

Pressing Needs in Research on K–12 Civic Learning: A Call to the Field

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Democracies across the globe are under threat. Scholars have warned of rising levels of misinformation and disinformation, political polarization, erosion of democratic institutions, global authoritarianism, and decreasing faith in democracy.^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9}

Tackling these threats will require the concerted efforts of many institutions, including K–12 school systems. Although young people learn about democracy and ways to engage in civic life through interactions in their families, peer groups, communities, out-of-school-time activities, and other contexts,^{10,11} K–12 schools play a key role because of the large number of students they serve and their formal responsibility of educating for democracy.^{12,13}

In recent decades, however, most school systems have not prioritized civic learning in policy and practice.^{14,15,16,17}

This lack of prioritization is likely a leading cause of the overall low levels of, and disparities in, civic learning outcomes. Results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in civics and U.S. history, for example, document (a) low overall levels of proficiency, (b) relatively stagnant performance over time, and (c) heterogeneity in performance across student groups.^{18,19,20,21}

Additionally, a recent study highlights the staggering inability of U.S. high school students to evaluate the credibility of online information and the considerable variation in such skills by race, socio-economic status, and locale.²² Regarding civic dispositions, there has been a decline in the percentage of U.S. citizens reporting that it is essential to live in a democratically governed country, from more than 70% of those born in the 1930s to slightly more than 30% of those born in the 1980s.²³ And in 2022, only about 23% of eighth graders in the United States had high confidence in their civic knowledge and skills.²⁴

We aim to contribute to a national conversation about the development of measurement and causal research agendas that will leverage a wide variety of expertise while tackling the significant challenges described in this brief.



In this brief, we discuss the need for action in two inter-related areas to help address the current state of democracy through the promotion of K–12 civic learning: measurement and causal research. Specifically, efforts are needed to:

1. determine where gaps exist in these two inter-related areas;
2. develop innovative, high-quality instruments that measure civic learning outcomes and opportunities; and
3. develop and implement a research agenda that leverages causal research designs to yield actionable knowledge for policy and practice.

Although our discussion emphasizes measurement and causal research, the advances that are necessary in these areas will not occur through the work of measurement and research professionals alone. For example, the contributions of educators and young people will be crucial for ensuring that measurement and causal research address their most pressing needs, leverage the assets these groups bring, acknowledge the challenges they are facing, and generate solutions that will promote high-quality civic learning opportunities for all. Engagement with policymakers is essential for informing the design of measures and research that respond to the current policy context and for helping to shape and inform future policy.

In this brief, we aim to contribute to a national conversation about the development of measurement and causal research agendas that will leverage a wide variety of expertise while tackling the significant challenges described herein. We begin by presenting a brief framework for civic learning, taking a broad outlook that extends beyond the traditional focus on social studies classrooms. Next, we discuss measurement issues related to civic learning outcomes and opportunities and make a case for investing in the development and use of measures to build the evidence base necessary to inform future decisions about policies, programs, and practices. We then highlight examples of research on the causal effects of K–12 policies, programs, and practices on civic learning outcomes as a starting point for discussion and to prompt further inquiry. We conclude with an invitation to stakeholders across the field of education to collaborate on efforts that are vital to better serve all students. Although we focus on K–12 schools, many of the themes and recommendations discussed in this brief can be applied in other contexts, such as out-of-school-time programs. We encourage collaboration across related areas to help inform future measurement and research agendas.

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CIVIC LEARNING FRAMEWORK

K–12 civic learning is not as clearly defined as other areas of K–12 education, and K–12 civic learning overlaps with several areas (e.g., civics, social studies, information literacy, and social and emotional learning). Although disagreement and debate over purposes and processes will occur, it is crucial for members of different disciplines and stakeholder groups to be able to communicate with one another to promote the collaboration that is essential for addressing the pressing needs described in this brief. Below, we present a brief civic learning framework based on recent developments within the field.^a

- **Civics** is a social science discipline focused on the rights and duties of citizenship, but the term has taken on a variety of meanings in research, policy, and practice.
- In recent years, the term **civic learning** has emerged and is intended to encapsulate how individuals develop **civic learning outcomes** through **civic learning opportunities**. In this regard, **civic learning** is much broader in scope than **civics**.
- **Civic learning outcomes** can be categorized into the following domains: **civic knowledge and skills**, **civic dispositions**, and **civic behaviors/actions**. Here, we describe examples of outcomes within each outcome domain while acknowledging the potential need for further refinement.
 - **Civic knowledge and skills** include the following:
 - » Academic readiness in civics, history, and social studies more broadly (i.e., both the relevant factual knowledge and the knowledge and skills regarding how and where to engage in civic life)
 - » Civic reasoning abilities (e.g., critical thinking skills and information literacy)
 - » Skills in civic discourse (e.g., ability to engage in discussions even when disagreement occurs)
 - **Civic dispositions** include civic interest, civic (self- and collective-) efficacy, empathy/compassion, personal responsibility, social responsibility/civic duty, integrity, valuing democracy, and open-mindedness.
 - **Civic behaviors/actions** include prosocial behaviors (e.g., helping, sharing, donating to charities, or volunteering) and political participation (e.g., voting, running for political office, or contacting elected officials).
- **Civic learning opportunities** include the scope of conditions and resources that promote **civic learning outcomes**. Therefore, **civic learning opportunities** are not limited to the content and activities in K–12 social studies classrooms. A much more expansive set of policies, programs, and practices can influence **civic learning outcomes**, which are described in more depth in this brief.

^a See Vinnakota, R. (2019). *From civic education to a civic learning ecosystem: A landscape analysis and case for collaboration*. Institute for Citizens & Scholars. <https://citizensandscholars.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Civic-Learning-White-Paper.pdf>

Measurement of Civic Learning Outcomes and Opportunities

Any effort to promote evidence-based policies, programs, and practices will require high-quality measures of civic learning outcomes and opportunities. As Rajiv Vinnakota, president of the Institute for Citizens & Scholars, noted, “... measurement may be the unifying force that helps us chart many paths forward towards a shared goal: a vibrant constitutional democracy in which we are all proud to participate.”²⁵ In this section, we present brief overviews of approaches to measuring civic learning outcomes and opportunities, discuss how these measures can and should be used in a more comprehensive, equitable civic learning ecosystem, and highlight some gaps that we believe must be addressed through future research and development.



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Measuring Civic Learning Outcomes

A range of measures of civic learning outcomes, as defined earlier, have been developed by researchers and measurement professionals. A recent effort by the Institute for Citizens & Scholars focused on compiling a list of existing measures with input from experts across the field.²⁶ As highlighted in the report, several civic learning outcomes overlap with competencies often included in other frameworks (e.g., social and emotional learning or workforce preparation), and to date, measurement of civic learning outcomes has taken a variety of forms (e.g., tests and self-reports in surveys). The Institute for Citizens & Scholars report serves as a foundation for the field on which to build.

Existing approaches to measuring civic learning outcomes use a variety of formats, and some approaches are better suited than others for measuring certain outcomes. For instance, standardized tests that consist primarily of multiple-choice or short-answer items are commonly used for large-scale data gathering (e.g., NAEP and state tests), and they can provide data on student knowledge of various topics. However, it is challenging, at best, to measure more sophisticated skills, such as information literacy or collaborative decision making, in these formats.²⁷ Performance-based assessments, which are increasingly administered in a digital format, may be better suited to gauging skills because they engage students in performing tasks that require applying skills. Self-report questionnaires can be useful for measuring dispositions, but skills are difficult to assess in this format.²⁸ Administrative records—for example, enrollment in certain school activities and voter registration—can offer evidence of some kinds of civic behaviors/actions.

Currently, however, significant gaps exist in the availability of instruments to measure many of the civic learning outcomes described earlier in this brief, along with the need to evaluate existing measures for use in a variety of contexts and for different purposes. The Institute for Citizens & Scholars report identified several civic learning outcomes for which relatively few or no measures—including community building, information literacy, and agency—have been developed.²⁹ Moreover, measures that are developed and validated for a particular purpose (e.g., informing classroom instruction or monitoring civic learning at the school level) should not be used for other purposes without first gathering validity evidence to support those uses.³⁰ For example, an assessment that was designed for large-scale research on civic learning should not be used to make high-stakes decisions for individual students in the absence of evidence that the assessment is appropriate for those uses.

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Several additional factors contribute to the need for improving measures of civic learning outcomes. The first is the extent to which existing measures provide accurate information about *change*. If users of an assessment are interested in measuring growth in students' competencies over time, they should seek validity evidence regarding the extent to which the measure is sensitive to those changes and what kinds of scores (e.g., simple difference scores) are most informative for documenting student growth.³¹ Second, assessment items or tasks must be *developmentally* appropriate; that is, they should be designed to align with the kinds of activities, experiences, and interests that characterize different stages of development.³² Third, assessment users should be aware of ways in which responses to assessment items or tasks might be influenced by students' *social, cultural, and linguistic contexts*.³³ All of these factors are important considerations for the future of measuring civic learning outcomes.

Measuring Civic Learning Opportunities

Beyond measuring outcomes, measurement of civic learning opportunities is necessary for research, for progress monitoring, and for helping decision makers identify and implement strategies to ensure that all students have access to the required conditions and resources. Traditionally, *opportunity to learn* (OTL) referred to the extent to which students received adequate exposure to subject-matter content before being tested on it,³⁴ and OTL measures typically focused on core academic subjects. In recent years, OTL has assumed a broader definition, encompassing the full set of “conditions and resources provided to schools to enable students to succeed.”³⁵ The breadth of people, contexts, programs, institutions, and policies that support civic learning suggests a need for civic learning opportunity measures to address not only traditional classroom instruction in civics/social studies topics but also a much broader set of learning environments and disciplinary foci. Indeed, civic learning outcomes can be influenced by a variety of additional conditions and resources, including teachers' preparation and practices; availability of instructional materials; school governance; and state policies (e.g., standards and accountability systems).

Measures used in existing surveys offer a useful starting point for measuring and monitoring civic learning opportunities. The NAEP civics and history assessments, for example, are accompanied by questionnaires that yield some data on curriculum and instruction in these subjects. These data provide a useful national portrait of some aspects of civic learning opportunities.³⁶ However, the NAEP civics and history data collection occurs only every 4 years, is limited to the eighth grade, and provides no state- or district-level information. Cross-national studies conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) have included measures of civic learning opportunities for decades as well, but the United States has not participated in these efforts since the late 1990s. These existing survey measures should be considered, among others, for inclusion in future progress monitoring efforts that allow for monitoring at local levels (i.e., not just national portraits) across multiple grades and across time. This type of systematic approach to measuring civic learning opportunities, in addition to civic learning outcomes, will provide the necessary data infrastructure for future research and decision making.

Causal Effects of K–12 Interventions on Civic Learning Outcomes

Researchers have long investigated ways to improve civic learning outcomes, with empirical and theoretical contributions from a range of disciplines. However, much of the existing evidence uses correlational methods that do not support causal inferences regarding the effects of interventions (i.e., policies, programs, and practices) on students’ civic learning outcomes.

Moreover, in response to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), state, district, and school leaders are seeking rigorously tested, evidence-based interventions shown to have positive outcomes. This requires that researchers conduct rigorous tests of interventions that shed light on their efficacy. Although



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more research is needed, researchers have conducted several groundbreaking causal studies of civic learning. We highlight some of this causal evidence next, though we do not attempt to provide a comprehensive review of the literature. Rather, the intent is to offer a starting point for discussion and to prompt further inquiry.

K–12 Policies

Educational policies for K–12 that are relevant to civic learning are wide ranging and can include curriculum policies (e.g., course requirements and tracking), school choice/governance policies, student testing policies, and teacher policies (e.g., certification and licensure).

Recent causal evidence suggests that some K–12 educational policies may improve civic learning outcomes, some may be harmful, and others may have negligible impacts. First, Holbein and Hillygus found that taking a high school civics course or an Advanced Placement® (AP®) history or government course had negligible impacts on civic participation overall and across student subgroups.³⁷ That said, variation in practices within AP (and other) classes can contribute to positive civic learning outcomes; we highlight this evidence herein. Second, in a study conducted in Germany, Savage and colleagues found that vocational tracking may cause differential effects on civic interest, civic self-efficacy, and voting intentions across the life course, favoring students on an academic track over those on a vocational track.³⁸

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This finding contrasts with the favorable outcomes found in the broader literature on career and technical education in the United States^{39,40} and suggests the need for further inquiry. Third, recent evidence indicates that Boston’s charter schools increased youth voter turnout relative to traditional public schools, with differential effects by gender (favoring girls), and that these effects were driven by promoting social and emotional skills.^{41,b} Finally, Jung and Gopalan (2022) found that mandated state civics tests do not influence youth voter turnout.⁴² Although voter turnout is not the only relevant civic learning outcome (and testing may impact other outcomes such as knowledge), these findings are noteworthy given the call for testing in civics and social studies in light of evidence from the No Child Left Behind era, which found diversion of resources toward the tested subjects.⁴³ These example studies of policy effects have advanced the literature; however, further evidence is needed to inform policymaking as states continue to implement policy reforms relevant to civic learning (e.g., required courses, school choice policy, student testing, and teacher policy).

K–12 Programs

Curricular programs, which include curricular resources and professional development for teachers, are common in K–12 education. In the context of civic learning, such programs are developed for use in civics/social studies classrooms (e.g., Generation Citizen; iCivics; Promoting Accelerated Reading Comprehension of Text [PACT]; Student Voices; We the People), mathematics classrooms (e.g., Citizen Math), interdisciplinary contexts (e.g., Facing History and Ourselves), and science classrooms (e.g., Connect Science).

Causal evidence suggests that K–12 programs can improve civic learning outcomes. For example, findings from two studies of a curricular program aligned to the Civic Mission of Schools,⁴⁴ called *Student Voices*, have demonstrated causal effects on students’ political knowledge, critical analysis of the news, voting confidence, and political efficacy.^{45,46} Recent research also has documented positive effects of programs focused on reading strategies on students’ historical content knowledge and ability to discern the credibility and accuracy of online information.^{47,48} Furthermore, a recent evaluation of

^b Although this study does not suggest that all charter schools have such impacts relative to traditional public schools, potential implications exist for school governance policy and innovation in traditional public schools.

Facing History and Ourselves, a curricular program focused on challenging teachers and students to stand up to bigotry and hate, identified positive effects on empathy, prosocial behavior, and the participatory citizenship beliefs of middle schoolers.⁴⁹ To inform further program development and educators' decision making, continued rigorous, causal research is needed to determine and compare the impacts of programs that educators use, including what works for whom and under what conditions.

K–12 Practices

Specific instructional practices used by educators and school leaders also can influence students' civic learning outcomes. Relevant to civic learning, these practices can include explicit instruction, writing exercises, field trips, project-based learning, real-world problem solving, discussions/debates, fostering of an open and safe climate, student government, simulations of democratic processes, and service learning. Such practices often are embedded within programs, but their individual impacts tend not to be teased out in studies of programs.

Recent causal evidence does suggest that K–12 practices can influence civic learning outcomes, and such evidence can inform the everyday practices of educators and school leaders as well as new program development. For example, two recent studies documented that project-based learning can have a positive effect on elementary students' social studies achievement,^{50,c} as well as on high school students' performance on the AP government exam.⁵¹ Other recent evaluations have identified causal effects of history- and arts-oriented field trips on historical content knowledge, support for civil

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liberties, enthusiasm for learning about history, and historical empathy.^{52,53} To inform instructional approaches and program development, researchers must continue to develop a stronger empirical foundation of the impacts of individual practices.

In addition to the need for a systematic review and meta-analysis of the existing causal research evidence, researchers and funders should move toward advancing the research (and potential topics for research) highlighted herein. When building on the evidence described in this section, continued use of research designs that identify causal effects is crucial to this work.

^c Although this study focused on the impact of project-based learning and not the impact of a developed program, supports also were included for treatment teachers (e.g., professional development).

Needs for Investment and Collaboration

To move the field of civic learning forward, a collaborative effort toward advances in measurement, the development of a causal research agenda, and the promotion and implementation of evidence-based interventions are key.

Measurement

Focusing on measurement is a necessary first step. Where gaps are present in the availability of measures, or with psychometric evidence of existing measures for particular uses, research and development should address these gaps to allow for monitoring and evaluating students' learning opportunities and the broad range of civic learning outcomes described earlier. High-quality civic learning measurement tools and practices will support a more deliberate and intensive approach to ensuring that all young people are prepared to engage effectively in a democratic society.

No single set of measures will be sufficient, as different types are necessary to support different goals and decisions. For example, measures that are developed to support classroom instruction might not be suitable for large-scale monitoring or research purposes. However, a system of measures that enables multiple uses through

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different measurement approaches can help promote a more coherent and comprehensive process for improving civic learning for all. Advances in assessment-related technology, including new applications of artificial intelligence, make this an ideal time to re-evaluate approaches to measuring the complex set of learning opportunities and competencies that young people need to become active, informed citizens.

Causal Research

To ensure that all young people have access to high-quality K–12 civic learning opportunities, future research must deepen our understanding of what high-quality civic learning looks like across K–12 and how interventions can affect civic learning outcomes and redress existing disparities. Articulation of this research agenda is imperative for the future of a healthy democracy for all.

To articulate this agenda, we suggest that public and private funders work with partners to convene panels of students, families, researchers, educators, and policymakers and use existing protocols^d to facilitate collaborative, agenda-setting discussions. Funding collaboratives could make this agenda-setting experience a priority at a future convening for their members. The research agenda should inform future requests for proposals for researchers and research-practice partnerships, and it should inform future graduate students' thesis and dissertation pursuits. Where research poses causal questions,

^d See, for example, <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midwest/pdf/researchagenda/Research-Agenda-Facilitator-Guide-508.pdf>.

appropriate research designs must be used. Finally, this research agenda should require all researchers to implement a strategic plan for communicating actionable findings to those best positioned to support wide-scale improvements at the federal, state, and local community levels.

Promotion of Research-Based Interventions

Advances in measurement and research will take time to yield new insights. In the meantime, education leaders at various levels should examine what clearinghouses say about the available evidence on specific civic learning programs and opportunities. These clearinghouses (e.g., the What Works Clearinghouse) often lack studies focused on civic learning due largely to prioritization of other areas. However, states and districts can invest in vetting and reviewing evidence of programs aligned to the ESSA tiers of evidence following guidance such as that offered by the REL Midwest.⁵⁴ States can consider whether they want to develop their own clearinghouses, and guidance is available to inform that decision, as well.⁵⁵ As new research is conducted and published, these clearinghouses will grow as the evidence base grows.

All Hands on Deck

Historically, the field of civic learning has been fragmented, which cannot continue if we are to address the threats described at the outset of this brief. Increases in research funding will help address this issue, but care must be taken to ensure that the future of civic learning measurement and research centers on a broad coalition of young people, practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and funders. This broad coalition is important for continuing to establish agreed-upon definitions related to civic learning, informing advances in measurement and assessment, developing research agendas, and implementing research-based interventions. This diverse set of stakeholders will have different views on, and ideas about, the best ways to move forward on the proposed investments and initiatives. These differing opinions are important components of discourse, with the potential to strengthen these efforts. A greater sense of urgency is needed, however. Democracy is wavering, and the field of education must step up and meet the moment before it is too late.

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