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# **The State of Civic Education in Massachusetts**

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A Report Prepared for the Massachusetts  
Department of Elementary and  
Secondary Education

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# Executive Summary

## PURPOSE

Civic education in Massachusetts experienced a landmark shift in 2018. The approved [2018 History and Social Science \(HSS\) Framework](#) increases emphasis on civics across all grade levels Pre-K through 12 and requires an 8th grade civics course focused on United States and Massachusetts government and civic life. [Chapter 296 of the Acts of 2018](#) (An Act to Promote and Enhance Civic Engagement) requires that all public schools serving 8th grade students and all public high schools engage students in at least one student-led civics project. The new law provides some money for the mandate by establishing a Civics Project Trust Fund to support underserved communities in the development and implementation of the 2018 HSS Framework, student-led civics projects, and civics professional development (PD) opportunities. The subsequent [Civics Project Guidebook](#), which the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) originally released in October 2019, emphasizes key defining components of student-led projects and project outcomes aligned to the Framework.

The 2018 HSS Framework was expected to be implemented in the 2019–2020 school year, and the student-led civics project requirement was expected to be implemented in the 2020–2021 school year. The purpose of this report is to answer the following questions:

- » What is the current *awareness and understanding* of Massachusetts K–12 educators and school and district decision-makers of the new civics requirements?
- » What is the current *spread and depth of implementation* among K–12 teachers of the content and pedagogical practices that the 2018 HSS Framework and civics policies espouse?
- » Is there any *systematic variation* in civics policy knowledge and civic education implementation based upon educators' geographic location, context, and types of students they serve (i.e., economically disadvantaged, English learners, grade levels taught, or resources available to support implementation of instructional reforms)?

## METHODS

We conducted a sequential explanatory mixed methods design, whereby we collected and analyzed quantitative survey data and used survey responses to recruit and select interview participants to further explain and illuminate nuances in the quantitative findings. First, we created, disseminated, and analyzed surveys from K–12 classroom teachers ( $n = 580$ ) and school and district decision-makers ( $n = 113$ ) across Massachusetts in June of 2020. Our stratified sample represented educators working in districts across different regions of Massachusetts (northeast, southeast, central, and west) and working in districts with low and high proportions of economically disadvantaged students, English learners, and racially diverse student populations.

We interviewed 48 participants from the pool of teachers and school administrators who completed the surveys and expressed interest in participating in interviews. Interviewees represented elementary and secondary school educators across the Commonwealth with differing

levels of experience teaching civics. Themes that emerged from the interview data were triangulated with the quantitative data to corroborate emerging findings.

## KEY FINDINGS

We found both an overall commitment to civic principles and practices among the educators surveyed across Massachusetts as well as variability in awareness of the civic policies and the depth with which civic practices are currently implemented. We also found marked differences between middle and high school and elementary school teachers in our sample. As compared to middle and high school teachers, elementary teachers were less aware and less likely to implement the elements of the Framework fully and reported lower confidence about teaching civics. Across teachers of all grade levels, participating in civic-focused PD was significantly and positively associated with educator reports of civic policy knowledge and civic teaching practices aligned with the 2018 HSS Framework.

### Awareness and Understanding of New Civic Education Policies

- » Ninety-six percent of surveyed educators were aware of the revised 2018 HSS Framework, with varying depth of understanding of how it impacts their practices. Of those who reported any level of awareness, only 44% reported knowing how they would impact their instruction, 32% reported familiarity with standards and principles but not with how it would impact their instruction, and 20% have heard of the Framework but not the details. Educators reported less awareness of the civics project requirements than they did of the 2018 HSS Framework, with 37% of teacher survey respondents reporting that they have *never* heard of the civics project legislation. Among middle and high school educators, only 22% said they were both familiar with the civics project legislation *and* knew how it would affect their instruction.
- » Middle and high school teachers reported that they were significantly more aware of the 2018 HSS Framework and civics project legislation compared to elementary school teachers.

- » For middle and high school teachers, those who were provided civics PD at least once a year reported statistically significantly higher levels of awareness of the 2018 HSS Framework and civics project legislation compared to those who were provided civics PD from their school or district less than once a year.
- » Awareness of the HSS Framework and civics project legislation did not significantly differ based on the regions or the district-level demographics of students in the districts in which teachers worked.

### Breadth and Depth of Civic Education Implementation

- » At the time of this research, teachers had begun to shift their teaching practices to align with the 2018 HSS Framework and civics project legislation to increase student access to civics. More changes involved overall curriculum and course changes rather than the introduction of student-led civics projects. However, student access was not uniform within or across schools and districts. For example, qualitative interviews revealed a trend in which students missed social studies because they were scheduled to be pulled out for interventions (e.g., IEP services) during social studies instruction.
- » Middle and high school teachers generally reported incorporating more civics content, inquiry and informed action, real-world learning, and democratic classroom practices than elementary school teachers. Qualitative findings further indicated that many teachers reported not following the entire inquiry arc process (i.e., developing inquiries about civic life, seeking and analyzing relevant information and research using discipline specific knowledge and tools, and communicating conclusions and taking informed action) and the civics project guidelines.
- » Middle and high school teachers reported more familiarity with and confidence about using the 2018 HSS Framework than they did with facilitating student-led civics projects, according to survey and interview data.

- » The majority of elementary school teachers surveyed did not dedicate substantial time to social studies. Only 8% taught it four or more hours a week on average; and 38% taught it only two to three hours per week. Twenty-eight percent did not have *any* specific time dedicated to social studies and instead integrate social studies into English language arts.
- » Elementary school teachers in districts with a high proportion of economically disadvantaged students or in districts with a high proportion of English learners relative to the state population were more likely to report not having time dedicated to social studies. In addition, qualitative data uncovered instances of within-school disparities: some students who received intervention services related to IEPs or ESL instruction did so during social studies classes.
- » Regarding resources that support overall civics implementation, the greatest barriers to implementation reported by teachers included not having enough time to plan and teach, having too much pressure to teach other content, and not having enough civics resources. The majority of teachers reported they were not receiving ongoing PD focused on civics from their school or their district.
  - » Forty-two percent reported having never been offered civics PD opportunities and only 18% reported being offered learning opportunities focused on civics more than once a year. Interview data corroborated a lack of district-level provision of civics PD.

### Predictors of Civic Teaching Competency

- » Confidence in teaching civics was the strongest and most constant positive predictor of the following factors of civic teaching competency that teachers self-reported: 1) government and institutions content; 2) inquiry; 3) real-world learning; 4) interdisciplinary learning; 5) culturally responsive pedagogy; 6) discussions; and 7) student-centered classroom climate.

- » Access to professional learning opportunities was significantly and positively associated with teachers' confidence in teaching civics.
- » District per-pupil expenditures were positively and significantly associated with civic teaching competency across multiple scales for elementary and secondary teachers. District-level student demographic data, including the proportion of economically disadvantaged students, proportion of English learners, and racial diversity, were *not* significantly associated with differences in teacher reports of civic teaching competency.
- » Qualitative data suggested that, in many instances, teachers' self-initiative led them to engage in civics professional learning opportunities. Further, teachers reported feeling that they had to do most of the legwork to seek out civics resources and opportunities.

## TEACHER REPORTS OF SUPPORTS NEEDED TO IMPROVE CIVICS INSTRUCTION

Through qualitative interview data and open-ended survey responses, Massachusetts teachers expressed the following needs to effectively teach civics:

- » PD that: 1) allows for collaboration across schools and districts on the 2018 HSS Framework and civics project legislation; and 2) provides teachers with both support with how to use available civic education resources and time to collaboratively plan to use these resources.
- » Framework-aligned, curated curricular and instructional resources that are appropriate for elementary school and 8th grade.
- » Support for student-led civics projects, including: 1) more teacher training on how to implement these projects; and 2) civics project exemplars across a range of school contexts.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, we make the following recommendations.

- 1. Continue to prioritize equitable implementation of the 2018 HSS Framework and the civics project legislation.**

Our findings suggest that intentional investment of civics resources in districts with a greater proportion of students from historically underserved groups may have kept disparities at bay. However, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic may compromise these positive signs. Commitment to and benchmarking of the extent to which the HSS Framework and student-led civics projects are implemented equitably across districts with students of varying economic disadvantage, racial/ethnic identity, and English learner status should remain of highest priority.

- 2. Continue to invest in and design for equitable PD and pre-service training infrastructure that is aligned directly to the [HSS Framework](#) and [Civics Project Guidebook](#), allowing for collaboration and sharing of best practices across schools and districts, and that is sustained across a school year or multiple school years.**

Civics PD should not be a once-a-year event but sustained across a school year or multiple school years. It should strive toward forming a culture and infrastructure for continuous improvement, starting with *why* the HSS Framework is important and then *how* and *what* should be taught, using formative and summative assessment as a tool for improvement, making explicit connections to the HSS Framework, and allowing room for differentiation by educators' prior experience. We further recommend that civics PD be widely accessible and designed for equity, meaning it should be accessible even under the most chal-

lenging circumstances (such as pandemic-forced changes in in-person learning, working with students with multiple needs, and logistic challenges related to convening teachers who are already tasked with multiple responsibilities), and provide opportunities for collaboration and sharing of best practices across schools and districts.

Given the lack of programmatic focus on civics in Massachusetts teacher education programs, we also recommend a renewed focus in bolstering civic education for preservice teacher training in order to lay a strong foundation in civic education across the teacher pipeline.

- 3. Invest in developing resources and professional learning opportunities specifically designed for elementary educators and designed to address gaps for middle and high school educators.**

Our study findings clearly point to the fact that *elementary* educators have lacked access to professional learning and are less prepared to teach civics the way the 2018 HSS Framework mandates. PD opportunities and civics classroom resources should be created for elementary school teachers—with a particular emphasis on civics content, controversial issue discussions, and the inquiry arc, which our findings pointed to as being the areas most in need of growth. For *middle and high school* teachers, PD should target the practicalities of student-led civics projects along with the underlying *whys* (e.g., rationale, research supporting the practice, how it would improve students' learning) and principles of the HSS Framework to help facilitate greater depth of practice.

- 4. Provide elementary school teachers with more time to teach social studies by carving out time in the existing schedule, more classroom resources to teach civics, and**

**more PD on how to integrate civics across subject areas.**

Our study shows that it is fairly common for elementary teachers to report incorporating civics into other activities, with 28% having no dedicated social studies instruction time in a week. Research continues to build evidence that content-rich instruction in ELA builds content knowledge as well as reading and writing skills, opening up the potential for integrating rigorous content and inquiry-based instruction in ELA and social studies. Long-term time and resource investment should be made to support all elementary grade educators in building capacity to develop deep inquiry skills and social studies content expertise across the curriculum, including targeted elementary school PD that focuses on how to integrate civics content and inquiry into English language arts.

**5. Educate school and district administrators on the requirements of both the 2018 HSS Framework and student-led civics projects and best practices in supporting continuous educator development in civics instruction.**

District- and school-level administrator support is paramount in successful implementation of the 2018 HSS Framework and civics project legislation, yet educators in our sample reported wide variation in the extent to which they felt supported by administrators in their school or district. Research from other states suggests the impor-

tance of directing resources towards educating school and district administrators about the intent of new civic education laws and new social studies frameworks or standards. Resources might include specific ways in which administrators can support civic education in their districts (e.g., a parent-ready one-page document explaining what the student-led civics projects are and why they are important for students) and training on how the 2018 legislation and HSS Framework can support overall school culture and success.

**6. Establish creative accountability and incentives mechanisms that bolster the value of civic education.**

Currently, Massachusetts does not have a standardized civics test. While testing is what many people associate with the term “accountability,” there are alternative ways the civics community in the United States has created accountability and incentives to ensure that students receive an excellent civic education. These strategies include questions on the knowledge of mandated practices in teacher licensure exams, tying civics teaching strategies to teacher evaluation frameworks, and creating a student civics accomplishment badge. These strategies should be shared and borrowed when there are parallel mechanisms and opportunities in Massachusetts, and widely communicated across the Commonwealth to encourage aligned implementation to the 2018 HSS Framework and Civics Project Guidebook.