.

Fiscal Impact

As civics education would be incorporated into existing school curricula, it need not require any additional expenditures. More ambitious programs like visits to state capitals to participate in mock legislative sessions would incur additional costs.

Related Reforms

- 17 Year Old Primary Voting
- Lowering the Voting Age
- Automatic Registration
- Voter Preregistration

Part Two Resources

Model statutory drafts for

- Civic Education
- Demonstration Elections
- Civic Engagement